



# “The Whole Shebang”

*by Elisa Adams*

*An instant family wasn't what David had planned for his life, but once he met single mother Lucy he knew he had to change his plans.*

Fifth grade teacher David Storm has had it up to *here* with one of his students. Lately the boy's attitude has changed. He's is obnoxious and rowdy, unable to sit still for five seconds, and is constantly interrupting to ask questions that have nothing to do with the subjects they're studying. The boy's twin brother is just the opposite—so quiet that it has David worried. He calls their mother and tells her he needs to speak with her, setting in motion a whole set of events he never could have imagined.

Lucy Parker knows what her boys are trying to do—and she doesn't approve. Since her divorce from their father three years ago, the eleven-year-olds have been trying to set her up with every single man in the tri-county area. They mean well, but she isn't looking for love. She's got enough trouble raising four rambunctious boys, and she doesn't need to add someone else to the list. Especially not their latest choice—their very handsome yet way-too-young-for-her teacher.

**Warning: This book contains monogamous sex scenes using some graphic language.**

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
512 Forest Lake Drive  
Warner Robins, Georgia 31093

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Copyright © 2007 by Elisa Adams

Cover by Scott Carpenter

ISBN: 1-59998-185-8

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

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First **Samhain Publishing, Ltd.** electronic publication: April 2007

# The Whole Shebang

*Elisa Adams*

## Chapter One

"I swear, if I didn't love you so much, I'd sell you to the highest bidder." Lucy glanced down at her oldest—by four minutes—son, Trevor, seated beside her on the hard plastic chair with his hands folded in his lap. At the moment, he was doing a perfect impression of a little angel. Too bad the eleven-year-old was anything but.

"Not that they'd pay much," she continued, her frustration rising to epic proportions. "Given the way you've been acting at school lately, I'd be lucky to get ten bucks."

"I'm sorry, Mom." He let out a shaky sigh and if she didn't know him better, she might have been fooled into thinking he was sincere.

The thick blond hair and big blue eyes he'd inherited from his father added to the angelic illusion, but looks weren't the only thing Mack had passed on to the boy. Trevor had Mack's personality, too. Once he set his mind on something, he didn't stop until he got what he wanted. He wanted something now. She just had to figure out what it was and find a way to put a stop to his behavior before things went too far. If they hadn't reached that point already.

"What's wrong with you, anyway?" she asked, shoving a hand through her hair. Her fingers tangled in the messy, windblown curls she'd long ago given up trying to tame. Finally she settled on tucking some of the strands behind her ears just to keep them out of her face. "You've never had problems in school before. Not even once. Is there something going on I should know about?"

"No, Mom." Trevor blinked, staring straight ahead, but the spark of mischief in his eyes belied his words. He might be a plotter, but he wasn't a very good liar. Why hadn't she seen this coming? Her loveable-but-scheming child had been quiet for far too long. She'd been hoping he

would grow out of the need to shape his world around his own ideals, but it had been the calm before the storm.

"There's *nothing* going on," Trevor said with so much emphasis, Lucy had to cover her mouth to hide a laugh. She had to remind herself the situation wasn't funny, even if her son's behavior was. The day before, when she'd gotten the call from his teacher asking her to come in so they could have a conference about Trevor's behavior, she'd hung up the phone ready to ground him for the rest of his life. Though she was still angry today, some of her aggravation had dulled. Now she just wanted to see him squirm a little, trying to talk himself out of the mess he'd gotten into. In public situations, Trevor was usually the best behaved out of her four boys. For him to act out meant he had ulterior motives.

"Oh, really, Trevor? Then why, in the last month of your *last* year of elementary school, am I being called in to speak to your teacher about a behavior problem you're having in class?"

He glanced her way and batted his eyelashes. "I have no idea."

*Yeah, right.* And Lucy was the Queen of England. "No idea?"

"Well, not really."

She could swear she heard a giggle behind the denial, but she chose to ignore it. For now. Once she knew what the problems were, she'd be better equipped to handle the situation.

Instead of pressing him for details she knew he'd refuse to give, she turned her attention to the wall across from where they sat and tried to swallow back the irritation clogging her throat.

Art projects in all colors of the rainbow lined the areas next to classroom doors, nearly from floor to ceiling. The scent of poster paints lingered in the air. The cheerful atmosphere of the small, neighborhood school made her smile, but at the same time, her stomach turned over. Next year, her twins would be leaving the comfortable environment of the two-story brick building with only a handful of classrooms for the big unknown of the middle school in the center of town. There they'd be grouped with incoming students from the other three neighborhood

elementary schools in Lilton, Vermont, and most likely put into different classes. Since preschool, the twins had been together.

Sometimes Lucy wondered if the idea of them splitting up bothered her more than it bothered either of them.

Though twins, the boys couldn't be more different, and they seemed to be looking forward to getting out on their own. Lucy wasn't ready to be the parent of middle-schoolers. She sighed. It was all downhill from there.

The frosted-glass-paneled door in front of them opened, yanking Lucy out of her depressing thoughts, and a dark-haired man stepped into the hall. He couldn't be more than twenty-six or twenty-seven, and probably stood at least a head taller than her—which wasn't saying much given her five-foot-two-inch stature. He wore khakis and a white button-down shirt. His hair, the color of black coffee, was a little long on top and shot through with blondish highlights, like he spent a good amount of time in the sun or paid a hairstylist a fortune to look like he did. His tanned face and the lower part of his arms exposed by his rolled-up sleeves told her it was the former.

Their gazes met and locked. Her stomach knotted and her throat went dry. He had a charisma that drew her to him, even though she'd never met the man. There was just something about him that stirred parts of her she'd long ago forgotten existed.

Trevor coughed.

The man shook his head and the moment vanished. His warm brown eyes lit up with an almost mischievous light when he smiled and turned his attention to her son. "Trevor, you and your mother can come in now. I'd like to talk to both of you first before I speak with your mother alone."

Without waiting for a response, he disappeared back into the classroom, leaving the scent of his clean, masculine cologne behind in the hallway. It was vaguely familiar and a little bit sexy. Lucy swallowed hard against the sudden lump forming in her throat. *That* was the teacher who'd replaced Mrs. Frye when she'd left on medical leave last

month? Why had Nikki, the school's third grade teacher and Lucy's closest friend, not mentioned the man was a complete and total hunk?

A glance at Trevor's smiling face brought Lucy's suspicion rushing back. The pieces of the puzzle that were her son's odd behavior slammed into place all at once, and she couldn't say she liked the finished picture. Young, good-looking man, no wedding ring, and a child who had yet to learn to mind his own business. How many times had the twins tried to do this very same thing? And how many times had she had to put a stop to it before things went too far?

Way too many times in the past three years since the divorce had become final.

She swung her gaze to Trevor, her eyes narrowed in disbelief. The last time—when they'd tried to set her up with the college-aged waiter at their favorite pizza place—had been months ago. After that disastrous meal, they'd promised to let her find her own dates and concentrate on things eleven-year-olds should be doing. They'd abandoned their plan when she'd been dating someone she'd met on her own, but since she'd split with Chris the boys seemed to be at it again. Had she really thought they'd given up? Of course not. They'd just been granting her a temporary reprieve.

"Is that Mr. Storm?"

Trevor nodded, a hint of a smile still on his face.

"I thought you said he was old?"

Her son rolled his eyes and spread his hands in front of him. "He is. He's *twenty-five*."

*Ugh.* What did that make her, at the ripe old age of thirty-two? Dust in the ground? As Lucas liked to put it, worm food. "Yeah, that's positively *ancient*."

She stood and ruffled her fingers through Trevor's hair. Might as well get on with the meeting so she could get Trevor home and discuss punishment. The other times, she'd let the boys slide with a warning, but obviously it had had little effect on them. Time to pull out the big guns and unplug their video game system for a few days. "Come on. Let's get



this over with. I know what you and your brother are planning, by the way, and you can forget about it. I have no interest in your teacher beyond what you learn in his classroom. At least most of the other men you've tried to set me up with have been closer to my age."

The waiter being the only other exception.

"Aren't you twenty-five, too, Mom?"

She laughed. The kid was destined for a career as a politician. "Nice try, Trev. I was twenty-five once. Seven years ago. Now I'm just about heading for a nursing home, at least as far as you kids are concerned. Come on, let's get moving here."

She grabbed Trevor's hand, knowing it would embarrass him to no end, and marched into the classroom with her oldest boy in tow.

Mr. Storm sat against the edge of his desk, hands in the pockets of his pants and legs crossed at the ankles. When Lucy and Trevor stepped into the room, he stood and walked over to them, hand outstretched. "It's good to meet you, Mrs. Parker."

Lucy nearly cringed at the name she'd given up three years ago. She hadn't even liked being referred to as *Mrs.* when she'd been married. Now it grated across her senses like fingernails on a chalkboard, especially coming from him. Even the boys' friends had always called her by her first name. "*Miss* Parker. But I prefer Lucy."

She took his offered hand, and the second they touched, her heart knocked against her ribs and she had to remind herself to breathe. The man was more than handsome, true, but for some reason he affected her on a deeper level. She didn't buy into the notion of love at first sight, but lust was another story—and she'd fallen head over heels in lust with her sons' teacher. *Lovely*. Just wonderful.

Her only consolation was that he seemed equally affected. His eyes widened, his lips parted, and he didn't let go of her hand for what had to be almost a full minute. When he finally broke the contact, he stepped back and cleared his throat, obviously shaken. "Okay. Lucy it is. Call me David. I don't like to be too formal with the parents. Why don't you have a seat?"

He gestured to a few wooden chairs placed next to his desk. Her legs wobbly, Lucy settled into one while Trevor sat next to her, the look on his face letting her know he'd seen the exchange between his mother and his teacher and he was all for it. She'd have to remind him later, once they were in the car on the way home, that his mother dating his teacher wasn't appropriate and, as much as he might want it, it was never going to happen. No way would he be interested in a single mother of four, seven years his senior.

"Has Trevor told you why I asked you to come in?" Mr. Storm—David—asked as he settled into the chair behind his desk. His all-business expression had her wondering if she'd imagined there being any sort of spark between them. Oddly enough, a little bit of disappointment welled low in her stomach.

"No. He won't tell me anything beyond the fact that you wanted to talk to me about something, and all you mentioned on the phone was that he was having an issue in class."

She'd asked her son repeatedly, and he'd told her every time he had no idea what the problem could be. Lucy had assumed he hadn't wanted to get into trouble, but now she realized she'd been wrong. He'd wanted to find the quickest way to get her to a meeting with his teacher, and acting out had probably seemed like the best solution to his preadolescent brain.

David nodded before he turned his attention to Trevor. "We're having a little bit of a behavior problem in school. He's loud, he interrupts other children in class and he doesn't turn in most of his homework assignments."

Lucy glanced at Trevor and gritted her teeth. Usually, when he was working with his brother to try and set her up with someone, both boys suddenly became model citizens. Patient, helpful and polite. Quiet and as near to perfect as two eleven-year-olds could get. Her two younger boys were generally the ones who misbehaved, though Trevor had been known on occasion to be a little mouthy. This change in tactic was something new, but it made sense. What better way to get their mother to meet their

teacher than for one of them to become public school enemy number one?

When Nikki had mentioned a younger male teacher would be replacing Mrs. Frye, Lucy should have known her boys would start trouble. They were like sharks, smelling fresh meat and going in for the kill. The homework shocked her, though. She checked each boy's assignments every night and Trevor's were always completed. She also made sure the assignments made it into the folder in his backpack before he left the kitchen table, where they all worked on their homework after school. What had he been doing with the finished work?

"Why am I not surprised by most of this?" she asked on a sigh.

David raised his eyebrows. "Are you having problems at home, too?"

*We will be now.* The boys had no idea what they'd gotten themselves into this time. *Can you say not leaving the house for at least a month?*

"No. Actually, he's fine at home, so I was a little shocked to get your phone call. What I'm not surprised about is that Trevor seems to be up to his old tricks."

Yes, shocked by the call, but not as surprised as she'd been to see the teacher Trevor and Lucas had described as "positively ancient" was anything but. After what Nikki had told her, she'd expected a man in his mid-thirties, but instead she'd found one barely out of college. Did Trevor and Lucas really think their little plan would work?

She hated to admit it, but this time they'd chosen well. If he wasn't seven years younger than her and the person responsible for her boys during their weekday hours, she might actually consider it. Not that he'd really be interested. She could safely say she wasn't the man's type, and she was an idiot for even wishing things were different.

"I'm sorry for the way Trevor's been acting. I think there might be something going on that doesn't really have a lot to do with an inability to control himself. I'm sure he knows exactly what he's doing. Sometimes my son has ulterior motives."

The look on David's face went from friendly to worried in seconds flat. He didn't say anything for a moment, seeming to think his words

through before he spoke. And when he did answer, he said the last thing she expected to hear.

“Well, it’s not just Trevor.”

She groaned on the inside. So now the twins had ganged up on the guy. What had her unholy terrors done to this poor man to have him so worried? “Lucas?”

David nodded.

Now that was unusual. At home, the twins usually had a good-cop-bad-cop thing going on. Trevor, boisterous child that he was, sometimes acted out to get attention, and Lucas, the quiet, bookish one, smoothed things over. Lucy had been on to them for years, but their father and most other family and friends fell for it every time. It had managed to net all four boys new bikes and skateboards the summer before, when their father had brought them home from visiting him.

“Don’t tell me Lucas has been having some issues, too.”

“No, it’s been just the opposite. He’s been so quiet. *Too* quiet, actually. I can’t even get him to answer a question in class. He says nothing, looks at no one, and even at recess, he sits alone against the side of the building reading a book. His friends ask him to play ball or tag, but he always shakes his head. He’s almost...listless, I guess.” He leaned back in his chair and sighed, his expression going decidedly uncomfortable. “The boys told me you’re divorced. I hesitate to mention this, but if your divorce is fairly recent, the stress on the kids could be causing behavioral issues. Lucas might benefit from some type of counseling, even if it’s just seeing the school psychologist a few times a month.”

She had to force back a smile. During the divorce, all four boys had taken trips to a therapist in town, just so Lucy could make sure they were okay and dealing with their emotions. For young children, they’d adjusted to the situation surprisingly well, probably because Mack had never been home. Even when he was there, he wasn’t really *there*. He spoke with them now more than he had when he and Lucy were married, so she supposed one good thing had come out of the whole mess.

The current issues the boys seemed to have developed had nothing to do with the breakup of her marriage to Mack. This was something far more devious and underhanded—and all too common in her household. The boys were playing cupid. Again. She was sure of it, even though she'd threatened them with giving all their toys away to children in need the last time. Why they thought she couldn't function without a man in her life was beyond her. She'd shown everyone she was much better off on her own.

"Let me ask you something, David," Lucy said, leaning forward in the chair until she rested her arms on the desk. With a quick glance over her shoulder at Trevor, she continued in a soft tone. "Do you have children?"

"Not yet."

She smiled, though she refused to admit the reasons. Sexy or not, the guy wasn't her type, and he'd called her in to deal with a real issue, not ask her out to dinner. "I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you've just been played by a couple of mini-masters. These kids have been honing their craft for years, and you're their latest victim."

His brows dipped into a frown and he glanced from Lucy to Trevor and back again. "What do you mean?"

She shook her head. She had a couple of up-and-coming Oscar winners on her hands.

"Trev, why don't you go wait out in the hall so I can have a little talk with Mr. Storm, okay?"

Trevor stood, cast Lucy a nervous glance and skittered out of the room. *Busted*. The kid knew he was in for one heck of a lecture when they left the school grounds. She could just imagine him sitting all alone in the hallway, in a near panic, trying to figure out the best way to talk himself out of the mess he and his brother had gotten themselves into.

Once the door had closed behind him, she turned her attention back to David. "He's manipulating you."

David shook his head, the expression on his face one of shocked disbelief. He probably thought she was a bad parent, not willing to accept that something was wrong with her children. Something *was* wrong with

them, it just wasn't as serious as he thought. They were a couple of con artists whose calculating streak needed to be squashed before it got too big to control.

"I might be young, but I've been a teacher for a few years, and before I was hired here, I worked in a school in a place much larger than Lilton," David said with a slight hardness to his voice. "I think I would know when a child is trying to pull one over on me."

Typical cocky man, never willing to admit he might be wrong. Lucy tried to push back the frustration brimming to the surface. He might be cute, but she should have realized he wouldn't listen to what she had to say with an open mind. Because he had a degree, he was suddenly the expert on her kids? She might not have a B.A. in parenting, but she had plenty of life experience.

"I've been a parent for a lot longer than a few years, and I know my boys. I work at home, so when they're not in school, they're with me. I'm sorry if this sounds rude, but I think I know them a lot better than someone who's only seen them part-time for a month. They do this all the time."

"Do what?" A hint of amusement settled in his gaze when she would have expected anger or aggravation. Did he think she was funny? Was he only humoring her here, or was he really interested in her explanation?

Unsure and unable to read his expression, she narrowed her eyes. "Since my divorce, they've been trying to find me a boyfriend. That's what this is about."

"I don't think..."

She held up her hand to stop him. "Trust me. I've been through this all before, and it's the same every time. Different pattern of behavior, at first, but the end results never vary. First it was the mailman. Then the butcher at the grocery store. The guy who came out to install my cable...the assistant librarian...even a few of my single male neighbors. So this is nothing new, at least for me. I feel bad that you had to get caught up in it, but I think you're worrying needlessly. Both boys are fine, and Lucas is *not* depressed. He's just a thespian in training."

She braced herself for his continued arguments, but David sat back and laughed instead. A minute passed before he spoke again, and even then, his chuckling hadn't quite stopped. "Wow. Sorry."

Lucy couldn't help but join in the laughter. Of course he'd be sorry. Why would he want to be set up with a rumped work-at-home mom? "Yeah, me too."

"I guess it makes sense." He shook his head. "All the questions they asked about my personal life. Kids do that all the time, so I thought they were just curious. I have four older brothers and sisters, and my two brothers used to pull the bad behavior thing on my parents all the time when they wanted something."

Now she realized why his last name sounded so familiar. She smiled. Though she hadn't grown up here, she knew the family from around town, and had been in high school with a few of David's siblings. "You're Jake's brother, right?"

"Yeah. Don't tell me you dated my brother or something."

A laugh bubbled up in her throat. He had to be kidding. Jake Storm had been one of the popular kids in school. Lucy had been an outcast, the new kid during their senior year who hadn't had time to form close friendships with more than a few people and, when she didn't have her head buried in a book, spent her time jotting down stories in notebooks she should have been using to study from.

"No. I graduated high school with him. I don't know him well, though. I moved here during my senior year to live with my grandmother. I do remember him causing some trouble in school on occasion."

"Yeah, he spent a lot of those high-school years being grounded. He didn't settle down completely until recently, when he got married."

Jake sounded a lot like Mack—though Mack had never bothered to settle down, even after they'd taken vows. He'd always said he would, always sworn things would change and he'd spend more time with Lucy and the kids, but had never quite managed to keep those promises. "I'm really sorry about what my boys are doing. I'll deal with the problem and make sure they realize this isn't right. If you have any other issues, feel

free to call me anytime. Like I said earlier, I work at home, so I'm almost always there."

As soon as the words left her mouth, she nearly groaned. She stood and smoothed her skirt down her legs. Why had she said he could call *anytime*? Now he was going to think she was hitting on him—or worse, that she'd put her boys up to the whole thing.

Luckily, he didn't show any reaction. Instead he pushed up from behind the desk and walked her to the door. "I'll do that. If I have any more problems with the boys, I'll let you know right away instead of letting it go for a few days, hoping it would correct itself. This problem doesn't seem like one that'll go away if ignored."

"You're probably right. It was nice meeting you. Don't take this the wrong way, but I really hope I don't have to see you again. At least not until my younger two reach fifth grade." She started to offer him her hand, but remembering what had happened the first time she'd touched him, she dropped her arm to her side instead. If she touched him again, she might not want to let go, and he might take issue with that.

She left the room, walking out in the hall to collect Trevor so they could head home to relieve the babysitter. The door shut behind her and she let out a breath heavy with relief.

"You know," she said to Trevor. "No matter what you kids might think, I can find dates on my own. I really don't need the help. Plus, don't you think it would be a little creepy having your mom date your teacher?"

He blinked up at her, the picture of innocence once again. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Like hell he didn't.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How did the meeting go?"

David turned around to see Lilton Elementary's third grade teacher, Nikki Mason, walking toward him, trying to carry a tall stack of



workbooks, some papers and a few rolls of poster board in her arms. He walked over and took the papers and books to help lighten her load. For a woman who always looked so put together, with her sleek brown hair and expensive-looking clothes, the fact that she couldn't manage to get organized made him grin.

"It was interesting. Trevor's mother seems to think her boys are acting out to get her and I together. Like they want to set us up or something."

Not that he'd mind. Not in the least. The second he'd seen Lucy Parker sitting in the hall, he'd been intrigued. Talking to her had only increased his fascination. Small and curvy enough to make his mouth water, she had wide green eyes and an easy smile. Full lips, and damn, he had a thing for full lips. Whenever he thought about her now—and he would—those pink lips would be what came to mind first, and they would inspire such incredible fantasies.

Her hair was such an unusual shade he couldn't quite decide if it was red or blonde. It wasn't just her looks that struck him, though. She was a woman who spoke her mind, and he had to respect that. Lately his life had really been lacking interesting people, and everything about Lucy Parker all but screamed *layers*.

Under different circumstances, he would have asked her for coffee, just for a chance to get to know her better and find out what made her tick, but she was his students' mother, and though the school had no formal policy against it, the ethics were shady.

It figured. The second he'd touched her, he'd known he would want to do it again. Too bad he couldn't.

"Fifth graders trying to fix me up with their mother," he continued, following Nikki down the hall toward the door leading to the parking lot. "Is that the craziest thing you've ever heard, or what?"

To David's surprise, Nikki's eyebrows rose and she laughed. "It's actually not so insane. I wouldn't put it past them. I've known Lucy since our senior year in high school—and I know her two oldest boys inherited their father's talent for manipulation. They're consummate actors at all of

eleven years old. Lucy's forever trying to channel that talent into something good, but every once in a while they take a little detour to the dark side."

"She's a friend of yours?"

"Yep. We graduated together. I have her middle son, Tanner, in my class this year, and I had the twins two years ago. I hate to tell you, but they were nothing but angels the whole year. Not an inappropriate peep out of either one of them, and from what the other teachers have said, this is the first time either of them have acted out like this. You probably don't want to hear it, but I think Lucy may be right."

That was the first thing he wanted to hear, and the last thing he needed. Already his body was starting to stir and the beginnings of a smile tickled the corners of his lips. Maybe in another month or two, once school was out and he wasn't the boys' teacher anymore...

Nah. She'd never be interested. Though he'd felt the spark between them and knew she had, too, she'd made it perfectly clear that she had no interest in pursuing it further.

David pushed open the door and held it for Nikki to walk outside into the warm, late-spring afternoon. He squinted against the bright sunlight shining off the car windshields. "This seems a little...advanced for a couple of grade-school kids."

Nikki shrugged. "It's happened before."

"So she says."

"Don't you remember doing crazy things with your brothers and sisters when you were the twins' age?"

"Not really. When I was the twins' age, they were all in high school. Jake and Brian had no interest in hanging out with a kid, and Amanda and Rachel were too busy doing their hair to even notice me unless my parents paid them to baby-sit. As far as trouble went, I was pretty much on my own, and I never did anything as sophisticated as Lucy Parker claims her boys are doing. To be honest, something so huge wouldn't even have crossed my mind."

Nikki didn't say another word as they reached her small sedan. She unlocked the doors with a click of the remote, opened the backseat and started pushing the tubes of poster board inside.

Once they had everything loaded into the car, he turned to her. "She's divorced, huh?"

Nikki laughed, a knowing look in her blue eyes. "Yeah. For three years now. Her ex got transferred to California two years ago, so most of the time she's raising four boys on her own. So, you're interested in Lucy, huh?"

*A little too much.* Though she'd left almost an hour ago, he couldn't get her off his mind. "I'm her kids' teacher."

"That wasn't what I asked."

He raked a hand through his hair. Not only was he their teacher, but he wasn't looking for an instant family, either. He'd love to have a wife and kids...someday. Today was *not* that day. Still, he couldn't help remembering the way it had jolted him when she'd shaken his hand, or how he hadn't been able to stop looking at her while she'd sat across from him.

"She's got four kids," he said, more to himself than to Nikki.

"So what? There are plenty of single mothers out there who date all the time. Lucy's not looking for a husband. She's not even looking for a long-term commitment."

He frowned, though he had to admit to himself that it made sense. Lucy had seemed even less thrilled with what Trevor and Lucas were doing than he was. "How can you be sure of that?"

"She dates, David. She's not a nun or anything. She just ended a three-month relationship because the guy was getting too serious, too fast, and she wasn't into it. She's not one of those women who uses her kids to get a man. In fact, she usually doesn't even let the few men she dates meet her kids at all. If you're attracted, I say go for it. Ask her out and see what happens. It's been a while since you and Katie Taylor broke up, right?"

Six months. Not that he was counting. He wasn't. He missed having someone to go home to, but at the same time, splitting up with her hadn't crushed him. Being with Katie had just become habit after a while. He'd dated her off and on all through high school and college, and even some of middle school before that, and it had become a given that the two of them would get married. At least in her mind. He'd broken her heart when he'd told her it wasn't going to happen. He cared about her, still did, but couldn't see himself spending the rest of his life as anything more than her friend.

"Don't remind me. She still won't speak to me, even after that big speech she gave me about wanting to stay close." He might not miss the mess their relationship had become after so many years of being together yet growing apart at the same time, but he missed the friendship. The easy routine they'd fallen into when they'd moved in together after college graduation. The apartment seemed empty without her and the dog she'd taken when she'd moved out, and with vacation approaching, he was still trying to figure out what he was going to do with all his free time. As it stood, it promised to be a very long and boring summer.

Nikki patted his arm, dragging him back to the present. "I know you say you don't want anything serious right now, and I can understand that, but you don't have to spend so much time alone, either. It's time to move on with your life. Go out and have fun. Lucy's at the same stage. What would be wrong with spending a little time with her? Face it, David. You wouldn't have asked me about her personal life if you weren't interested. What's wrong with a summer fling?"

He nearly laughed. A fling didn't appeal to him. He wasn't superficial. When he spent time with a woman, he wanted to get to know her inside and out. He wanted to get to know Lucy Parker.

"Maybe I *am* interested. A little bit. But you know, she made it clear she wasn't happy with what her kids were trying to do, so there's no point in worrying about it." This conversation had the potential to get uncomfortable very quickly. The last thing he needed was Nikki in the boys' corner, especially since she was Lucy's friend. Whether or not to act on his attraction was a decision he needed to make on his own.

He glanced at his watch. Four-thirty. Way past time to get home and start grading spelling tests. "Have a nice weekend, okay? Thanks for the advice. I'll see you on Monday."

Without waiting for a response, he walked a few rows over to where he'd parked his car and got behind the wheel. All the way home, he tried to ignore what Nikki had said, but it was almost impossible. She'd been right. He *was* ready to start dating again, but he hadn't realized it until Lucy had walked into his classroom. She was the first woman who'd caught his attention in six months, and that had to say something.

What was the harm in asking her out? He wouldn't be Trevor and Lucas's teacher forever. He knew what Jake would say, and it made David roll his eyes. So what if she was a single mother. Not all of them were looking for replacement daddies for their kids. Some of them just wanted to live life the way normal, single adults did, and from what Nikki had said, Lucy was one of them. There was a pull between them he wouldn't mind exploring.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lucy slapped a plate of homemade macaroni and cheese in front of Trevor, eyebrows raised. "I'm still waiting for an explanation. And you..." She turned her gaze to Lucas. She had yet to discuss with him the interesting little meeting she'd had with his teacher. As if knowing how upset she was, he'd avoided her when she'd gotten home from the meeting, and had gone right upstairs after school, claiming he needed a little peace and quiet for once to do homework, and hadn't reappeared until she'd called the boys for dinner. Even then, he'd been dragging his feet and refused to meet her gaze. "What is this I hear about your behavior? It's a little soon for this, don't you think? You're not supposed to act all depressed and maudlin as a way to get attention until high school."

