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Daring Sheila

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Chapter One

A low whistle escaped Ray Walker's lips.
What a woman.

He watched the curvy brunette sashay towards The Jump Zone office with all-consuming interest. In snug, faded jeans and a fitted black T-shirt, she made his mouth water.

Behind him, Jennifer Evans, his business partner's wife, and long term friend, walked into the room exclaiming, "I don't believe it! Sheila actually showed."

Ray didn't look at Jennifer. He was far too enthralled with the woman approaching. Something about her lit him up. "Who exactly is Sheila?" he drawled in his lazy Texas accent that San Francisco had done nothing to erase.

"She just joined my team at the *Tribune*. She's quite impressive." A heartbeat of a pause. "She used to write for the *New York Times*."

"Ah," he said. A writer. Vaguely he wondered why she would leave a big time gig like the *Times*, but it was a fleeting thought. He was too busy thinking about what he would do to Sheila if he got her alone.

No, when.

When he got her alone.

He had to have her.

No question about it.

Shaking his head, he was a bit baffled by his extreme reaction, but no less prepared to let it go the distance. He'd experienced his share of women in his days. Not lately though. Perhaps his over-the-top reaction to this woman came from lack of female companionship. Or not. Something about this particular woman danced along his nerve endings in a whole new way.

Hot. She was hot. Damn hot.

And she was making him hard.

He could hardly believe it. How many years had it been since he got a damn hard-on just watching a woman? At thirty-three, he was far from an adolescent with no control.

Maybe he was a bit randy. It had been...hell, months since he got laid.

Time hadn't allowed him the option. He, Jason, and Bobby, Jennifer's husband, had gotten out of the army and bought The Jump Zone. He'd been consumed with getting it off the ground.

Bobby was waylaid in the army longer than he and Jason, and then got married the instant he returned home. The burden of start up had fallen on Ray and Jason. Not that they had minded. Bobby had waited a long time to win Jennifer's heart, and both Ray and Jason approved.

For the first time, in all the years he had known

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Bobby, the man seemed truly happy.

Jennifer's laugh snapped him out of his reverie. "I dared her to jump," she said. "Seems she thinks she's up to the task. Would you believe she has never even been on a roller coaster?"

Before Ray could comment, Sheila pulled open the glass door to the office, and pushed her sunglasses on top of her head.

Her eyes locked with his.

Hers were forest green, a deep, sultry color. A shot of heat raced through his body. The intensity was like a rocket launch straight to his groin.

Awareness darted between them, instant and hot. Damn, he wanted this woman. And if the steamy look in her eyes was any indication, she liked what she saw in him.

"I can't believe you showed," Jennifer exclaimed shooting around the counter in a wisp of blond hair to wrap her arms around Sheila.

Sheila laughed. It was a sultry sound that did nothing to take the edge off of Ray's growing desire or the bulge beneath his zipper.

"I told you I'm no chicken," Sheila said clearly reprimanding Jennifer for thinking anything of the sort.

Jennifer leaned back as a frown furrowed her lovely features. "I had asked Bobby to be your jumpmaster, but he had some pro golfer show up. The guy paid extra to get him and only him to take him up."

Sheila smiled, and it was like a burst of sunshine.

Ray was spellbound. Her lips were full, lush, and damned kissable.

Sheila winked at Jennifer. "That husband of yours must really be something."

"I'll take you up," Ray said in a lazy drawl as he leaned one elbow on the counter and crossed his dusty, booted feet.

Sheila turned from Jennifer, her deep green gaze slipping down his body and then back up again. When their eyes met he saw the unmistakable flash of heat in hers. Quickly, but not quick enough, she averted her gaze. It was too late. He had already seen what was there.

Oh, yeah, she liked him, all right. This was getting interesting.

Sheila Gibson flicked a glance at the man leaning against the counter, praying her voice would be steady as she spoke. "You look a bit too daring for my first time."

Gulp.

Bad choice of words.

He gave her a knowing and far too arrogant look.

The man had a killer body. Just an observation, of course. One impossible to miss. Arrogant or not, he was damn sexy.

A slow smile filled Ray's too-handsome face. "I'll be easy with you, darlin'. I promise." There was a readable innuendo to his words.

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Sheila gulped again. Oh boy. Now what?

He promises.

Said the cat to the mouse.

Thinking about jumping from a plane with his front attached to her, er, backside made her nervous. He was a bit intimidating, all ruggedly male, and proud of it. A man like him was trouble. Nothing like the men she knew back home.

Those men she knew how to deal with.

They were polite, charming, and utterly boring. And easy to blow off. This one was a different story. He looked rowdy, and well, determined to get his way. In fact, she would wager he had interesting ways of getting his way.

Not boring.

Sexy.

Not boring.

How did one deal with a man so deliciously dangerous?

Jennifer cleared her throat. "Sheila, this is Ray 'Cowboy' Walker. He's one of Bobby's partners. And you're right. He is a bit too daring. And a lot wild. I'll have Jason, Bobby's other partner take you up."

A twinge of unexpected disappointment flared inside Sheila. Ray's eyes met hers. She wanted to look away, but there was a dare in his eyes, and damn it, she wasn't about to let him think she wasn't up for the challenge.

Jennifer must have noticed what was silently developing between her and Ray, because she added, "Jason is much milder than Ray." There was a

warning in Jennifer's voice as she glared at Ray.

Ray didn't spare Jennifer a glance. There was a mischievous gleam in his eyes as he said, "Pick your flavor, Sheila." Oh, the way he said her name, soft and sexy with a hint of a taunt. "*Mild or daring?* I personally have always thought life was too short to play it safe. Jason is safe. Are you mild or daring?"

He has said the magic words. *Life was too short*. She knew. Thirty had come too quickly. Tomorrow, to be precise, though she had kept that little tidbit a secret.

Safe should be a good word when skydiving, but today...

She had spent all thirty of those years living in her father's world, letting him dictate her actions. Leaving New York, with a promise to herself, to see and do things she had only dreamt of doing, had been a big step.

Now it was time to live up to her promises to herself.

Nervously wetting her lips with her tongue, she said, "*Cowboy*, huh?" She was proud of the little taunt in her voice. What goes around comes around.

One dark brow inched up furthering the challenge. The man was sexy as hell. Her eyes skimmed his long, muscular legs hugged nicely by his faded jeans. Too sexy. Too much. Too everything.

He was trouble. She knew it, but she couldn't seem to make it matter.

"Yes, Ma'am," he said with a slight twitch to his lips. The look in his eyes said he had caught her checking him out. Damn the man.

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Cowboy.

The nickname seemed to fit. He had a rugged, dark, untamed look. There was one exception. His thick, black hair, and naturally tanned skin made her think more Indian, albeit sexy Indian, than cowboy.

"Sheila –" Jennifer started but Sheila cut her off.

"Daring," Sheila said in a confident voice that she was proud of, because she felt far from it. "I choose daring."

Sheila watched a smile turn up Cowboy's sexy lips. "Good call."

Chapter Two

Sheila sat at the long table in the training room as Jennifer popped a video into a VCR. It felt like she was back in school, sitting amongst the metal chairs, paper and pencil in front of her.

Jennifer eyed her with concern in her expression. "You don't have to do this, you know?"

Sheila wished that were true, but she *did* have to do this, and more. "I *need* to do this."

"Why?" Jennifer asked, plopping her hands on her hips.

Jennifer's long blond hair was a mass of shiny silk, her expression expressive. But it was her friendly nature that had drawn Sheila to her from day one. How could she explain? "Ray was right. Life *is* too short. Besides, you're the one who dared me to come here today."

"To jump with Bobby," she argued, reaching for the pause button on the VCR that looked like it had seen a few too many days. The plastic trim work was half hanging off the front. She had to pop it back on to achieve her task of pausing the tape. "Ray is a whole

different story."

"I can handle Ray," Sheila said and hoped she sounded convincing.

Jennifer sat down across from Sheila. Too close for comfort, with only the slim metal table separating them. They were eye to eye. "He's not like those men you knew back home. He's...Ray."

She didn't dare blink, let alone look away. "Which has nothing to do with him and me jumping out of a plane together. Are you telling me it's not safe to jump with him?"

"No," she hesitated, "yes," she bit her bottom lip. "I mean no. Of course not." Jennifer let out an exasperated breath.

"Yes or no?" Sheila asked. Jumping out of a plane scared the hell out of her almost as much as Ray did. If he was not qualified to assist her safely, now was the time to find out. Reaching for new horizons was different than digging her grave.

Jennifer shoved a wayward strand of hair from her eyes. "Ray's good at what he does. Jumping with him isn't the issue. It's what I saw pass between you that worries me."

Averting her gaze, Sheila picked up her pencil to start filling out the forms Jennifer had given her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm not blind, Sheila. Ray is nothing like the politician types you are used to dealing with. He doesn't follow rules."

Sheila laughed, and looked at Jennifer. "The last thing those politician types do is follow rules. They

just approach breaking them discreetly."

"Ray doesn't," Jennifer replied quickly. "If he breaks a rule, he doesn't mind saying so. In fact, he's likely to tell you before he does it. No holds barred. That's Ray."

"I can handle Ray," Sheila said, hoping it was true.

"Can you now?" The deep, sexy drawl of the man in question came from directly behind her.

Sheila cringed. Getting herself into trouble wasn't her normal style, but then either was jumping out of planes.

Sheila's eyes met Jennifer's. They exchanged a look of understanding before Jennifer pushed to her feet. "I need to get this video started."

"There's a call for you on line two. That Mike guy who always calls for you or Bobby," Ray said.

Jennifer looked torn. She looked at Sheila apologetically. "That's one of the contractors bidding on the new Jump Zone facility."

"I'll be fine," Sheila told her.

"Yeah, she'll be fine," Ray said. "I'll start the video for her."

Jennifer looked from Sheila and then above her head at Ray, fretfulness in her eyes. She pointed at Ray. "Behave."

A soft rumble of laughter echoed behind Sheila. "What fun would that be?"

Jennifer made a frustrated sound, threw her hands up in the air, and then rushed from the room. Just before the door slammed she called out, "Don't put up with his junk, Sheila."

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The chair beside her moved, and one boot appeared on top of it. Ray leaned an elbow on his knee. "You can handle me, can you?"

Forcing herself to meet his gaze head on, she ignored the fluttering of her stomach. "You seem to have a thing for power. I have a knack for handling men with that particular affliction."

He laughed. "What makes you think I have a thing for power?"

She tilted her head a moment, studying intently. "From what I gather, you do a lot of wild and crazy things, thus the nickname, *Cowboy*." She made the word a taunt. "You do it because it gives you some sort of high. A power trip, a mark that says you can do what others can't, or are too afraid to try."

His face was as unreadable as a blank slate. "What about you? What are you afraid of, Sheila?" He used a low, intimate tone that danced along her nerve endings with way too much impact for comfort.

Suddenly, the room seemed to shrink to a small box enclosing the two of them. He was close enough to allow her to smell his cologne, to see the depth of those chocolate-brown eyes, and to reach out and touch the slight darkening of his jaw.

In other words, too close.

This man was far too much for her senses, and far too insightful for her comfort. "I'm not afraid of anything."

One dark brow inched up in challenge. "Come now. Everyone is afraid of something."

She shifted in her chair, averting her gaze to the

tabletop. "If you say so."

"I think you're afraid of me."

Her head snapped up. "Of you?" She hoped she sounded convincingly appalled. "Why would I be afraid of *you*?"

"You have some reason for wanting to overcome your fears. That's why you're here today, why you didn't back down from Jennifer's challenge." He let the words sink in for several seconds. "That's why you chose me over Jason. You refused to let yourself take your normal, safe path."

Sheila laughed nervously. "You're crazy."