Lucas's eyes widened a fraction, but like Trevor, he admitted nothing. Instead he focused on forking as much pasta into his mouth as he could

and still manage to close his lips to chew. Lucy sighed in frustration. What was it with these kids? Hell, what was it with everyone in her life? Did they really think she couldn't be happy without a man in it? Chris had said he understood her need to keep things casual, but in the end, he hadn't wanted to settle for only taking her out to the movies or dinner once a week.

He'd wanted a *commitment*, and she hadn't been willing to give it to him. When he'd told her she'd be knocking on his door within a month, wanting to be let back into his life, she'd all but laughed in his face. Even when she'd been married, she'd been alone most of the time. What made Chris think she'd lost the ability to take care of herself?

She settled into her chair at the head of the table, crossed one leg over the other and pushed her food around her plate with her fork. Who was she trying to fool? She'd seen David Storm this afternoon and she'd practically drooled all over the tile floor in the classroom.

Okay, so she didn't *need* a man. But that didn't mean she didn't *want* one. The thing she missed most since she'd broken up with Chris was having someone to go out with on the weekends. Having someone to hold hands with, and to kiss. As far as sex went, she might as well be a virgin again. It had been too damned long since she'd even thought about sex in any serious way and even longer since she'd had it, but seeing David had brought all kinds of illicit thoughts into her head. He was sexy, strong and handsome. And way too young for a mother of four. But still, it never hurt to fantasize.

A smile spread across her face and her cheeks heated. Here she was, having a family dinner with the boys, and she couldn't get David off her mind. Even if he hadn't been the boys' teacher, he'd never be interested in her, anyway. A man like that could get any woman he wanted. He'd have no use for a slightly-less-than-fit, too short older woman with hair that couldn't be tamed and a body she never could get to sit still for more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time.

"Mom?" Tanner, her eight-year-old, asked, his tone worried. "Are you okay?"

“I’m fine, kiddo.” She smiled. *Just dreaming about something I’m never going to get in this lifetime.*

## Chapter Two

Lucy glanced at Nikki through her sunglasses. “Would you believe the boys are trying to set me up with their teacher?”

Even now, she couldn’t stop thinking about the meeting yesterday afternoon. The boys had pushed the limits this time. And yet, she couldn’t get David’s warm eyes and easygoing personality off her mind. And the way he smelled. And the sexy way he smiled.

She bit back a groan. This was insane. He so wasn’t her type.

“I work with him. If it were happening to me, I don’t think I’d complain about it.” Nikki leaned back against the lounge chair, laughed and closed her eyes. “Though I have a feeling my husband might take issue with that.”

A smile spread over Lucy’s face. Ryan probably would, but the man really had nothing to worry about. Nikki was totally devoted to her husband, and Ryan was totally devoted to his wife. Lucy had always been jealous of her friend’s relationship, given the fact that her own had been such a mess for a long time, even before the divorce.

Lucy grabbed her water bottle from the table between the two lounge chairs, unscrewed the cap and took a long sip of the cool liquid. New England weather at this time of year could be volatile, but luckily they’d had unseasonable warmth this May. Lucy had opened the pool the week before, and though the water was still too cold for her, the boys were having a blast laughing and splashing around while Lucy and Nikki preferred to watch from the sidelines, just outside the splash zone.

“Any luck in the baby department?” Lucy asked, knowing to tread carefully but dying to ask the question. Nikki didn’t open her eyes.



“Not yet. We’re still hopeful.” She pushed a hand through her dark hair and sighed, her body seeming to tense. “And still trying.”

*And trying and trying.* The words went unsaid, but Lucy understood them all too well. She swallowed hard, sorry she’d brought up babies yet again. Nikki and Ryan had been trying—both naturally and with a fertility specialist’s help—for nearly six years, and so far they had nothing to show for their efforts. Lucy, on the other hand, had seemed to be able to get pregnant if Mack just looked at her a certain way and winked. Four boys during the course of their nine-year marriage proved that.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Nikki said, her tone softly chiding. “And you need to stop. We’ve been through this a thousand times before. You have no reason to feel guilty because you have four beautiful children. If it’s meant to be, Ryan and I will get pregnant. If not...well, for a while now we’ve been talking about adoption. I haven’t mentioned it sooner because I didn’t want to jinx things, but a few months ago we decided to start the process. With any luck, we’ll have a new child soon.”

Lucy smiled. If anyone deserved to be a parent, it was Nikki. So many people out there had kids they didn’t care about, and it broke Lucy’s heart to see good, loving people struggling so hard to start a family. “That’s terrific. I’m so glad to hear you’re not letting it get you down too much. And you know you’re welcome to borrow any of mine if you want to. For practice and all. At the moment, I’d give you the twins to keep as long as you wanted. Maybe even forever.”

Nikki glanced at Lucy and laughed. All at once, the tension seemed to drain out of the afternoon. “They’re great kids. They just want to see you happy. That’s what all this is about. And David isn’t a bad choice, if I do say so myself. He did his student teaching at Marley Elementary a few towns over, in my twelve-year-old niece’s class. In her words, he’s a total hottie. You could do a lot worse than him.”

True, but robbing the cradle wasn’t her style. Seven years didn’t sound like a lot on the surface, but given her marital status and children, it seemed more like there were decades between them.

“Yeah, he is pretty nice to look at. But he’s not my type. And he’s the boys’ teacher. That’s wrong on so many levels.”

“How do you figure?” Nikki frowned. “He’s sexy, he’s smart, he has a great body, a steady job and he loves kids. What more could you ask for?”

“An earlier date on his birth certificate?”

“Ha, ha. Very funny, Lucy. Believe it or not, he’s actually in a similar situation to yours, as far as relationships go. He dated someone for a *really* long time before they finally split up a few months ago.”

“It’s not the same. He wasn’t married to her, and he didn’t have kids. Why should I even consider dating the guy? He won’t be single for long. He’s not someone any sane woman with a pulse can ignore.” There was something about him that just naturally drew attention. But that didn’t mean she had to do anything about her interest. “I’m older than his oldest brother Jake.”

Nikki let out an exaggerated sigh. “*Please*. By a few months, maybe. We all graduated in the same class.”

“I know, but still. When we were seniors, David was the same age as my oldest boys are now.” She flopped back against the lounge chair and huffed out a breath. Mack was five years older than her, and had still had a lot of maturing to do. It seemed strange to even think about going in the other direction. “It really steams me that the kids are resorting to this. I thought they’d outgrown this need to find me someone to date.”

“They like him. They want him in their lives. It’s almost the end of the school year, and next year they’ll be moving on to middle school. Can you blame them for wanting to keep the guy in their lives?”

Lucy glanced at her friend. She had a point. Listening to Nikki’s explanation, it all started to make sense. The boys made no secret of the fact that he was their favorite teacher, even though they’d only had him for a little while. Next year they’d be at a different school, so they wouldn’t see him anymore. But that didn’t make what they were doing right.

She glanced toward the pool. Nate sat on the steps in the shallow end, squirting a water gun at Tanner a few feet away, who ducked and laughed. The twins were busy diving into the deep end and swimming all the way to the other side. Such cute kids.

Such devious minds.

"I'm not going to go out with the guy just because they want to keep seeing him after the school year ends."

"No, you're going to go out with him because *you* want to."

Yeah, like *that* was ever going to happen. "Even if I did want to—which I wouldn't even admit under threat of torture and death, mind you—there's no way he'd be interested in me."

Nikki wrinkled her nose and waved her hand in the air in front of her. She let out an impatient noise. "What's wrong with you? You're cute."

"Yeah, exactly how a thirty-two-year-old woman wants to be thought of. *Cute*. Why would he choose cute when he could have gorgeous? And believe me, Nikki. He could have gorgeous."

"Maybe he's not as superficial as most of the men you know." The look on Nikki's face was nothing short of sly. "He asked me about you, you know."

Lucy froze. No way. If he'd asked about her, it was probably just to make sure she wasn't as crazy as she must have seemed during their meeting. "He did not."

"Did too." Nikki followed the words up with a dramatic nod and a giggle so loud it drew the boys' attention. Once they realized nothing interesting was going on and went back to their playtime, Lucy leaned closer to Nikki.

"What did he say?"

"He wanted to know about your divorce, and if you were seeing anyone."

Lucy narrowed her eyes at Nikki, studying the other woman's face to see if she was lying. Unable to pick up on any of the usual signs that her

friend wasn't being entirely truthful, Lucy waved her hand in the air. "He's probably just wondering about the boys' mental states."

*Or mine.*

"You just keep telling yourself that."

"Maybe I will." If it would keep her from obsessing about the man, she just might.

\* \* \* \* \*

David was heading out to his car on Monday afternoon when he saw Trevor Parker sitting on a bench near the playground adjacent to the parking lot, swinging his feet. Since Lucy had been in to meet with him, both her boys' behavior had improved dramatically, but he'd noticed some unusual things he might have missed before he'd spoken with their mother. They shot him looks from time to time and then whispered to each other. They still liked to ask him questions about his life—and most of the questions centered around whether or not he was dating anyone. Lucas had even gone as far as to ask him if he thought Lucy was pretty, but then had walked away before David had had a chance to recover from the shock.

His answer was an unequivocal yes, but neither twin needed to know that. In fact, since that first meeting, he'd barely been able to get her off his mind.

He walked over to the boy and took a seat next to him. "Hey, Trevor. What's going on?"

Trevor shrugged, giving David a look that last week would have seemed forlorn, but now it made David suspicious. What was he trying to pull? "I missed the bus."

Of course. The boys hadn't given up on their plan. They'd decided to step it up instead. He should have expected this. "Do you want to go inside and call your mom?"

“No, thanks. I used my cell phone and tried calling my house and her cell, but she didn’t answer. I left her a message and told her I was sitting here waiting. I’m sure she’ll show up.”

David sighed at the drama in the boy’s voice. Didn’t he know enough to quit while he was ahead? “Do you want me to wait with you?”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to.”

The dejected look on Trevor’s face tore at David’s heart—but then again, the kid was apparently a born actor. David couldn’t really trust anything the boy said or did since he was trying to get David to go out with his mother.

Would it really be such a bad thing? What Nikki had said to him had made sense. Maybe Lucy was just looking for something casual. If she was, she might be exactly what he needed to break out of the slump he’d been in for the past six months.

He raised his eyebrows at the boy. “Didn’t she say she works at home?”

A worried look flashed across Trevor’s eyes for a brief second before he managed to school his expression. “Yeah, but she might have had to go shopping or something. Or she might be outside doing yard work and didn’t hear the phone ring. Or she might have walked to the end of the street to the bus stop to meet my brothers. The bus usually gets there late, at almost four o’clock, so it might be a while before she gets back.”

“Oh, yeah?” David was definitely suspicious, but he wasn’t going to call Trevor on it yet. A surprise trip to the kid’s house might help him figure things out. Besides, he wouldn’t mind seeing Lucy again, even though he doubted she would be happy to find him there. “Why don’t I give you a ride home?”

“Really?” Trevor looked up at him and David could swear he saw a healthy dose of mischief in those big blue eyes.

“Yeah, really. Let’s go.”

Trevor didn’t say a word as they walked to the car and got inside, but David could just about feel the humor in the air.

“You’ll have to tell me where you live,” he said to Trevor as he pulled the car out of the school parking lot and onto the quiet street. “I don’t know how to get there.”

“We live on Mason Street, number fifteen. It’s a big white house with flowers in the front, and it’s really easy to find.”

“Mason Street, huh?” David’s eyebrows rose. It was the richer section of town, home to older Victorians with beautifully manicured lawns. Lucy probably rented a place in one of the homes that had been converted to apartments. From what he’d seen of her and her children, she didn’t look like the type to have married into old money. Though the kids always looked well taken care of, there was nothing stuffy or pretentious about any of them.

When he finally pulled up to the house, he was surprised to find it was a single family, and appeared to be in immaculate shape. The more he learned about her, the more curious he got about the woman underneath the long, floral skirt and the wild hair. “Does your mom rent this house?”

“No. She got the house in the divorce and my dad bought a new one in California.”

David frowned. Had the boys ever mentioned what their father did for a living? If they had, he couldn’t recall. The two-story Victorian with the wraparound porch was twice the size of the house he’d grown up in, and he had a feeling his apartment would fit nicely in Trevor’s living room. “It’s a nice place.”

“It’s big. There’s plenty of room for more people.” The boy glanced up at David with such a hopeful look on his face that the truth struck David across the chest like a physical blow. Any residual doubt rushed away, leaving him certain of the kids’ intentions. The boys really were trying to set their mother up with him. Worse than that, they seemed to be out to try and find her a husband. After what Nikki had told him about Lucy, he doubted she’d appreciate their efforts.

"I'm sure there is, but I have a feeling your mother isn't interested in taking in renters." Without another word, he got out of the car and started up the walk toward the front door. Trevor followed.

"Is that your mother's car?" He pointed to a Mercedes sitting in the driveway. It wasn't new, but it was still a nice car, and in very good shape. The kind of car his mother would love to have, but not what he would have pictured Lucy driving.

Trevor blinked. "Um, yeah. You can come up to the door with me, in case she went out for a walk. She doesn't like us to be home alone."

Trevor opened the door with a key he pulled from his pocket and grabbed David's sleeve, just about dragging him inside. "My mom is probably here. She might not have heard the phone ring. Sometimes she gets so into her work that she doesn't hear anything, and she forgets to check for messages."

David nearly laughed, wondering if Trevor realized he wasn't painting the picture of a very good parent. In his three years of teaching, David had seen his fair share of neglectful parents, and Lucy Parker wasn't one of them.

"I bet she doesn't like it very much when you bring strangers into the house."

Trevor frowned. "You're not a stranger, and she won't mind if you're here. She wants to see you again."

"Did she say that to you?" David doubted Lucy would have confessed something like that to her children, even if what he said was true.

"Well, no, but I could just tell."

As if on cue, Lucy walked around the corner into the foyer, drying her hands on a dishtowel. She wore another long skirt in a dark floral pattern, paired with a black tank top and bare feet. A knot tightened low in his gut. He loved bare feet, and that hair...he'd had a few late-night fantasies about those silky curls.

"Trevor?" she asked. "What are you doing home so early? Did the bus come already?"

She saw David and she blinked. Her mouth opened and closed a few times before she spoke. “Hi. What are you doing here? Did something happen at school?”

“Hi.” Just as he’d suspected, the woman was *not* happy to see him. “Trevor missed the bus. He said he tried to call, but you didn’t answer, so I offered him a ride home.”

Her hands dropped to her side, the towel swaying gently back and forth against her right leg. “I’ve been here cleaning the house. I haven’t gone anywhere all day. If the phone rang, I would have answered.”

“I’m not questioning *you*.” His chin dipped slightly to indicate he knew what Trevor and his twin were up to. “I was leaving work anyway, so I figured I’d just give him a ride. I hope that’s okay with you.”

“It’s fine. Thank you.” Her lips pursed for a second before she turned and addressed her son. “Trevor, why don’t you go and make yourself a snack while I have a talk with Mr. Storm.”

Suddenly looking worried, Trevor dumped his backpack on the floor by the door and rushed out of the room like someone had lit his shoes on fire. When he was out of earshot, David turned his attention back to Lucy.

“Look, I’m sorry about this. I knew what he was up to when I saw him sitting outside the school, but he said he’d already called home and I couldn’t leave him there.”

“It’s fine.” She rolled her eyes. “I just wish they would stop this. It’s crazy. Let’s go in here and talk. Away from young ears.”

She led him into a small room to the left of the door. Bookcases lined the walls, and a computer desk dominated the center of the dark-paneled room. “This is my office.” She gestured around the room with a wave of her arm. “Excuse the mess. For some reason I can’t figure out, I work better with a little bit of clutter.”

The discomfort he caught in her eyes made him laugh. Did she think a few papers lying around on the desk were going to bother him? “This is nothing. You should see my apartment.”

“Not much of a cleaner, huh?”



“Nah. Not really.” Katie had been the one obsessed about everything staying in its place. David couldn’t care less. He liked to think of the apartment as lived-in rather than controlled chaos. His mother had a few other choice words for the state of his home, but since she had yet to volunteer to come over and clean it, he figured it couldn’t be too bad. It wasn’t dirty, it was just...cluttered.

He walked around Lucy’s office, looking at the bookcases. Apparently they had a shared interest in reading, and the subject matter seemed to be a match, too. He read as much as he could, mostly thrillers and horror novels. He had a lot of the same books on his own shelves as she had on hers.

Near the window, a shelf of titles by his favorite horror author caught his eye. He glanced at Lucy over his shoulder. “You like L. J. Reed, too?”

She laughed, as if caught by surprise, and her face flushed an attractive shade of pink. “Not exactly. I don’t usually pick those ones up.”

“You haven’t read these books?” If not, she was missing out. The author knew how to paint a perfect visual of a dark, gothic world.

“Like I said, I try to avoid reading them, unless I absolutely have to.”

“What do you mean?”

Her expression turned sheepish and she glanced away. “I guess I’m one of those writers who hates everything they’ve written. I just can’t stand to look at the stuff once I’ve read through the final copy.”

He froze, his hand halfway toward the shelf to grab a book. No way. How could he not have known there was an author living in Lilton? Especially given that his mother was usually up on any gossip floating around. “You’re L. J. Reed?”

“Yep. Lucy Jane. Reed is my maiden name. I used it since my first book was published before I was married, and it was just easier to stick with the same one.”

“Shit.” The word came out before he could stop it, and by the way Lucy laughed, he guessed she hadn’t been expecting it.

“Surprised?” she asked, her head cocked to the side and an endearing smile on her lips. He was hit with the sudden urge to cup her

cheek in his palm and stroke his thumb across her mouth. Swallowing hard, he pulled back the urge. She wouldn't appreciate him touching her. At least not yet.

"Actually, that's a huge understatement." He shook his head, trying to shake off some of his shock along with it. "You're one of my favorite authors."

"Really?"

Lucy's blush deepened, and it only made him want to touch her more. He curled his hands into fists. "Yeah. And you know what else?"

"What?"

"You, Ms. Parker, have a very twisted mind."

She closed her eyes for a few seconds, a smile on her face. When her lids opened, she met his gaze. "Thanks. I think."

A layer stripped away, and he was still no closer to knowing the woman standing in front of him than he'd been the first day they met. If anything, she'd become even more of a puzzle and his fascination with her grew. No way would he be able to stay away now.

She might pretend she wasn't interested, like she had in his classroom, but he was nothing if not determined. He didn't give up easily when he found something he wanted, and damn, he *wanted* Lucy Parker. "It was definitely a compliment. You don't look like a person who would write books like these. They aren't for the faint of heart."

"So I've heard."

"You were really young when you started writing." Her raised eyebrows had him backpedaling. He waved his hands in the air in front of him in a gesture of surrender. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that you aren't young now, just that you've written twelve books. If you graduated with my brother, that would make you about thirty-two."

She smiled, but shifted from foot to foot and glanced anywhere but at him. So she didn't like talking about her books or her writing. "Yeah. My first book was published when I was twenty, and I've written one a year since then. But I'd been writing a lot longer than that, and have a few manuscripts gathering dust in boxes under my bed to prove it. I started

submitting to agents when I was sixteen, but didn't get anywhere until a couple years after that."

He leaned back against the desk, hands in the pockets of his pants. The whole process fascinated him, especially that she'd started before she'd even graduated high school. "So you've always known you wanted to be a writer?"

"I guess. I also wanted to be an actress, a lawyer, a police officer and a doctor. Writing was the only thing I've wanted to do for any length of time. I've always loved it, but I have to tell you, sometimes it isn't easy. I'm self-supporting now, but that wasn't always the case."

She must do very well for herself to be able to afford the house she lived in and the car she drove. He shook his head, but didn't refute her claims. He'd learned early on there was more to this woman than met the eye.

"It lets me stay home with the boys, which is definitely a good thing," she continued. Her expression went from playful to serious in a matter of seconds and she sighed. "Listen. About the kids..."

The last thing he wanted to talk about was the kids. He wanted to get to know Lucy better, but it seemed like whenever she brought up the boys she slammed down her own mental armor. What was she afraid of?

He held up his hand to stop her. "It's fine. I know what's going on. Since you told me your thoughts on the matter, I've been watching Trevor and Lucas closely and I have to say, I agree. They're definitely up to something, and they still think they're getting away with it. In situations like this, I've found it's better not to encourage them. If we make a big deal out of it, they might redouble their efforts. They'll eventually stop on their own if they don't get the results they're hoping for. If I bring you my copies of your books, will you sign them for me?"

Lucy blinked, her expression filled with disbelief. She tucked a few curls behind her ears and let out a shaky laugh. "Um, sure. I guess that would be fine. Come by whenever you want to. Trevor and Lucas are great kids, and usually really well behaved. I'm all for ignoring it, if you think it'll help."

No way would he let her talk herself out of the interest he'd seen in her eyes the first time they'd met. He didn't know much about Lucy, but he had to have her in his life, even if only for a little while. He took a step forward and plucked the locks of hair from behind her ear, brushing his fingers across her cheek as he did. "I don't want to ignore it."

Her gaze snapped to his, her brows knit together. "But you said—"

"I said ignoring the problem would probably make it go away. But I didn't say I wanted it to go away. I want to get to know you better. Have coffee with me."

"No." She didn't even hesitate, and she accompanied her denial with an emphatic shake of her head, dislodging his hand from her skin.

He frowned. He'd never struck out so fast in his life. "Why not?"

"You're my kids' teacher. Wouldn't it be unethical to date me?"

At the moment, ethics were the last thing on his mind. He hated to admit it, but that was a dangerous place to be. Backing off—just a little—might not be a bad idea. He could wait until he wasn't the boys' teacher anymore. "The school year is over in less than a month."

"Still. I'm not sure I'm comfortable with this." She walked over to the window and glanced outside. "I don't think it's a good idea. Ignoring them might not work this time. I'll talk to the boys and get them to stop. Maybe taking away their video games and pool time again and making them go to bed right after dinner would smarten them up a bit."

He shook his head. She was too busy pushing him away without hearing him out to really listen to him. If she expected him to give up so easily, she had another think coming. "Would coffee really be such a bad idea?"

"It probably would."

"If this is about me liking your books, that's not why I asked you out."

She turned back to him, hands on her hips. "It's not?"

"Not at all. I didn't even know about that until a few minutes ago, remember?"

“I guess so.”

The conflicted look on her face echoed somewhere inside him. He walked over to where she stood and cupped her cheek in his hand. Without giving himself time to come to his senses—or giving Lucy time to push him away—he leaned in and kissed her.

He’d meant the kiss to be a soft brush of lips. A show of his interest and a way to convince her to go out with him. Once he tasted her lips, he knew there was no going back. The kiss turned into so much more. She seemed to hesitate, holding herself stiff against him for a few seconds before she finally gave in and parted her lips, sinking against him and wrapping her arms around his neck. He slipped his hand into her hair, deepening the kiss while he stroked his tongue into her mouth.

Lucy moaned, a soft, shuddering sound that made him want to push her against the wall and press his body up against her. His cock stirred at the thought, but for the moment, he’d have to be content with pulling her closer, feeling the way her body molded to his and wishing this incredible kiss could go on forever.

The sound of the front door crashing against the wall snapped the spell. She broke the kiss and stepped back as if she’d been burned, smoothing down her skirt and licking her lips nervously.

“Are you okay?” he asked, waiting for her to slap him or tell him to go to hell.

Instead of getting angry, or showing him any emotion at all, she shook her head, sighed and left the room, calling out to her kids on the way. “You boys are going to put a hole through the wall one of these days.”

David walked out of her office and followed the brood into the kitchen. He’d stressed the woman out enough for one day, and as a single mother, she had bigger problems to deal with than his offer of coffee. He wasn’t giving up on her, but he wasn’t going to push too fast, either. The kiss might have been too much, too soon, and he’d have to watch that. For now. Once the school year ended and the boys were no

longer his students, all bets were off. "I'm going to go now, so you can get them settled."

"Thanks." She smiled, relief flooding her expression. "I appreciate it. And I appreciate you giving Trevor a ride home. Hopefully he won't miss the bus again. *Ever.*"

The last part was added with a pointed glare toward her son, who sat staring at the table like it might sprout legs and run away.

"Are you sure you won't change your mind about the coffee?" he asked when he was halfway through the kitchen doorway, glancing at her over his shoulder.

Her gaze shot up to his, her eyes wide, and he realized his mistake. Lucy glared at him. "No, thanks. I have plenty of coffee here, but thanks for offering to send some home with the boys. I'm grateful, but it *really* won't be necessary."

She rushed forward, grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the foyer, not stopping until they stood next to the still-open front door. Her lips were parted, her brow knit in aggravation. She looked beautiful when she was pissed, but he figured she'd smack him if he told her so.

"Are you crazy?" she asked, glancing toward the kitchen like she expected one of the boys to walk through the door at any moment.

He forced back a laugh. Was she talking about the kiss? "What did I do?"

"They *want* me to go out with you, remember? Don't feed into their games by asking me out in front of them. It'll only encourage them more, and then they'll *never* stop."

He shook his head. Why was she so against going out with him? He knew she was interested. Whenever her gaze locked with his, he caught something in her eyes that mirrored what he felt inside. They were circling each other, and she refused to admit it. "You have very expressive eyes."

Lucy took a step away from him. She leaned against the doorframe, her arms crossed over her chest. "Excuse me?"

"You say you don't want to go out with me, but you really do."

She huffed out a breath and looked outside, but said nothing in response.

The fact that she didn't make any attempt to deny it brought a smile to his face. He stepped closer until he stood right in front of her. For days, he'd been dying to touch her. One brief kiss hadn't been nearly enough. He wanted to stroke her arms to see if the skin there felt as soft under his hands as he suspected it would. "So why not just say yes?"

"I've already told you my reasons, but you refuse to listen. Because it isn't a good idea."

But *why*? She seemed to be very skilled at avoiding the real issues. He'd bet anything that she didn't even know why she kept rejecting him, at least not really. Excuses only went so far before a person had to face the truth. "You've said that. I'd like to hear some real reasons to support it, rather than just excuses."

Lucy waved her hand in the air in dismissal. "I'm *not* making excuses."

*And I'm not giving up on you yet.* In the six months since he'd split with Katie, he hadn't met another woman who turned him on like Lucy did. She was smart, gorgeous and talented, and he had a feeling she'd be a blast to talk to. Mentally, she'd challenge him, and he needed that in his life. Plus, he couldn't ignore the tension between them that had nothing to do with her family or his job. It deserved exploring, and if she wasn't willing to admit it, he'd just have to find a way to show her. Whether it lasted a few weeks, or a few months—or even became something more significant—he wasn't about to let her walk away without giving it a chance. At the very least, he intended to find out what her lips tasted like and how soft her hair was again when he tangled his hands in it as he kissed her.

And if he kept going with that line of thinking, she'd know without a doubt exactly how she affected him and she'd kick him out and slam the door in his face. Not a pleasant option.

His fingers itched to touch the side of her face, but he held back, both out of respect for her wishes and out of fear of scaring the woman

away. He met her wary stare and smiled, hoping to disarm her fear a little bit. Her expression softened only marginally, but it was enough for him. “If you say so. I’ll bring some books by in a week or two.”

“For what?”

“You said you’d sign them for me, remember? I’m going to hold you to that.” And if it was what it took to see her again, he would make sure he did just that. But not too soon.

Without giving her a chance to answer, he turned and walked out the door. He’d give her time. Maybe even until the school year ended. But then her time to hesitate would be up.



## Chapter Three

Lucy let out a breath, trying to calm herself before she flew off the handle and screamed at the boys. All four of them had been atrocious today, culminating in Nate's attack on the family dog. Muffin's collar was now glued to her fur, thanks to the six-year-old who'd been working on arts and crafts when the twisted brainstorm had hit. It was going to take forever to get it unstuck and the remnants of the school glue out of the poor animal's black hair.

At fourteen, Muffin was living on borrowed time anyway and most days she liked to lay by the sliding glass door in the kitchen, soaking in the sunshine and sleeping. The poor thing had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and now she was hobbling around the house whining and scratching at her neck.

*Welcome to summer vacation.*

Lucy leaned against the counter and closed her eyes, trying to shut out the sounds of the kids laughing and playing, terrorizing each other and the two cats—Jack and Dino—that had decided to hide out under the living room couch. A few deep breaths relaxed her a little bit, but as soon as she opened her eyes, the disaster area that was her house during the first week or two of summer vacation only stressed her out again.

She was only annoyed and frazzled because she had edits to do, and a deadline to keep. Any other time, and she could take it all in stride. Even so, she had to put an end to the chaos before it took over all their lives. Already she could feel her frustration level creeping into dangerous territory.

It didn't help that David had said he'd stop by with some books—and had never shown up. She hadn't really been looking forward to his visit...well, not much, but it irked her that he seemed to have lost interest so quickly. Just when she'd been thinking about accepting his invitation, he'd decided not to issue it again. He'd probably gone home, thought about dealing with her kids and decided it would be better to make himself scarce. Not that she blamed him. Any sane man would do the same thing in David's situation. The fact that he'd even asked her out in the first place didn't say much for his mental acuity.

"Trevor, Lucas, Tanner and Nate," she called, trying to keep her voice even. "Get your little butts in here and clean up all these scraps of paper and art supplies you left lying around. If I have to take care of it myself—again—you'll all be going to bed at six until you leave for your father's house."

She nudged some of the multicolored dots of paper with her toe. Were they trying to make confetti or something? It seemed like every time they sat down with their construction paper, more of it ended up on the floor than it did in the projects. And forget the twins. They were too *old* and *cool* to do arts and crafts. They just crumpled the paper into balls, pretended the balls were evil alien creatures, and used the scissors to "vanquish" the monsters. The results of the destruction always ended up on the kitchen tile. Usually they were fairly good about cleaning up after themselves, but lately they all seemed to *want* to make things more difficult for her.

She rolled her eyes. It probably had something to do with David, how they wanted her to go out with him and she had yet to do it. *Looks like you're going to be waiting a pretty long time, boys.* There was no way David Storm would be back in this house. Now that school had ended, his responsibility to the twins had ended with it.

Scuffling noises from the hall drew her attention to the doorway. Lucas, Tanner and Nate marched into the kitchen and immediately started doing as told, but Trevor was suspiciously absent. That didn't bode well for the rest of the evening. Lucy frowned in suspicion.

"Where is your brother?" she asked the group.

When none of the boys even looked at her, she knew there was trouble. Big trouble, given that they weren't even talking to each other. Normally the chatter in the house was ever-present. "I asked you gentlemen a question."

"He's upstairs," Lucas said, stuffing a few handfuls of scrap paper into the recycling bin next to the fridge.

"Doing what?" A knot formed in her stomach and she pressed her palm there. What had he done now?

"Probably still trying to unclog the toilet." Nate gave her a smile only a six-year-old could pull off without getting into some major trouble.

It took a few seconds for her mind to process what he'd said, but when it did, she almost screamed. Her heart dropped to her toes and her breath caught in her throat. *The toilet.*

"Trevor!" She took off at a run, taking the steps two at a time, and rushed into the upstairs bathroom. As Nate had told her, Trevor knelt in front of the toilet, jabbing the handle of the plunger into the bowl over and over, as if it would fix the problem. Water was filling up the bowl and starting to spill over onto the white tile floor.

"What are you doing?" Lucy rushed over and turned the water off, stopping the flow. She grabbed some towels and tossed them onto the floor to sop up the mess.

"I got something stuck," Trevor stated in a matter-of-fact tone, still jabbing with the plunger. More water spilled onto the floor with every thrust.

"*What* did you get stuck?" At this point, she wasn't even sure she wanted the answer. "And stop sticking the plunger into the toilet like that. It's the wrong end, and a plunger might not be the solution, anyway. Depending on what's in there, it might make things worse."

Trevor was lucky he was leaving soon to spend a month with his father. He'd just ruined all his summer fun with one stupid, immature action an eleven-year-old should never have even thought to do. *You are under complete house arrest this summer, buddy.*

"I heard you need some help in here," a familiar masculine voice spoke from the doorway. It made Lucy go hot and cold all over.

*David.* With a frustrated sigh, Lucy spun around, arms crossed over her chest. "What are you doing here?" she asked, even though she already knew the answer.

"Lucas called me. He said Trevor clogged the toilet and you needed help fixing it." He shrugged and gave her a sheepish smile. "I didn't know what to believe, but I figured I should come anyway, just in case. I'm glad I did. Your boys let me in when I knocked."

She shot the three standing in the hallway behind him dirty looks. They were so in for it. Come six o'clock the whole bunch of them would be heading to bed. "You know better than to answer the door."

"It was Mr. Storm," Lucas piped in. "We checked. We didn't think you'd mind."

More like they didn't think she'd let him in, so they decided to take matters into their own hands. How had they managed to find his phone number in the first place? "Sorry they dragged you all the way over here."

"I'm already here," David said. "I might as well take a peek."

The look on his face told her he wasn't going to take no for an answer, so she stepped to the side and let him deal with the issue, grateful that she wouldn't have to be the one to stick her hand in the bowl to figure out what was going on. Better him than her, if he really felt the need to insist. A small smile curled the corners of her lips, but she refused to acknowledge it was from seeing him again. She was only glad to see him because it had been so long since she'd had a man around the house to help with minor repairs. Usually she had to deal with the problems herself or break down and shell out the money to hire someone to come in and take care of it.

Dressed in a pair of well-worn jeans and a tight white T-shirt, he looked better than he did in his dressier work clothes, and he'd looked pretty amazing in those. He really was a hottie, as Nikki had put it, and he seemed to know his way around household repairs. He leaned down

to work on the toilet, and her gaze dropped to his rear end. Yeah, definitely a hottie.

And her kids were all in the room, so she really needed to get a handle on her emotions.

“Thanks for coming over,” she said to distract herself from thoughts she had no business thinking in the first place. “I appreciate it.”

“No problem. I don’t mind. Anytime you need help with something, feel free to give me a call. I’m pretty handy around the house.” He stood, holding a soggy, rolled-up wad of socks in his hand. Water dripped from the ball onto the floor by David’s feet. “Missing some laundry?”

Lucy groaned. Of all the embarrassing ways for the boys to get him over to the house. Couldn’t they have done something less utterly and completely disgusting? Sadly, that sort of thing was all too common around here, though usually on a much smaller scale.

He tossed the ball of socks into one of the double sinks and washed his hands in the other.

While he was drying his hands, Lucy turned her attention to her boys. “Trevor, what the heck were you thinking?”

He glanced from her to David and back again, blinking like crazy. He looked toward his brothers, who all looked away. “I’m really sorry, Mom. I wanted to do my own laundry. You know, so you’d have less to do.”

She might almost have believed it if Lucas hadn’t snickered. Here she thought they’d given up on their plan, but they’d really just started. What would they do next, blow up her car for attention? At this point, she wouldn’t put anything past them. “Both of you. To bed. Now. That’s enough of this. Now you’ve gone too far. Nate and Tanner, did you have anything to do with this?”

The two younger boys met her question with a chorus of emphatic denials.

“Good. Why don’t the two of you take Mr. Storm downstairs and get him something to drink? I’ll be right down after I have a nice, long talk with your brothers.”

\* \* \* \* \*

David sat at the table with the two younger Parker boys, eight-year-old Tanner and his brother, Nate. The boys had grabbed him a bottle of water—their mother didn't *allow* soda since they were “hyper enough already”—sat him down at the table, and given him the children's version of Lucy's life story. Especially the recent months, since she'd broken up with the man they referred to as the “dumb boyfriend”. He wondered if she realized the younger kids appeared to be in on the plot, too. They gave such glowing recommendations he had to bite back a laugh.

“So then my dad moved to California,” Tanner told him, his eyes sparkling with the same mischief he'd seen in Trevor's eyes so many times at the end of the school year. “And he got married again. My mom wants to get married again, too.”

David nearly choked on his water. “Does she know that?”

“Well, no,” Tanner continued, his big, blue eyes wide. “But she will.”

“You think so?”

He nodded, going about as solemn as a preteen could get. “I know so. My daddy says she'll be happier when she...*moves on*.”

David smiled. He had a feeling Lucy already had moved on, but her ex and her boys didn't seem to know it yet. Either that, or the kid had watched a few too many episodes of *Dr. Phil*.

Tanner glanced at David out of the corner of his eye. “Do you like my mom, Mr. Storm?”

“Call me David. You're not in school right now. We're all friends here. And yes, I do like your mom.” Probably a little too much. He barely even knew her.

“Are you going to ask her out on a date?” Nate asked, making *date* sound like a forbidden word. He blinked a few times before bursting into a round of giggles.

David joined in the laughter. “Your mom doesn't want to go out with me.”

“Yes she does,” Nate argued. “I know it. She said so the other day. I heard her talking with Aunt Nikki.”

“Oh, really?”

The little boy nodded his blond head and wrinkled his nose. “She said you’re a hottie.”

David couldn’t help but smile. That put a new spin on things. Maybe she wasn’t as averse to the idea of coffee with him as she’d pretended to be.

He didn’t have a chance to say anything else. Lucy walked into the room, took one look at her boys and threw her hands up in the air. “What do you two think you’re doing, harassing Mr. Storm like this?”

“Just talking, Mom,” Tanner assured her, his tone serious. “And he said we can call him David since we aren’t in school, and we’re friends.”

The glare Lucy shot him had him shaking his head. He’d pissed her off. Again. Damn, she was cute when she was all red and frazzled.

“Upstairs, guys.” She propped her hands on her hips. “Go brush your teeth, wash up and get your pajamas on. It’s almost bedtime.”

Once they’d rushed out of the room, she turned to David. “Don’t listen to anything they told you. None of it’s true. Absolutely *none* of it.”

Her face was flushed, her lips parted and her hair a mass of wild, strawberry blonde curls around her face. The urge to kiss her—hard—nearly overrode his common sense. Almost. At the last second, he dragged the feeling back and stood, balling his hands into fists to keep from grabbing her.

“So you don’t think I’m a hottie?”

“I...” Her voice trailed off and she huffed out a breath. “Can I plead the fifth on that one?”

“Sure, but I already have my answer. And for the record, I think you’re pretty hot, too.”

Hope, and something stronger, lit her eyes for a second before her expression fell. “David, don’t. We talked about this. There can’t be anything between us.”

“Why not? School’s over. I’m not their teacher anymore.” He stepped forward, unable to resist touching her any longer. It had already been too damned long. Almost a month since he’d last had his hands on her skin and his lips on hers. He’d done the wait-and-be-patient thing, but now that patience was wearing thin. He needed to touch her. Anywhere. He reached out and grasped a lock of hair, rubbing it back and forth between his forefinger and thumb. “Your hair is so soft.”

“Stop.” She said the word, but she leaned into his touch. A soft sigh escaped her lips. That was all it took for his cock to stir against his zipper. Any more of this, and she was going to kill him. Did she even have a clue?

“Why do you tell me to stop when you don’t really mean it?”

Lucy licked her lips. “You know it wouldn’t work between us.”

She’d said that to him so many times, he couldn’t hold back the aggravation. He dropped his hand and scowled. “Why the hell not?”

“David.” The single word held a warning he chose not to take.

“Is it because I’m younger than you? You don’t think I’m mature enough to handle a real relationship? Because I have to tell you, that’s not true.”

“It isn’t that.”

He searched her eyes for a lie but found only sincerity. What was it about this woman? She confounded him. Made him hot and bothered with just a look. And she confused the hell out of him because she kept telling him no without having a valid reason. He might have been reading her wrong, but he got the feeling she was scared. If she was, he didn’t blame her. He wasn’t exactly ready to jump in with both feet, either, but at least he was willing to give it a chance. This kind of attraction didn’t happen every day. “Then what is it?”

“I have four kids. You don’t want to get involved with someone like me. Too much baggage.”

He stared at her. She had to be kidding. What kind of lousy excuse was that? “Why don’t you let me make that decision myself?”



She said nothing, but he was fine with that. He could wait her out. He wasn't leaving her house tonight without either a yes or a real reason why she was turning him down, and he told her as much.

"Are you serious?" she asked, a hint of laughter in her voice.

"Absolutely."

"Okay, here's a reason for you, and it's a damned good one, too. I'm not interested." She hesitated when she said the words, and glanced down at the floor.

Yeah, and that kiss in her office had been completely one-sided. "You're lying."

She narrowed her eyes, but he didn't give her a chance to refute what he'd said. Instead, he walked over to her, cupped her face in his hands and kissed her.

Lucy didn't even hesitate. Her hands came around his shoulders and she held him close, putting as much into the kiss as he did. He'd intended the kiss to be brief, not much more than a little proof for Lucy that there was something between them, but like the time before, it quickly combusted. When he touched her, he lost his control. Heat flared between them and he pulled her closer, reveling in the feel of her soft, curvy body against his.

Her fingers dug into the muscles of his shoulders and he stroked his tongue into her mouth, relishing in the sweet, warm taste of her. He bunched her skirt in his hands, raising it up a few inches, wanting to raise it more. He would give anything right now to lift her onto the counter and fit himself between her thighs.

The woman was perfect. And he was going to give her another reason to say no if he didn't slow things down. His body responded to her a lot faster than he'd expected. *Nothing like going from zero to sixty in two seconds flat.*

Reluctantly, he broke the kiss, not wanting to push her too fast. She'd send him packing if she knew what one brush of her lips did to his body, and if she kept pressing herself against him the way she had been, he wouldn't have been able to do anything to hide his reaction.

He glanced down at her and smiled when he saw she appeared just as affected as he was. Her eyes had a glazed-over look and her lips were swollen. Very sexy and thoroughly kissed.

“You okay?” he asked, trying to slow down his erratic breathing.

She nodded, hesitating for a few seconds before she spoke. When she did finally speak, her voice was soft. “Do you want to come to dinner tomorrow night?”

He had to fight the urge to cheer. Finally, she admitted she wanted to see him again. And not just for coffee. Dinner, at her house. With her family. The idea of a family date shouldn’t have thrilled him as much as it did. Something inside him warned him it wasn’t what he should want, but he ignored it. Lucy said she’d see him again. In a social setting. So it wasn’t the quiet, intimate evening talking over a cup of coffee he’d imagined. So what? Her kids could be little hellions at times, but they were great kids, and spending time with them would be fun.

He hoped.

Schooling his expression, he nodded. “Sounds great.”

What might have been anxiety passed across her eyes. She walked over to the cabinet, grabbed a glass and filled it with water from the filter attached to the tap. Once she’d downed the whole glass and set it on the sideboard with a thump, she turned her attention to her fingernails, like they were the most interesting things she’d ever seen.

Was she having second thoughts about inviting him for dinner? She didn’t seem happy to be in the same room with him all of a sudden. The woman wouldn’t speak to him or even meet his gaze, and however he spun it, it still spelled trouble.

“Hey, Lucy?”

She glanced up, a shaky smile on her face. “Yeah?”

“Is everything okay? You look a little pale.”

“Everything is fine. It’s just been a long and stressful day. The boys have been crazy, and a few hours ago, Nate glued the dog’s collar to her neck.” As if on cue, an ancient-looking chocolate lab waddled into the room, at least fifteen pounds overweight and as much white as brown.

David reached down to pat the animal and it nuzzled against his hand. "I didn't know you had a dog."

Lucy smiled. "A dog and two cats. The cats spend most of their time hiding from the boys, and Muffin here is getting up there in age. She likes to lay around all day, either in here or out on the deck if it's nice outside."

"I used to have a dog," David said. Jasper. A mutt, but the sweetest dog he'd ever seen. He missed the little guy. Missed having someone to go for morning runs with. For the past six months, he'd been out every morning by himself.

"What happened?" Lucy asked, handing Muffin a dog biscuit from a box on the counter.

"He lives with my ex." He shrugged. "It was her dog. Not much I could do about her taking him. What time should I be here tomorrow night?"

"You're really good at changing the subject, aren't you? Seven o'clock. And it's casual. *Very* casual. It'll be the two of us and my four little monsters. I promise they won't break any household fixtures this time. I'll make sure they're on their best behavior. At least the best they can manage, at under twelve years old."

A few months ago, if a woman had said that to him, he would have bolted in the other direction. For some reason, when Lucy talked about her kids, it didn't bother him at all. "Sounds terrific. See you tomorrow night. I'll bring dessert."

## Chapter Four

“I’m not going to be able to make it tomorrow night,” David said to his brother Jake over the phone. He’d been back from Lucy’s house for a few minutes and figured it would be better to get this conversation over with sooner rather than later.

“Why not? You never miss a game on my big-screen TV.”

David couldn’t help but smile. Baseball fan that he was, seeing Lucy would trump even the World Series. He wandered into his living room and flopped down on the couch, grabbing the remote and surfing through the channels. “I have a date.”

“No way.” Jake let out a long, low whistle. “I thought you were going to take a break from women for a while after what happened with Katie.”

“So did I. And I did take a break, but then I met someone. You know how that is. You weren’t looking for anyone when you ran into Amber again after not seeing her for so many years.”

And though Jake had tried to fight his attraction to Amber at first, he’d ended up married to the woman anyway. Not that David expected to marry Lucy. He’d barely known her a month. But he did expect to have a good time with her while it lasted.

Jake was silent for so long David began to wonder if his brother had heard him. When he spoke, there was a weightiness to his tone that David rarely heard, even coming from his lawyer brother. “Is this like Amber and me?”

By that, Jake meant a serious, headed-to-the-altar kind of thing. The thought had terrified David a few years ago, hell, even seven months ago when he’d broken up with Katie, but now it just made him think. He

hadn't known Lucy very long, but he couldn't discount the possibility of a long-term relationship with her, either. "I don't know."

He had a feeling it might be. He felt different with Lucy than he had with any other woman, including Katie. Only time would tell. He wasn't naïve enough to believe in love at first sight, but he'd definitely felt an instant attraction. "This is only the first date," he continued. "It's too soon to tell. I like her. That's all I can say right now."

"Be careful," Jake warned. "If you tell Mom you're getting serious again, she's going to start with the whole grandchildren speech just like she does with the rest of us. Just like she did when you were with Katie."

"Lucy has four kids," he said before he could pull the words back.

"Are you for real?" Jake's hearty laugh carried across the line. "No way. Talk about instant family. How old are they?"

"Six, eight and a pair of eleven-year-old twins."

"Geez," Jake commented. "Are you sure you know what you're getting into?"

"Yeah. I know exactly what I'm getting into. The kids are nice boys. I had the twins in my class last year. But I'm not in this for the kids," he said, hoping to cut off any questions he wasn't ready for. "She doesn't really want me getting close to them, and that's fine with me. I just want to spend a little time with her. I can't say yet whether or not it'll end up as something serious."

"She's a little old for you, isn't she?" Jake asked, and then he laughed. "Wait a second. You're talking about Lucy Parker, aren't you?"

"How did you know?"

"Just a hunch. Not many people in town have twins. Those boys tried to set her up with my buddy Tony once. They're something else, those kids. Not so much nice boys as they are wild maniacs most times. I know you're not going to listen, but I think you might be getting in over your head."

*Wonderful.* He hadn't called for advice on his love life. He'd just wanted to explain to his brother that he'd be too busy to make it to his

house to watch the game. “Funny, she doesn’t look as old as you do. Must be all that stress at work, making you look old and wrinkled.”

“That’s hilarious coming from someone who’s barely out of college. Really freakin’ funny, David. Okay, you’re dating a single mother. Not that there’s anything wrong with it, just...you know how Mom gets. You really don’t want her finding out about this. She’ll put pressure on Lucy, and then Lucy will put pressure on you, and before you know it, you’ll have a family of five to take care of and another couple of kids on the way.”

David shook his head. Miriam Storm wouldn’t bug her two remaining single children. At least not yet. She had Jake and Rachel to pester for grandchildren now, and Amanda would most likely be the next one of his siblings to get married. It would be a long while before she started harping on David. Then again, she’d probably see Lucy as her way to get lots of grandchildren fast. She’d latch on to the poor woman and never let go.

The thought made him shudder. “Like I said, it’s just one date.”

“And that’s exactly why you don’t want Mom to know. And don’t do anything stupid, either. Be careful. The woman doesn’t need any more children.”

For an hour after he hung up, he couldn’t stop thinking about what Jake had said. Was he serious about Lucy? *Could* he be, given a little more time? He didn’t know, but tomorrow night he intended to find out. Having dinner at her house with all four of her children would be a trial by fire, but surprisingly, he couldn’t wait to go.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lucy ran her fingers through her hair, staring at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She’d told David tonight was casual, and she’d meant it. Instead of her usual summer uniform of a long skirt and tank top, she wore a pair of ratty jeans and a faded black T-shirt, and hadn’t even

bothered to do much with her hair. She'd put on a bit of makeup, only because after years of wearing it, it had become habit.

*Yeah, right.* If that wasn't a lie, she didn't know what was.

So she might have tried, just a little, to make herself look good, but there was nothing wrong with that. He was a man, and she was a woman who hadn't been all that close to any man in way too long. The makeup was only natural. Instinctual, even. But she wasn't interested in attracting David. Her plans tonight didn't include much beyond trying to chase him away.

She needed to find an older man, someone who was settled and wouldn't mind dealing with four boys for most of the year, except for the time in the summer and the few holidays they went to visit their father. She had no future with David, and she wasn't at a place in her life for games, as tempting as an affair with him might be.

And tempted she was. Especially after that kiss. The man had a very talented mouth, and she'd spent most of the night before awake, tossing and turning in bed and wondering why she felt such a strong need to get rid of him. A fling wouldn't be so bad, would it? A week or two spending time between the sheets before they each went their separate ways. The idea was an appealing one, in theory, but she had the kids to think about. She might date some, but she couldn't carry on an affair when they were at such an impressionable age.

She pressed her hand to her stomach and groaned. Inviting him here had been a mistake. As soon as she saw him, she'd want to touch him. Want him to touch her. None of that could happen tonight.

The doorbell rang and she knew she had a matter of seconds before her boys answered. They were expecting David, and had been flying high all day because of it. She hadn't even bothered to warn them to be on their best behavior, thinking if they weren't, it would show him another reason not to bother sticking around. Wasn't that why she'd invited him in the first place? It certainly hadn't been because she wanted to *date* the guy.

She sighed. The whole day, she'd done nothing but think of her reasons for wanting him around. The answer disturbed her, and had prodded her to follow through with her plan of getting rid of him before things went too far. No, she didn't really want to date him. She just wanted to sleep with him a little, and that was a disaster waiting to happen.

After a final check of her appearance in the mirror, she left her bedroom and walked down the stairs, ready to greet her guest and start the night sure to chase him away. Telling him things wouldn't work between them hadn't been effective. Now to move on to plan B, and *show* him. She'd show the kids at the same time, too. All it would take was for David to get aggravated with them and lose his temper one time, and they'd dismiss him without a second thought. She hoped. From where she stood, she seemed to be the only sane one in this whole, big mess. Though, if she had to admit the truth, her sanity was hanging by a thread. Those kisses they'd shared were to blame for *that* problem.

When she rounded the corner and started down the stairs, her palms began to sweat. Her heart beat a little faster and anticipation curled low in her belly. She dismissed the reaction, telling herself she could *not* get interested in David, at least not any more than she was already. At the end of the night, it would be a non-issue, anyway. He'd be gone, and she'd be better off for it.

David stood near the door, surrounded by her children, a white bakery box in his hands. He smiled when he saw her, and the look in his eyes did funny things to her insides.

"Hi, Lucy. I was just telling the boys I brought something for dessert they'll really enjoy. Very kid-friendly. I would have brought you flowers, but for some reason, I didn't think you'd want them."

She had to return the smile. How could he manage to read her so well? Here she was, trying to lose him for his own good, and he'd kept his word and brought something to dinner. Not for her, but for her kids. She closed her eyes for a second and took a deep breath. When she opened her eyes, he was still looking at her with a mix of heat and kindness, and she snagged her lower lip between her teeth.



He was really going to hate the meal.

“Thanks.” She walked over to him and took the box out of his hands. “What did you bring?”

It would probably be some sort of dry, trendy pastry—something kids hated and adults only pretended to like. In her experience, people who didn’t have children didn’t understand them the way a parent did. Even childless teachers and caregivers didn’t really have a clue. Until a person was a parent, they had never completely immersed themselves in a child’s world.

“Nothing special. It’s just a chocolate whipped cream cake the bakery downtown makes. My mother used to get them for all our birthdays when we were kids, and we went crazy over them. I figured these guys would probably like the cake, too.”

Her heart warmed to him a little bit more. He wasn’t just trying to impress her, he was trying to impress her kids, too.

Or was he trying to use the kids to get to her?

Some of her elation dissipated and she walked into the kitchen with the box. He didn’t seem like the type to use a woman’s children as pawns to get closer to their mother, but she didn’t know him that well.

“It sounds terrific.” She opened the fridge to find a place for the box. After shuffling a carton of eggs and a gallon of orange juice, she managed to make it fit. “Thanks. I appreciate it. And you’re right about the flowers. I don’t need them, and in all honesty, they’re not really my thing.”

Mack used to bring her flowers on occasion, and he’d always complained that she never threw them away after they’d died. She’d left them in the vase on the counter, withered and brown, until the kids started to complain. It wasn’t that she was lazy, she just hadn’t really noticed them sitting there. Between the kids, the house and her writing, she’d learned early on to ignore the little things.

The flowers had stopped coming after a few years of marriage.

She stood and turned to find David right behind her, the boys nowhere in sight. She wet her lips. What were the kids up to now? If they thought she wanted some time alone with David, they’d thought wrong.

She'd been counting on having them constantly underfoot tonight. Without them in the room, she was too aware of how close David stood to her, and how much closer she wanted him to get. She smoothed her hands down her thighs and backed up a step, but the distance didn't help. A lock of his dark hair had fallen across his forehead, and she had to tuck her hands into the pockets of her jeans to keep from brushing it away.

"Your kids took off pretty quick," he said as if reading her mind. The heated look in his eyes told her he knew what she was feeling—and that he felt the same way. She swallowed hard. A very small, totally insane voice in her head wondered what it would be like to kiss him again, and this time to not stop quite so soon. The last two kisses had been cut off before they'd really gotten started.

"They're probably off playing video games. When dinner's ready, they'll come running. You can join them if you want. It'd be more fun than sitting around watching me burn the food." She shrugged, trying for nonchalance, but fearing she'd failed miserably. He had to see how nervous she was. No one could miss her shaking hands and sweaty forehead.

"You don't cook?" he asked, eyebrows raised. The amusement lighting his gaze told her he didn't believe her.

"Not much."

"That's not what I heard."

Her boys again. It had to be. "What did they tell you?"

"Lucas mentioned all the time how much he loved your cooking. And I saw those lunches you packed the boys. Lots of work went into those. Not the lunches of a mom who doesn't cook." The look on his face let her know he was on to her.

Lucy rolled her eyes. Of course they would have mentioned that. How was she supposed to talk her way out of this one? "Dinner is nothing special," she said, mimicking his earlier words. "Just spaghetti. Jarred sauce. No meat or grated cheese or anything like that. Days like this, I'm so busy with work and the kids I just don't have time to cook a big meal."

David surprised her by laughing. "I'm used to living on microwave meals and fast-food takeout. Spaghetti sounds awesome."