"So they say," he said with a grin, and a view of his perfect white teeth. He was such a contrast. Dusty, rugged cowboy wrapped with perfect physical features in one too good to be true package. "And that scares the hell out of you." His hand moved to a loose tendril of her hair. He wrapped it around his finger. "You have beautiful hair."

Having him play with her hair was such a shock, she hardly could find words. Even more shocking was how much she liked it. It was bold, and out of line for a first time meeting, yet, she liked it. She didn't allow herself to move away from him.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said, a bit too softly to be convincing, and she knew it.

A faint, knowing smile touched his lips. "And if I said I want you, Sheila? Would that scare you?"

I want you, too, she thought, but didn't have the courage to say it out loud. He was way too wild for her, even in her present mode of adventure. She

needed to work up to someone like Ray. Take it nice and slow, not fast and wild.

She wet her lips with her tongue, and bit back a sound as his eyes followed the action. His desire was almost palpable. Or maybe it was their combined attraction generating so much heat.

She just didn't know. This was all so new to her. She did the slow, politically correct dating thing. Not this. Whatever *this* was. "All this is, is a game to you. You're trying to get a reaction out of me, and it won't work."

He laughed, eyes twinkling with mischief. "If it makes you feel better to think so, then fine. But we both know the truth."

"Which is?" she asked really wanting to know, because she didn't.

"That you need to conquer your fear of me as much as you need to conquer your fear of skydiving. I simply want to offer my assistance."

Sheila had to laugh at that. The man was just too cocky for his own good. It was also hard to believe how accurate he was. Still for him to boldly say what he had, was just plain arrogant.

Yet, truth be told, she was busted, plain and simple. This stranger had managed to see through her barriers like none other.

He had also awakened some odd, hard to ignore, sexual side of her. One she neither knew as her own nor did she understand.

And she wasn't sure she wanted to.

Yes, she wanted to face her fears, to experience life.

But one step at a time. Starting with a man who had the kind of power this one did over her seemed a mistake.

It was best to put him in check, and get on with other methods of exploring her new self. She took a deep breath, as she slanted him a glance. A flash of her fingers in that dark hair danced through her mind with such vivid color, she gulped.

Not good.

Her thoughts went further off the deep end as she tried to justify getting involved with him.

Just because he was sexy and had a wildcard edge didn't mean she couldn't handle him. How many years had she dealt with blown up political egos?

Could she walk away from a man like this?

She should.

But...

Summoning her air of confidence learned by being not only a politician's daughter, but from years in a high profile press position, she met his gaze squarely.

"You are quite sure of yourself, aren't you, *Cowboy*." She enunciated the name, taunting him on purpose. No way was she lying down and letting him get the best of her.

He winked. "Good start, Darlin'. Put me in my place. I think you could conquer the man much easier than you think."

It was like he was reading her mind. She didn't like this. She had to gain control. "Assuming I want to."

"Want to what?" Jennifer asked from the doorway. Sheila sent a silent thank you to the gods above as

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Jennifer continued, "Tell me you're not backing out of jumping."

Sheila smiled at her, hoping she wouldn't noticed how forced the effort was. "No, of course not."

Ray caught Sheila's gaze with his own. "We were debating the likelihood she would go for two."

Jennifer frowned. "That's so like you, Ray. Let's get her through one jump before we try and get two out of her."

Ray winked at Sheila. "One step at a time is fine by me."

Sheila swallowed. *Could he read her mind?*

Jennifer studied Sheila. "Do you have plans tomorrow, Sheila?"

The question took her off guard. She had kept her birthday a secret, and planned to keep it that way. It was her birthday, a Saturday, and she was going to be alone. Did Jennifer somehow know?

Sheila didn't know what to say. "Just normal Saturday stuff."

"Good," Jennifer said. "Then you can come here bright and early and jump during the sunrise. It's amazing."

Ray eyed Jennifer with surprise. "I thought we were taking one jump at a time."

"Well, there is a slight challenge," Jennifer said. "The plane had some mechanical problems."

"What?" Sheila said stiffening. "The plane I was going up in?"

"Don't worry," Ray said. "You'll be jumping out of it anyway."

Sheila pushed to her feet. "No I won't. Not anymore. Not happening."

Jennifer tried to reassure her. "It'll be fine by morning, I swear, Sheila. You can do your training today, and jump tomorrow."

Sheila shook her head. "No way am I going up in some small plane with mechanical problems."

"It'll be fixed," Jennifer insisted.

Sheila grabbed her purse. "This was a bad idea." She started to walk past Ray when his hand snaked out and gently wrapped around her arm. Sheila's breath caught in her throat. The sensations that traveled up her arm at his touch shook her to the core. Her eyes locked midair with his.

They stared at one another. For how long, she wasn't sure. Time seemed to stand still. It could have been an hour as easily as it was seconds.

Finally, he spoke. "I thought you chose daring."

Looking into his eyes, she felt an odd sense of support, even understanding. Gone was the man who had taunted her. Now, he seemed to comfort and encourage.

She wasn't sure how to respond. "I did, but..."

"Life is short, Sheila," he said softly. "Don't let it pass you by."

He was right, and she knew it. She had uprooted her entire life to live a little. The need to explore the world and her other sides suddenly surfaced with crystal clear clarity.

"Well," she said, "I guess I've come this far, I might as well go all the way."

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Ray grinned. "Exactly."

Chapter Three

Jennifer studied Sheila's paperwork, and then looked up suddenly. "Tomorrow's your birthday."

Sheila cringed. "Don't remind me. I've been trying to forget."

"It's your birthday. A day to celebrate. Do you have plans?"

Sheila sighed. "Besides throwing myself out of a plane, you mean?"

Jennifer made a face. "I'm serious."

"So am I," Sheila insisted. "I have no desire to celebrate leaving my twenties."

Jennifer studied her for a long, scrutinizing moment, and then shuffled the papers. "Everything's in order. You're all ready to jump."

Sheila blew hair from her eyes. "Well, that's something, I guess."

"You could have Bobby jump with you, if you like."

For some reason, Sheila felt disappointment at the suggestion. "I'll stick with Ray." Laughing, trying to seem flip, she said, "Wouldn't want him to think he

scares me."

"I know I gave him a hard time, deservedly so, in some ways. He is a wildcard with his own affairs. But still, where anyone else is involved, he's on his best behavior."

Sheila frowned wanting to understand Ray's ways a bit further. "Wildcard how?"

"He loves to take risks, be it in the air or on the ground. And he tends to push others to do the same. That's why I was worried about you and him hooking up. I know you're pushing yourself right now. You don't need someone else doing it to."

Sheila smiled sincerely. "No one pushes me where I don't want to go. Not even Ray."

Smiling Jennifer said, "I know. I overacted. There is no doubt you can take care of yourself." She pushed to her feet. "Bobby, Ray, and Jason have ribs on the grill, and beer in a cooler. It's their Friday night tradition. Stay and save me from guy talk."

"I don't know," Sheila said hedging, thinking of Ray. Sure, she could take care of herself, but sometimes that meant walking away. In Ray's case, distance seemed the best way to protect herself.

"Oh come on," Jennifer pressed. "What else do you have to do?"

"Well..."

"See? Nothing. You're staying."

Sheila sat at the picnic table, trying not to be obvious

as she watched Ray. He was talking with Bobby and Jason as Bobby used huge tongs to move things around on the grill.

It was a friendly, fun setup. The picnic tables, covered by huge shade trees, felt cozy and warm despite the cool breeze of the San Francisco evening. In her life, she hadn't ever had the chance to have a picnic. Grilling out with friends was something she saw on television. She went to fancy restaurants, and drank expensive champagne.

Watching these people interact made Sheila envious of what she had missed in her life.

Apparently, one of them had just said something funny, because Ray tilted his head back in laughter. Then, surprising her, his gaze fixed on hers.

Damn. Busted. He must have felt her watching him. Tilting his head down slightly, Ray fixed her in a sharper gaze, almost predatory. She resisted the urge to change positions, not wanting to let him know he was rattling her.

Even though he was.

He was so not like the men she was used to dealing with. Not at all. She couldn't simply dismiss him, politely slide by with a glib rejection. No, this man knew she wanted him, and if she gave him the chance, he would act of their mutual attraction.

Of their own accord, her eyes swept his long, muscular body. She swallowed. He was way too much man for her present state of mind. She needed far more adventure before she could tackle him...

Her eyes returned to his, and he winked. A

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knowing look on his face, he said something to his friends, and then started her direction.

Sheila panicked and pushed to her feet. Looking at Jennifer, who sat next to her, she said, "I'm going inside to the bathroom."

And then, without hesitation, Sheila took off towards the building.

She was like a deer in headlights, running without any real logic to the action.

Like running would stop him.

Ray never stopped walking, as she turned and took off towards the building. Instead, he followed in her footsteps. He didn't rush.

He didn't have to.

He wasn't the one running. Years before, while in the army, he had learned the mental game of pursuit. The aggressor set the pace.

As his boots scraped the ground, a slow smile turned up the corners of his lips. He loved the way her eyes widened with awareness when she looked at him. And how her bottom lip trembled when he was watching her and she knew it, but was trying to act like she didn't.

Sheila was like no other woman he'd ever known. In her he saw both a frightened kitten and a wild tigress. It was as if she had been suppressed in some way. He sensed she had held a part of herself in check for quite some time. Maybe for all her life.

Why was the question?

One he thought she knew the answer to, but didn't like. Maybe it was something she had pretended didn't exist until now.

Clearly, she was fighting to overcome some kind of past. Nobody moved away from family and friends, and took a lesser job, if they didn't want an escape.

He reached for the door of the building. She thought jumping out of a plane would help her open up her adventurous side. He had other ideas.

Sheila wasn't daring when it came to life or love. Judging from her reaction to their mutual attraction, she wasn't accustomed to acting on her sexual feelings or needs. She simply tucked them away someplace and pretended they didn't exist.

If she wanted to learn about her adventurous side, he wanted her to start with the bedroom. With him in it...and her. What she needed was a little – no, a *lot* – of hot, sexy lovemaking.

And he was just the man for the job.

As he stepped into the building, he moved towards the ladies room. It was, after all, the logical hiding place. He leaned against the wall, beside the door, and crossed his feet and arms in front of him.

Sooner or later she had to come out.

Sheila paced the small bathroom, with one stall, and one sink. It was a tiny space to pace, but she managed, now on her millionth or so lap. Stopping in

front of the mirror, Sheila eyed her image, and she scolded herself. "You're such a chicken."

A sudden noise made her swing around just in time to see Ray standing in the doorway. He looked tall, broad, and intimidating, and she couldn't help but feel a sudden wave of panic. A half smile on his face, he spoke in a casual drawl, as if him coming into the ladies' restroom was normal. "You gonna stay in here all night?"

His hand which had held the door open, dropped to his side, and it swung shut behind him with a loud thump.

Suddenly, the room was very small, and Ray was very big.

And he smelled good, like spicy male, loaded with the essence of temptation.

Inwardly, she cringed. Already he had an advantage. She was thinking about how good he smelled instead of how outraged she should be by his presence in the ladies' room. Grabbing hold of that thought, she shoved her fists on her waist.

Her eyes challenged him, her words reinforced the message. "What are you doing in here?"

He gave her an amused look. "I should ask you the same question. You were in here so long, I started thinking you might be sick or something."

She frowned. "I'm not sick," she exclaimed, and then added with a bit of discomfort, "or something."

His brow inched up.

"Okay, maybe something." She waved a hand through the air in frustration. "Regardless, you

should have gotten Jennifer to check on me."

His gaze seemed to heat instantly. "That wouldn't have been near as much fun."

"You're impossible!" Sheila spurted nervously, taking a step backwards.

As if by instinct, he stepped forward, following her movement. "And you like it."