She walked over to the stove and turned on the burner under the pot of water she'd put there earlier for the pasta. All the while, she could swear she felt his gaze on her back. He knew what she was doing. He had to. The look on his face and his tone when he spoke had told her as much.

Once she had the burner going, she spun around, her hands on her hips. "Are you always this agreeable, or is it just for my benefit?"

David shrugged. "I'm a pretty easygoing guy."

"Hmm." No one could be that calm all the time. Even when Trevor had clogged the toilet, David had stuck his *hand* in there, barely breaking a sweat. Someone so relaxed around kids who were often more demon than human had to be holding something back. Sooner or later, she'd figure out what his deal was. In her experience, nice guys were generally jackasses in disguise. She'd learned that lesson several times over. "Is there something wrong with you I should know about?"

He laughed. "What do you mean?"

"Like mental illness, maybe?"

"Honey, if I was mentally ill, they wouldn't let me teach a bunch of impressionable young minds."

Very true, but she'd never met anyone who could hang around her kids for long and not go crazy. Separately, they were fine, but put the scheming little bunch all together and they turned into hell on legs, especially for someone who didn't have kids. And particularly when they were trying to get someone's attention, like they'd been doing with David.

"You're very good with children." She reached up into the top cabinet and pulled down the jar of spaghetti sauce she'd bought for tonight, almost cringing. Cooking was like therapy for her. She loved it, and standing at the stove creating meals was a good part of what had gotten her through the messy months of her divorce. Usually she made her own sauce in large batches and froze it in containers to use for dinnertime, but had vowed not to do anything that might impress the man she was

trying to scare away. Instead she'd gone with the cheapest, most basic variety the store had available, and she wasn't going to doctor it up with anything.

She popped the top on the jar, dumped the contents into an empty pan on the back burner, and set it to high. With any luck, the sauce would scorch and stick to the bottom of the pan. If he couldn't even eat the food, he'd be gone before dessert. Then she could order a pizza for her and the boys and finally let go of the tension that had been tightening her muscles since she'd asked David over for dinner.

"Did you not expect me to be good with them?" he asked, head cocked to the side.

"I wasn't sure."

"I love kids," he said, surprising her.

She stopped and turned to him. "Really?"

"Yeah. You seem surprised. I teach fifth grade. I wouldn't have gone into teaching at all if I didn't like kids."

Over the years, she'd known some teachers, both male and female, who couldn't seem to stand children. It wasn't always a given. "A lot of men I know, especially single ones, just tolerate kids. Once they get around a woman who has them, they don't last long. Either that, or they don't go near her in the first place."

She was speaking out of personal experience, at least on some level. A few of the men she'd dated since her divorce had been turned off at the thought of dealing with four young boys. The only one who'd ever actually met the boys was Chris, and that had been after six weeks of dating. The meeting had been a disaster. Neither the boys nor Chris had really taken a liking to each other. The boys had let him know with their behavior what they thought of him. It hadn't been pretty, and had made her remember why she usually kept her personal life and her family life separate.

David was different. He'd already known two of her kids when he'd met her, and had apparently seen them at their worst during the little

stunts they'd pulled. It was going to take a lot more than the mere mention of children to send this one packing.

Maybe, just maybe, he'd be the one to stick around. Though she doubted it. Tonight would be the real test, and though part of her was hoping he'd pass, the larger, saner part of her hoped he didn't. Sure, he was sweet and handsome and funny, but that didn't guarantee forever and since her boys were already involved, she couldn't ask for anything less than everything.

"Not all men are jerks, you know," David said, dragging her out of her thoughts.

Lucy chose not to answer, getting a feeling he was talking about her ex. Mack had been the king of jerks, but he wasn't the only ass she'd dated. There had been plenty, starting just after high school and ending with her latest disaster of a relationship. She had yet to meet a truly nice guy, and had long since convinced herself that particular species was only a myth.

"I'm not a jerk," David continued when she stayed silent. "I'm a good guy, and I'm going to prove it to you, no matter what it takes."

Like she hadn't heard that one before. He needed to know where she stood. There were too many things up in the air between them. "Listen, David. I think you're a great guy, but I've said it before and I'll say it again. There really can't be anything between us."

"There already is." His expression darkened and he touched his fingertips to her face, tracing down her jawline to her chin. A shiver rippled through her and she had to fight not to lean into the touch. The man turned her on so easily.

"No, there isn't. You're here because the boys want you here."

"And you don't?" There was no hurt in his expression. No doubt, either. The amusement she caught there let her know she wasn't fooling him for a second. The intensity in his eyes made her swallow hard.

"I didn't say that."

"So you *do* want me here." He took another step, bringing his body so close she could feel the heat coming from him. She let out a short laugh

and turned away. The last thing she needed right now was to get caught making out with her kids' teacher, and that was where they'd be headed if he kept looking at her like he wanted to eat her alive. To say she was sex-starved would be an understatement. She hadn't been with a man since a year before her divorce. Standing so close to David, she was starting to feel a little too needy.

"I invited you," she said in response, not caring that she hadn't given him much of an answer. He was smart. He could figure it out on his own.

David didn't seem to mind. He walked over to the sink and washed his hands, drying them on a dishtowel from the bar on the stove before he turned to her. "What do you need help with?"

"I thought you said you don't know how to cook."

"I don't. But I want to help, anyway. Give me something easy so I don't screw it up."

She almost laughed. The whole meal was easy. Simple. *Plain*. Just another way to show him he didn't want to get involved. Yes, she loved to cook, but when she had a deadline, dinners weren't often a five-star event. Sometimes they weren't much more than pizza delivery and store-bought chocolate chip cookies.

"You can make the salad." She gave the sauce a quick stir before she added the pasta to the now-boiling water.

"Cool. What do I have to do?"

"Get the bagged salad greens out of the fridge"—she grabbed a plastic bowl from the counter and slid it toward him—"and dump it in here."

David glanced at her, eyebrows raised and a mock-hurt expression on his face. "I said something easy, not brainless."

She turned her back on him, but looked at him over her shoulder. "Hey, I'm just trying to give you what you can handle."

With a rakish smile on his face, he leaned in so close his breath brushed her cheek. "I can handle anything you want to throw at me, Lucy."

She shivered. If she leaned back, even an inch, her whole back would be right up against his front. She had to grip the counter to keep from following through. What had she gotten herself into? She glanced at him over her shoulder. "You really need to stop. My kids are in the next room."

He straightened, still smiling. "I'm not doing anything."

*Yeah, right.* He was driving her crazy, and he was doing it on purpose. Where was the fairness in anything here?

\* \* \* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, still laughing at Lucy's teasing insult, David sat at her dining room table surrounded by her boys, who'd crowded their chairs as close to him as possible. If Nate moved any more to the left, he'd be sitting in David's lap. Lucy had taken a chair at the other end of the table, and she was pushing her food around her plate rather than digging in like the rest of them had. The woman was adorable when she was annoyed—and tonight he'd learned she could scheme as well as her boys, if not better.

She'd been trying to push him away with this meal. If she thought the chaos and burnt food would bother him, she had another think coming. Growing up with five kids in his family, things hadn't been any less hectic, and once he and his siblings had been old enough, they'd taken over a lot of the cooking duties. David had learned to eat pretty much anything if he didn't want to go hungry.

She was testing him, and he planned to pass with flying colors. Did she want him to prove he could handle a meal with her kids? If so, he had an advantage. During the school year, he spent every weekday with a classroom full of eleven-year-olds. Her two weren't the only ones capable of bad behavior.

"Is everything okay?" he asked her, trying to keep the laughter out of his voice. The sauce had burned to the bottom of the pan and some of it had stuck. The part she'd poured into the bowl on the table had taken on

an odd brown color. Eating it didn't bother him, though she seemed to be having a real problem getting it down.

"The sauce tastes funny," Nate said, frowning at his mother. "What'd you do to it?"

"She burned it," Trevor supplied, wrinkling his nose at his plate. "Why did you do that, Mom? You never burn anything."

"You never use sauce out of a jar, either," Lucas chimed in, his nose wrinkled, too. Though the fraternal twins only had a passing resemblance to each other, the expression was exactly the same.

None of the boys looked particularly happy, and David had a feeling it had more to do with them thinking she wasn't impressing him the way they'd hoped rather than the food itself. He wanted to tell them he was sufficiently impressed already and had been since the first meeting with Lucy, but he doubted she'd appreciate hearing it.

"I think it tastes fine," he said, knowing it would irk Lucy and loving every second. She didn't disappoint. The look she shot him would have struck him dead if looks could kill. She shoved the pasta across her plate so hard some of the sauce splashed onto the off-white tablecloth.

"You would," she muttered and went back to pretending she was eating.

By the time they'd finished the meal, David was the only one who'd cleared his plate, though it was because he knew it would make her face turn that cute shade of red she flushed when she was aggravated. The boys acted like he was some kind of hero, and Lucy acted like he was scum she'd scraped off the bottom of her shoe.

*You're not getting rid of me that easily, honey.* If anything, he wanted her more now than ever. He didn't quite understand it himself, but if she went to this much trouble to prove to him she wasn't worth his time, it had to mean she *was*. Katie had never made such an effort in anything. He couldn't wait until the boys had settled down for the night. Then he could tell Lucy what he really thought of her plan.

He could show her, too.



He helped her clear the table, freeing the boys from their responsibility, more because he wanted to talk to her alone for a minute rather than wanting to help them out of their chores. Once they were unaccompanied in the kitchen, dishwasher loaded and leftovers dumped into the trash, he backed Lucy into a dark corner and kissed her, hard and fast. The brief contact sent a wave of heat through his body. She felt it, too; he caught an answering flash of lust in her eyes just before she tried to push him away.

“Stop it.” She swatted at his shoulder. The corners of her lips twitched like she was fighting a smile. “What do you think you’re doing tonight, anyway?”

“I could ask you the same thing. You’re quite the con artist, aren’t you?”

She stilled, all humor dropping from her expression. It wasn’t long before she started to close off to him and turn away. She didn’t get far, at least in the physical sense, since he blocked her in, but she managed to push him away all the same. “What do you mean?”

“If you’re trying to get rid of me, it isn’t going to work.”

“Why not?”

“Because you like me.”

“You’re so full of yourself.” She stalked across the room, poking her head outside the kitchen door. Probably listening to see if the kids were anywhere nearby.

Instead of going after her, he stayed where he was and leaned back against the counter. “Come on. Admit it. You like me. You know you do.”

She narrowed her eyes and frowned for all of five seconds before the frown morphed into a smile. The first genuine one he’d seen all night. It lit up her face and made him want to kiss her again. The first time tonight hadn’t nearly been enough. “Okay. Fine. I like you, David. But you don’t seem to get it. The kids and I are a package deal. If you want to be in my life, you have to be in theirs, too. With anyone else, I could keep my personal life and my family life separate, but given the history here, you and I both know that isn’t going to be happening.”

He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. So they were back to this again. Couldn't she just take what he said at face value? "Don't you think I know that? I'm not completely insensitive."

"I don't think you really understand what that entails."

"Give me a break, Lucy. I teach fifth grade. I understand more than you think." He walked over to the fridge, grabbed the cake box and set it on the counter. "I'm sure the boys are more than ready for dessert, so we can discuss this a little later. I tell you what. Why don't we take the boys out this weekend? Bowling, a movie and dinner. I'll spend the whole day with them and you can see I'm more serious than you seem to think."

"This weekend isn't really good for them," she said, her tone hesitant enough to make him curious.

"Why not?"

"They leave on Friday. Every summer they spend a month in California with their father."

David couldn't help himself. He smiled. A whole month without her kids. She'd been using them as an excuse to keep from seeing him. What would she say when she no longer had that crutch to fall back on? "So you're all alone. For a month."

She nodded slowly, her gaze wary. She looked like a deer caught in the headlights, unable to move, not knowing where to go to get out of the way of an oncoming car. He liked her off balance. Liked making her really think. Whatever was between them scared her a little. It scared him, too. Shocked the hell out of him every time he touched her. She wasn't the only off balance one here. He was just better at hiding it than she was.

"Got plans?" he asked, silently daring her to say no. He'd found he enjoyed trying to get the truth out of her, even if it did take a while. His parents had raised him to know that anything in life worth having was worth working for. Lucy was putting him through his paces, but the woman was more than worth the trouble.

She shifted from foot to foot, curiosity mixing with doubt in her eyes. "When?"

“Next Saturday. I want to take you out to dinner. And don’t tell me you don’t think that’s a good idea. Just say yes. You know you want to.”

He added the last part with a grin and a waggle of his eyebrows, trying to keep things light. Planning it for Saturday was risky, giving her a whole week to change her mind, but if he made himself scarce, she probably wouldn’t even think to call him and cancel.

She was silent so long he thought she might kick him out, but in the end she surprised him. A hesitant smile spread over her face and her shoulders slumped a little as the tension seemed to drain out of them. She gave a slow nod and walked across the room toward the cabinet, pulling out plates for dessert. “Okay. Dinner sounds nice. Saturday it is, then.”

David had to turn his head away to hide what had to be a stupid grin. Finally he’d get her alone, no pretenses or schemes between them. He shouldn’t have been as happy as he was, but he couldn’t help it.

## Chapter Five

“I don’t think I mentioned it before, but this house is amazing,” David told Lucy when he walked through the door on Saturday night. “You and your ex must have paid a fortune for it. Then again, doing what you do, you can probably afford it.”

She took a step back and laughed. How much did he think she made? Apparently, the house had given him the wrong impression. She had a solid fan base, but she was no Stephen King. “Actually, it was my grandmother’s. I moved in with her when I was a senior in high school, after my dad left and my mom was in no shape to deal with a rebellious teen. When Mack and I got married, my grandmother had us move in here so we could take care of her. She passed away five years ago and left me the house and the car in her will. I’m not rich, just lucky enough not to have a mortgage or a car payment.”

“You *are* lucky.” He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, sending a frisson of heat racing through her body. “You should see the size of my apartment. It’s about as big as your kitchen.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“No, but it’s damned close.” His smile turned sheepish and he rolled his eyes. “Nikki told me you were serious when you said you’re not really into flowers, so I didn’t get any this time either. I hope I did the right thing.”

“They usually die on me in a few days, anyway, so yeah, you did right.” Suddenly self-conscious, she fiddled with the spaghetti strap of her dress. “You don’t have to do all that romantic stuff, anyway. It’s not really my thing.”

The look he shot her told her he didn't believe her, and she shook her head. It was the truth. She'd never been a romantic herself, and she'd married a man even less so than she. The first few years they'd really tried, but after that, the spark of romance had died out and they'd let it.

Lucky for her, David didn't press her for an explanation. "Are you ready to go?"

"Let me just put on my shoes and I'll be all set."

She rushed into her office, where she'd left the strappy sandals with the three-inch heels. She didn't have a lot of practice walking in heels so high, but if she could bring herself closer to his at least six-foot height, she might feel a little more in control of the situation. Plus, she really hadn't found anything else in her closet to match the dress, and as usual, she'd put off shopping for something until the last minute, so she was stuck with what she had.

It took her longer than expected to secure the thin straps in the tiny buckles. Once finished, she stood and walked back into the foyer, wobbling on heels she hadn't worn in several years. Most of the time in the summer she wore one of her ten pairs of flip-flops, but he'd told her he'd made reservations at one of the fancier restaurants in town, so she'd had to search through her closet full of comfortable, casual clothes for something passably appropriate.

"I'm ready." She gave him a big smile she didn't quite feel. She was too nervous to relax. Around Chris, she'd felt comfortable. David made her feel anything but. He made her stomach flutter and her pulse pound out of control with just a look. And when he kissed her, there was a spark she'd never felt with anyone else.

She started to lean a little too far to the right, and David steadied her with a hand on her elbow. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, though her face heated. "I'm not used to these shoes."

"So wear something else."

If only it were that simple. Men didn't get it. She might dress casually most of the time, but she was still a woman. There were times in every woman's life when the situation called for getting dressed up and making

herself presentable. After what she'd done when David had come over for dinner, Lucy figured she should at least try to look good tonight. "None of the other shoes I have match this dress, and none of my other dresses are right to wear out to the restaurant."

"Does it matter if you don't match?"

She shot him a withering look, and he laughed. "Okay, so I guess it *does* matter. For what it's worth, you look incredible."

Her face flamed even hotter, and she wouldn't be surprised if she was beet red. After a few breaths to compose herself, she forced her shaky lips to smile. "Thanks. You look pretty great yourself."

Tonight he wore a pair of black slacks and a deep blue shirt that fit his personality. "Aren't you warm in a long-sleeved shirt, though?"

He shook his head. "Believe it or not, the wind is picking up. It's getting cool out, and the restaurant will have the air conditioning on. I'm not too worried about it." He held the door open for her and they stepped outside. "Are you going to be warm enough?"

"Of course." It didn't really matter if she would be or not. Her options, clothing-wise, were severely limited. One of the side effects of working at home, all alone. She could bring a sweater, but it would have holes in it. All of the ones in her closet were old and worn. The few nice things she had were business attire, and they made her look like what she was. A thirty-something mother of four. Tonight, she didn't want to be that woman. She just wanted to be the woman David chose to spend time with.

They made small talk on the way to the restaurant, and Lucy was surprised at how comfortable she was with him. It probably had a lot to do with the fact that he'd seen her at her worst—or nearly her worst. After the dinner with her boys, tonight would be a piece of cake.

David parked the car in a lot across the street, and Lucy opened her door to get out. She stood, and one of her heels started to sink into the mud left over from an earlier rainstorm. She should have taken that as an omen, but instead chose to ignore the sign. Things couldn't go wrong tonight. She just wouldn't allow that to happen.

Once they were seated at the table and the hostess had left them with menus, Lucy got up the courage to ask David what she'd been dying to ask since Nikki had mentioned his recent breakup.

"Will you tell me about your girlfriend?"

David, who'd been in the middle of taking a sip of water, sputtered. "I don't have a girlfriend."

"I don't mean a current one. I mean the one you just broke up with."

He frowned, as if trying to figure out what she was talking about. "Katie?"

"I don't know her name. Nikki just mentioned you'd been with someone for a long time."

"Yeah, Katie." He laughed, but it was strained at the edges. Maybe she should have started with a safer topic, like the weather. "I can't believe she told you about that."

The waiter came by to take their order, stopping conversation for a few minutes. Once he'd written down what they wanted and left the table, Lucy continued. "I didn't realize it was such a big deal."

Already, some of the excitement deflated. David sat back in his chair, looking around the room, and she didn't know what to say to make things better. So much for not letting anything screw up the evening. She'd managed to mess it up all by herself in record time. "I'm sorry if I upset you. All I wanted to do was make conversation."

"It seems like a pretty heavy topic for a first real date, just the two of us," he said, but he smiled. "But you can ask. I don't mind answering, as long as you'll answer some of my questions in return."

Lucy nodded in agreement. She had no problem answering questions about Mack. She'd never been secretive about the reasons behind their breakup. "No problem."

He seemed to think for a minute, his gaze never leaving hers, before he spoke. "I've known Katie almost all my life. We went to preschool together. We had an on-again, off-again relationship going from about seventh grade right up until the middle of college. We split apart completely then for a few months, but got back together. Once we

graduated, she moved in with me, but things didn't work out and she moved out about seven months ago."

"How come?"

David shrugged, but his expression let her know it was anything but casual. "I asked her to."

Lucy picked up her water glass and took a long sip of the cooling liquid. Being a writer, she was naturally curious, and that trait got her into trouble sometimes. Now would probably end up being one of those times. "Do you mind if I ask why?"

He fiddled with the knife resting on his linen napkin. "We just weren't close anymore. We were going through the motions, but there was no passion behind them."

She let out a small laugh. "Believe me, I can relate."

"Is that what happened with you and Mack?" he asked, throwing her a pointed glance.

"It was the underlying reason, I think, but what made me file for divorce was finding out about his affairs."

David raised his eyebrows. "More than one?"

"Yeah, unfortunately. As far as I can tell, they started around the middle of our marriage. Some lasted longer than others."

She'd found out by accident when she'd come across a statement for a credit card she hadn't known he'd had. At first, she'd fumed, but too quickly her anger had faded to a dull roar. To this day, she still thought she should have been more upset with him. The fact that she'd barely cried when she'd kicked him out of the house said a lot about the lack of love and understanding in their relationship.

In a way, his cheating had been good for her. It had given her the impetus she'd needed to get out of an unhealthy relationship. At the time she hadn't realized it, but staying with him for the sake of the children hadn't been good for them, either.

"That must have hurt a lot."



"It did," she said simply, not willing to delve into her inadequacies as a wife. There were some things about her David didn't need to know. She hadn't been perfect, and though it was Mack's fault he'd cheated, she could have been there for him more before it happened. They'd both made mistakes. "It's been three years now. I'm okay with the whole thing. I've made my peace and moved on."

Though, in all honesty, she hadn't moved on as much as she pretended. She didn't want him back, but she was stuck in a rut. Even though it had been three years, it still stung. Not that Mack had cheated, but that she hadn't been what he'd needed. She wasn't fool enough to not blame the man for his own actions, but she had to admit some of the responsibility for the breakdown of the marriage was hers. If she'd tried harder when things had started to sour instead of giving up and throwing all her energy into the kids and her writing, maybe the marriage would have survived.

Mack, in true Mack fashion, had tried to get her back once his latest love interest had walked out on him, but she hadn't been tricked. He would never change, and though some women could live with an unfaithful spouse, she wasn't one of them. She was too strong, too independent, to rely on a man for anything. Ever again.

"Are you sure you're okay?" David asked, frowning and glancing toward the tabletop.

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"Because you just bent your spoon."

Blinking, she followed his gaze and saw he was right. She dropped the flimsy utensil and let out a shaky laugh. "Sorry about that."

*Want to do anything else to show the guy what an idiot you are? If you've got anything planned, now's the time to do it.*

"I really am okay with it all," she continued into the silence. "It's been three years. It's been a lot less time since your breakup. How are *you* coping?"

"Me? I'm fine. It had been time to let go long before Katie moved out. It just took us a while to get to the point where we were ready."

Lucy didn't know what to say in response, so she said nothing. They sat in relative silence, occasionally chitchatting about the weather or local politics, until the waiter came with their food. As the minutes passed, Lucy felt the tension slowly draining from the situation. She let her shoulders relax, enjoying how easy it was to talk to him if they stuck to topics that weren't as serious.

Halfway through the meal, David grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips, brushing a kiss across her knuckles. Lucy shivered and jerked her hand back out of reflex, but David didn't let go of her fingers. His arm came with her, his sleeve dipping into the flame of the candle burning in the center of the table. By the time she managed to kick her mind into gear and make her hand drop his, it was too late. The material on his cuff caught fire and David jerked his arm back, shaking it as the small flame flickered and started to die.

Lucy gasped and grabbed for her napkin, but when she reached for his sleeve to put out the small fire, she bumped into his water glass, dumping the contents into his lap. Mortified, she sat there watching while he took her glass, splashed water on his sleeve to douse what remained of the flame, and used his own napkin to mop up the puddle of water soaking his pants.

She couldn't even meet his gaze. *Good going, genius. What's next? Planning to chop his head off with the butter knife?* She braced herself, half wanting to run away and half wanting to spend the rest of the night apologizing. Here she was, trying to show him they could have a nice, normal, *sane* evening together, and she'd nearly scorched the poor guy's arm. "I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

David surprised her by laughing and shaking his head. "It's okay. Really."

"No, it isn't. I just...I don't even know why I did that. You kissed my hand and I wasn't expecting it, and I guess I got nervous." She twisted her napkin in her hands, fidgeting in her seat and so wanting to melt into the floor and shrink away before the situation got even more embarrassing. First she'd upset him with talk about past relationships,

and then she'd *lit him on fire*. What was wrong with her? Could she be any more of a fool?

"Lucy, stop." His smile helped to calm her nerves. "I can tell you're berating yourself, and I don't want you to do that. Relax. You're obviously a little too tense tonight. What are you worried about?"

She let out a sigh and shook her head, trying to ignore the glances from other diners in the restaurant. Of course everyone in the vicinity had seen her mistake. They were probably all wondering why David hadn't stormed off in a huff yet. "I like you. I don't want to, but I do. Apparently I don't know how to handle that very well. As far as this sort of thing goes, I'm a little out of practice."

She'd always considered herself a woman in good control of every aspect of her life. Even in her marriage, she'd never let that control slip. With David, she couldn't seem to help it. Something about him brought out the worst in her. He made her nervous and shaky. Unsure of herself and where this thing between them was going. He also made her ache in places she hadn't ached in a very long time, and maybe that was where the problem began.

Maybe she just needed to touch him—*really* touch him—and get it over with so she could stop being such an embarrassment to herself.

*If* he still wanted her once the meal was over.

"I like you, too." He reached for her hand again, but this time he leaned forward and blew out the candle first. "I think about you a lot. All the time, really. I want to get to know you better. Maybe we should have just stayed in and ordered takeout. It might have been a little easier on you that way."

She swallowed hard. She knew he couldn't have been as casual about the incident as he'd first said. "I'm so sorry."

"That was a joke. You were supposed to laugh."

"You try laughing after you light your date's sleeve on fire."

He stroked the inside of her palm with his thumb, his face losing all traces of humor.

She gulped, both from the sensation his touch invoked and from the serious look in his eyes. “What did I do now?” she asked, sure he was about to get up and walk away, leaving her alone with the bill to pay and no ride home. It would serve her right, too.

“Nothing,” he said softly. He didn’t say anything else, just continued to stare at her with that I-want-to-eat-you-alive look, until she was squirming in her seat. She tried to pull her hand away, but he wouldn’t let go.

“Why don’t we skip dessert tonight?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I think we should back it up a step, head over to your place and spend some time really getting to know each other. It’s quiet there. For some reason, I think you’d be more comfortable on familiar ground.”

The breath left her lungs in a big whoosh of relief. That sounded like the best thing she’d heard all evening.

“You’re right.” And he’d leave the second he dropped her off. He was too polite. The guy probably couldn’t wait to get rid of her so he could go back to all his friends and tell them stories about the klutzy idiot he’d been stupid enough to take out. “But you don’t have to stay and talk if you don’t want to.”

He laughed. “Talk? Yeah, I guess we could do that too.”

Her stomach knotted and a shiver raced down her spine. *Oh, man.* The guy was something else.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Tonight didn’t work out so well, did it?” Lucy shifted from foot to foot again in a way David found adorable, though, in those sexy shoes, it might prove to be dangerous if she kept it up. She hadn’t started out the night steady on her feet.

They were standing on her front porch. The light breeze blew her curls around her face and the overhead light illuminated her body,

accentuating her curves. Since he'd picked her up earlier, he'd wanted to put his hands on her, but the night had yet to cooperate. It had been a small disaster.

"It wasn't so bad," he told her, and meant it. It could have gone a lot worse. Granted, it could have been better, but once she got over the mortification they'd have something to laugh over together.

She cocked her head to the side, her expression losing all traces of humor, and regarded him through narrowed eyes. After a drawn-out sigh, she spoke. "You must have a selective memory. I *lit* you on *fire*. Or did you forget that part of the disastrous date already? Are you *sure* you don't have some form of mental illness?"

"Positive." He hadn't forgotten about the candle incident. He was still laughing about it on the inside, and the dampness in his lap wouldn't let him forget the glass of water she'd managed to dump there. He should be upset, but for some reason, he couldn't quite muster the emotion. True, the night hadn't gone how he'd planned, but that didn't mean it couldn't end that way. Already she seemed to have relaxed, though she didn't stop fidgeting.

She really had no idea of the effect she had on him. The woman was a spitfire. Not his usual type, but he was just starting to realize she was exactly what he needed. They might not be in it for the long haul, but hell, he'd been half in love with the woman since she'd tried to chase him off with the burnt dinner the first night. The more he learned about her, the more he wanted to know.

He wanted *her*. He couldn't avoid it any longer, and he couldn't let her avoid the fact that the attraction between them was a two-way street. Yeah, the night had been a freakin' disaster and his favorite shirt would be going into the trash once he got home, but it didn't change the way he felt about her. Right now, with her looking all soft and vulnerable, he wanted nothing more than to kiss her senseless until she forgot about apologizing and putting herself down.

"Yeah, you do light me on fire. Every time you look at me."

He expected her to slap him for using such a cheesy line, to tell him to get the hell off her porch and out of her life, or worse, to burst into tears and another litany of apologies, but instead she did the last thing he'd planned on. She threw herself into his arms and kissed him.

## Chapter Six

*Stupid mistake, Lucy. Probably the dumbest thing you've ever done. Not only did you light the man's sleeve on fire, but you dumped a glass of water in his lap in the process of trying to put out the flame. Do you really think you should be sucking face with him after that?*

She broke the kiss and backed away, already forming another apology in her mind. He said he didn't need to hear them, but he was just being nice. No one was that calm and understanding. If she'd done to Mack what she'd done to David, he wouldn't have spoken to her for a week. "Listen, David. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. It was the wine."

A corner of his mouth tipped up in a way-too-sexy half smile. "We didn't have any wine tonight. We had water, remember?"

"I know, but I was hoping you'd forget we hadn't and I'd still be able to use it as an excuse. Other than that, I'm tapped out on reasons for my behavior." Not only her mealtime issues, but the way she'd all but attacked him. Neither had been appropriate.

"I kind of like you when you're draped all over me."

She couldn't help it. She whimpered. A curl of arousal spun in her stomach and her mouth went dry. What was his deal? How could he possibly still want her now?

He couldn't. There was no way any man could look past her obvious issues—which she hadn't realized were so numerous until tonight. "Don't. Don't say things you don't mean. I'll always be honest with you, and I would appreciate the same courtesy."

"I have no reason to lie to you, Lucy." He glanced down and she followed with her gaze, stopping when she saw the impressive bulge against the zipper of his pants.

*Whoa.* Okay, so maybe he wasn't as angry as she thought he should be. And maybe he hadn't resented the way she'd kissed him. Her nipples beaded against the lacy fabric of her bra. If he was willing, what would be the harm in inviting him in? Hadn't she thought earlier that maybe all she needed was to get him out of her system?

"Do you still want to come in?" she asked before she could stop herself.

He didn't answer, but then, he didn't have to. The heat in his eyes said it all. Without breaking her gaze, he nodded.

Desperate to get away from that gaze before she burst into flames, she turned and started trying to get her fumbling fingers to unlock the door. Most of the time, David was easygoing, and he almost always had a smile on his face. Then there were those few times—like right now—that he let his intensity out to play and it nearly brought her to her knees every time.

Finally she managed to get the door open and step inside the house. He waited on the porch.

"Did you change your mind?" Her heart started sinking to her toes. Of course he would. All she had to do was break eye contact with him for a second to let him remember how different they were.

"No. I just want to make sure you're not going to."

She couldn't hold back the laugh that burst from her throat. Was he kidding? He was lucky she hadn't torn his clothes off on the porch. She hadn't even realized how desperate she was until she'd launched herself at him. "Can I be candid with you?"

"Of course."

"I haven't had sex in four years. Since a year before Mack and I split up and he started making excuses."

He frowned. "I thought you said you'd been seeing someone pretty steadily for a while?"



And of course, in a man's world, seeing someone equaled having sex with the person.

"I was, but just because I was dating someone doesn't mean I was sleeping with him." In truth, Chris had never really been more than a friend. He'd been fun to hang out with, but she hadn't been very attracted to him. Though he'd broached the subject of sex every so often, there had never been a right time. She hadn't been interested. At the time, she'd thought sex with *any* man was off-limits after what Mack had done to her, but then she met David and she'd realized how wrong that line of thinking was.

"You dated the guy for a few months," he said, seeming to contemplate her words. "And you didn't sleep with him. We've dated a couple of times."

"Please. You don't consider dinner with my kids a date, do you?"

"Of course I do. You and I both know it was." He smiled, and when she thought he'd turn and walk away, he came into the house and shut the door behind him. "Why me, Lucy? Why not this other guy? He had to have meant *something* to you."

She could give him the excuse about not being ready, just like she'd told everyone else, but that would be a lie. Instead, she locked the door, dropped her keys and purse on the hallway table, and headed toward the kitchen, speaking as she walked. "I wasn't attracted to him."

Just like she'd hoped, David followed. She stopped by the counter, absently thumbing through a three-day-old stack of mail, and he came up behind her and put his hands on her hips. He bent down until his lips touched her neck. "You're attracted to me."

"Yes." She had to fight the urge to lean back against him.

"Was that so hard to admit?"

"You have no idea." She spun around, trying to dislodge his hands, but it was no use. With the counter behind her and David in front of her, she couldn't even put a little bit of space between them. "For ten years, I leaned on my husband. I learned the hard way that I can't lean on anybody."

“Not every man in this world is as untrustworthy as he is.”

“I know.”

“I’m one of the good guys, Lucy,” he said just before he brushed his lips over hers. Sick of fighting her body’s reaction to the man, she wrapped her arms around his neck and hung on for the ride.

He backed her into the counter, pressing his hard body right up against hers. Holding her in place, he waged an all-out assault on her mouth. Every nerve in her body woke up, screaming for attention, and it was all she could do to remain upright on legs threatening to give out. No man had ever made her weak in the knees before. Up until now, she’d thought it only happened in movies.

After a few minutes, the dampness of his pants from where she’d spilled water on him started to seep through his clothes to hers.

“You’re wet,” she murmured against his lips.

“Yeah. Did I forget to thank you for that?”

“I’m really sorry.”

“I’m not.” The look in his eyes was nothing short of sinful. “It’s getting cold, though. I think I should probably get out of these clothes.”

Lucy grinned. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d heard such an appealing idea. “Works for me.”

A corner of his mouth lifted in a half smile and he started to pull his shirt over his head. Lucy stopped him with her hands on his chest. “Maybe we should take this upstairs.”

“So soon? I’ve read your books, Lucy. I know you know how to get creative with those sex scenes.”

She gulped. Of course he would bring that up now. “Demons and monsters exist in my books, too.”

“That’s different.”

“How so?”

“They’re not real. This thing between us, whatever it is, is about as real as it gets.” He pulled her close and sealed his lips over hers in a kiss that set her on fire. All night she’d wanted to touch him, wanted to kiss

him and feel his hands all over her. Her nerves had made her clumsy. The fact that he still wanted her impressed her more than anything else. Maybe he was worth hanging on to, at least for a little while.

She put her hand on the back of his neck, her fingers sifting through the soft hair at his nape. His hands were everywhere, just like she wanted. No way would she stop his exploration. She was enjoying this too much. The feel of his hands on her body threatened to drive her insane.

He broke the kiss long enough to let out a laugh. "You're right. We probably should take this upstairs. The sooner, the better."

She took his hand and led him up the stairs into her bedroom—a room no other man had been in for three years. She might have chickened out, but David was right there behind her, hands at her waist, mouth moving up the side of her neck right after she stepped through the door, and backing out was no longer an option. He nipped softly at her earlobe. She leaned back against him and moaned.

"You like that, huh?"

"Uh-huh." Her dampened panties proved it. Her earlobes had always been sensitive. Of course he would pick right up on that.

His hands skimmed up her ribcage until he cupped her breasts. He thumbed her nipples and she cried out, rocking back against him. He hissed out a breath.

When he let her go and stepped away, she turned around to find David taking his shirt off. He dropped it onto the floor and her mouth went dry as she studied his chest. He was toned with a six-pack stomach and smooth, tanned skin. And she was a pale thirty-two-year-old who would probably always carry a few extra pounds.

Her eyes widened and she stepped back.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just don't know if I have any condoms."

She raced into the adjoining bathroom, searching through the drawers, half hoping she wouldn't find any. The man was too perfect for

words, and she was anything but. He'd laugh and walk out the second he saw her naked.

She grabbed the box she found and pulled it out of the drawer, but her hopes fell when she noticed they were past the expiration date. They'd been in there since she'd been married to Mack, so she should have expected this. If she'd thought the evening with David would end this way, she would have gone to the store and bought another box.

She turned around and David was standing in the doorway.

"They're no good." She tossed the box into the trash. "I don't have any more."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I have a few." He patted his pocket and gave her a look so comical she had to laugh.

"Were you expecting something tonight?" she asked him, eyebrows raised in question.

"Nah. I was just hopeful. I don't usually carry them around all the time. I just figured it was better to be prepared. Come here."

She stayed where she was, so he walked over to her and pulled her close to him, kissing her long and slow and deep. By the time he broke away, some of her anxiety was gone, but a good dose of it was still there under the surface, waiting for the right time to bubble up all over again. Four children and over a decade of sitting in front of a computer had taken their toll on her body, and seeing how fit he was made her want to wrap up in her bathrobe and go eat a pint of ice cream.

"You're beautiful," he told her as if reading her mind. "And don't say you're not, because there are things I'd rather spend the night doing than arguing."

She had to smile. He knew how to shut her up, and that was a good thing. There were times when she had as much trouble controlling her mouth as she did her clumsiness.

He took her hand and led her back into the bedroom, and no walk in her life had ever been so slow. She wanted him, so why hold back? She could think of a few reasons, but none of them were particularly good ones. He probably wouldn't even be able to see most of her flaws. It

wasn't bright in the bedroom. The only light came from the open bathroom door and the moonlight spilling in through the parted curtains.

If David sensed her hesitation, he didn't show it. He stripped her out of her dress, undoing each button down the front one at a time, kissing his way lower until he reached the front clasp of her bra. He took the time to dip his tongue into the valley between her breasts, and she let out a small moan. Still wearing the dangerous heels, she teetered a little, but managed to steady herself with her hands on his shoulders.

He undid the bra clasp, freeing her breasts, and at the same time pushed back the sides of her dress. He nudged it down her shoulders and she dropped her hands, suddenly eager to free herself of the confining fabric. The dress fell to the floor in a whoosh. She shivered, but it didn't have much to do with the cold. Anticipation wedged its way between her anxiety, making her fingers itch to grab him and tear off his clothes. She wouldn't, though. Given the way the dinner had gone, she'd probably end up breaking his nose.

"You're still thinking too much," David whispered against her cheek. He brushed a kiss across her mouth, running his tongue along the seam of her lips. "You really need to stop. There's nothing to think about. It's going to be great."

She swallowed down a lump of nervousness. "Yeah, sure it is."

"Trust me."

"I do. But I have to warn you, if I don't get these shoes off soon, I'm going to fall."

With a smile and a small shake of his head, David knelt down in front of her and helped her remove the sandals. The kiss he pressed to her abdomen sent a rush of heat from her head to her toes. When he had both shoes off, he tossed them against the wall under the window. "Better?"

Lucy nodded.

He sucked her nipple into his mouth, cupping her breasts in his palms to bring them closer, and her knees went weak. She whimpered

and put her hands on his shoulders again, knowing she'd fall into a heap at his feet if she didn't.

David chuckled against her skin and moved on to the other breast to offer the other nipple the same treatment. When he finished, she was squirming, barely able to stand anymore. He took off her bra and helped her step out of her panties before he leaned in to kiss her again, backing her up at the same time. Her legs hit the mattress and she went down, taking him with her. He landed on top of her, both of them laughing, but soon the laughter turned into something more intense. His hands were everywhere again, and this time hers were, too.

He got up long enough to strip out of his clothes, grab a condom out of his pocket and roll it over his erection before he climbed back onto the bed and lay down at her side.

The man was beautiful, all tanned skin and dark hair and long, lean muscles. He stroked his fingertips up and down her side, touching and caressing and kissing until she thought she might explode. Unable to wait anymore, she guided his hand between her legs to where she really wanted him.

He gave her a hot smile, stroking his fingers along her folds. Her hips arched into his touch, her long-deprived body already begging for more. She wrapped her fingers around his biceps, her nails digging into the solid muscle there. The man was an expert. He knew just how to touch her to make her whole body writhe. It wasn't long before she came with a cry he swallowed with another kiss.

Shaking and satisfied, Lucy rolled onto her side and let her eyes drift closed. A smile spread over her lips as David continued to run his big hand up and down the side of her body, sending a wave of tiny shivers washing over her. She felt him smile when he pressed his lips to her neck.

He rolled her onto her back and positioned himself between her legs. He pushed into her, inch by inch, until he was fully seated inside her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, raising her hips to meet each of his thrusts. Tension built in her inner muscles again, higher and higher,

until she toppled over the edge into another shattering orgasm. David came with her name on his lips.

It wasn't long before she dozed in his arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lucy woke up to the smell of fresh coffee the next morning. With a yawn and a long stretch, she sat up and rubbed her eyes. David sat on the edge of the bed, a big smile on his face. He held two of her favorite coffee mugs and looked way too chipper for so early in the day. She nearly moaned when she saw wisps of steam curling out of the dark blue stoneware. Her usual morning dose of caffeine, and she wouldn't even have to leave the warm comfort of her bed for it. Forget a boyfriend. Maybe what she really needed was a servant.

Though a servant wouldn't make her come the way David had last night. She smiled at the thought.

"Is that for me?" she asked, blinking her eyes and trying to focus. She was no good in the mornings until she had at least one cup of coffee, but usually it took half a pot to really get her going. Before she'd had kids, she'd never even gotten out of bed before ten a.m.

"Yeah. I didn't know how you'd want it, so I made it like you had it during dessert the night I came over for dinner. Extra light, extra sugar. I hope that's okay."

She nearly purred. A man who was good in bed, didn't care if she wasn't shaped like a college coed and made her coffee in the morning to boot. What more could a woman ask for? She scooted up, tucking the sheet around her upper body and resting her back against the headboard. "That's perfect. Absolutely wonderful. Thanks so much."

He had no clue, but he'd just made her day. Mornings usually consisted of Lucy fumbling around in the cabinets for the can of coffee and the filters while trying to get the boys fed and making sure they got dressed and brushed their teeth. Only when they were out the door on the way to school did she take a second to breathe and relax.

When the boys were with their father, she generally rolled out of bed around lunchtime, since her best writing hours were later at night and she never managed to shut the computer down much before two in the morning.

"I've got breakfast downstairs whenever you're ready." David took a sip from his own mug, settling back against the high footboard of the bed.

"You cooked?"

He laughed. "Yeah, right. On my way back from my run, I stopped at the bakery and grabbed some bagels and cream cheese."

There was only one bakery around, and it was downtown, a good two miles away from Lucy's neighborhood. Her muscles groaned at the thought of so much strenuous exercise. The fact that he'd been able to get there and back—and shower—before she even woke up made her feels like a lazy slob. Exercise for her was walking up and down the stairs putting laundry away.

"I let the dog outside, too," he told her. "She was scratching at the door. I wasn't sure if you let her out alone, but I figured since the yard is fenced in, I'd give it a chance."

"That's perfect, thanks. You ran all the way downtown?" she asked, still stuck on the fact that he was able to get moving so quickly in the morning, especially after the nearly sleepless night they'd had. Her muscles still tingled when she remembered what they'd done. He'd woken her up two more times during the night.

"Yeah. It was actually a little shorter than my usual run. I usually try to get at least five miles in every morning."

*Wonderful.* She set her coffee on the bedside table, flopped back against the pillow and closed her eyes. Not only was he a health nut, but he was a morning person as well. Could they be any more opposite? This definitely had to be a fling, because it could never be anything else. "How long have you been up?"

"Since around six. I went for my run, and then came back here to take a shower in the bathroom down the hall. I hope you don't mind."



“Mind?” The guy had to be going on two hours of sleep. *Must be nice.*  
“What time is it?”

“A little after ten. I was going to wait for you to wake up, but I was starting to get bored downstairs all by myself.” He winked and gave her a sexy smile.

“Ugh. You’re one of those *morning people*, aren’t you?”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” He stood and she noticed the gray cotton shorts and white T-shirt he had on. Very different from the clothes he’d had on the night before. And what had he gone running in, anyway?

She narrowed her eyes. He said he hadn’t planned what had happened between them, but why else would he have extra clothing?  
“You had a change of clothes with you?”

“I always have an overnight bag packed and in my trunk during the summer, just in case I decide to head out of town on a whim. That’s the good thing about being a teacher. Summers off to do what I want.”

“Do you go away often?” Was he about to leave her in favor of something more fun to do?

“Once in a while. I like to head out to the beach a few hours away and relax, spend the night sometimes. It helps me think.” His expression turned hesitant and he lifted one shoulder in a small shrug. “You could come with me, if you have some free time over the next few weeks.”

“When are you going?”

“Whenever you want. Like I said, it’s not something I really plan too far in advance. I have absolutely nothing on my schedule for the rest of the month, so I’m pretty flexible.”

Lucy swallowed hard. It seemed a little too soon to even think about going away with David. They’d had two dates, and neither had gone particularly well, but the fact that he was still here this morning said a lot. Besides, getting away, even for one night, might be just what she needed to get her mind off the boys being gone and the prospect of a whole month by herself, especially if it guaranteed her a repeat of last night.

“How about Tuesday?” she asked before she could stop herself. “Unless you’re busy with something else.” *Or someone else.* Who knew how long it would be before he found another woman to pursue. She wasn’t dim enough to believe this was anything more than a summertime fling, and she’d enjoy whatever she could get for as long as she had it.

“I only see one woman at a time, if that’s what you’re worried about,” he said, quirking his lips into a smile. “And Tuesday would be great. It’ll be a lot of fun. We can stay overnight and head back late Wednesday evening.”

She picked up her mug and took a sip of her coffee, excitement and anxiety bubbling in her stomach. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d gone away just for the heck of it. Had she ever? Even at the beginning of their marriage, Mack had been too busy with work to take time off. Since the boys had been born, she’d been to New York a few times to meet with her editor and agent, but besides that, she couldn’t remember another time she’d been anywhere but home unless the vacation involved an expensive theme park and four hyper, sugar-slicked children running around.

“Can you get a room this late? Places around the beach fill up pretty fast this time of year.”

“I have a buddy who owns a motel on the coast. If I give him a couple days’ notice, he can always get me a place, even if it’s just for a short time. Sound good?”

A day at the beach with David, no worries, no responsibilities. It didn’t only sound good, it sounded like heaven.

“Yes,” she said, not giving herself a chance to change her mind. Spending the time away with David would make it the best mini-vacation she’d ever taken.

## Chapter Seven

David pulled up to Lucy's house at noon on Tuesday. He tapped his hands on the steering wheel, already anticipating the fun they would have. He wondered if they'd even make it out of the hotel room. Though he loved the beach, he wouldn't mind if they only made it as far as the bed.

He usually preferred to get an earlier start, but in deference to her need to sleep in, he'd scheduled their departure time for a little later in the day. His buddy Ed had told him the room wouldn't be ready until after two anyway. By the time they made the nearly two-hour drive to the southern Maine coast, it would be just about time to check in.

There wouldn't be time for the beach today. Swimming and sunbathing would have to wait until morning, if at all. He had plans for her, and they didn't include leaving the motel room. The night he'd spent with her had been amazing. Unexpected, too. Waiting a few days to see her had been hell, but at least now there was a little relief in sight. He laughed to himself and shut the car off, climbing out. Lucy was something special, even if she didn't realize it. Everything about her turned him on.

She was waiting on the porch when he hit the walkway, duffel bag in hand. "Good morning," she said, looking a lot more well rested now than the last morning he'd seen her.

"Good afternoon. How did you sleep?"

"Like a rock. I was up until midnight writing, and I didn't even stir until an hour ago."

He smiled, though he didn't really get why anyone would want to spend the morning sleeping. If he wasn't up by seven at the very latest, he felt like he'd wasted a whole day. During the school year, he had to be to work by eight, so he'd trained himself to roll out of bed around five and run to help wake up. The routine carried over into the summer. Of course, he never made it much past ten at night, when Lucy seemed to be at her best.

They were complete opposites, and though he'd never really bought into the idea of opposites attracting, he was starting to understand that sometimes it could be true. They had yet to find any real common ground beyond him liking her writing, and yet they managed to get along just fine. He and Katie had been so much alike, and he'd never felt the same pull with her as he did with Lucy.

He grabbed the bag from her hand and walked down to the car, popping the trunk and sticking the bag inside. He'd been afraid she'd say no when he asked her if she wanted to go away with him. He hadn't expected her to set a date—and he hadn't expected her to say yes so quickly, but he was glad she had. He couldn't think of a better way to spend his summer than to immerse himself in all that was Lucy Parker. Getting to know her better was at the top of his priority list.

"Thanks for inviting me." She leaned up and kissed his cheek, and just like that, his day got a hell of a lot better. This would have been his first summer being single, and spending time with Lucy would keep him from going out of his mind with boredom.

Plus, she smelled so damned good he got hard just being close to her. He'd missed her the past few nights.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked, head cocked to the side.

"Almost." He leaned down and kissed her. Not a peck on the cheek, but a real kiss, meant to shake her to her toes. When he broke away she swayed toward him and put her hand on his shoulder. He covered it with his own for a few seconds before he stepped back, walked around the side of the car and opened the door for her. "I haven't really planned anything besides where we're staying. I thought we could just check in,

and then see what happens. Tonight we can stay in, and then spend the day tomorrow at the beach, just relaxing. I have a feeling you need it. I hope that's okay with you."

"It sounds perfect." She beamed and got into the passenger seat, buckling her seat belt as he closed the door for her.

With a smile on his face and anticipation knotted his stomach, David jogged around the car, slid behind the wheel and pulled out of her driveway, already envisioning what he wanted to do to her as soon as they had the motel room door locked behind them.

It would be nice to spend the day lounging around on the sand, rather than shopping like Katie had always wanted to do. Lucy had seemed so tense lately, he figured she could use a good dose of R and R. It had to be hard to be away from her kids for such a big chunk of time, and maybe sitting on the beach would help her get them off her mind for a little while.

"You can play with the radio if you want," he offered once they were on the road. "Put on whatever you want to. I'm not picky. I listen to a little of just about everything."

"Cool." She selected a classic rock station and settled back against the seat, taking a pair of sunglasses out of her purse and putting them on. "I'll probably need your help putting sunscreen on my back, you know. I can't quite reach."

Her tone was nothing short of suggestive, and it had him shifting in his seat. He'd do her back, her front and anywhere else she needed a little help. Even if she *didn't* need help, he was so there. Every muscle in his body tightened at her suggestion. "Honey, I'll put it wherever you want me to. Just tell me where."

Lucy smiled at the double meaning behind David's words. She squirmed in her seat, her face heating. She'd half expected him to change his mind about taking her away once he'd had a chance to think about it. The whole thing still seemed too surreal. She didn't quite understand why he wanted her, but she was done complaining about it. No more

trying to chase him away or convince him nothing would work between them. She didn't try to fool herself into believing it would last more than a few weeks, maybe a month at most, but she intended to hang onto it for as long as it lasted and enjoy every second.

"Can I ask you a question?"

He shot her a glance, grinning. "As long as it's personal."

"It is." Though he might not like it. She braced herself for his reaction, hoping he wouldn't clam up like Chris had every time she asked him about past relationships. Hoping he wouldn't react like he had in the restaurant. "Did you really want to marry Katie?"

His shoulders tensed and she could swear a muscle in his jaw ticked. All the good humor fled from his expression. His knuckles turned white where he gripped the wheel. "You mean before we grew apart?"

She swallowed hard. She hadn't meant to upset him. It wasn't a question she should be asking, given the circumstances, but she was a writer and curious by nature. She had a habit of trying too hard to get to know people, to get right down to what made them tick. David interested her, and she wanted to understand him better, the good as well as the bad. Mack had called it a flaw, but given her chosen career, Lucy had always thought of it as a strength, though it did sometimes make people uncomfortable.

She did have another reason for questioning David and why he ended things with Katie, but she was loathe to admit it, even to herself. It was too personal a reason to say out loud. Ever since Mack cheated on her, she'd been striving to understand why he'd snuck around behind her back rather than coming to her and telling her he was unhappy. She'd been trying to get inside the male mind and figure out why they did the things they did, and sometimes the questions got a little uncomfortable. "Yes, before you grew apart. When the two of you were at your happiest, had you planned on marrying her?"

He let out a breath, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. The expression on his face wasn't angry or annoyed. It was more anxious than anything.

“For a while, I thought we’d end up married. We’d been together for so long, it seemed like marriage would be the next logical step to take. But you know what happened then. We grew apart.”

That was the same excuse she used every time someone asked her why she and Mack had split up. The same reason she gave David when he’d asked. It wasn’t the whole truth for her, and she had a feeling it wasn’t the whole truth for David, either. There was more to it than that, even if he didn’t realize it.

“Likely excuse,” she muttered, patting his thigh and offering him a smile.

“We really did,” he said, turning a corner onto a street that would lead them out of town. “We’d been together since seventh grade. I always thought we’d end up getting married, I guess we both did, but once we hit college...I don’t know. I guess I started to resent the relationship.”

Even his thigh muscle was tight now, and she massaged it with the palm of her hand. The beginnings of a grin played at the corners of his mouth and he loosened his grip a little on the wheel. “What do you mean?”

“She got controlling. Wanted me on a leash, and I couldn’t live like that.”

Lucy nodded, understanding all too well. She’d never believed in anything but equality in a relationship, so she’d never tried to put a leash on Mack. Given his behavior, the man had probably needed one. A *very* short one.

“There were a few times during the years that we broke up, but it didn’t last. It was almost like drifting apart, and then drifting back together again. It was just habit, I guess. But after a while it wasn’t the same as it had been. She resented me for seeing other women during the times we’d broken up. I resented her for trying too hard to control me, and I finally decided I’d had enough.”

His story sounded a little too familiar for comfort. She and Mack hadn’t broken up, but there had been some big ups and downs in their relationship. In the end, she’d come to resent him for the social life he

had outside of the marriage and the way he felt the need to keep secrets from her, and he'd resented her for being able to stay home with the kids and still make a living.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, wishing she hadn't asked him the question in the first place. She would have thought real love and passion were just fairy tales, if she hadn't seen Nikki and Ryan together. Maybe Lucy and David were two people who weren't destined to find "the one". Or, more likely, they'd just settled when they should have spent a little more time looking.

"It's over and done now. I've moved on. She's the only woman I've ever really been serious about." He shrugged. A little more of the tension seemed to seep from his body, but the situation had her wondering. Was he really as over Katie as he thought he was?

At least she'd learned something insightful about him. The guy had staying power. That didn't mean he was interested in getting serious with *her*. Part of her was scared to death about getting involved in a serious relationship again, but a small part of her delighted in the idea. As depressing as the thought of another messy breakup was, the thought of David being more to her than just a casual date or summertime romance definitely appealed.

"Tell me about Mack," David said, pulling her out of her wishful thinking. "What caused your split, really?"

"We did grow apart. When I told you that, it was the truth."

"But there's more to it, right?"

She laughed. Leave it to him to turn her questions back on her. One thing she'd learned in all her years of studying people was that nothing was ever as simple as it seemed, her own life included. "Of course. I told you he had affairs that I didn't find out about until we were already separated. But I don't think I mentioned the one that sent me over the edge and prodded me into filing the divorce papers. One of his affairs lasted for almost a year. He even had an apartment with the other woman, and he thought he was in love with her. Apparently, they'd had



plans for a future together, and not once did he even mention how unhappy he was with the marriage.”

“Wow.” David let out a low whistle. “That must have been hell to find out about.”

“It wasn’t easy. I learned about her after she’d already left him for someone else. He was alone, and trying to get me to let him move back home. He seemed depressed a lot then, and before I found out about her, I’d assumed he missed being at home with me and the kids. He was really just upset that she’d walked out on him. I couldn’t take him back, and it wasn’t only because of the affair. I’d already made that decision, not long after he moved out. I’d learned how happy I was without him in the house, though, so I’d been telling him no. And then I found out about Angie and I realized I’d made a smart decision.”

“You sound so calm about it. It didn’t upset you?” he asked, his tone a little suspicious.