"Do not," she said biting her bottom lip, and praying she wouldn't get struck by lightning for being untruthful. Her Mom had instilled that fear in her, and despite her Dad's political background, honesty was still a strong part of Sheila's character.

She took another step backwards, and hit the wall.

He smiled, and stepped forward, taking a long stride that brought him so close they were inches from touching.

He leaned forward, hands flattening on either side of her yet he was careful not to touch her. Tilting his head down until his mouth was very near her ear, he let his breath, warm and sensation-inducing, brush her earlobe.

"We have one of those hard-to-find instant connections, Sheila. The minute we looked into each other's eyes, it wrapped around us like a magnetic force, pulling us together."

He let his words linger in the air, not moving, not saying another word. Perhaps waiting for her to speak.

But she couldn't.

Instead, she marveled at the fact that he hadn't even touched her, yet she ached from her desire for

him. Wetness pooled between her thighs as her desire made itself known, loud and clear, in her body's responses.

She did want Ray. In a way she had never wanted a man, either stranger or friend. She was quickly beginning to wonder why she was resisting. Never, ever had she felt such sensations.

And still he hadn't even touched her.

What could he do if she allowed her walls to drop, and actually experienced what he offered?

His knuckle caressed her cheek. The touch, light and tender, drew her eyes to his. What she saw there was more than desire. There was tenderness and understanding in his gaze.

Her hand went up to his, barely touching it, but telling him she felt what he was trying to convey. "I..."

"I know," he said softly. "I know this isn't normal stuff to you."

She nodded. "No, its not."

He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. "I won't mince words, Sheila. It's not my style. I want you, and I believe you want me. And I'm pushing because I think you need a little help acting on what you really want. But," he said and paused, "say the word, and I'll back off. I need to know. Do you want this or not?"

She did want him. Still...did she have the courage to jump into an affair or even a one-night stand with a man she hardly knew?

A man who was everything she had never

experienced wrapped in one package. A man so different from the men in her world she didn't even know what to expect? Wasn't he a big step to start her new life with?

Sheila couldn't figure out the answer. She wanted him. But at what price did her choice come? "I...I don't know what to say."

His hands settled on her waist. "You have to make the call, Sheila. Do I stay or go?"

Her mind bounced around different responses. She shoved them all aside. *Don't think. Just do. For once in your life, just do.* "Stay."

Instantly, she felt his body sway into hers. She felt the contact like some sort of awakening. She melted against him, soft against hard. His size and strength felt like some sort of aphrodisiac, sending sizzling sensations across her skin. Her nipples tingled, her thighs ached. His hand slid to the side of her face, fingers lacing into her hair.

His mouth slowly lowered towards hers. Sheila felt the anticipation of what was to come next in every inch of her body.

When his lips touched hers, it was like a soft, warm caress with molten, hot results. Her lashes fluttered to her cheeks as his tongue darted ever so lightly against hers.

She sighed into his mouth, savoring the flavor that was Ray's, and his alone, melting into her taste buds. It filled her senses with his unique presence, making her almost light headed with its potency.

He tasted like some unnamed delicacy, light and

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sweet, yet vividly intense, even addictive.

And his smell...it was male perfection, spicy and raw.

One of his hands slid up and down her waist as the proof of his arousal nestled against her stomach. Instinctively, she pressed closer.

Because he felt like the answer to some previous unknown ache.

One only he could fill.

As if he knew what she needed even better than she did, he deepened the kiss. Their tongues slid together, intimately exploring. Again, unable to stop herself, she moaned into his mouth, needing what he was giving her so much more than she could have ever imagined.

Her hands were wrapped around his back, her chest pressed into his, yet she never remembered moving.

After long moments, he pulled away slightly, looking into her eyes. "Let's get out of here."

Her breathing was heavy, her mind foggy with passion. "I don't know." She wanted to go with him, but did she dare?

His forehead settled against hers. "Say yes, Sheila. You want to."

She swallowed. "Why is this happening?" she murmured almost to herself.

He leaned back fixing her in his gaze. His dark, almost smoldering eyes hypnotized her into a transfixed state. "We're attracted to each other. More than attracted. Drawn to one another. It's natural to

want to act on the feeling we have. Say yes, and let's see if we're as good together as I think we might be."

She was scared, but also more than a little aroused. Something about Ray called to her. Sheila's lashes fluttered to her cheeks, and then back up. She had to do this.

"Yes. Okay, yes."

Chapter Four

Sitting behind the wheel of her car, Sheila peered out of the window. Following Ray to his apartment had been a bad idea. It gave her time to get nervous again.

She cut the engine and stared at the building. She could already tell he had one of those two-story condo-style places.

The ones so popular in San Francisco.

Her hands were clammy as she reached for the door handle. Ray was walking towards her Camry, having already parked his pickup and gotten out.

She let out a breath. No way was she going to sit in the car and act as if she were some kind of frightened child. She shoved open the car door. Pushing out of the car just as he would have reached for her door, she tried to act nonchalant, even confident.

All she managed was a nervous twitch of a smile, and a dry mouth that seemed incapable of producing words.

Their gazes locked, and in his eyes, she once again, found understanding. It calmed her in an odd sort of way. He seemed so strong and confident, even

dominating in his methods, yet he also had such a tender side.

A side that seemed to understand when she felt vulnerable. He appeared to choose his actions based on her needs, pushing her when she was strong, and comforted her when she wasn't. How could a stranger already know her so well?

He took her hand in his, gently urging her to step forward. Night was upon them, and the streets and sidewalks were barren. Intimacy danced in the air as he she allowed him to lead her forward.

The cool San Francisco night washed over her heated skin, lifting her hair, and brushing her neck. It seemed to sing a melody of calmness, calling her with its comfort.

He pushed her door shut. "Did you lock it?"

She was taken aback by the question. No one looked out for her, which was what he was doing. Her Mom long ago remarried and moved to Colorado. Her father, well, he wanted her around for his own purposes, and she had always performed on demand. In return, she was lucky to so much as get a happy birthday.

The thought made her stomach flip-flop. It hurt knowing tomorrow, as she turned thirty, she wouldn't be hearing from him.

"Sheila?"

Ray's soft prodding pulled her out of the reverie she hadn't even realized she had slipped into. "Huh?"

He tilted his head down to get a good look at her. "Did you lock your doors?"

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"Oh, um," she said with a nervous laugh. "Yes, I did. Thanks for asking, though."

His eyes narrowed as he looked down at her, as if he was trying to figure out what she was thanking him for. "Let's go inside."

Sheila nodded. "Okay." Her voice was a mere whisper.

He surprised her by sliding his hand around her neck and stepping close. "I know you're nervous. I'm nervous, too."

Her eyes widened. No way was this big, manly man nervous. Letting her eyes drop to his chest, she said, "Right. Somehow I doubt that. You seem quite confident in yourself."

"As do you."

And he was right. She was. Just not with him. Her eyes lifted to his. Could he feel the same way with her? "Why?"

His expression was hard to read. "Why are you?"

She made a face. "Now you sound like the men I know, politicians who answer a question with a question."

"I can assure you I am nothing like the men you know. I'd like to hear about your world, Sheila. But first, I want to know why I make you nervous. Is it because I'm different from the other men you have known?"

"Exactly," she said, glad to have the answer given to her so she didn't have to explain.

"You're just as different to me."

"I am?" she asked, studying his face, searching for

the truth. His thumb was moving back and forth at the nape of her neck, sending thrilling little waves of sensation down her spine.

He nodded. "Yes, very much so. But I like it." A brief paused. "A lot."

Her hand went to his wrist. "You do?"

"Yes," he said softly. "I do." Then his lips were suddenly there, touching hers, softly teasing, and tasting. "Come inside and let me show you how much."

Ray wasn't sure what Sheila did to him, but it was most definitely not the norm. He loved women. What man didn't? Having a woman in his bed, but not in his life full time, was the way he liked things.

Sheila, though, she made him think about a second meeting before the first had ever ended. She made him feel things.

He wanted her in a physical way, yes, but he also felt something deeper. It wasn't a feeling he understood, or could identify, because he had never experienced it before.

As he pushed open his front door, Ray also pushed the thoughts aside. Right now, he wanted to enjoy Sheila. He'd analyze things later, after he got her naked and calling out his name. He pulled her in the door, and sensing her nervous state was only increasing, took action.

In a quick move, he closed them in his dark

apartment, and gently pressed her against the wall. His lips touched her earlobe. "I want you, Sheila."

Her hand slid up his side and to his back. They moved together so that their lips lingered a hair from touching. "I want you, too."

He could feel and almost taste her breath. It was warm and sweet. Inviting. Brushing his lips across hers, he felt her shudder. The fingers of one of his hands brushed her cheek, comforting, even as his lips touched hers a second time.

Slowly, he moved his index finger to touch her bottom lip. The action was almost a part of the kiss. A touch with his finger, a quick lick of his tongue following the same path.

Then, their lips came together, simply absorbing one another for long moments. Though their tongues didn't touch, there was an overwhelming intimacy to the way their lips lingered, almost melting into one another.

Their bodies followed the same pattern as they seemed to become one, arms wrapping one another, hips pressed together.

After long moments, their lips partially separated, and he lightly darted his tongue against hers. She moaned at the contact, responding slowly, as if she was lost to his taste.

When her tongue finally touched his, it was his turn to moan. In the far corners of his mind, he wondered at the intensity of the impact. How could a mere kiss impact him on such a deep level? It was as if he felt their tongues meet in every nerve ending in

his body.

Was this what people called chemistry?

The thoughts quickly disappeared as he was pulled into the moment. Their tongues played against one another, slow, sultry, like an invitation to savor.

Suddenly, the passion stepped up a notch. Ray wasn't sure which one of them deepened the kiss. Their needs seemed so mutual, so in tune, it was as if they both felt more urgency in the very same instant.

Their lips pressed tighter, as their kiss became a passionate, hungry exploration. The need to touch her, to feel her body beneath his hands became almost critical. So wrapped up in the moment, he hardly remembered sliding his hand across her breast. He simply enjoyed the feel of it in his palm as he lightly kneaded.

Even more so, he enjoyed the way it seemed to ignite the flame in Sheila. She moaned again, and her hands roamed his body. Her touch set his senses on fire, pressed him to want and want and want.

More.

Acting on his instincts, he cupped her backside and lifted. Her legs wrapped around his waist, as her arms circled his neck. His voice was distinctly passion-filled. "I want you naked and in my bed."

The darkness of the room shielded her eyes, which he so wanted to see. "Yes," she whispered. "I want that, too."

She buried her face in his neck, and he felt the unfamiliar ache of possessiveness. Something about having her in his bed, in his arms, made him want to

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yell *mine*.

Taking women to this home wasn't even his style. Yet he had never hesitated to bring Sheila here. It felt as if she belonged in his bed, beneath him, on top of him, all around him.

Some strange hotel bed simply wouldn't have done. And her home would have given her all the power. With Sheila, he already knew he couldn't allow her that. She would use it to hide from him.

Sitting her down on the edge of his bed, he stepped back and simply looked at her. There was just enough moonlight slipping through the windows to cast her in a warm glow of dim light.

"You're beautiful," he said, meaning it. Sitting there, her long hair streaming across her shoulders, her eyes dark with desire, she looked like a perfect painting.

"Thank you." Her voice was soft, and seemed to hold a hint of embarrassment. As if she knew he was reading her, perhaps correctly, her eyes dropped to the ground.

He following, kneeling down in front of her, directly in her line of vision. His hand brushed the hair from her eyes. "You *are* beautiful. Surely you've heard that many times. Why does it seem to bother you to hear the words?"

She opened her mouth as if to answer and then shut it again. "What is it, sweetheart?" Ray asked. "Please tell me."

Hesitating a minute, she seemed to struggle with her words. "It's...it's just the way you said it."

He looked at her expectantly. "Meaning?"

She swallowed. "Like you meant it."

It took him a minute to digest her words. Who in her life had made her feel as if compliments were used to manipulate?

"Come here," he said as he gently moved to the bed and maneuvered her to her side.

Resting side by side, he stared into her eyes. "I'm going to make you a promise." She didn't say anything so he continued, "I won't ever say anything to you I don't mean, and I won't operate with any hidden agendas. What you see is what you get. Fair enough?"

Her brows dipped. "Why would you make me a promise like that? You hardly know me."

"I know you well enough to know whatever happens between us should be honest, and real. Maybe that is only what happens here tonight, maybe it's more. For now, I want us to grab hold of the moment with no barriers. Live a little, by giving me your trust." He hesitated. "At least for now, for tonight."

She seemed to consider. Then her hand went to his chest. "Yes. I'd like that."

Chapter Five

Sheila took a deep breath in an effort to steady her nerves. A hard task with a man like Ray so near. He was so big, so male, so, well...him. Unique, thrilling, with an edge that made her believe he would be a bit wild, and impossible to control.

And here she was, in bed with him, wanting him.

Something about him scared her, but it pushed up her pulse even at the same time, making her aware and needy.

For him.

He was different from everything she had ever known. Ray screamed of unbridled passion, and zero boundaries. Without a reason, just her gut instinct, she knew he lived without conventional restrictions in mind.

It was a sense she got from him.

Her hand rested on his chest. As her eyes went to where it rested, his hand moved to cover hers. Suddenly she knew she couldn't let this opportunity slip by her. She was here, now, with Ray. She wanted

to enjoy what he offered.

Her eyes went to his. "Will you take off your shirt?"

His eyes widened slightly before a slow smile slipped onto his lips. Without words he pulled it over his head.

He was even more impressive than she had imagined. Looking at him, the woman in her alive and kicking, she was dry-mouthed with the anticipation of touching him.

But even with that said, she couldn't help but be impressed with how his body spoke of his character.

The kind of distinctive muscle definition he possessed took years of hard work. Once she had done a story on a professional athlete, and learned about building a strong body. The depth of training required to achieve a physique like Ray's spoke of discipline. It contradicted the wildness she sensed in him.

Ray was a mystery.

She wondered if anyone fully understood him. Certainly she didn't.

Her hand ran the length of one of his biceps. "You've worked hard."

He laughed low, amused. "Yes, I work hard at everything I do. Does that surprise you?"

Her gaze flew to meet his. "No," she said quickly. "I didn't mean that at all. I just meant..."

His brow inched upward. "Meant what?"

"I understand that bodies like yours aren't just made. They're created." She paused, grasping for

words. "Like art."

"We think alike," he said softly. "I was thinking how like a perfect painting you look tonight."

He didn't speak for a long moment, nor did she. His finger played with a strand of her hair. Though he didn't touch her skin, she felt as if he did. Awareness crept along her nerve endings.

When he spoke again, he studied her expression. "You make me sound far more than I am."

She touched his jaw, sensing some wall in him she suddenly wanted to remove. "Tell me, then. Who are you, Ray Walker?"

His hand covered hers. "I'm simply a man. What you see is what you get. I don't play games. I don't work with hidden agendas. I am who I am."

She believed him, and for that reason, his words impacted her profoundly. Yet, he was from such a different world than hers. Could he really be a snake in hiding? Was she deceived by his differences?

Shoving aside the thought, she focused on the night, on the moment. "I can't believe I'm here with you."

His finger brushed her cheek. "Why?"

Her voice was tight. "I don't make a habit of going home with strange men."

"I'm not just some random man. We both know and trust Jennifer." Inching closer, his thighs rubbing hers, he pressed his lips to her temple.

She wanted to tell him that didn't matter. He was still someone she had just met, and she didn't make a habit of this type of thing. But it was too late. His

mouth settled lightly on hers, and she was lost.

His lips lifted, and then brushed hers again. Returning again and again with butterfly kisses, he seduced her into a fog of passion. He lingered, breath mingling with hers, before he nibbled her bottom lip.

She felt as if she was floating in the middle of some perfect dream. A sexy man-filled dream. His tongue touched her bottom lip, and then pressed between her lips.

Barely, his tongue connected with hers, yet it sent a surge of urgency through her body. Her nipples ached, her inner thighs dampened. His tongue slid into her mouth once again offering a warm caress, another light flutter of touch that taunted, teased, and invited response.

Made her have to taste him.

Her tongue moved against his, tentative, nervous, yet eager. He moaned, sliding his tongue deeper into her mouth like a velvet stroke of her senses.

She moaned as her body pressed against his. God, how she wanted this man. In turn, his hand slid down her back, around her backside, back up her hip. She pressed closer to his body feeling the evidence of his arousal as it strained against the soft material of her worn jeans.

Her fingers found his belt loops. His hand found her knee, lifting her leg up over his hip, pressing her pelvis into his groin.

Deeply, his tongue explored her mouth. As his tongue incited her desire, his hand covered her breast, squeezing with delicate pressure. His thumb stroked

her nipple, a perfect form of friction and pressure, and she whimpered into his mouth.

Swallowing the sound, he kissed her into a new level of heat. Seducing her with his tongue, intimately exploring her taste, he made her frantic to return each action.

He stroked her tongue with his.

She stroked his tongue with hers.

Slowly, he slid his tongue along the bottom of her lip, and then delved deep into her mouth again.

Moments later, Sheila ran her tongue the length of his bottom lip, imitating his action. But before she could taste him fully, his hand moved under her shirt hem.

"Take this off," he ordered.

She pulled back and looked at him. His eyes, dark with passion, spoke of wild passion. A sweet feeling of power raced through her body.

Ray wanted her as much as she did him.

For once in her life, she wanted to let go and enjoy. Perhaps Ray was right. This was exactly what she needed. Responding to her newfound power, she pushed up to her knees. Meeting Ray's surprised gaze, she pulled her shirt over her head.

She saw the look of excitement flash in his eyes before he wiped his expression clean. Reaching behind her, she unhooked her bra, fighting the flutter of nerves in her stomach.

Not giving herself time to chicken out, she rolled her shoulders and shrugged out of the black silk of her bra. Tossing it to the floor, she let Ray look at her.

She had nice breasts. It was one thing she had always been thankful for. A full C cup, almost a D, with rather full nipples that tended to draw male attention.

"Like I said," he said quietly, maybe a bit hoarsely. "You're beautiful. Come here and let me touch you."

She swallowed. Now that she had the power, she didn't want to give it up. As scary as being the aggressor in a sexual way was to her, giving all the power to a man like Ray seemed far more dangerous.

"No," she said in a voice she was pleased to find very confident. "You can touch when I say you can. Let your hair down." She longed to run her fingers through that rich, dark mane of his.

His face remained impassive, his body unmoving. For a moment, she thought he might refuse. It made her confidence waver. But then he reached behind him, pulling the tie from his hair, and then shaking his hair loose.

Her mouth went dry. He looked wild, and like he was a..."You're Indian."

His eyes narrowed. "Part. Is that a problem?"

Problem? "I like it." She whispered the words, meaning them.

The differences in him, from her and from everything she had ever known, turned her on. Even his dark skin to her light enticed, and did funny things to her insides.

In a swift, graceful movement, he came to his knees to face her. Suddenly, naked to the waist and facing him, he seemed big, almost intimidating. But somehow it managed to make her hotter, more needy.

His eyes locked with hers, and then slowly, intentionally, slid down to her breasts. His gaze felt as if it were a hand, touching her nipples, making them pucker and throb.

When his eyes returned to hers, he said, "I won't touch until you say I can." A slight smile hinted on the corners of his mouth. He raised his hands out to his sides, offering himself to her. "But you can touch all you want."

Gulp.

Her eyes went wide, but despite her shock at his words, her hands moved. She wanted to touch. Now, later, all over.

Her fingers entwined ever so lightly in strands of his hair. The move brought her breasts deliciously close to the perfect speckling of darkness on his chest. She fought the urge to rub her nipples in it.

The thought made her feel the ache between her thighs, and she felt the distinctive wetness of growing arousal. Biting back a moan, she willed herself to be patient. This was too good to rush. He was a work of art-regardless of what he thought-and meant to be savored.

And *then* devoured.

"Don't expect me to be shy," she purred softly.

His eyes dropped to her breasts again, hungrily studying them. "Move a little closer so your nipples touch my chest."

His boldness surprised her. But it was her reaction to his words that was the most amazing. She was more turned on than ever. The wetness between her

thighs, and pure humming of need, intensified.

His gaze moved to hers, a challenge in his eyes. "If I can't touch you, lean forward so I can feel your breasts against my skin."

She sunk against him, fingers sliding into his long hair, even as their mouths connected, lips earnest as they pressed together. Wildly their tongues tangled, hungrily exploring. His hands went up her back, to her side, and then cupped her breasts. She arched into him, feeling the touch like a new flame.

"I told you not to touch." She barely got the teasing words out between kisses.

"I can stop if you want," he murmured against her lips.

But he didn't.

Instead, his fingers gently tweaked her nipple. At the same time he feathered kisses down her cheek to her ear. He nuzzled the sensitive spot behind her lobe.

"Um," she said barely able to find her voice. "Don't."

His hands moved, as his head lifted slightly. She grabbed them, and put it back on her breasts, her hands over his. "Why'd you stop?"

He looked down at her, amusement mixed with passion in his gaze. "You said don't."

"Don't stop." Needing to be sure he understood, Sheila squeezed his hands, and then repeated her words, "Don't stop."

Immediately his fingers began to gently knead. Before she could even process the satisfaction it

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provided, he moved, and took her with him.

Sheila found herself on her back, legs spread so he fit between them, and his hands still on her breasts. He leaned down and licked one of her nipples.

She sucked in a shuddery breath just as his teeth scraped with sweet friction.

For long moments, she found herself lost as he suckled, licked, and nibbled at each of her nipples with delicious thoroughness. Her hands were in his hair. Her back arching towards his mouth, as the warm wetness of his tongue taunted, teased, and most definitely, pleased.

Suddenly, he was looking down at her, propped up above her. His hair hung over his shoulders, dangling so it brushed hers as well. He looked wild, and so damn sexy her mouth all but watered.

Staring into his eyes, she felt seduced by their dark depths, so powerfully compelling. His voice, a deep, masculine baritone, seemed to only stroke her passion to a higher spot. "You have on far too many clothes."

His words, direct and with intent, only served to press her further over the edge of no return...She was drowning in desire. "So do you." His lower body was pressed against hers or she would have tried to remedy the situation.

He stared at her for a long moment and then brushed his lips against hers as he pressed their bodies close. Her breasts were instantly molded against the hard planes of his chest.

His breath touched her ear. "I can't seem to get enough of you. I want us both naked, together,

touching everywhere.”

It might have been his words, or maybe the complete understanding of their meaning, but she found the need to cling to him, to press closer, impossible to ignore. Her arms wrapped tightly around his back, her body arched into his.

Their mouths mated, tongue to tongue, hungrily ravishing each other. He tasted like an addictive flavor, the teasing sensation of never getting enough lingering with each stroke of her tongue.

Then, in another sudden movement, something he seemed to do a lot, he was on his knees, looking down at her. “Take your clothes off,” he ordered.

Sitting up, weight on her hands, she looked at him. Her bottom lip trembled. Being naked when he wasn’t, despite her current state of arousal, intimidated. “You first.”

A smile touched his lips, and she thought he might insist differently. But then he was standing at the end of the bed, taking off his boots, and then his remaining clothes. When he was finished, he stood there, aroused, and perfectly male, allowing her to look her fill.

And she did.

How could she not? He was amazing. Completely, utterly, amazing. As her eyes trailed downward, she explored and enjoyed. His broad shoulders were well rounded, his chest broad with a perfect amount of dark hair sprinkled across it. Her gaze trailed downward, past his narrowed waist and chiseled abs to focus on his arousal.