Of course it had upset her. She’d felt used and betrayed, but she hadn’t felt brokenhearted. At least not in the conventional sense. She’d been slowly falling out of love with Mack for a few years before they even separated. Angie, the other woman, had been the push Lucy had needed to end the marriage, but she hadn’t really been the cause.

“It did. I’d be lying if I said no. But it didn’t upset me as much as I thought it should have. This is going to sound terrible, but I think at that point I’d already let him go. We hadn’t been getting along for over a year, so it was almost a relief to have a little bit of closure on the situation.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and glanced out the window at the passing scenery. “I know. It makes me sound like a horrible person. It’s tough to say the man broke my heart, though he did, in a way, but even if it all hadn’t happened we still would have ended up divorced.”

They rode in silence for a little while, and Lucy started to wonder if David wanted to change his mind about taking her on his little getaway. But then his hand landed on her shoulder and he squeezed gently.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his tone taking on a worried edge.

"I'm fine. It's been three years. I moved on with my life a long time ago." Though she'd never really come to terms with what had happened, since even today, Mack wouldn't admit to some of the things he'd done. "Are *you* okay?"

"If you think hearing the details of your divorce is going to scare me away, get that idea out of your head right now. We were in similar situations. Around the end with Katie, I didn't care if I was with her or not. I can understand where you're coming from. And just in case you're wondering, I don't think you're a bad person."

How did he always manage to read her so well, when they'd only known each other for a short time? She smiled, though a knot of worry curled in her stomach. Where did he think this thing between them was going? It could never be serious. He had to see that. As much as she wanted to hope for more, it wouldn't work. David was young. Down the road, he'd realize Lucy wasn't who he really wanted to be with for the rest of his life, and he'd leave.

By then, maybe she wouldn't even notice.

She narrowed her eyes, telling herself she was acting like an idiot. David wasn't Mack. There had never been a lot of passion between her and Mack. Sex—at least sex with her—had never really interested him. He'd seen her as his stability. Maybe even his friend. But she hadn't been his love. Too bad it had taken her a long time to come to the same conclusion.

*You're getting ahead of yourself, Lucy.* A handful of dates hardly constituted forever, anyway. She'd promised herself this would be a summer fling, and for all she knew, that was all he was expecting, too. He'd never mentioned commitment, and she had no right to expect it from him. All she had a right to expect this summer was a repeat or two of Saturday night.

"I like that you speak your mind," David said into the silence. "Always do that with me. Always be honest and open. I find it much easier to know where a woman stands than to have to guess what's going on in

her head. I don't like games. I'd rather know the truth upfront, even if it's a little painful sometimes."

"That won't be a problem with me." She laughed, shifting on the seat to face him again. "I generally have foot-in-mouth disease."

David shot her a playful glance. "Nah. There's nothing wrong with saying what you're thinking. What are you thinking now, anyway?"

She laughed. Not a very smooth segue, but effective enough to pull her out of her growing foul mood. "I'm thinking I need this mini-vacation more than I even realized."

"You're going to love this place. It's right on the beach. Steps away from the sand, but still pretty private. We can spend all day tomorrow in the sun."

"We'll be there in the early afternoon, right?"

"Yep." His lips turned up in a secretive grin.

"We really won't be going to the beach then?" When he'd mentioned it earlier, she thought he was joking.

"Maybe later tonight, if you're really dying to get down there. I have plans for this afternoon."

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David set their bags on the floor by the bed and turned to face Lucy. After their conversation in the car, things had changed a little between them. He was still trying to figure out if it was a good change, or a bad one. At the moment, he figured it was a fifty-fifty chance of either. They seemed to be delving into very personal territory very quickly, but he hadn't had enough relationships to know if that was normal, and from the sound of it, neither had she.

Unsure of what to do or say next, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his shorts. "We don't have to stay in the room if you don't want to. Really. I don't want to freak you out or anything. We could go swimming, or there are the outlet malls down the road if you want to go

shopping. Or coffee. We could get coffee if it would make you more comfortable.”

She closed the door, locked it and threw the latch across the top. “What is it with you and coffee? I’m jittery enough without the added caffeine. I’m not much of a shopper, and to tell the truth, one day at the beach is more than enough. I have fair skin. I burn.”

The last sentence was spoken in an unmistakably seductive tone, paired with a smile that had his heart racing. Anticipation tightened his gut. So she wasn’t upset. Good. After spending three hours in the car with her, feeling her beside him, smelling her shampoo and her perfume, he was about ready to go out of his mind. One night with her hadn’t been enough. He wanted to sink into her body again and learn every inch of her. “Then what do you want to do?”

“I’m sure you have a few things in mind.” She moved across the floor until she stood only inches from him, his biggest fantasy wrapped in a blue sundress and a smile. She stroked her hand down his cheek. “You do have plans, right? You mentioned earlier that you didn’t want to hang around the beach until tomorrow.”

How did she manage to go from uncomfortable in the car to seductive right now? He didn’t care. He swallowed hard. At the moment, his plans involved stripping her naked and taking her against the wall, but she deserved better than that. Lucy would *always* deserve better than that. “Sure.”

“And what would those plans be?” Her fingers trailed down to his collarbone, stroking his skin through the thin fabric of his T-shirt. He’d been on edge since he’d picked her up that morning and had a whiff of her perfume. This one was different from the light one she usually wore. It was spicier, more exotic, and it had instantly made him half-hard. Now, with her touching him and looking at him like she wanted to eat him alive, he went rock solid.

He managed a strangled laugh. “I’ll let you know as soon as I can think again. You smell incredible.”

Her smile grew. She didn't respond with words. Instead she stroked her hands down his chest, slowly enough to torture him, until she reached the waistband of his shorts. She stopped there, wrapped her other hand around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss.

The contact was too brief, and then she stepped away. He grabbed her wrist to keep her from getting too far. "Where do you think you're going?"

He tugged her close and kissed her again, this time backing her toward the bed. Once he had her laid down on the mattress, he covered her body with his and kissed her long and slow, putting everything he had into the kiss. His hands stroked up and down her sides, his tongue sweeping into her mouth to brush with hers. He'd never get enough of the taste of her. Years down the road, all he would have to do was think about this moment and he'd taste her again on his lips.

She ran her hands down his back, her fingernails digging into his shirt when he nipped at her lower lip. Soon she was writhing and moaning underneath him. With a quick swipe of his tongue across her lips, he broke the kiss and trailed his mouth down her neck, licking and sucking until he reached her collarbone.

He moved further down her body, sliding her dress up her legs as he went. When he had the fabric bunched at her hips he pulled her panties off and dropped them on the floor.

Her hand came down on his head, caressing his hair and driving him nearly insane. He pressed a kiss to the inside of each thigh, and low on her stomach right above the light thatch of curls. When he moved her legs apart and got down between her thighs, she tugged on his hair.

"What are you doing?"

"One of the things I've wanted to do since the first time I saw you." Without giving her a chance to protest, he leaned down and stroked his tongue across her folds.

Lucy hissed out a breath, her fingers tightening in his hair. Her hips rose to meet his mouth. He continued to kiss her there and she arched her back, thrusting her breasts against the tight top of the dress. Her

nipples had hardened to small points and it made a growl rise in his throat.

It wasn't long before she threw her head back, toppling over the edge into climax. With a soft kiss to her stomach, he moved back up her body and started unbuttoning the tiny buttons on the front of her dress. He loved her clothes, but sometimes they weren't easy to get her out of.

"Wow." Lucy smiled, her eyes closed and her expression one of pure bliss.

He echoed the sentiment. She was amazing. And damn, he needed to be inside her. Once the buttons were all released, he spread the dress out and smoothed his palms over her breasts.

"Can I return the favor?" she asked, cracking one of her eyes open.

"Not yet. Later. Right now, I just want to get inside you."

Her lids fluttered open and she pushed his hands away. "Then get undressed. You're wearing too many clothes."

She didn't have to ask him twice. A grin on his face, he got up and stripped out of his clothes in record time. A quick search of his bag produced the box of condoms he'd bought. Family pack, just to make sure they had enough. Once he'd sheathed himself, he turned around to find Lucy naked on her back on the mattress.

He swallowed hard. All those curves made him nuts. He clenched his hands into fists and drew a slow, deep breath. "You undressed, too."

He'd wanted to take the time to undress her, to do things right, but she seemed to be in as much a rush as he was.

"We can go slow next time," she said, seeming to read his mind. "Now I just want you as close to me as you can get."

He joined her on the bed, fitting himself between her thighs. Her hands on his hips, she urged him inside. Sliding into her in one swift stroke, he closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers. Their breath mingled, and it made him smile. She felt so *right*. So perfect. What he'd been waiting a lifetime for. And he'd only known her for a few months.

She might think this was a brief affair, but David knew the truth. He had to have this woman in his life, for as long as he could keep her there.

Despite his earlier urgency, he forced himself to hold back. He made love to her slowly this time, pouring every ounce of feeling into it. She wouldn't appreciate it if he told her how he felt, but he could show her in other ways. When he found his release, she fell over the edge with him. It was a long time before either of them moved.

## Chapter Eight

Lucy handed David the bottle of sunscreen and waggled her eyebrows. "I'm ready whenever you are. I know it's getting late, but I think I'm about ready for another coat. My shoulders are starting to look a little pink."

He took the bottle from her and smiled. "Anytime, honey. Anytime."

She leaned forward in the beach chair David had brought for her and closed her eyes, loving the feel of his hands all over her back. He stroked the sunscreen up and down, rubbing and caressing a lot more than he needed to, but she wasn't one to complain. The man had magic hands. Tingles ran the length of her spine and her toes curled.

"Sit back," David whispered, his breath against her cheek heating her blood. "I'll do your front now, too."

As tempting as the idea sounded, letting him get so personal in public would only lead to trouble. She shook her head. Some things were better left in the hotel room. "I just need help with my back. I've already taken care of everywhere else."

"What a shame." David made a clicking sound with his tongue. "I was looking forward to doing your front."

"You can do that later." She was looking forward to it, too. After the way he'd touched her last night, she didn't think she'd ever be the same. Sex with Mack had been good, when it had happened. Sometimes she'd even thought of it as great. But David had managed to show her all she'd been missing, and she'd never be able to go back to the way things had been. They hadn't slept much, but then, she hadn't expected them to.



She took a deep breath of salty, ocean-scented air and glanced around. A group of children laughed and played nearby, and it made her think of the boys and how much she missed them. They would really enjoy this place. Maybe once they got home, she'd make plans to bring them here. With David, if he was still around. Her boys would love spending time with him, too.

*Not a good idea, Lucy.* How would she explain it to them once he was gone? Dating since the divorce had been like walking a very fine line. With the other men, she'd managed to keep them out of her children's lives. Chris had been the one exception, and it hadn't taken Lucy long to figure out what a mistake that meeting had been. With David, keeping them separate would be impossible, and since they had such high hopes, it would really kill them when the summer was over and real life invaded.

Maybe she'd just have to take them to the beach by herself.

"Believe me, I would love to do your front later," David said, pulling her out of her thoughts. "But I have a feeling you won't need another coat after this. You probably didn't even need one now. You're right. It's starting to get late."

She smiled. She hadn't needed it, but the prospect of his hands on her again had been too tempting to resist. They'd been lounging on the beach for most of the day, and had even spent a little time in the water. It had been too cold for Lucy, so for a while she'd hung out in the ankle-deep surf watching David swimming out further. Every once in a while he'd splashed her, and eventually it had led to her jumping into the water to get him back. Shivering, she'd let him lead her back to their chairs and dry her off with one of the oversized towels he'd brought.

Lunch had been a couple of sandwiches and bottles of water from a sub shop across the street, but it had been a long time ago and her stomach was starting to growl again. It was pushing five o'clock now, and the only reason she hadn't burned was the SPF fifty sunblock she kept slathering all over her skin. Despite the sun, she'd had an amazing time. A wisp of disappointment washed over her. She wasn't ready for this to end yet, but they couldn't stay out here, away from the real world, forever.

"Maybe we should head back and take a shower before dinner," she suggested, wanting to get back to the room to have a little fun before they had to go out and find some food. Though he'd taken them away, she could still feel his hands on her back, and her body tightened in anticipation of more. She smiled. As far as sex went, she still had a lot of lost time to make up for, and she couldn't think of anyone else she'd rather do it with.

"And waste all that sunscreen?" David asked, eyebrows raised.

She shrugged. "Why not?"

"Okay. You've talked me into it."

They gathered their things and took the short walk across the sand back to the motel. The air conditioner hit like an icy blast when they stepped through the door and Lucy shivered.

"Are you okay?" David asked, his tone laced with concern. "Not coming down with something, are you?"

"No, I'm just not used to spending that much time outside in the heat." Whenever it got above seventy-five at home, she turned the central-air unit on to keep the house nice and cool. She spent days outside by the pool with the boys in the summer, but most of that time was spent in the water with them.

"I'll get the shower started to warm you up. You get your clothes together."

He turned and walked toward the bathroom, giving her a nice view of his rear under the black swim trunks he wore. She snagged her lower lip between her teeth and bit down, smiling. What a body the man had. His dedication to fitness showed in every angle and plane, in every well-toned muscle. She couldn't help but admire the way he moved. And, for the moment at least, he was all hers.

He disappeared into the bathroom and soon the sound of running water reached her. A few seconds later, he stepped back outside, leaned against the doorframe and grinned. "All set, darling."

"Why, thank you." She grabbed her things and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. All she needed was a quick

shower to get the slick sunscreen off her skin and the saltwater out of her hair, and she'd be as good as new, though she had to admit, dinner was the last thing on her mind. She had other plans for David as soon as they were both clean, and they didn't involve leaving the hotel room at all.

She stripped off her damp swimsuit and stepped under the spray, letting it wash off the remnants of salt and sand. The heat felt good against her cooled skin. She closed her eyes and ducked under the showerhead, loving the way the water warmed her, reminding her of the day in the sun and David's touch.

The shower curtain rustled and her eyes snapped open. David, naked and grinning, stepped into the tub.

"What are you doing?" She hadn't really expected him to join her, but she'd been hoping. "It's not very big in here. The bathtub is tiny."

He laughed. "I'm hungry. I know you are, too. If we share a shower, we'll save both water and time. How's that for efficiency?"

She glanced down at his heavy erection and licked her lips. He could call it whatever he wanted, but they both knew what he had in mind. Not that she was complaining. Her sex dampened at the thought of him touching her again, and her nipples beaded—a fact he didn't miss if the way his eyes darkened meant anything. "Efficiency, huh?" she asked, touching his cheek.

"Okay, maybe there are a few other reasons." He brushed his fingers across her collarbone, dipping lower until he circled one of her nipples. She shuddered.

"One of those reasons is very clear, at least from where I'm standing." She wrapped her hand around his erection, stroking from base to tip, and he groaned.

"Yeah, but it's a damned good reason."

"It certainly is. But we need to get clean first."

His fingers circled her wrist, pulling her hand away. He leaned in to kiss her, getting his head wet under the shower spray, but he broke the

contact too soon and reached for the bottle of shampoo, squirting a dollop into his palm. "Turn around. I'll wash your hair."

What was this all about? She frowned. "I can wash it myself."

"Yeah, but I want to. Will you let me?"

The intensity in his gaze had her nodding. She'd never had a man wash her hair before, but she was up for anything. She did as he requested, spinning around and bracing one hand against the cool tile of the shower wall. He stood just behind her and stroked his hands through her hair, his fingertips massaging her scalp.

"You seem tense," he said softly, rubbing the shampoo into the length of her hair. "Relax."

"I'm fine." If she was any more relaxed, she'd melt into a puddle at his feet. If she didn't steady herself, she might just fall over. It was a very sensual experience, with his body so close she could feel the heat emanating from him. The feel of his hands in her hair was decadent. Something she'd never even thought about, but was definitely enjoying.

She leaned back into his touch, but all too soon he told her it was time to rinse. He washed his own hair while she conditioned hers, and after he'd rinsed the shampoo away, he grabbed the small bar of motel soap and lathered up a washcloth.

He turned her around. "Need some help getting the rest of that sunscreen off?"

Did he really think she'd turn him down? "Okay."

He brought the cloth to her skin and, with long, slow strokes, washed her body. He ran the cloth down her chest, paying special attention to her breasts, caressing and teasing until he had her whole body shaking. When he dipped the cloth between her legs, she moaned.

"Hold on to me." He stroked the cloth along her folds. "I'll keep you standing upright."

She did as he asked, and he increased the rhythm of his strokes. Heat arced through her body, pushing her closer and closer to the edge.

She came like that, her fingers digging into his shoulders and her legs refusing to support her weight any longer. David held her against him, her back to his front, rubbing his hands up and down her body to wash off the rest of the soap. It seemed like an eternity before she could stand on her own, and even then, her balance was questionable.

When she could breathe again, she decided to return the favor.

She took her turn soaping him up, making sure he was clean and teasing him with the washcloth as he'd teased her. His breathing grew heavy and he shot her a couple of warning glances, but said nothing. Lucy smiled, fighting a giggle threatening to escape. Touching him this way filled her with a sense of power she couldn't get enough of. She could just about bring this big, strong man to his knees, and damned if she didn't love every second of it.

Her gaze traveled down his body to his erection and her smile widened. She dropped to her knees in front of him, taking the hard length of him in her hand.

"Lucy, you really should wait—"

"I don't want to." Without giving him another chance to protest, she leaned in and took him into her mouth.

David braced his hands on the shower wall behind her. His eyes closed and he groaned. Soon one of his hands left the wall and tunneled through her hair, holding her to him as she laved him with her mouth.

He came with a harsh breath, and dragged her to her feet, pulling her close and kissing the top of her head. "I could really get used to having you around."

She laughed. "I'm sure I don't do anything to you that you haven't had done before."

"It's not just about the sex," he said softly, his lips brushing her forehead. "It's everything. I like being near you. I like spending time with you, and talking to you. I guess I just like...you."

She shuddered, her body suddenly going cold. He couldn't expect forever from her. They weren't right for each other, at least not for more than a fling.

\* \* \* \* \*

When David dropped her off that night, Lucy's heart ached to think of him leaving. After spending time with him, going into her dark house alone didn't hold much appeal. It had been amazing. A vacation she'd needed, even if it hadn't lasted long. She hadn't wanted the time to end, but tomorrow she had to return to the real world of late nights and deadlines, immersing herself in her characters and filling her days with words so her agent would stop calling and asking when the next L. J. Reed book would be on her desk.

She sighed. That was tomorrow. Tonight, she wasn't ready for the intrusion of reality. She'd already had enough of that in the form of David's unsettling confession.

"Thanks for inviting me," she told him at the door, touching her palm to his cheek. "I had a great time."

"You look exhausted." He reached out and tucked a curl behind her ear. She shivered just from that little contact, but was too tired to do anything about it. After the shower they'd shared and dinner at a seafood place on the beach, they'd gone back to the room and made love another time before packing their things to go home. It would probably be a week before her body fully recovered.

"I am. I bet you are, too."

He nodded, yet he hesitated. She understood. She didn't want him to leave, and he didn't seem to be in any rush to get out of there, but nothing about the evening had a sexual charge.

What was going on here? She hadn't gone into this expecting to find a serious relationship, but all signs said they were headed in that direction. She needed to pull back a little, to regroup and remember her reasons for avoiding commitment. And she had plenty of them, thanks to her jerk of an ex-husband, along with so many of the other men she'd dated.

Tomorrow, she would do that. Not tonight. Tonight she'd revel in the emotions in his eyes and the gentleness in his touch. Just for a little while, before she had to send him home so she could get a decent night's sleep.

"I'd ask you in, but we'd end up in bed and I just don't have the energy."

A relieved look passed across David's face. Apparently she wasn't the only worn-out one. "Would it be so bad to just sleep with me without sex tonight? Nothing has to happen. I'd like to fall asleep with you curled up in my arms like we did last night—but we'll keep our pajamas on this time."

She smiled. The thought appealed a lot more than it should. "Okay. That sounds nice."

"You go inside and get settled. I'll go back out to the car and grab my stuff."

Lucy watched David go down the porch steps before she let herself through the front door. She dropped her bag in the foyer and walked toward the kitchen for a glass of water to wet her suddenly dry throat. Falling asleep with him sounded like heaven, and that was an issue too big for her to deal with when she was so exhausted.

If things kept going the way they were, she'd soon find herself in real trouble. He was funny, sweet, charming and laid-back—all the things Mack hadn't been, especially near the end of their marriage. David would be a great choice—but her mind still warned her that he might be too good to be true. She had yet to meet a man who didn't have enough issues to keep a psychiatrist busy for a year. There had to be a catch somewhere. Now she just had to figure out what it was.

"I locked up the house when I came inside," he said from the doorway, pulling her out of her thoughts.

She took a moment to compose herself, not wanting to let him know that anything was wrong, before she glanced up at him. "Thanks. Do you want something to drink?"

“I’m fine. We need to get you into bed. You look like you’re going to pass out standing there. Sorry I wore you out. I’m going to go upstairs and brush my teeth. See you in a few minutes?”

She nodded and watched him walk away. She had to wonder how long this would last. They were already so comfortable with each other, and she could easily see herself falling head over heels for him—not only in lust this time, but so much deeper. She should pull back a little, but that would deprive her of the emotions she deserved to feel. Emotions she’d ignored for far too long. When he decided to leave, she’d have to accept it. She just hoped he wouldn’t go too soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Tell me about your family,” David whispered in Lucy’s ear. Family seemed to be a safe enough topic.

She wriggled in his arms, snuggling closer, and pulled the covers up a little higher. “What do you want to know?”

*What I really want to know is why I feel like you’re pulling away from me emotionally.* Ever since he’d walked inside from his car, he’d felt like something had changed between them. It wasn’t anything specific, but the air around them had shifted. A new tension had been added, as if she was trying to build an emotional wall around herself. Letting her do that would be a mistake, but at the same time, he knew better than to push too fast. Her life was far more complicated than his, and he owed it to her to slow down and allow things to happen naturally.

“You said you moved in with your grandmother when you were in high school.”

“Yeah,” she expelled a breath on a sigh. “My mom and dad had had problems for a while, and when I turned eighteen, they finally split. I was just starting my senior year, and going through a bit of a rebellious stage, so my mom thought it would be best if she got me out of Boston and all the craziness of the city. So she sent me here, where it’s quieter and calmer, and my grandmother could watch over me.



“My grandmother and I were really close. I was closer to her than I had been with anyone else, even my mom. Then she got sick and died, and she left me just about everything she had.”

“I’m really sorry. It must have been tough on you to lose her.” He kissed the side of her ear and held her just a little closer. His family drove him nuts most of the time, but he wouldn’t want to live without them, either. “Do you ever see your mother?”

“I do sometimes. For a while, we weren’t close, but now that I have the boys, she comes to visit a couple times a year.”

David only shook his head. His family was so tight-knit there were times he felt like he couldn’t get away from them. He couldn’t imagine not having the support system they provided.

“I grew up in a big family. Two older brothers and two older sisters.”

She glanced over her shoulder and smiled at him in the semidarkness. “The baby, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess. When I was a toddler, my sister, Amanda, got really sick with leukemia. We were all young, and it was hard on everyone. My mother likes to keep close tabs on us kids, even now, and I think Amanda’s illness and how it affected the whole family has something to do with it. Amanda’s okay, though. Has been for years. My mom still hasn’t completely gotten over it.”

“That’s awful. I had no idea. I’m glad she’s okay. So you guys are all pretty close, huh?”

He laughed. She really had no idea how a family like his worked. “We still have meals at her house at least once a week—except for Rachel. She and her husband live too far away to come home all the time, but they visit almost once a month. Amanda drags Joe home every couple of weeks. My parents are great, they really are, but my mother can be a little...*much* sometimes.”

Lucy reached back and pinched his side. “Is that any way to talk about the woman who raised you? You’re a terrific guy. She obviously did something right.”

"I'm sure she'd thank you, if she heard you say that. And then she'd disagree with you."

"Why do you think that?"

He heard the amusement in her voice, and he couldn't bear to tell her he wasn't joking. In his mother's eyes, he'd failed since he'd had a perfectly good woman all set to settle down with him, get married and start a family, and he'd thrown the relationship away. She hadn't understood why he'd ended things with Katie. No way would he introduce her to Lucy. At least not yet. His mother would scare her away, and she was already skittish to begin with. Bringing her around his family would be the easiest way to frighten Lucy right out of his life.

"She can be a little overzealous sometimes, and she tends to speak before she thinks." He tightened his hold, afraid she might try to move away. Enough talk about his crazy family. He wanted to know more about her. "Do you have any brothers and sisters?"

"No. I'm an only child. I always wanted to be part of a big family, though. When I was growing up, I used to tell people I was going to have ten children."

He laughed. As odd as it sounded to hear her say that, he really could picture her having such a big brood. "Oh, yeah?"

"Obviously that didn't happen."

For some reason, her words made his jaw clench. "You're still young. What if you get married again someday?"

"I never really thought about that. I guess I may have more children down the road—but I don't think I'd want ten. What about you? Do you want kids?"

"Yeah, definitely." Growing up in a big family, he'd always known if he had kids, he'd want them to have the same experience. Having a bunch of siblings around at all times had made life interesting.

"Why did you go into teaching?" she asked, taking him by surprise.

"I'm not exactly sure. I was a camp counselor when I was a teenager, and I liked it. I'd originally thought about being a high-school teacher, but then I decided I liked working with younger children, so I chose

elementary school instead. I taught a few towns over my first couple years out of college, and then I left there to take a long-term substitute position here at home.”

“I didn’t know about that. Where did you teach in town before you came to Lilton Elementary?”

“Fox School. One of the teachers there was out on maternity leave. My mother knows the principal, and she let me know about the opening. Once the teacher came back in March, I took a little time off, and stepped into my current job when Mrs. Frye left.”

Lucy yawned and shifted in his arms, snuggling closer. “That was lucky.”

“Yeah, I guess it was. How did you get into writing? And this may sound strange, but why horror, of all things?”

Her laugh held a sleepy edge. “When I was eleven, my uncle and aunt used to baby-sit me when my mother was at work. I...ah, didn’t sit still very well when I was a kid. I guess I was a handful. My aunt gave me some horror novels to keep me busy, and my love for that genre started there. As for writing...it’s the same old thing almost every writer says. I’ve been telling stories for practically my whole life. It was only natural that I grew up to do something with that love of the written word.”

For such a sweet, honest woman, the genre didn’t seem to fit. Every time they talked, he learned something surprising about her. “I almost forgot, but I brought those books for you to sign, you know. They’re out in my trunk.”

Lucy groaned. “Tomorrow, David. Tonight, I think we both need to get some sleep.”

## Chapter Nine

“I have this thing I have to go to tonight,” David told Lucy over the phone. She didn’t respond and he winced. He could assume what she was thinking—and it wouldn’t be good. Lucy had a wild imagination, and to her, it probably sounded like he was blowing her off.

Nothing could be further from the truth. He wanted to spend time with her, but he wouldn’t yet bring her around his family and they wouldn’t let him skip out on family time anymore, at least not without a valid reason. No way would he tell them about Lucy. His mother would want to meet her, and it would be the beginning of the end.

“Sorry I didn’t mention it sooner. I would have, if I’d known. I just found out about it a little while ago.”

It wasn’t a lie, at least not entirely. The family gathering was held every year and most of the relatives from around New England made appearances, but this year he’d been so busy with Lucy it had slipped his mind.

“So you’re canceling dinner tonight.”

It was a statement rather than a question, and it killed him to hear the disappointment in her voice. For the past three weeks, things had been amazing. He’d spent more time at Lucy’s house than at his own apartment, and the sex had been better than he’d ever had.

If he had to be honest with himself, it wasn’t just the physical aspects of the relationship keeping him coming back for more. The conversation had been pretty damned good, too, and they’d had a lot of fun. The woman was incredible, and he’d been looking forward to taking her out tonight.