Good gosh, everything about the man was big and...her mouth felt dry...wild.

He leaned forward without warning and grabbed her legs. Damn, what was the man doing now? Not that she was complaining. Not entirely. His hands on her body was exactly what she wanted. Still, as her backside moved to the end of the bed, she wondered at what came next.

Ray was just so damn unpredictable.

When her legs dangled off the end of the bed, he tugged her shoes off, one at a time. Then her pants. It was only moments later when she realized his intent. He squatted between her legs, putting her feet over his shoulders.

Before she could protest, which she fully intended to do, his mouth, warm and wet, closed down on her clitoris. "Oh, God." She half moaned the words.

The pleasure he was creating pushed her eyelids shut. He worked magic with his mouth, using his tongue to lick her sensitive flesh, and his lips to gently suckle her nub.

Unrepentantly, and without warning, one of his fingers slid inside her. She gasped, and then whimpered with need he stroked her inner wall. All the while he applied soft pressure with his mouth at just the right spots.

She was so on the edge of orgasm, her hands moved to the blanket, clutching it above her head, as if she was holding on to the last remnants of control.

But they were already too far gone.

His fingers worked in and out of her, simulating

sex as he suckled her to the edge...and then over. Her back arched, and she called out his name. The feeling of reaching the very top of a roller coaster hill peaked inside her body.

She'd never liked roller coasters...but she did this one.

Then he took her over the top, into a pure rush of bliss as ripple after ripple of her orgasm shook her body. Ray expertly led her through the pleasure zone, easing his tongue and finger action until it was a slow caress of movements.

Long moments later, she fell silent, her breathing still erratic, her body humming with the aftermath of Ray's doing. Ray feathered kisses up her stomach as she reveled in his talent to bring her to such quick satisfaction.

No man had ever made her come before, period, let alone so easily. But as good as her release had been, there was one thing she had missed, and still did.

Him inside her.

She could feel the slight spasms of aftershocks making her ache for fulfillment. "Ray, I need —"

He slid her up on the bed cutting her words off with his movement. His very hard erection slid to rest against her core even as the sweetness of his weight settled on top of her.

His lips were so close to hers she could feel his breath. "What do you need, Sheila? "Tell me," he said, leaning up just enough to fix her in a dark, sexual look.

"No," she said shyly. Saying it felt far too bold, and

daring.

"Say it," he murmured.

"You know what I need," she insisted.

He leaned back to reach between them, and she thought he was giving into her. Instead, he took his erection in his hand, and began gently rubbing it in her wetness, spreading her own liquid along the head of his penis.

Her hips arched, wanting him inside her.

He used his body to caress her outer folds, ever so slightly starting to enter her, but pulling back. She gasped, and cursed him.

His gaze locked with hers. "Tell me what you want, and you can have it."

Needing him, afraid he might leave to get protection, she blurted, "I'm on the pill."

"That's not what I'm asking, but good." Then he slid his penis back and forth, side to side, and dipped inside her once again, allowing the very head of his erection to enter her.

Only to pull back again.

Her body begged for him. "Ray, please!" she exclaimed.

He continued to rub their bodies together. "Please what, Sheila?"

She couldn't hold back the words any longer. "I want you inside me."

With a low growl, he granted her request, sliding inside her, and sinking deep. His face was buried in her neck, near her ear. "All you had to do was ask."

"You're a tease," she whispered through clenched

teeth.

He moved to look at her. "No," he said, gently sliding back and forth, and watching her expression as he did. She tried to hide her pleasure, but knew she failed as a whimper escaped her lips.

His voice was gruff with desire. "Does it feel like I'm teasing?"

"Yes," she whispered because she needed more and she knew he knew she did.

He picked up the pace, sliding back and forth with more forth, fulfilling her needs with every movement. "What about now?"

She barely found her voice as her fingers dug into his back. "You're still a tease."

Bracing his hands on either side of her body, he lunged hard, sinking far into her depths. "Now?" he demanded gruffly. "Am I still a tease?"

He began a rapid pace, in and out, deeper and deeper. She was lost. "No, not now. You're not a tease."

She felt bolder now, more able to say what she wanted. "But I still want more."

A low growl escaped his throat as he answered her with a hard, deep thrust followed by another and another. She called out *yes*, but he pressed their bodies and mouths together, swallowing the word.

He kissed her frantically, and she met him stroke for stroke.

Their bodies molded, moved, ached to be one. She clung, but so did he. Frenzied, and completely lost in one another, they moved up and down, and side to

side. And as impossible as she would have thought it was, she felt the top of the rollercoaster track again.

"I'm going to —"

"Me, too," he replied hoarsely, face buried in her neck. "Me, too."

And then his body shook, but only after he called out her name. Her body followed, clinging, spasming, and making her feel the sweetness of satisfaction.

When they finally both stilled, for long moments he lay there on top of her, carefully resting his weight on his elbows.

She stroked his hair, and closed her eyes to soak in the feel of them together, so intimate, so close. There was something about her and Ray. She felt as if he knew her better than a mere stranger could.

She felt as if he was special in some way. As if, maybe, they were suppose to know one another. She tried to fight off the thoughts, knowing they were dangerous, but still they danced in her head, unwilling to leave.

He leaned back and looked at her, his eyes filled with unspoken words. And she thought he must have felt what she did. Or maybe she imagined the look in his eyes, or wished for it.

He never spoke.

Instead, he rolled off of her, pulling her onto his chest, and under his arm. She knew she should leave but instead, she snuggled against him, unable to stifle the urge to linger.

She'd stay just a few minutes, and then she'd get up and leave.

Lisa Renee Jones

Before she got any more attached, and into this amazing man.

Chapter Six

Her eyes fluttered open as dim light registered in her mind. Instant warmth and comfort surrounded her, making her nuzzle deeper into the bed, wishing daylight would delay a little longer.

The spicy smell of a man, of Ray, once again inched into her nostrils even as her hand curled in the soft hair on his chest.

She swallowed.

Ray.

She was still with him, in his bed, sleeping.

Images of their naked bodies wrapped together flashed through her mind. The instant stirring of her body took Sheila by surprise as a low hum of needs burned between her thighs.

She wanted him again.

Her heart kicked up its pace, beating at double time. Control was something she prided herself on, yet, now, with Ray, she seemed lacking. He wasn't even awake and he had the power to turn her on.

Flicking a look towards the window, she didn't

dare move for fear of waking up Ray. The sun was on a rapid path to a new day. No matter how Sheila looked at it, it was time to go home.

Unable to resist the temptation to know more about Ray, for the first time since her arrival, Sheila eyes her surroundings. The room was large, like the man, filled with massive wood furnishings, including a dresser and matching chest. A recliner chair sat by the window with a book next to it, open, on the floor. *Huh. Ray read?* He was a complicated guy, and at each turn, he seemed a contradiction from the wild man she had first pictured.

Wall to wall, framed photographs, also surprised her. Images of his time in the army, with a variety of people she couldn't make out, indicated he was sentimental. She felt an odd twinge in her chest. He was far more than she had expected on an emotional level. Could he be that wild cowboy, and a stable, caring guy, the way all the other signs, even his interaction with his friends, indicated.

It simply didn't compute. The combination of traits to this man made her confused. Her feeling for him were complex, and frightening, and far too emotional for good measure.

She wanted to know more about him.

She wanted *him* again.

But it would be crazy to let herself indulge further. Already she had broken her own rule of no one night stands. A morning after event just seemed like she was pressing her luck.

Something would backfire.

Maybe she would get hurt.

Maybe he would see how much she was into him, liking him, wanting more than one night.

Sucking in a big, silent sniff of his scent, she felt the familiar stirring of her limbs intensify. His smell was like an aphrodisiac. It did things to her. No. *Ray* did things to her. It was how he smelled, tasted, sounded, looked, and even acted.

It was the whole package.

His voice, his hair, his deliciously rippled abdominals.

Ray brought out the sexual, carnal side of her personality she never allowed to escape.

Turning off her reaction was impossible.

So she had to leave before she did something to make things worse. Like really fall for Ray in a big, bad way. Which would be oh so easy.

The way he touched her, gently sensual, almost loving, did the most amazing things to her inside and out. And his voice, soft and enticing, was almost too tender, too comforting.

Being with Ray intimately...well, she had felt like she was being made love to for the first time in her life.

Sheila frowned, inwardly scorning herself. One-night stands were about sex, not making love.

She inwardly sighed. Even separated from her father, his teachings were harder to shake. Sex was sex, one-night stands were bad, but reality. That meant no lovemaking. It had been pure physical gratification. That was her father's opinions. The way

she had always heard about sex, and relationships.

Her mother had other opinions, but since she was in Colorado, Sheila rarely heard them. No, her father had molded many of her thoughts. He had made her see the dark side of relationships, and the lack of trust and love that could exist.

Suddenly, Sheila wanted away from Ray. She needed space. Yes, away from Ray. Away from the things he made her feel. Things she didn't understand and was afraid to completely examine.

Gingerly, Sheila eased her hand off his chest. So far so good. He didn't as much as move a hair. Easing backwards, Sheila managed to sit up without recourse.

Carefully, she slid off the bed, silently putting her bare feet on the floor. She tiptoed around the bed. She found her clothes, not daring the possible noise factor by lingering to dress. She quickly headed towards the door, planning to dress in the other room.

"Where are you going?"

Sheila froze, bare back and butt plain for Ray's viewing. The door, her sweet point of escape, was just out of reach. Reflexively, she turned to face him. His eyes dropped to her bare breasts.

Her arms crossed protectively in front of the area of his focus. Ray's voice held amusement and challenge. "Suddenly shy?"

His eyes were like dark pools of lava, addictively drawing her attention, willing her into their heat. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Sarcasm laced his tone. "But you thought you'd

just leave and pretend you never met me.”

Denial was her first instinct, but she hated lies. She let out a breath. “An awkward morning-after didn’t sound like fun. I preferred to remember last night, not this morning.”

He stared at her a long moment before his head fell back, and a rumble of deep laughter escaped his throat. It was several seconds before he pinned her in a stare. “At least you were honest.” Two beats passed. “What if I said I wasn’t planning on letting this morning be a disappointment?”

Sheila throat felt frozen. What did he mean? He wanted her again? The thought made her anxious, even excited. Before she could decide on a response, he said, “Come here and let me show you.”

Nervously, she asked, “Show me what?”

“How good the morning after can be.” He paused. “Of course, if you really want to leave...”

The ball was now officially in her court. He had a way of doing that, of ensuring the choice was hers, and hers alone. Strange, because she didn’t know any other man who handled things that way. She was used to men who dictated. Yet, Ray seemed confident enough not to need to control. At least not directly.

She liked that about him. The truth was, she really liked way too much about him. Which was reason enough to leave, and certainly to avoid going back to bed with him.

Feeling the need to run for shelter, away from her growing attraction to Ray, she stiffened. “I need to go.”

Turning, she tried not to think about her bare butt as she raced towards the doorway. Once she was in the hall, she darted towards the door she thought to be the bathroom.

Bingo. It was. She quickly entered, shut the door, and locked it. She sank down onto the side of the bathtub, and bit her bottom lip.

Ray was far more overwhelming than she had estimated. She had to get out of here. She'd figure out how to get out of the skydiving thing later.

Ray stared at the bedroom door as Sheila's perfect white butt disappeared through it.

"Damn," he murmured.

There was something about Sheila. He wanted her on some level he'd never wanted before. Every instinct he owned called for him to act. His nature was to go on the aggressive. He wanted to go after her and drag her back to bed. Then he'd make love to her several times, several ways. After, he'd fix her breakfast and get to know her.