But then his mother had called and reminded him about the family cookout she and his father held every year in July. At first he'd tried to beg off, telling her he had other plans, but she'd nixed that right away. She'd even gone as far as to tell him she suspected he was seeing someone new, and to suggest he should bring her with him. He couldn't bring Lucy into the mess that was his crazy family. Jake had been right—if David mentioned Lucy to his mother, he'd never hear the end of it. And if he introduced them, Lucy wouldn't, either.

"Yeah, I have to cancel. I'm sorry. I feel really bad about it. I'll make it up to you later. I promise."

"It's okay. You don't have to apologize, and you don't owe me anything. We never made a commitment. I figured this wouldn't last forever, anyway."

The disappointment in her voice had him closing his eyes and scrubbing his hand down his face. How had he managed to get himself into this situation? He didn't want to hurt her, he just didn't want to scare her off, either, and if she met his mother, Miriam would scare her off faster than anything David could do or say.

At the same time, part of him wanted to introduce her to his family. She might not be ready to think of what they had as a commitment, but he had—almost since day one. She was important to him, and he wanted to bring her around the other important people in his life.

Could it really be so bad as he'd first thought? His mother would be on her best behavior around someone new, and she had married children to bug about grandchildren now. Maybe she wouldn't mention them to Lucy, and they could all avoid an awkward situation.

And maybe he was fooling himself, pretending it would work out when he knew damned well it wouldn't.

"It's not what you think." He regretted the words the instant they left his mouth. Of course now she'd assume whatever she was thinking was the reason he was canceling. His excuse ranked right up there with *It's not you, it's me*, and he needed to find a way to salvage it. "I mean, it's a family thing."

Oh, yeah. *That* was a lot better.

“Oh. Okay. Well, I wouldn’t want to intrude. Have a nice time.”

“Thanks.”

“Will you call me later? Whenever you get in is fine. I’m going to pull an all-nighter on my manuscript, so I’ll be awake.”

The words broke his resolve to protect her from his family. He was acting like an ass, trying to cancel on her at the last minute, and not even being straight about it. She’d never been anything but honest with him, and he owed her at least that much in return.

“Hold on a second. I just thought of something. If you want a break for a while, you could come with me. It’s just a family dinner. Nothing special.”

Just the annual family cookout his parents always had in July. No one was ever allowed to skip a year, except for Amanda, who’d just last year bought a house and started a new job and hadn’t been able to get the time off from work. Even she’d be there this time, though.

“That sounds great.”

The relief in her voice made him smile. He knew she had trouble with the boys being gone for so long, and he really did want to spend more time with her. He’d just have to watch his mother carefully to make sure she didn’t say anything offensive to Lucy. If he stuck by her side all night long, no one would have the chance. “It starts around four this afternoon. Why don’t I pick you up at two?”

“Why so early?” Suspicion laced her tone and he had to laugh.

By the end of the night, when his mother had harassed her to no end, she probably wouldn’t want to see him anymore. He wanted to get in every little bit of time with her that he could.

“I need some time to relax first before I have to face my family. I figured we could relax together.”

Lucy’s laugh carried across the line. “Come on. They can’t be that bad.”

Poor woman. She really had no idea what she was getting herself into. Well, he couldn't say he didn't warn her. "You have yet to meet my mother."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lucy met David at the door, her hands shaking and her palms sweaty. Why did he have to make the comment about meeting his mother? She'd done nothing but worry since she'd hung up the phone, and had changed her outfit six times before she found something she hoped was appropriate to wear.

After rejecting almost everything from her closet, she'd finally settled on a pair of white linen shorts and a cap-sleeved T-shirt in baby blue. A pair of sandals finished it off—no heels this time—and though the outfit was nothing special it wasn't washed so many times it was worn soft, either. The outfit was sedate, calm, and hopefully wouldn't give his family the wrong impression. Just because she worked at home didn't mean she couldn't get out of her old, comfortable clothes once in a while.

"Hey," she said, forcing herself to smile. Why had she said she'd go with him, anyway?

"Hi." He bent down to press a quick kiss to her lips. The heat in his eyes made her stomach tighten. "You look cute."

"I look like I'm twelve." The words were out before she could stop them, and saying them made her laugh. She didn't look like she belonged with him, that was for sure. His parents were so going to hate her.

She sighed, still trying to figure out why it mattered so much they didn't. It shouldn't even be an issue, yet she couldn't stop herself from worrying—so much that her stomach hurt and she had a feeling she'd gnawed a hole right through her lower lip.

"Nah. You look great. Just different than you usually do. No long skirt today, huh?"

She nearly laughed. Her long skirts might look fancy, but on a normal work day, she was all about comfort. The skirts were stretchy,

soft from being washed so many times, and if a person looked closely enough they'd see how worn out the things really were. "It's too hot to be outside in something so long."

*I'm not trying to impress your family. Really, I'm not. Because if I was, it would mean I'm looking for a commitment when that's the last thing I want.*

Lucy shook her head. *Want to tell yourself any more lies?*

"Well, I like this shirt," David said, rubbing the sleeve between his thumb and forefinger, and a tiny shiver danced from her shoulder down to her fingertips. "But I really do love you in those skirts."

A drop in his tone warned her he was up to something. "Why?"

His thumb skimmed her lips before tracing the line of her jaw. His gaze heated and he shut the door behind him with his foot. "A lot less work to get you out of your clothes. And you know how much I like it when you're naked."

She laughed. "That doesn't really matter right now, since we have to be at your parents' house in a couple of hours."

"We have plenty of time, Lucy. Plenty of time." He backed her into the wall next to the door and kissed her, long and deep. Her whole body responded, her sex going wet and her nipples beading. By the time he broke the kiss, they were both panting and she was seriously considering asking him to skip the cookout. The thought of meeting his family sent a jolt of apprehension through her, and staying in for the night was so much more of an appealing idea.

"If we stay here, we could go swimming in the pool. Naked."

She expected him to nod, but he just laughed. "We can do that tonight after we get home. Now I'm trying to figure out the fastest way to talk you out of your clothes."

She raised her eyebrows. He had to know all he had to do was ask. "Sometimes you're such a gentleman, and others, you're..."

"A pig?" he supplied, laughing.

"Yeah, that about sums it up."



“Sorry. I just have a problem. Every time I see you, I can’t keep my hands off you.”

Three and a half weeks of sex should have taken care of that. The fact that it hadn’t made her smile. Maybe this was more than just a summer fling, after all.

She swallowed hard. Part of her reveled in his words, but another, larger part of her was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. One of these days, he’d wake up and realize he made a mistake. Until he did, she’d never be able to completely relax around him.

“Hey,” he said softly, cupping her chin in his palm. “What’s the matter?”

So much, but nothing she could explain to him. He wouldn’t want to hear about her fears and insecurities. Mack hadn’t been all that interested, and she’d been married to him. She wouldn’t trouble David with her issues and risk chasing him away even sooner.

She locked the door. “We have a few hours before we need to be there.”

“Yes, we do.” A smile spread over his face and he pulled her into his arms. “I know exactly how I want to fill that time, too.”

## Chapter Ten

“You didn’t tell me this was a *wedding*,” Lucy whispered to David as they walked into his parents’ backyard.

“As far as I know, it’s not,” he whispered back, glancing around at the tacky wedding décor that seemed to have vomited all over the place. Everything was white, from the paper streamers strung from tree limbs to the cheesy crepe-paper bells perched in the center of each table. Flowers seemed to explode from huge baskets placed in what looked like a random order around the lawn. What the hell was going on here? “It’s as much a surprise to me as it is to you.”

She shot him a look, letting him know she doubted him, and he could only shake his head. “Trust me, Lucy. If I’d known about any of this, I would have let you know. Odds are, it was a surprise to everyone. My mother does things like this all the time.” *Unfortunately.*

“Why would she do that?”

He shrugged. He and his siblings had been searching for the answer to that same question for as long as he could remember. He gave her the only answer they’d ever managed to come up with. “Because she can. Come on. I want to introduce you to my brothers and sisters.”

He took her hand and went in search of Jake or Rachel, or someone else who might be closer to sound mind than his mother apparently was. The first person he spotted was Amanda, his thrice-divorced sister, standing by the food table, and everything clicked into place. His sister must be having another wedding. Hadn’t she learned from the first three that letting their mother plan them didn’t work out very well?

“Hey,” he said to Amanda and her boyfriend, Joe. They didn’t look like a couple about to take the plunge, but with Amanda, one never really knew what she had on her mind. “Amanda and Joe, this is Lucy.”

“Nice to meet you, Lucy,” Amanda said, shooting David a glance. “Have you been dating my brother for long?”

“A few weeks,” Lucy said, her tone laced with discomfort. David shifted his position and tightened his grip on her hand. Her discomfort was his fault.

“Should I be congratulating the two of you?” he asked Amanda, hoping to diffuse some of the tension from the situation.

Amanda nearly choked on the chip she’d been eating. She sputtered and coughed, her eyes going wide. “Who told you?”

“So you *are* getting married. I thought you’d decided never to go down that road again.”

Amanda had been clear with the whole family from the first time they met Joe—she planned to be with him for a very, very long time, but she wouldn’t be marrying him. All her marriages—and the engagement a few years ago—had ended in disaster.

“Who said anything about getting *married*?” Amanda’s eyes widened even more. “This isn’t for Joe and I. This is some nutty idea Mom had about giving a reception for Rachel and Doug, and Jake and Amber, since she didn’t get to plan those weddings, or even go to them.”

In his opinion, his married siblings had done the right thing by eloping. A Miriam Storm wedding could rival a circus affair.

“If you’re not getting married,” he asked his sister. “What news did you think I was talking about?”

“We’re getting married,” Joe said, a possessive arm around Amanda’s waist. He pulled her close and kissed her temple, his expression filled with finality.

Amanda narrowed her eyes at him. “No, we’re not.”

“Yeah, we are.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head. Typical stubborn Amanda. “We’ve discussed this. We’ve only been together for a year. I’m not ready.”

“Too bad.” Joe shrugged, his eyes hinting at amusement. Luckily for Amanda, she’d found someone willing to put up with her. He loved his sister, but she wasn’t always easy to get along with.

“You only have about six months to get there,” Joe continued, his tone a little softer this time, and brimming with something David suspected was male pride. Suddenly, Amanda’s initial reaction made sense.

David smiled. “You’re pregnant, aren’t you?”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “Not on purpose. And would you care to explain to this man that we don’t have to be married to have a child together? Plenty of people stay together all their lives without taking vows.”

David couldn’t help but laugh, and Lucy joined in.

“You know what’s crazy?” Joe asked, shaking his head. “My twenty-one-year-old son just got engaged. I could be a grandfather in a couple of years, and now I’m going to be a father again. We’re getting married,” he said to Amanda. “Soon. I have to set a good example for my kids.”

Joe and Amanda had both been divorced and wounded when they’d met. Joe had two kids in their twenties, even though he hadn’t quite hit forty himself.

“We’ll talk about this at home.” Amanda’s words were firm, but David detected a hint of resignation behind them. She turned to David and Lucy. “You two are the only ones around here who know. Whatever you do, don’t tell Mom. She’s nuts with this whole reception thing as it is. Hearing about the baby would put her over the top.”

“Our lips are sealed,” David assured her, knowing his sister was right. Now would not be the time to make any sort of announcement.

Amanda turned her attention to Lucy. “Watch out for my mother. Once she finds out David is seeing someone new, you’re going to get the baby speech. Do you want kids someday? Because it really will be better

for you if you just say yes when she asks. And she *will* ask. It's instinctual with her."

Lucy laughed, though a good dose of disbelief showed on her face. "Talking about kids doesn't bother me. I already have four boys."

"Oh, my mother is so going to love you."

"What do you mean?" Lucy asked, throwing David a glance that had him gulping. He shouldn't have brought her here. Once they were alone, she wouldn't let him hear the end of it.

"She wants grandchildren, and she figures she has five adult children and it's about time they give them to her. She lets us all know, very often, how much she wants them."

Lucy's answering laugh held a nervous edge. David figured it was time to get her out of there before Amanda did any more damage. He grabbed her hand and steered her away.

Once they were a few dozen feet away, Lucy pulled him to a stop. "What's wrong with you? Why are you so jumpy?"

"My mother's going to find out you have kids, and then it's going to be all over."

"Care to explain that comment?"

"Like Amanda said, she wants grandchildren. She's going to think we...that you and I..."

"Don't worry. I know you're not interested in anything serious with me." She started to walk away, but he grabbed her hand again.

Is that what she really thought? He narrowed his eyes, wondering if her nerves today were caused by thinking he wasn't interested in anything serious with her. He'd assumed she was anxious because *she* didn't want *him*. Was he reading the situation wrong?

"Who said I wasn't interested?"

"No one, but we've never made any commitments."

He sighed. Yeah, he'd read her all wrong. She'd done a good job hiding her interest, pretending she wanted nothing more from him than a

month-long affair, but she'd been lying to him. Maybe even lying to herself.

He bit back a smile. It was about time he found a crack in that particular armor. "Is that what you want? A commitment?"

"No."

He let the smile loose at her wavering tone. "What if I said I do?"

"Do what?"

"Want a commitment."

"I'd say you're lying."

Hope lit her eyes and his smile grew. Maybe she did want more than she'd told him she did. He hadn't gone into it looking for something serious, but he'd fallen for her anyway. She wasn't his usual type, and that was what he loved about her.

"I'm not lying." He stroked his fingers down the side of her arm. For a brief second, she leaned into the touch, but all too soon she pulled away, putting distance between them, both emotionally and physically.

"Can we discuss this later? I don't think this is really the place to discuss what's going on between us."

What was she so afraid of? If she thought he wouldn't want to put up with her kids, she had it all wrong. Hadn't he proven time and time again that he was good with children?

If she thought he was going to be like her ex-husband and cheat on her, she couldn't be further away from the truth. He would never cheat on any woman, let alone one he'd fallen in love with.

He frowned, not ready to let the subject go until he'd made her understand where he was coming from, but he didn't get a chance to respond. His mother hurried over to them, her arms stretched out wide, and pulled him in for a hug. When she let go, she shook her head and made a *tsking* sound. "You didn't tell me you were bringing a friend."

She looked toward Lucy, a big smile on her face. "I'm Miriam Storm."

"Lucy Parker. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Storm."

"Please, call me Miriam. We're all family here."

David groaned. It could only go downhill from there, and he had a feeling it wouldn't be very long before the situation hit rock bottom. Lucy was skittish, and his mother was going to chase her away. He started ticking off numbers in his head. It was only a matter of seconds before she brought up something that was sure to make Lucy uncomfortable. *One...two...three...four.*

"Amanda tells me you have children," his mother went on, a gleam in her eyes.

David shot a glare in Amanda's direction. What had she been thinking? She must have run right over to their mother as soon as David had led Lucy away. She was lucky he didn't blab her and Joe's little secret in return.

Lucy glanced at David in silent plea before she answered. "Four boys."

"You should have brought them. It's been so long since we've had children in the house." She said the words with a pointed glare at David before returning her attention back to Lucy. "We would all have loved to meet them."

"They're with their dad for a few more days," David cut Lucy off. His mother needed to know the truth right away, or else she'd argue. "He takes them for a month in the summer."

"Yes, he does." Lucy pinched him just below the rib cage.

David glanced away to hide his smile. Lucy was taking it all in stride. He was lucky she hadn't smacked him yet, though he wouldn't discount the possibility for later. The tension he felt in her body told him she was pissed.

"Once they get back, you'll have to bring them by. I'd love to meet them."

She squeezed his hand. "That sounds nice."

"Go grab some food," she told them. "I have to go greet the rest of the guests, but we'll talk again really soon."

Once his mother had walked away, Lucy turned to him. "That wasn't so bad."

He sighed. Lucy was right...but David knew his mother. Nothing was that easy with Miriam Storm. "Brace yourself. I have a feeling she's just getting started."

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time David dropped Lucy off at home, she seemed ready to snap. She sat ramrod straight in the car seat, hands clenched into fists in her lap, knuckles white. The tension coming off her was so thick he got the impression he could reach out and touch it.

She'd been stressed out by the evening, and he'd only added to the tension. Jake had been right. Introducing her to the family—especially his mother—had been a mistake. So much for taking things slowly and giving her time to adjust. His mother hadn't left her alone all night. Every time she walked by them, she'd reminded Lucy that she couldn't wait to meet the kids. And then she'd started with the questions, all but asking Lucy if she was getting ready to get married again. Not exactly how he'd envisioned the day going, but it was a lot closer to what he should have expected. He'd been fooling himself to think she'd leave unscathed.

"Are you okay?" he asked, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm fine." She managed a small smile, but he noted a hint of sadness in her tone.

"You don't sound fine."

He sighed when she said nothing. "Listen, Lucy, I'm really sorry I dragged you to my parents' house tonight. It was a mistake. I'm sure my mother drove you crazy."

She let out a small laugh. "Actually, your mother's terrific."

He braked for a stop sign and looked at her, trying to keep his jaw from hitting the floor. She had to be kidding. Most people who hadn't been raised by his mother could only take her in small doses. Hell, sometimes even her children felt the same way. "Ha ha. Very funny."



"I'm serious, David. Your whole family is great." She sighed and looked out the window as he put his foot on the gas and moved away from the intersection. "I always wanted a big family."

Something inside him cheered at her words, but there was something she wasn't telling him. "Why do I detect a *but* in there somewhere?"

"It's nothing. Really. I just...growing up with just my parents, I missed out on a lot of the stuff you all got to do. It must have been amazing."

"That's an interesting way of putting it."

"You just don't understand what you have. You don't, and I'm sure there's nothing I can say to show you."

The rest of the ride home was silent. He didn't know what to say to her comments, and she didn't seem inclined to keep up the conversation. A knot formed in his gut and his throat had long since gone dry. She'd closed herself off to him, though he didn't know why. If she liked him and thought his family was great, what could be the problem? He felt her slipping through his fingers, but he couldn't understand why it was happening.

He pulled into her driveway and rushed around the car to open her door, but she was already out and heading up the walkway toward her front porch.

"Hey, hold on a second!" he called after her. She slowed down, but didn't stop and didn't look back. "Come on, Lucy, talk to me."

She said nothing, but allowed him to take her hand and walk her up the porch steps. He kissed her at her door, but she pulled away a little too quickly. There was a tension between them that hadn't been there before, and it made him nervous. He tucked a stray curl behind her ear. "You are something else. I don't know if I've told you that often enough."

Lucy only shrugged. "Thanks for tonight. It was fun."

She didn't look like a woman who'd had a lot of fun. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm just tired. I need to go inside and get some sleep."

"Okay. I'll call you tomorrow."

“Better make it next week sometime. I have a deadline, and since the boys won’t be home for a few more days, I’m really going to pour myself into my writing and see what I can get done. I’m really sorry, but I can’t have any distractions.”

*Shit.* He’d known bringing her to meet his family so soon had been a mistake.

“Why don’t you call me when you’ve got some free time?” he asked. Telling her he loved her was on the tip of his tongue, but he had a feeling she wouldn’t appreciate hearing those words right now. Knowing her, she wouldn’t even believe them.

“I’ll do that. And David, thanks for a great month.”

No way was he letting her go without a fight. No way in hell. It would kill him to let her walk away from him now, when everything was still so great between them. “Lucy, I—”

She cut him off with a wave. “Don’t. Don’t ruin this. It was the most incredible month I’ve had in too long to remember. I don’t want to taint that memory. I want to keep it forever. I’ll call you when I get a chance, okay?”

He watched her go inside and stood on her porch for a few minutes before he walked down the steps and got into his car. She thought she could end this, that she could walk away and pretend it had never happened? The woman thought wrong. He loved her, damn it, and there was no way he was going to fade out of her life. She wouldn’t call him, but that didn’t mean what was between them had ended.

He’d give her a week before he gave in and called her.

## Chapter Eleven

Lucy watched David get into his car, slam the door and drive away. She pressed her forehead to the stained-glass window next to the door and sucked in a shuddering breath. Tonight had been...overwhelming. And it had showed her two important things. She was head over heels in love with David Storm, and she wasn't planning to tell him. Ever.

He said he wanted a commitment, but the way he'd talked tonight to his siblings about marriage and family said the opposite. He might have thought he was joking, but she heard the truth behind the words. He was afraid of marriage. Afraid of having children, and here she was with four of them.

It was better to make a break now, before the boys got back. The less time he spent around them, the better. The last thing she needed was to have them get attached. She'd caught something on his face that looked like it might have been relief just before she'd stepped inside. She'd made him uncomfortable. He hadn't been able to wait to get away from her.

*Stupid Lucy, falling in love with the man. You should have known better.*

She had, but she'd let herself fall for the guy anyway, and in the process had managed to break her own heart.

She dropped her keys on the table by the stairs and went into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. She hadn't lied when she'd said she planned to throw herself into the book, but she hadn't been entirely honest about her reasons. It was true that writing was easier without the boys around, but she really didn't think she'd be able to see David again, even after she was finished. The deadline had proved to be a convenient

excuse. If she saw him, she'd only end up sinking deeper into her feelings and getting hurt more when he finally walked away.

Once the coffee had brewed, she poured a cup, added milk and a few spoonfuls of sugar, and took the mug into her office. Might as well start on the book. Now, at least, she was in the right state of mind to write something dark and twisted.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week had gone by, and David hadn't heard from Lucy. Like he'd told himself, he'd given her that time, and it had nearly killed him to not call. Now he held the phone in his hand, listening to it ring and waiting for someone to answer. On the fifth ring, Trevor picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Trev. It's David. How was your time with your dad?"

"It was great." Trevor proceeded to go into a five minute, highly detailed description of what seemed like every second of the boys' time in California.

"Is your mom home?" he asked when Trevor stopped to take a breath.

"Hold on. I'll get her." A few seconds later, the boy came back on the line. "She's working on her book now. She said she'll call you when she gets a chance, but it might be a while."

Damn it. Why hadn't he pressed to see her again? What was going through her mind? In trying to give her the space she needed, he hadn't tried hard enough to convince her he was serious. He should have made sure she was okay after the family cookout instead of letting her push him away. Now it was going to be a struggle to see her again. Good thing he was up for the challenge. She might not believe it, but the woman was more than worth it. He'd do just about anything for her. All she had to do was ask.

"Is everything okay?"

There was a slight hesitation before the boy spoke. "She told us we probably won't see you again, except at the school sometimes if we have to go pick up my brothers."

He'd been afraid of this, and yet he'd let her push him away. What an idiot he'd been.

"Did she, now?"

"Yeah."

He'd see about that. He'd have to find a way to at least see her again. If she could tell him to his face to go away, he'd have to accept it, but the fact that she wouldn't even talk to him gave him hope. She was avoiding him for a reason, and it was time to make her face what was right in front of her. "I have an idea, but I'm going to need your help."

He detailed his plan to the boy, and hung up the phone to call Nikki. He'd need her help, too, if she was willing to give it.

"I know what you're calling about," she said when she answered. "And I don't think this is a good idea. What are you trying to do, anyway? Lucy's been hurt before. She doesn't need to be hurt again."

He sighed. When had this suddenly become his fault? "I thought you were on my side here. I don't want to hurt her."

"She's my friend. I have to side with her. You'd just leave her once things got serious. That'd hurt her more than anything."

"It's already serious, damn it." He shoved a hand through his hair and, clutching the cordless phone to his ear, paced back and forth across the kitchen floor. Couldn't anyone make this easy? "You're the one who told me I should go for it with her. Why are you suddenly changing your mind?"

"She thinks you're not in it for the long haul."

She had to be kidding. "Like hell I'm not."

"Lucy wants forever," Nikki said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Funny, but she'd sworn to him that was the last thing she wanted. "Apparently not, if she's pushed me out of her life."

"Listen, Mack hurt her."

"I know. She told me the story."

"Everything?"

"Yeah, everything."

"Then you can understand why she's afraid."

"Yeah, I guess I can." She'd explained it when they'd gone to the beach. She wasn't afraid of being hurt as much as she was of them growing apart. She and Mack hadn't been close by the time they'd divorced. How was he supposed to deal with *that* fear? He could handle her fear of him breaking her heart, but this one was too much.

He told her about what he'd worked out with Trevor. "So what do you suggest I do?"

"You'll have to find a way to convince her you're serious. I hate to say it, but she doesn't believe it. And you need to show her you want to be with the kids, too. Chris didn't really care much about her kids. Their father lives all the way in California, and barely sees them. They need a father figure here. Someone to play ball with them, and take them to soccer practice."

Did she really think he didn't want any of that? He'd understood from the beginning that if he got involved with Lucy, he'd be involved with her whole family. "Okay."

"You also need to prove to her you aren't going anywhere," Nikki continued. "She didn't chase Mack. It's not in her nature. She's not going to chase you, but if you stuck to your guns and went after her, it would show her you're willing to put in the effort."

He was more than willing. He smiled. "No problem."

"Listen, about your plan to see her again, I'm going over there tonight for pizza and a movie. Why don't you come with me? We could surprise her. If I'm there, I doubt she'll tell you she won't see you."

It was all falling into place, with practically no effort on his part. If he didn't know better, he'd think fate had a hand in all of this. It wasn't fate, though. It was everyone around Lucy. She was too busy thinking about what she wasn't looking for to even consider what she did want in her life. "Sounds like a plan."

\* \* \* \* \*

“Mom, Aunt Nikki’s here,” Lucas called from the foyer.

“Send her in,” Lucy mumbled, up to her elbows in dishwater. She’d made her deadline, but she was running behind because of it and had yet to get a day’s worth of dishes done.

Footsteps behind her made her smile. She hadn’t seen Nikki in a few weeks, and she’d missed the girl talk. Though they’d talked on the phone—mostly about David and the huge mistake Lucy had made with him—it wasn’t the same as seeing her friend face to face. “Give me just a couple minutes to rinse these off. I called in the order for the pizzas. They should be here in about ten minutes. Do you want something to drink?”

“I’m all set,” Nikki told her. “I think I’ll go hang out with the boys and wait for the pizza guy. I brought you a present. I think you might enjoy it alone rather than in a group setting, so I’ll go make sure the boys are busy for a little while.”

Frowning, Lucy wiped her hands on a dishtowel and turned around. Standing behind Nikki in the doorway of the kitchen was the last person on Earth she wanted to see. David.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked Nikki, trying to ignore the way David’s smile made her weak in the knees.

“If you won’t make yourself happy, someone has to do it for you.” Nikki gave her a wink, turned and walked out of the room, leaving Lucy and David alone for the first time since before her boys had come back from California and jolted her back to reality.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Why are you here?”

He shrugged, as if sneaking into her house after she’d said she wouldn’t see him was the most natural thing in the world. “I wanted to see you.”

She’d wanted to see him too. So badly. It had been hell not to pick up the phone and call him. “I told you I’d call you when I wasn’t busy.”

He propped his hip on the table. The stubborn set of his jaw told her he wasn't going anywhere, and the look in his eyes let her know she wasn't fooling anyone. "What's really going on here, Lucy?"

She swallowed hard. With him staring at her with such intensity, her stomach flip-flopped and her breath caught in her throat. What was he doing here? If he wasn't serious, he wouldn't have come, but at the same time she couldn't forget he hadn't spent much time with her kids. A few weeks with them on a full-time basis and he'd be headed for the hills.

"I don't know," she said, leaning against the wall for support. "You tell me."

"Why haven't you called?"

"I've been busy." The excuse sounded weak. Pathetic. Who was she trying to fool?

"Have you been thinking about me at all, or have you already given up on us?"

"There is no us." *Not anymore.*

"That's a lie and we both know it." His voice had dropped to nearly a whisper and hurt flashed across his gaze.

It broke her heart to think she'd put that pain there, but what was she supposed to do?

"Don't do this," she said. "You don't want to do this."

"I'm confused here. Exactly what am I not supposed to want to do?"

"Get involved with me."

The doorbell rang and she started to leave the kitchen, but David's hand on her arm stopped her. "It's the pizza. Nikki will take care of it. Don't run away from this right now. Talk to me."