He started to get out of the bed, and made himself stop. "Damn." As much as he wanted to go after her, he also knew he had to handle her just right.

She had a breaking point. He was pushing her to reach above and beyond her normal limits. It might be best to give her a little time.

Which really sucked. He wanted her back now. Not later. Actually now and later.

Daring Sheila

He looked at the clock, and a slow smile filled his face. Five o'clock. She had three hours. He'd survive the wait.

Then he would strap her to him, and take her for another ride. This time they'd jump out of a plane. After, they'd jump back into bed.

Chapter Seven

Lying in her bed, Sheila was thankful for the raindrops she heard thrumming against her window. A light breeze filtered through the windows, blowing her white lace curtains, and making her wonder at the force of the wind outside. She now had an excuse to miss her jump with Ray. She'd gone to bed as soon as she'd arrived home, but not to sleep.

Sighing, she eyed the room. She kept it all clean and neat, with white curtains and a white down comforter. She liked her world clean and under complete control. So why couldn't she get a grip on how Ray was making her feel?

It had really upset her that Ray hadn't followed her to her car, or tried to stop her from leaving. Why, she didn't know, but after hours of fretting, she'd accepted it as fact. She had wanted him to stop her.

But he hadn't. Which meant what she didn't want it to mean. It really had been a one-night stand. The jangle of the phone broke her reverie, giving her a break from her mental beating.

With a sigh, she grabbed the bedside receiver. Very

Daring Sheila

little sleep colored her voice with a gravelly tone. "Hello."

Jennifer's too-perky voice filled Sheila's ears. "Whoops, woke you up, huh?"

"Yeah," she lied, "but that's okay."

Too Cheerful continued, "Happy Birthday."

The words made Sheila cringe. "I hate my birthday."

"You're cranky," Jennifer said quickly and then moved on dismissively, "It's raining. No jumps today. How about I take you to lunch? I have something to give you."

"Jennifer," Sheila said as she pinched the bridge of her nose. She knew what her new friend was up to. "I don't want to celebrate my birthday. I want to forget it. I appreciate it, but —"

Jennifer interrupted with determination in her voice. "You're being hardheaded, woman. I'm coming over."

"Please don't," Sheila said a bit abruptly, and then immediately wished she could pull the words back. "Look, I just need to be alone. It's good the jump isn't today."

Silence.

And then finally, "Okay. I didn't mean to intrude."

"It's not that," Sheila insisted. "I just hate birthdays. Any other day will find me in much better form."

Jennifer was never one to give up easily, a fact that Sheila was quickly learning. "You shouldn't be alone."

Sheila made a disbelieving sound. "Jennifer, please, stop pushing."

Jennifer sighed. "Fine. For now. I'll call you later."

Relieved for at least a temporary reprieve, Sheila let out a breath of air. "Yeah, okay."

After saying a quick goodbye and replacing the receiver, Sheila dropped back onto the bed. There was no doubt in her mind she would hear from Jennifer again before the day ended.

Just like she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, she wouldn't be hearing from her father.

Looking towards the window, she whispered, "Happy Birthday, Sheila. Welcome to thirty."

It was eight o' clock that evening when she hung up the phone from an hour-long talk with her mother. Sheila sat on her fluffy blue couch, her comfort spot of choice, chin resting on her knuckles, and stared into space.

She loved her mother, and her mother loved her. It was just hard knowing she only saw her once or twice a year. They had been close once, but now...now they had so much space between them. Colorado had done well by her Mother, but it had also taken her away from Sheila.

She felt suddenly very alone.

And to make matters worse, Ray and stayed on her mind... like some sort of addictive drug, she couldn't escape him. What she needed was a hot bath and a

glass of wine. Decision made, she pushed to her feet, but before she could take a step, her doorbell rang.

Her brows dipped. Who in the world would be at her door? The last thing she wanted was company. So she just wouldn't answer the door.

"Sheila, I know you're in there." It was Jennifer.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Sheila reached for calm. "Damn," she whispered, but even as she said the word she made her way to the door. Though she hadn't known Jennifer for long, she knew full well she wasn't going away without a face-to-face dismissal.

Pulling the door open, she found Jennifer, along with a tall, broad, blond man Sheila recognized from pictures as Bobby. "I told her not to do this," he said apologetically.

Jennifer frowned at him, and then quickly replaced the look with a smile as she looked at Sheila. "Happy Birthday, sweetie." Sheila found herself in a big hug, and then being handed a small gift bag. "Open it later. Get dressed. We're going to Shorty's bar and celebrating."

Sheila stepped away from Jennifer. "Oh no. No way. I'm running a bath, and drinking a glass of wine. Then I'm going to bed."

Jennifer linked her arm in Sheila's moved through the door. "After Shorty's."

Bobby stepped in through the door behind them. Sheila shot him a pleading look. He shrugged. "She's hard to control when she's this determined. It might be easier just to give in and come have a beer with

us.”

Sheila sighed. He was right and she knew it. She was going to Shorty’s, like it or not.

And she didn’t.

She wanted a hot bath, a glass of wine, and Ray in the tub with her. She could just image that hard body dripping wet, slick, and rubbing against hers.

Yum.

Instead, she was getting a beer at Shorty’s.

Damn, sometimes life just sucked.

Shorty’s was a country bar complete with cowboys, women in tight Wranglers, and lots of cigarette smoke. Eyeing the couples sashaying around the dance floor, Sheila frowned, wondering why she had agreed to come here. She had never two-stepped in her life. Standing next to Jennifer, she tried to seem interested in the conversation around her.

She wasn’t.

Sheila took a long swallow of her beer. If one more cowboy asked her to dance...

She might just find a paper and pen, and make a *no* sign to wear on her shirt.

Jennifer and Bobby didn’t seem to notice her discomfort. Jason, however, seemed more than aware, and even sympathetic. He wasn’t quite as tall as Bobby or Ray, but he was just as physically fit.

The three men who owned The Jump Zone, Bobby, Ray, and Jason were quite the team of pure sex

appeal. How did Jennifer endure so much arrogance sun up to sun down? But then again, they all seemed very nice.

Good looks and arrogance hadn't seemed to make any of them bad guys. Yet, back home, men with far fewer physical assets...well, they were all into self-serving ways.

But not the guys who owned The Jump Zone.

Jason tried to get Sheila to lighten up by making small talk. It wasn't working. He chose all the wrong subjects, bless the guy's heart. She knew he meant well. "I hear you are jumping with Ray."

"Was," she said quickly.

Jason frowned which did nothing to wipe the handsome off his too-good-looking face. "Meaning what?"

Sheila sipped her beer. "I'm not jumping."

Jason started to answer when his eyes caught and locked across the room. "There's Ray now." Jason waved. Sheila almost choked on her beer as he added a mumbled, "Damn, he doesn't see me." He gave Sheila an apologetic look. "Excuse me a second. Be right back."

Sheila didn't wait. The instant Jason stepped away, she moved the opposite direction. But not fast enough. Jennifer's hand settled on her arm. "Where are you going?"

Sheila needed out of Ray's sight. "Bathroom. Be right back."

With Jennifer satisfied, Sheila weaved through the crowd. She had limited time to figure out how to

handle this new turn of events.

The bathroom was behind the DJ booth, on the other side of the room. Which was good because it gave her more time to figure out how to get out of this mess. She wasn't up to facing her one-night stand that she had gotten way too into in public.

Sheila stepped inside the bathroom to find rows of mirrors and chairs. She quickly sat down, feeling weak in the knees, and a bit frantic.

A large woman with jeans two sizes too small and a shirt that had cowboy boots printed all over it stopped in front of Sheila. *Jeez*, Sheila thought. *Only in a country bar.*

The woman gave Sheila a look. "You okay, sweetie? You look like you've seen a ghost...or an ex-boyfriend."

Sheila gave her a fake, barely there smile. "Nothing that simple."

The woman frowned. Sheila held up her hand. "Please don't ask."

The woman patted Sheila's shoulder. Then she sashayed away, swinging her hips wildly, despite the pain Sheila was certain the too-tight pants must be causing.

Refocusing on her problem, Sheila looked into the mirror. The scary part was she didn't even know who she was looking at.

Who was she?

Her identity was a jumbled mess at a time in her life when she should be well established and comfortable in her own self.

Thirty was supposed to mean you had your shit together. Instead, she was in a bar called Shorty's, dodging a one-night stand she'd like to make a two-night stand – no more than that – but was too chicken to try.

How pathetic was that?

Besides, Ray had already proven he didn't want more. He let her leave that morning. That said it all. If he had wanted more than a night of sex...she stopped the thought. Bottom line, he didn't, and she had to deal.

Now.

That was the unfortunate part.

He was here and so was she. No hiding.

Mustering up her inner strength, she called on her political training. She could seem cool and collected in the most awkward situations.

She would just put on a happy face and pretend nothing happened. Not giving herself time to think, she pushed to her feet.

Do it, and get it over with.

Do it, and get it over with.

Pulling back her shoulders, she marched towards the bathroom exit, through the door, and straight into a hard chest.

She sensed him, felt him, and then looked up at him.

"Ray," she said in a shaky voice brought on by the shock of walking straight into the arms of the very man she was avoiding. "What are you doing here?"

He stepped her backwards until she pressed

against the wall. His thighs touched hers, bringing back memories of their legs locked together in intimate mating.

He leaned closer, his lips brushing her ear. "I came for you, Sheila."

Chapter Eight

I *came for you.*

Sheila wasn't sure she had heard him right. And even if she had, what did it mean? It was hard to think. He was so close he was stirring her senses, making her forget rational thoughts.

Sheila's hands instinctively went to Ray's chest. An action meant to keep him at some semblance of a distance.

Touching him was a mistake.

Instantly, the contact sent a wave of awareness rocketing through her limbs. Their eyes locked. Mutual awareness, hot and consuming, passed between them. The music and activity around them seemed to fade, and then disappear.

She knew she should move her hands, but she didn't seem to have control of her body. The urge to press up close to him was so strong that she quickly tried to regain her resolve by questioning him.

"You came for me?" Her goal was to sound accusing, but the words came out as a hoarse whisper that gave them a lusty tone.

"Yes," he said definitively. "Are you going to run from me again?"

That got her attention. "I didn't run from you."

He gave her a sexy I-don't-believe-you look. "Did too."

"Did not."

His brow inched up.

"It's not like I had to run. You weren't exactly following."

"But you wanted me to?"

"No!" she exclaimed. This time her hands dropped to her sides.

He laughed.

That made her more determined to set him straight. "I'm simply saying it proves I wasn't running."

"Literally, I agree. But you were running. From what, is the question?" He paused, searching her face with a probing stare. "Me or yourself?"

Desperate to seem unaffected by his words, she made a motion with her hand. "Shoo, fly. You're bothering me."

"I don't shoo easily." He took her hand. "Let's dance."

She dug her heels in. "No way. I don't do this kind of dancing."

He smiled. "I'll teach you."

She shook her head. No way was she making a fool of herself. "I don't want to learn."

He pulled her forward, into his arms. "How many things are on that list of yours?"

She blinked. "What?"

He gave her a challenging look. "The list of things you're too afraid to try."

His words were like a slap of reality. The whole reason she had moved away from her home, quit her job and given up everything she knew was to reach beyond her comfort zone.

Her eyes shut a moment before she refocused on Ray. "Fine, let's dance." Stepping forward, their hands still linked, she pulled him towards the dance floor.

Once they were there, she wasn't sure what to do. She turned and looked at Ray. Their eyes locked. Slowly, he pulled her towards him. "If you trust me, I can help you."

She wasn't sure if he meant with the dancing, or something else. His scent, kind of sweet and spicy all at once, was doing funny things to her senses. Thinking logically was getting tougher by the minute.

Nervously she allowed him to hold her. The music was fast, and people were twirling around the floor as if they were professional dancers. "I might step on your toes."

The music changed to a slow song.

"I'll live," he said, pulling her closer.

She melted against him, unable to fight the draw of his closeness, the need to feel his body next to hers. What was it about Ray that called to her so freely?

He began moving to the music, and she followed. A slow swaying of their bodies that created intimacy and conjured up images of their bodies wrapped

together, naked.

She felt him nuzzle her hair with his mouth, maybe even kiss her. "You feel good, Sheila."

Spoken softly, his words had been barely audible. Yet she had heard them, savored them even, and was replaying them over and over in her mind. Now, here, on the dance floor, lost in the music, and the man, she was able to escape reality.

She took in an inhaled breath intentionally drawing his scent into her nostrils. His hand moved down her hair, evoking a warm rush of sensation. Just when she had completely forgotten her surroundings, the music changed.

A fast, country two-step came over the speakers. Blinking, Sheila looked up at Ray. Though the other dancers had started a merry stomp around them, they didn't move. Ray's fingers brushed her cheek, and his gaze touched and held her own.

"Come with me," he said, taking her hand.

This time she didn't hesitate to follow. Fighting off what was between them tonight was impossible. He stopped at a small table in the corner of the bar. He sat down on one of the barstool height chairs, and pulled her between his legs, facing him.

"I asked you to stay this morning."

"I know," she whispered. Her hands were on his muscle thighs, resting there, but wanting to move.

His gaze held hers, refusing to let her look away. "But you were afraid to."

She hated the word afraid, yet it was the word that held the truth. She looked down despite the insistence

in his eyes that she not. "I told you I'm not one to do the whole one-night stand thing."

His finger tipped her chin up so he could see her face. "And you're so sure I am?"

"It's not that..." She wasn't sure what to say.

His voice was gently probing. "Then what is it?"

"I don't know how to deal with you," she said honestly, because it seemed her only option. His directness was refreshing, but intimidating because it exposed her emotionally.

"I'm not complicated," he said as his mouth inched closer to hers. She knew she should move, to avoid kissing him, but she froze, waiting, and wanting. Just before he touched his lips to hers, he said, "What you see is what you get."

The touch was brief, a mere brush of lips, but it felt as if it touched her entire body. Their mouths lingered close together. She was breathless as she whispered, "You make things sound so simple."

His hand slid to the side of her neck, and he pulled back enough to look into her eyes. "Maybe you just need to ease up a little."

Which was true. The fact that Ray already knew that about her was hard to fathom. Was she that obvious or was he that in tune with her? "I'm trying."

His eyes narrowed as if he was surprised at her honest answer. "Is it so difficult?"

Her lashes fluttered before she met his gaze again. "Being a politician's daughter tends to make one a bit conservative and perhaps a bit overly cautious."

He leaned back a little more as if he wanted a full

view of her face. His hands settled on her waist. "So you thought you'd shock yourself into a new way of thinking by taking a drastic step like jumping out of a plane?"

She bit her bottom lip. When he said it out loud, it sounded a bit crazy. "Something like that."

"But you won't ride a rollercoaster. Why is that?"

Surprised flashed in her eyes. "How did you know that?"

"Jennifer, of course. *Why*, Sheila?"

"Well," she said a bit hesitantly. "It's a control thing. I can't control the rollercoaster, but I can control pulling the cord when I skydive."

"So letting go of control bothers you?"

"Yes. My father has never liked that about me, my need to stay in control. Yet had I let him he would have taken all I was. Control was all that saved me."

He studied her a long moment. "Jumping out of a plane won't solve your problems."

This time her eyes narrowed. "But you can, right?"

He grinned. "Smart girl. No wonder you worked for that big time newspaper in New York."

"How'd you know that?" she asked, but of course, knew Jennifer had talked.

He ignored her question, clearly knowing the answer was obvious. "You left a lot behind to find a new you. Don't you want to make it count?"

"You didn't answer my question," she reminded him stubbornly. Obvious answer or not, she didn't like being ignored.

He leaned close until his breath was near her ear.

Daring Sheila

His had slipped around her back. It tickled her ear and enticed her senses. She could feel him like a warm flame growing, and twinkling in the darkness of pitch black. She knew where he was going with this.

His words danced in her head. "Do you want to make it count, Sheila?"

She shut her eyes, soaking in what he made her feel, what he made her want. "Yes, I want to make it count."

His hands inched into the sides of her hair. Looking down at her, eyes locked with hers, he said, "Enough to take a journey with me, Sheila?"

She swallowed. "What...what do you mean? What journey?"

His eyes, dark and unreadable, held hers like some sort of magnetic force. "To self discovery, Sheila."

She sucked in a breath. Her hands went to his wrists as she fought her first instinct.

Run.

But was that what she really wanted?

No.

She wanted to make her choices count.

She wanted to have the courage to explore herself fully.

And most of all, she wanted Ray.

She tried unsuccessfully to keep the quiver from her voice. "What do you have in mind?"

Chapter Nine

Ray knew Sheila would take his dare. Actually, it was harder convincing Jennifer that Sheila was safe in his hands than it was convincing Sheila. He didn't think they would ever get out of the bar.

And all Jennifer thought he was doing was giving her a ride home.

He almost laughed at the thought.

He had a whole lot more than a ride home planned for Sheila. A ride yes, but not home. The truck cab was dark, the air thick with anticipation. Sheila sat next to him, silent and, if his instincts were right, nervous.

He'd expected as much, which was why he had insisted she sit next to him. He didn't want to give her the space to get all reserved on him.

One of the things he liked about Sheila was the inner spunk he sensed in her. She might not think she had the courage to reach for more, but he did.

He believed in her.

Pulling into the dark parking lot of the Captain's Club, Ray killed the engine to his truck. He took his

hand from her knee, and put it around her shoulders. She kept looking forward.

"What is this place?" she asked quietly.

"The Captain's Club."

She turned and looked at him. "Are you — ?"

"No," he said. "But I extend some special jump privileges to people who are, and in turn, I get a few extras. Like a key to this facility."

Her brows dipped before she turned to look at the building. "It looks closed."

"It is," he said pushing open his door and stepped onto the gravel. Extending his hand, he said, "You get the private tour."

Silently she slid from the truck. When she stood facing him, he pulled her close, and kissed her. He moved quickly, not giving her time to think. It was a slow kiss, meant as a soft, seductive tool. The beginning of what was to come once they went inside.

She clung to him, kissing him back, though tentatively at first. By the time he ended the kiss, she was his, kissing him with all she had, tasting him as he was her.

Tenderly, he brushed a wayward strand of hair from her eyes. "You're beautiful, Sheila."

She touched his cheek. "So are you."

He laughed. "No one has ever told me that before."

Her expression remained serious. "But they thought it."

He took her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her palm. "Thank you, Sheila."

She stared at him with eyes so full of passion he

wanted to take her right there in the parking lot. But he wanted this to be an adventure for her.

No. For them.

He wanted this for the two of them, together.

Pulling her with him, he pushed the truck door shut and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. She snuggled close and he couldn't help but notice how perfectly she fit him. As if she was meant to be with him.

It was a crazy thought, he knew. One he had never experienced with any other woman, though, and to him that made it significant. Sheila meant more to him than just a passing fling. The potential for something unique and special existed between them. He felt it when he looked into her eyes.

He wanted to know what. No. He needed to know what.

They walked to the building, hand in hand, silently moving together. Once they were inside, Ray quickly moved towards his destination.

Flipping on the light to the room, he watched Sheila as she took in the sight before her. "It's a swimming pool," she said with obvious surprise in her voice.

He moved to stand behind her, hands on her shoulders, body snuggled close to hers. The feel of her soft, round bottom tucked next to his groin stirred to life his readiness.

He pressed his lips to her hair. "It's heated." Slipping her hair to the side, he kissed her neck. "Perfect for an evening swim."

Daring Sheila

She turned in his arms, looking up at him with trepidation in her eyes. "Are you suggesting we take a swim?"

He fixed her in his gaze letting her see his desire and intent in his eyes. "That's exactly what I'm suggesting."

She swallowed so hard he saw her throat move. A sure sign she was fretting. "But we...we don't have suits."

His tone was gentle despite the frank expression in his eyes. His hands settled on her waist. "It's just you and me here."

She whispered her question. "Are you saying skinny dip?"

He smiled. "Do you dare, Sheila?" Pausing, he gave her several seconds to think.

"What if someone walks in?" she asked nervously.

He answered quickly. "They won't."

"What if they do?"

"They won't. But if you're afraid —"

"I'm not afraid," she insisted. "I just don't want to get caught."

"No risk, no reward. Living a little is your reward. What will it be?"

He watched her face flash with varied emotions. Then, abruptly, she stepped backwards. Before he knew her intention, she began unbuttoning her blouse.

He watched her change from timid to bold. It was a transition he enjoyed. Inside, Sheila was a woman of adventure and he loved being the man to set her free.

She smiled though her lips quivered. "I always wanted to try skinny dipping."

His brow inched up, a small smile of satisfaction playing on the corners of his mouth. "Did you, now?"

She pulled her shirt from her jeans to get the last two buttons. She shoved the material over her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. He barely had time to admire the delectable image she made in her sheer white bra when it fell to the floor as well.

Not that he was complaining.

She had amazing breasts. Full, high and perky, with plump, rosebud nipples. Blood pumped through his veins at rocket speed and settled with heaviness in his groin.

Seconds later, her shoes were off and she had stripped down to nothing. Boldly she stood before him looking like some sort of goddess with her perfect, creamy white skin, long, sexy legs, and curves in all the right spots.

"Come here," he said holding out his hand.

She gave him a smile, and then her back. Looking over her shoulder flirtatiously, she said, "*You* come here."

The words were barely out of her mouth before she dove into the water, disappearing under the surface for long moments. When she came up for air, he was staring at her.

"Well?" she challenged. "What are you waiting for?"

Then she disappeared under the water again. Ray didn't need any more encouragement. He stripped,

Daring Sheila

never taking his eyes off the water as he did. Several times, Sheila poked her head out of the water, only to disappear seconds later.

When he was naked, he stood at the edge of the pool, erect and ready for Sheila. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to stand still. He was hot for her. So hot he was like a randy schoolboy. Sucking in a deep breath, holding it, and then slowly let it out, he mentally tried to calm his body.

But then she peaked out of the water and wickedly crooked her finger at him. "Come play, Ray."

Unfuckingbelievable. One minute she was a damned pussycat, the next a tigress. Damn if it didn't turn him on. He dived into the water, making a quick sweep of the bottom of the pool before circling around and coming up behind her.

His hands slid from her ankles up her outer thighs, over her hips as he moved upward. When he lifted his head from the water, he settled his hard length between her thighs, lifting her at the waist to position himself properly.

Her head tilted backwards, lips reaching for his. Their mouths met, dripping wet and hungry to taste one another. His hand moved up her side, and he found her breast. Squeezing it, teasing the nipples, pinching and kneading, he couldn't get enough of her.

Moving so they were by the wall, he urged her forward so that her hands rested on the wall. Anchoring himself with his hands on her hips he brought his penis between her legs. But he didn't

enter her.

Instead, he kissed her back, her neck, and then her tilted her head to get to her mouth. She moaned, and made little sounds of pleasure that only served to make him hotter and harder. It was all he could do to keep from driving deep inside her.

But he wanted to make this last.

"Please, Ray," she whispered as her hand went behind her, and she reached for his head, pulling his mouth to hers.

Instead of immediately kissing her, he brought his lips just above hers. "Please what?" he asked in a voice laced with desire.

Breathlessly, she whispered, "Please don't make me wait."

His mouth closed down on hers, as he delved his tongue into her mouth, taking all he could get, and still wanting more. "You make me crazy, woman."

"Please, Ray," she pleaded.