"The kids are going to come in here in a second." She glanced up at him, swallowing against the lump in her throat. He was so close, and she wanted too much to kiss him. "Let me go."

"Not without a fight." The fact that he dropped his hand from her arm let her know he wasn't talking about the same thing she was.

"David, don't."



"You keep saying that." He cupped her face in his palms and stared down at her with an intensity that made her whole body shake. "Don't fall in love with you? If that's what you're afraid of, stop. It's too late. I'm already way past that."

She blinked, searching his gaze for deception but only found honesty. "You're in love with me?"

He nodded. "You look surprised."

Hope sparked inside her, but she had to remember that Mack had said the same words to her a long time ago, and their relationship hadn't had a fairy-tale ending. She'd loved Mack, too, once, but things had changed a lot over the course of their marriage. There were no guarantees the same thing wouldn't happen with David, and without that assurance, Lucy wasn't ready to step into the great unknown.

"I am, a little. I don't see you as the type to tie yourself to a woman with four kids."

"You use that as an excuse too often. That's okay. Use it all you want. For now. One of these days I'm going to show you I'm not going anywhere. What's between us isn't what you had with Mack, and it's not what I had with Katie. It's real. Strong. Full of a kind of passion that just won't die—and if it starts to, I won't let it. I'm willing to work to keep the spark between us, Lucy, but you have to meet me halfway. The kids are great. You know I care about them, but this isn't about that. It's about us. I'd still want you in my life, with or without them."

The kids rushed into the kitchen then, followed by Nikki carrying four large pizza boxes, and she let out a sigh of relief. Saved by the dinner bell, at least for the moment.

"That's a lot of food," David commented, his voice hinting at his amusement.

"Yeah. The two younger boys can each eat half a pizza on their own, and the twins polish off six or seven slices, easy. I'd rather have extra than not enough. Kids are expensive," she pointed out, eyebrows raised.

David laughed. "What's your point?"

"You know exactly what I'm trying to tell you."

“Do you think that bothers me? If you really want me to leave,” he said, leaning down and whispering in her ear, “I will, but I don’t want to.”

She opened her mouth to tell him to go home, but she couldn’t make the words come out. “No. Stay. Spend some time with the boys.”

“You’re doing it again.” He ruffled Nate’s hair.

“Doing what?”

“They’re not going to scare me off.”

*Famous last words.* “You haven’t seen them hyped up on sugar and caffeine.”

\* \* \* \* \*

If Lucy thought her kids were going to scare him away, she didn’t know him very well. The thought of her still trying to pull away distressed him, given the amount of time they’d spent together, talking about anything and everything. Hadn’t he done enough to prove to her that he wasn’t going anywhere?

And more disturbing, did she *really* not want him around anymore? He didn’t think he’d read her signals wrong, but there was always the possibility that she was serious.

He sat next to her on the couch, and the boys lay on cushions on the floor. Nikki had taken an overstuffed chair halfway across the family room, but she kept shooting glances toward the couch and smiling.

David wished he was feeling it.

Lucy might be right next to him, but she was stiff and distant.

“This is what nights are like here,” she stretched up and whispered in his ear. “They’re boring. We watch TV, and then they go to bed. I don’t go out at night very often at all when they’re around.”

He just smiled and shrugged. He’d done his partying in college and had given up on that lifestyle when he’d graduated. Now he preferred small groups to huge gatherings, and the idea of spending quiet evenings

on the couch watching TV with Lucy held a lot of appeal. "I'm not a party animal myself, you know."

"But you go out sometimes."

"Yeah, once in a while with the guys." Usually to one of his brother's places to watch a game or play a few hands of poker. Nothing outrageous, and he was always home at a decent hour.

"And you date."

"No, I don't. There hasn't been anyone since I met you. I dated once or twice during the times Katie and I had decided to take a break, but after our final split, I hadn't met anyone who interested me until you walked into the classroom. I *was* on a break then, but you came into my life and changed everything."

The look she shot him told him she didn't believe him.

"It's the truth," he whispered. "Whether you believe it or not, there it is. I *want* to settle down. I *want* to have a family. The funny thing is, before I met you, I didn't even know it. But now I'm sure."

She frowned at him, but he returned his attention to the movie. If she wanted to discuss their relationship, they could do it at a time they were alone. No sense ruining the movie for the kids and alerting Nikki to the problems they couldn't seem to work through.

By the time the movie ended and Nikki had gone home with a wink at David and a promise to call Lucy over the weekend, the kids were all yawning. Lucy asked David to stick around so they could have a talk, but said she had to tuck them into bed first.

"Can David read us a story?" Nate asked in a sleepy voice.

"I'd love to, buddy," David said before Lucy had a chance to kick him out of the house.

## Chapter Twelve

This was going to be a problem.

A huge, massive, tear-a-person's-heart-out sort of problem.

Lucy slumped against the doorframe and sighed. How was she supposed to get rid of him now?

David sat propped against the headboard on Nate's bed. All four boys lay on the mattress, totally enraptured by the book David had picked out to read. Amazing that he'd chosen one to interest all her boys, despite the differences in their ages. Unwanted warmth spread through her middle. He really did care about her kids. A man who didn't like them wouldn't have spent the past half hour reading to them, seeming as taken with them as they were with him.

That still didn't make the situation right.

One day he'd find someone else and start a family of his own. A new family, not one that came ready-made. He wouldn't want to be tied down to shared custody and visitation, or her mood swings every summer and every other holiday when the kids went to California with Mack.

Yes, he'd proven to her tonight that he could be there for her and the kids, but it didn't change anything. She still had to let him go. Her heart ached at the thought and she pressed her fist to her chest. He said he loved her. She loved him, too, and that was why she had to step away. Love didn't always last when the two parties had so many other responsibilities.

David finished the story, said good night to the boys and walked over to where she stood, a wary look on his face. "You look beat, too."

"I am. It was a long week."

"I'd offer to stay and tuck you into bed," he told her with a sad smile, "but that probably wouldn't be appropriate."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. As much as she wanted him to stay so he could hold her all night long, her twins were at the age where they questioned everything. If they woke up in the morning and David was still there, she'd have a lot of explaining to do.

"You're right. Thank you for understanding."

"No problem. I'll wait downstairs until you get these guys tucked in. I think we need to have that talk."

"Give me about ten minutes, and I'll be there."

She tucked in the boys as quickly as she could and headed downstairs. She and David really did need to have a talk, but she had a feeling he wasn't going to like what she had to say.

He was sitting at the kitchen table when she walked into the room. "Why do I have a feeling this isn't going to go well, even though the evening was pretty great?"

"You and I both know this won't work, at least not forever, and with you, because of how close you are with the boys, I can't do anything less than everything. It'll be too hard on them when you leave."

He narrowed his eyes, frustration written in the lines and angles of his face. "At least sit and talk to me. Why are you standing in the doorway?"

"It's late, and I'm tired. You should probably go."

She expected him to put up a fight, and a sliver of disappointment wedged itself in her mind when he didn't. Instead he stood and walked over to her, dropping a soft kiss on her lips before he went past her into the hallway.

He turned around when he reached the front door. "I'd ask you to marry me, but you'd think I wasn't serious. You'd brush me off, and I have to say, I don't think I'm really in the mood for any more rejection."

With that, he opened the door and walked out into the night.

Lucy reeled, flopping into the chair David had just vacated. Her head pounded and her mouth went dry. Marriage? He was thinking about *marriage*? How could she have not noticed he was that serious?

How could she have sent him away without at least giving him a chance?

She lifted the cordless phone off the cradle on the wall and started to dial Nikki's number, but hung the phone back up before she could finish. Nikki wouldn't be any help in this situation. Her friend would push her into something she wasn't ready for right now. Something she might never be ready for.

Toward the end with Mac, it had gotten bad. He worked a lot of overtime shifts and traveled often, and she hadn't cared. When she'd found out he hadn't been working nearly as much as he'd told her, it had hurt, but it hadn't broken her heart. What they'd had together as a couple had taken a backseat to the children for so long it had faded away before either of them had noticed. Three years later, she still had no strong emotions about what had happened.

She had no closure, either.

Maybe that was what she really needed before she could move on.

She picked the phone back up again and dialed—this time Mack's number. Though they remained on friendly terms, they never really talked. He hadn't been honest with her about what had ended their marriage. She'd known about the affairs, and though he'd hinted to them, he'd never actually confessed. She'd forgiven him, but she couldn't move on with her life until they got a few things straight.

Mack answered on the third ring and she took a deep, fortifying breath before speaking. "Hey, Mack. Do you have a minute?"

\* \* \* \* \*

David sat across from Emily, the dry-as-toast woman his brothers had set him up with, trying to keep up with the conversation. The woman had the amazing talent of making everything about her, even if the

subject was totally unrelated. She hadn't stopped talking all night, but he'd stopped listening a half hour ago. Now he was counting the minutes on the clock, waiting until he could get the hell out of there.

"How's it going?" Jake asked, interrupting Emily's story. David would have to remember to thank his brother for that later.

"Peachy." He smiled at Emily when he really wanted to get up and leave. He wouldn't, though. He wasn't that cruel.

And she wasn't *that* bad. He just had Lucy on the brain. Hadn't been able to get her off his mind for the past two weeks. School would be starting again soon. Being busy at work would be a welcome distraction. At least then he'd have something else to think about other than the fact that she still refused to see him.

He'd tried calling, tried stopping by, and each time she'd told him it was over between them. Last week, he'd finally had to accept that she meant it. He'd told her he wouldn't give up on her without a fight, but damn it, he'd all but run out of steam. He loved her, but he couldn't spend the rest of his life miserable and wanting her back while she kept rejecting him.

Emily excused herself to go to the bathroom and his other brother, Brian, slid into her chair. "She's cute, isn't she?"

David narrowed his eyes. "If you like her so much, why don't you take her out?"

Brian laughed. "I don't think I've ever seen you surly before. It's kind of funny."

"There's nothing funny about this. Why did you guys do this to me?"

"Do what?" they both asked in unison, the picture of innocence when they were anything but. Sometimes they reminded him of Lucy's twins, with their conniving and scheming. They thought this was funny, but David didn't find the humor in the situation.

"Drag me here for a so-called guys' night out when you were really trying to set me up with the world's most boring woman."

"She's only boring compared to your horror-author ex," Jake pointed out. Hearing Lucy referred to as his ex only darkened his mood.

He slapped his palms down on the table. "Enough, okay? I don't want to hear another damned thing about Lucy."

"Touchy, touchy." Jake patted David's back, and David curled his hands into fists. "Don't hit me. I'll have to hit you back, and you're not in any shape to get into it with me right now."

"What the hell do you care?" He downed the rest of his drink and set the glass on the table with a thump. Lucy didn't want him. What made them think Emily would?

What made them think *he'd* want *Emily*?

The whole situation just sucked.

"Have you heard from her?" Brian asked, serious again. Brian was still pushing for David to call Lucy again, to do *something* to get her back, but Brian was one of the rare men who believed in happy endings. After his past two relationships, David was convinced real happiness was only a myth.

"No. I won't, either."

"Amber saw her at the grocery store a few days ago," Jake told him. "She said she's pretty miserable. I think Amber might have mentioned to Lucy you were about the same."

*Just wonderful.* Now the whole town would know what a mess he was. His phone rang, saving him from a reply. He glanced at the caller ID and frowned when he saw Lucy's number. "It's her."

"Her, or her kids?" Brian asked.

"Her. It's her cell phone."

He turned away from his brothers and answered the call. "Hey. What's going on?"

"I want to talk to you."

She didn't sound happy, but then, he hadn't really expected her to. She probably wanted to yell at him for the comment he'd made a few weeks ago about asking her to marry him.

"Sure. No problem. When?"

"Do you have a few minutes now?"



“Very few. I’m a little busy.”

Brian kicked him under the table. “Go. I’ll give Emily a ride home.”

“Can you please make time for me?” Lucy asked, her tone pleading. “It’s really important.”

The worry in her voice nearly undid him. He could be angry with her all he wanted, but if she needed him, he’d be there. “Is everything okay? Are the boys okay?”

“The boys are fine. They’re in bed. I’ll be home for the rest of the night working. If you get a chance, stop by.”

She hung up without giving him a chance to answer.

He stood and faced his brothers. “She needs me. I’m going to go. And Brian, you’re damned right you’re giving Emily a ride home. You’re the one who brought her here.”

David was taken, whether Lucy knew it or not. All he had to do was hear her voice and know it was all over for him. He couldn’t say no to her, and if he had to be honest with himself, he didn’t want to.

It took him ten minutes to get to Lucy’s house. She was sitting on the porch steps when he got there, arms wrapped around her knees and red-gold curls shining in the light spilling out from the fixture overhead. She glanced up when he walked over to her. Tears shone in her eyes.

“I didn’t think you’d really come.”

“You sounded like you needed me. I told you before, when you need me, I’m here.”

“Do you want to come inside?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know yet. What do you need to talk to me about?”

“I miss you.”

The three words were so simple, yet so meaningful, and they made his heart clench. He sank down onto the step next to her. “I miss you, too. I love you.”

“And I pushed you away.”

He draped his arm over her shoulder, and for a second, he thought she'd duck out from under it, but she snuggled closer instead.

"It's okay. I understand why you did what you did. I pushed you too hard. I just didn't want to give you the chance to back away."

And once she'd backed away, he'd realized the truth. What an idiot he'd been.

"You did the right thing. You made me face some issues I hadn't wanted to face before." She sighed and nuzzled her cheek against his shoulder. "I talked to Mack. He finally admitted the truth about his secrets and lies, and he apologized."

"Does that make you feel any better?"

"Yeah. Deep down, I'd already known he'd fallen out of love with me, too, but to have him say it helped a lot. We just didn't love each other the right way. Probably shouldn't have stayed together as long as we did. Since I was still so confused by what happened, I didn't see the real thing when it came along."

Hope swelled inside him, forming a lump in his throat. He swallowed hard and took a deep breath before asking the question he really needed the answer to. "Are you talking about us?"

She pinched his side. "Of course I am. I love you, you know. Now you're stuck with me, and all the excess baggage I come with. The whole shebang, baby, whether you like it or not."

A smile broke over his face and all the tension he'd felt since they'd been apart left him in a whoosh of breath. "You have no idea how long I've been waiting to hear you say those words."

She pulled away and smiled up at him. "Do you want to come in?"

"What about the kids?"

"They're having a sleepover with their aunt Nikki. She and Ryan are going to be adopting four-year-old twins in a few months and they want to see what it's like."

"So we're all alone?"

She nodded. "Coming inside?"

Did she really think he'd say no? If she did, she had a lot to learn about him. No way was he leaving her side again. Ever. "I thought you'd never ask."

## About the Author

Born in Gloucester, Massachusetts, Elisa Adams has lived most of her life on the east coast. Formerly a nursing assistant and phlebotomist, writing has been a longtime hobby. Now a full-time writer, she lives on the New Hampshire border with her three children.

To learn more about Elisa Adams, please visit [www.elisaadams.com](http://www.elisaadams.com).  
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*When an explosion rocks the Devlin Group, two agents must risk everything to save them all.*

## On the Edge

© 2007 Shannon Stacey

*Available now at Samhain Publishing*

Tony Casavetti emerges from an undercover assignment only to be summoned to NYC by Charlotte, the Devlin Group's executive administrator. When he arrives, he finds out she may be ruthlessly efficient, but his assumption about her being matronly was dead wrong.

Charlotte Rhames has it all—looks, wealth and the respect she craved. But an attack on the Devlin Group throws her back into the pit of sex, money, and murder she'd crawled out of.

With Tony's life at stake, how far is she willing to fall?

*Book 2 of the Devlin Group series*

Enjoy the following excerpt for *On the Edge*:

Charlotte turned and walked back to the car. She put a little extra swing in her stride, knowing the man's eyes would follow her ass like it was a hypnotist's watch.

So this was Tony Casavetti in the flesh—lean, tan and nicely muscular flesh. Despite having a starring role in many of her XXX mental movies, his file photo did *not* do justice to the man himself.

He was tall—just the right height to dance with while wearing killer stilettos. Well-broken-in jeans hugged a really fine ass, and even more broken-in leather boots and jacket gave him a decidedly bad-ass cowboy look.

Charlotte had a lifelong *thing* for bad-ass cowboys. The world could keep Tom Cruise and Orlando Bloom. She'd take her Sam Elliott, Clint Eastwood, James Arness.

She'd play Miss Kitty to Tony Casavetti's Marshall Dillon any day.

And the thing about Tony was his delicious physique wasn't even the best part of him. She'd been on the comm system with him during the

good times and the downright horrific, and she liked the man he was. Decent, intense, smart. He wasn't as coolly detached as Alex Rossi and Gallagher when an operation got interesting. Tony's emotions fueled his temper and he tended to go balls-to-the-wall toward his objective.

In the eight years she'd known Tony, she'd come to see him as the complete package. And now she finally had the opportunity to maybe take him home and unwrap him.

After popping the Mustang's trunk, she stepped back to let him dump his suitcase. He dropped the carry-on bag next to it, then stripped off the leather jacket. Charlotte admired the smooth rippling of his biceps as Tony unzipped the suitcase and removed a lockbox. He pulled a key from his pocket and a moment later was strapping on a holster. Unfortunately, his next step was slipping the jacket back on.

Tony closed the trunk and rolled his shoulders. "Much better."

Once they were buckled in and navigating through the city as slowly as she could get away with without being obvious, Charlotte glanced over at her passenger's rugged profile. It was no accident she'd been free to meet Tony Casavetti's plane.

She'd been waiting a long time to spend a few minutes with this agent, and the tall, dark and silent thing wasn't cutting it. "How was your flight?"

"Commercial."

"Sorry, but we've only got the one jet. We did spring for first class, though."

"I'd have felt better about the extra helping of shitty peanuts if I'd been armed." There was a relaxed, almost amused tone in his voice that she found encouraging.

"That's one of the key bullet points of new and improved Homeland Security—not giving shitty peanuts to armed airline passengers."

He laughed—a husky baritone—and Charlotte realized it was the first time she'd heard it. She'd heard Tony's calm, slightly southern-accented voice give status reports. She'd heard him hissing live surveillance into the comm, and screaming orders into it when the shit really hit the fan. But she'd never heard him laugh. She wanted to hear it more often.

"We would have given you a weapon, you know," she said.

He shook his head. "I prefer my own."

"A Smith & Wesson M&P .40's not exactly a unique piece."

"Like I said, I prefer my own. And she's the best when it comes to ambidextrous firing."

Charlotte mentally scanned the info sheets she had on Tony. "You're right-handed."

Through the corner of her eye, she saw his sharp look. "Anything you don't know?"

"Sweetheart, I even know you had your wisdom teeth out when you were seventeen and had a bad reaction to Demerol. There's very little about you...uh—*all* of you guys—I don't know."

"You don't know why I shoot the S&W M&P .40."

"True. So why don't you tell me?"

"When I was ten, I jumped into a really bad brawl. Kid managed to break two of the fingers on my right hand and I was screwed—couldn't hit a damn thing with my left. Bastard beat the living shit out of me. There was no way I was letting that happen again."

"So you actually trained yourself to be ambidextrous?"

"Yeah. It's a secret, though."

She grinned at him. "I'm pretty good at keeping secrets. Although, on the grand scale of secrets I keep, that's not a very juicy one."

"Not to you, but the guys in the black hats not knowing I can kill them as well with my left hand as my right could save my ass someday. Hell, it *has* saved my ass." He paused, then said, "So you know *everything*, huh?"

His tone had changed, and Charlotte had an idea of what he was thinking. Childhood hadn't been particularly kind to Tony Casavetti, and young adulthood wasn't much better. "The lives of the Devlin Group agents are open books to me. But *only* to me."

Tony only looked out the window, and she didn't press the issue. It wasn't an easy thing having a person know every nook and cranny of your past, as Alex Rossi knew hers.

But Tony's...she couldn't imagine suffering through what the court transcript attached to his psych file had detailed. A hard-ass Texas judge



looking down at an *eleven*-year-old Tony and asking, “Well, son, how does it feel to know you’re such a worthless pile of refuse, ain’t nobody in the whole world who wants you?”

Charlotte forced herself to stop squeezing the life out of the steering wheel. This visit—the DG meeting being the exception—was supposed to be about her fulfilling an ongoing little fantasy. Flirtation, fun, and—hopefully—a weekend of smoking hot sex. Getting to know Tony Casavetti a little better. Or a *lot* better.

“So what’s this little shindig about?” the star of said fantasy asked after a few minutes.

“Just an announcement we only want to make once, with the opportunity to hash any resulting issues out face to face.”

“Sounds interesting.” Tony turned to face her, one eyebrow raised. “The Group isn’t downsizing, is it? Because unemployment forms don’t have check boxes for my particular occupational skills.”

It was her turn to laugh. “No. Nothing like that.”

“Good. And thanks for having my back when the Chavez job went to shit. Thought I was heading for a pine box that time. And there at the end...”

The thought made Charlotte shudder. She was no stranger to violence, but she hated being reminded of how often the agents found themselves—or *put* themselves—in the line of fire. Especially the “core” of the Group—Alex Rossi, Gallagher, Carmen Olivera, Grace Nolan before she left the Group. And Tony Casavetti. She *really* didn’t like when Tony was in the line of fire.

“The girl he took as a hostage? Her name is Rosa, and she’s been reunited with her family in Mexico. I just thought you might like to know.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. She forced her attention back to the road. “That makes it all worthwhile,” he said.

“I’m glad we happened to be on open comm when it went bad.” She felt his gaze on her, but resisted the urge to turn and meet it. Let him look.

“You know, you don’t look anything like I expected you to.”

“Let me guess,” she said. “Stout. Gray hair. Clipboard?”

“Metal ruler, actually.”

“Too Catholic school,” Charlotte replied, then shot him a sexy smile. He missed it, since his focus was on her legs. “I’m not a very parochial kind of girl.”

Tony’s eyes returned to her face and he gave a sexy smile of his own. “Maybe not, but I bet you’d look hot as hell in the skirt and knee socks.”

Was he hitting on her? Flirting to be polite? During down time they tended to be flirtatious over the comm, but she wasn’t sure how he’d react in person. She’d been told her looks could be intimidating.

She didn’t care—he was in her sights for a very limited time and she intended to make the most of it. “Hmm...I have a cute little schoolgirl outfit left over from a Halloween party a few years back. I’ll model it for you after the meeting.”

There. The ball was in Casavetti’s court, and she waited to see how he’d play it. Laugh it off? Launch into a lecture on how sex would undermine their professional relationship? Throw himself out of a moving vehicle?

“A naughty schoolgirl, huh?” Tony said in a low voice. “I’ll have to remember to wear a belt.”

And dammit, just when things were getting good and hot, they pulled up to her townhouse. A townhouse currently containing fourteen agents and seven support personnel, none of whom factored into her personal plans for Tony Casavetti.

She calculated quickly in her head. Meeting in a half-hour. Should take an hour or so, then more mingling and what-not. A meal. If she were lucky, in about four hours she’d be playing giddy-up with her favorite cowboy.

*Honey is not far from the sting.*

## **A Taste of Honey**

© 2007 Lynette Rees

*Available now at Samhain Publishing*

Fran Santini has a secret she keeps from her family. During the day, she works as a waitress, but at night, she is a honey trapper for the Peace of Mind Agency, working for women who suspect their partners are cheating.

Travis O'Connell is minding his own business, enjoying a pint of Guinness at his local pub, when he is accosted by Fran who believes he is her intended target. After all, he has a goatee just as his "wife" described.

Fran, a hopeless honey trapper, fails to realize she has set up the wrong guy. What's more, when the penny finally drops, she is forced into a compromising situation, begging the question: can Fran's job stay a secret for much longer?

At the risk of incurring the wrath of Fran's brother, Antonio, Travis finds himself attracted to sultry Fran Santini. Will the secret draw the couple together or drive them apart?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *A Taste of Honey*:

Francine entered the steam-filled kitchen via the back door.

Big brother, Antonio, stood at the hob stirring a large pan of spaghetti sauce. He looked a little stressed, the way he concentrated on the task in hand. Normally, he carried it out automatically. He looked up, his face relaxing when he saw her.

"Hi, Sis, what happened to you?"

One day he was going to find out what else she did for a living, one day they might all find out—but not at this moment.

"Just a bit delayed in the rush hour traffic." It was a half-truth. Would anyone forgive her or even pat her on the back if they knew the

whole truth? She very much doubted it. "What's going on?" she asked to change the subject.

"Looks like Dad's interviewing for a new head chef. I told him I'd be up for the job, but he won't have it. Why does he have to bring a stranger into the family business, Sis?" For a moment, Antonio sounded sad.

"I suppose it's because he fears you might leave some day soon..."

"I won't. I promise. Those wanderlust days are behind me. I just want to find me a nice girl to settle down with."

"Where's that coffee?" Mamma stood by the serving hatch. "Don't tell me you haven't made it, Toni. Not when your father specifically asked you to."

Antonio shook his head and carried on stirring.

Mamma threw up her arms in despair. "*Mamma mia*, how come I raised a boy like you who won't even listen to his own papa?"

"It's okay, Mamma." Fran had to save the situation and rescue Antonio yet again from his bad behaviour. She picked up a white order slip the waitress must have left for her brother. "He asked me to do it. I won't be long."

"They want brandy in it, *cara mia*."

"Okay." Fran shot her brother her best scathing glance and gave him a dig in the ribs for good measure. "For heaven's sake. Grow up. Will you get over it? You don't have the experience for head chef."

"Maybe not. But I bet I know more about Italian cooking than that Irish bloke sitting out there."

"You got something against the Irish?" she asked, filling up the two coffee mugs from the silver Gaggia machine.

"Not at all. Not if they aren't after the same job as myself. I've been waiting for years for Dad to put me in that position, yet he never does."

"Perhaps, before you take on that sort of responsibility, Antonio, you're going to have to prove yourself. Oh and by the way, I like Irish people." She thought back to the Irish bloke in the pub, poor man. She would make a conscious effort to be nice to this one should he get the job. She knew Papa went very much by his instincts and they never

proved him wrong. The last chef had been great, but he had to leave suddenly and go back to Scotland when his father had taken ill.

She opened a bottle of Five Star brandy and poured a tot into each cup, placed them on a tray with a plate of raffia biscuits and pushed open the swing door that led into the restaurant.

Humming quietly, she made her way to the alcove where her father sat with the interviewee. Her father was in full animation, gesticulating wildly with his hands. He appeared to be getting on well with the man, whoever he was. Fran could only just make out the back of him, smartly dressed and leaning forward across the table, hanging onto her father's every word.

"I've brought the coffees." She placed the tray on the table, and was just about to introduce herself to the prospective new chef when she froze in horror. It was him, the man from the pub last night. He was obviously just as horrified. His eyes widened and his mouth fell open as if to say something, but he closed it again.

The moment was broken as her father said, "Fran, I'd like you to meet the new head chef, Travis O'Connell. Mr. O'Connell, this is my daughter, Francine."

Shifting her gaze from the floor, Fran looked into the man's eyes, silently sending him a message. If her father should ever find out what her other job was...

Travis searched the woman's face. What was she trying to tell him? She was pleading with him not to mention anything about last night, he guessed. This was going to be a great way to have his revenge on a lunatic woman. He was about to say, "Mr. Santini, I am afraid I can no longer work here. I cannot work with a woman who tried to set me up, who walked into a pub and caused trouble for me last night." But instead, he smiled, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on hers. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Santini. I look forward to working with you."

The woman in front of him gulped. He had her over a barrel now and, oh, how he would love to *have her* over a barrel. She owed him big time and she knew it.

“Likewise, Mr. O’Connell. If there’s anything else I can do for you, please let me know.”

“I’m sure I’ll think of something,” he muttered under his breath, grinning as he watched her walk away in a daze, almost bumping into another table. He had rattled her cage just as she had rattled his last night.

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