No longer able to hold back, he positioned himself and entered her. She gasped as he slid inside, and he hesitated, despite his urgency. "Does it hurt?"

"No," she said hoarsely. "No. Pleasure, not pain."

That's all he needed to hear. He held her hips and sank deep. His eyes pressed shut as he felt the overwhelming pleasure of her body squeezing him tight. The warmth of the water and the heat of her body combined felt like being swallowed up in a heat wave of pleasure.

She arched into him, practically moving into a sitting position. Needing to touch her, to feel her, he

arched into her and slid his hand up her stomach, between her breasts. He pressed his lips to her ear and whispered to her. Over and over he told her she was beautiful, sexy, and driving him wild.

And he meant every word.

Sheila was like the ultimate woman to him.

His hand covered her breast, and her hand covered his hand. She kept saying his name. God, he loved that. He loved hearing her say his name in the midst of pleasure. Knowing he was making her as crazy as she was making him.

Urgency was building as his need for her seemed to grow to magnitudes above his prior comprehension. They clung to one another, pressing their bodies together, aching for one another.

"I can't hold out much longer," he told her, not wanting to come without satisfying her.

"Come," she called out, no longer whispering.

"I..." He couldn't stop himself from thrusting harder and deeper. "I...want you to come."

"I...I am," she said in a voice that cracked. Her head fell backwards, her hips pressing against his thrust.

Thank you.

His silent words barely registered before he shook with release. Spilling himself inside her, he called out her name. Feeling her body spasm and squeeze him, she drew out every drop of his ejaculation. The pure pleasure that danced in every nerve ending of his body made him bite his lip.

"God," he said, as he bent over her, holding her. In

a gently movement, he moved so that his back was on the wall, and her body was cradled against his. Her head fell back on his shoulder.

His hands settled on her stomach. "You are absolutely amazing."

"So are you," she said a bit breathlessly. "So are you."

He nuzzled her neck. She turned in his arms, resting her hands on his chest. Staring at him, she was silent for a long moment. "Who are you, Ray Walker?"

He touched her cheek with his fingertips. "Just a man, Sheila. One who has a sincere interest in getting to know you better. Is that so hard to believe?"

"I believe you," she said softly.

"Who are you, Sheila Gibson?"

Her eyes shut. "I don't know anymore."

The pure torment in her words pulled at his heartstrings. Pulling her into an embrace, he held her close, stroking her back, her hair, and shoulders.

"I'll help you find yourself. I promise."

Chapter Ten

Sex worked up an appetite. Thank goodness Pizza Palace made darned good pizza.

It was a small little place with checkered linens, and wobbly tables. A candle flickered on each table casting shadows on the walls, and making the casual environment a bit more intimate.

Sheila sat in a booth across from Ray trying to control the urge to touch him, and fearful her expressions might give her away. She reached for another slice of pizza—her third—as he reached for his fourth. Nerves hadn't diminished her appetite.

"It's almost gone," Ray said. "I didn't know you ate so much. I should have ordered a large."

Sheila smiled. "I guess I should have warned you, I eat like a guy."

He winked. "You don't look like one, and that's what counts."

Sheila took a bite of her pizza, and then sat it down on her plate. Studying Ray, she couldn't help but be curious about him. She knew from Jennifer that he,

Bobby, and Jason had all been in the Special Forces together. That was about all she knew about him.

Other than the fact he made love like a mystical god, and looked like one as well. Even the long scar by his left eye was sexy. "How did you get that place by your eye?"

He didn't so much as blink. "Me and a bad guy had a disagreement."

She shouldn't have asked. "A bad guy?"

He set down his pizza. "Nothing you want to hear about, I promise."

"Oh," she said feeling shut out even though she knew she shouldn't have asked. "I understand."

His hand slid across the table and covered hers. "I don't think you do. I'm not trying to avoid telling you about myself. There are just some things about my time in the military I either can't or don't like to talk about. Ask me anything else and I'll answer."

She still felt shut out, even though she truly understood what he was saying. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have asked."

"It's fine," he said. "Really. Ask me something else. Anything else."

She stubbornly shook her head. He sighed heavily. "Then I'll tell you about myself and you can just pretend to be interested, okay?"

"Ray —"

He cut her off. "My parents have been married for thirty-five years."

"They have?" Sheila asked surprised. No one was married that long anymore. "I thought all Special

Forces guys came from broken homes?"

"Most do. I simply wanted to experience new things, and the military seemed a good option."

That took courage. Something she felt she was only just learning.

His voice was monotone, his expression blank. "I'd make the same choice if I had to do all over."

His answer came too quick. She wanted to understand him. "But you got out."

"I was ready."

"Why?"

He shook his head, and laughed. "You're persistent, aren't you?"

She blushed. There were things you didn't press people about. Years in the political arena had taught her well. Yet curiosity was killing her. She wanted to know what Ray was all about. "I'm sorry. There I go again. Asking what I shouldn't. I don't mean to be nosey."

He studied her a long moment, and she felt his assessment vividly. The decision to trust or not to trust was in his mind.

Taking her by surprise, he pushed out of his seat, and then slid beside her. His arm was on the cushion behind her, and he sat to face her. "You can ask me anything you like. As for why I was ready to leave the military, well, it had it had some nasty little things that came with the job I was ready to do without."

"You had to kill people." Sheila said the words a bit hesitantly. Here sat a man who had killed rather than be killed. Searching his features she looked for

signs of a man who could take another's life.

It was there, buried deep in his eyes, the ability to kill...but yet there was such kindness she sensed in him. It didn't quite compute.

"I won't lie. Killing was a matter of survival. I did it, and I won't apologize. Was it what made me get out? No. No it wasn't."

"You don't have to tell me this," Sheila said, sensing he was exposing himself in a way not normal to him. Why she didn't know, but it made her feel as if she needed to do the same with him. Could she? Something about Ray's direct honesty and soulful, knowing eyes scared her.

"I want to." He spoke the words with slow precision never taking his eyes from hers. "I went home for Christmas for the first time in five years. It was like a slap in the face. I was thirty-two, and didn't have a place I called home. At least not of my own. I knew it was time for a change. Special Forces isn't a place for family."

The unspoken words were in the air. He wanted a family, and a home. Sheila wanted those things, but she wasn't sure she believed in them. After all, her father ran around with a harem of women, her parents had split, and the men she knew were hardly trustworthy.

At some point, she had stopped believing in happily ever after. Yet here was a man who had seen all kinds of violence and trauma who still wanted the American dream.

He truly had more courage than she did.

Maybe she didn't need self-discovery. She already knew what was wrong with her. Doing crazy, wild things wasn't going to change who she had become. Still, it felt good to work outside the restraints of her father's career.

Liberating.

Was there a chance a little freedom would allow her to view life a bit differently? Inwardly, she sighed. Probably not. "I think your reasons were good," she said to him. "Having a place you consider home must feel nice."

His brows dipped. "Meaning you wouldn't know?"

If he only knew. "Calling a place home, and feeling at home are two different things."

His expression was thoughtful. "So you came here in search of the same thing I did."

She laughed, not even realizing the bitterness in her tone. "No. I don't believe in the happy home thing. I just wanted free of the restraints I felt. I want this part of my life to be for me."

His eyes rested on her with heaviness. "As I said before, jumping out of a plane won't solve your issues."

"I disagree," she said adamantly. "Doing what I want because I choose to is something I've never experienced. I want that. No," she added more vehemently. "I need that. Tonight at the pool, well, I would have never done something like that before. But, you helped me to reach beyond my fears." Her voice softened. "Thank you."

"Sheila." He spoke her name like a plea.

She'd never heard her name spoken with so much need. "Yes?"

His voice was thick, heavy. "Did your father do this to you?"

"Do what?" she asked again. A flutter in her stomach signaled her nervousness. Why did she feel as if he saw way more than he should?

"Ah, sweetheart," he said gently, touching her cheek with his fingers. "You're running so hard you can't even see it, can you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said quickly, shoving away his words both verbally and mentally. She wasn't running. For the first time in her life, she was *experiencing* life. That wasn't running. Who was he to judge her anyway? "I need to get home."

He sighed. "Very well. I'll take you home."

Ray leaned a shoulder against the wall as Sheila dug through her purse. She was getting more frantic by the minute.

"Problem?"

Sheila's forehead dropped to the door. "My keys. I can't find them."

Ray said a silent thank you to the heavens above. Getting Sheila alone at his house was exactly what he wanted. "Do your neighbors have a spare?"

She raised her head and turned to face him. "No

one. I'll have to call a locksmith."

"It's too late for that now. Why don't you stay with me tonight, and we'll call in the morning."

Clearly nervous, her fingers twisted in the strap of her purse. "Stay with you?"

"Yes," he said. "Stay with me."

"I...I don't know if that's a good idea."

He wanted Sheila like he never wanted another woman. With each bit of resistance she gave him, he wanted to fight harder to win her trust. "Why are you so afraid of me, Sheila?"

"I'm not!" she blurted far too abruptly for the situation. "Stop trying to analyze me. I don't like it."

Her cell phone rang. She struggled with her purse, digging around and then pulling it out. She punched the answer button. "Hello."

Ray listened to her conversation, not even trying to be discreet. Jennifer had her keys and was on her way. So much for Sheila staying with him.

As soon as she hung up the phone, he continued as if they hadn't been interrupted. "You *are* afraid of me. Maybe the plain, simple truth is, you're afraid of life. You don't take any real risks."

She shoved her hands on her hips, feigning anger, but he could see the true pain in her expression. "I'm taking risks. Damn it, I'm even going to go skydiving."

"Which solves nothing, as I have repeatedly stated. Besides, it's a safe ride, attached to an expert who will keep you safe. When are you going to take real risks, Sheila? The kind that require you to reach outside of

your safety net?"

"I don't know what you are saying! What do you want from me?"

He grabbed her arms, not too hard, but firmly, pulling her close. Looking down at her, he searched her face. What *did* he want from her? More than he had ever wanted from another woman, that was for sure. "I want you take a real risk."

Her bottom lip trembled, and he knew she knew what he was talking about. "Jumping out of a plane is a risk."

He shook his head. Having only met Sheila, it was crazy, but he just wasn't willing to settle for a detached sexual relationship with her. Something about her called him. And she felt the same about him. He knew it.

But was she willing to risk her heart? He had to know. "No, it's not."

"Throwing myself out of a plane isn't a risk?" she asked incredulously.

Jennifer's voice called to them. Neither looked towards her. They stared at one another, both searching each other's faces, both intensely wrapped up in their shared moment of her internal struggle.

"Hey, you two," Jennifer said, dangling the keys. "What's going on?"

Still neither looked at Jennifer. Ray broke the silence, speaking in a voice so quiet only Sheila could hear. "Think about it, and I'm sure you'll figure out what I'm talking about."

With that said, he let her arms go, and stepped

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backwards. "Jennifer," he said, giving her a nod, and then stepping past her.

It was time to go. Way past time. Sheila was quite possibly not capable of giving herself emotionally. Which sucked.

It was too damn bad he wanted her so much.

Chapter Eleven

Sheila parked her car in front of The Jump Zone, and let out a deep, nervous breath. Today she would skydive. She'd lined it up with Jennifer the night before.

It had been three days since that night in front of her apartment, and Ray hadn't called.

She was going crazy.

She'd tried to ignore the feelings she felt, but they seemed to only grow, and ferment. Ray did things to her, made her want him on some level she had never experienced before.

And that was bad. Emotionally, she was involved with him, a man who was the type of guy who broke hearts. Wasn't he?

Ray challenged her to grab a hold of life and live it. And boy, was she. In a not-so-good-feeling way.

She was falling for Ray in a big, bad, dangerous-to-her-heart kind of way.

She turned off the ignition to her car.

It would be smart to never see him again...but just the thought of walking away bothered her intensely.

So here she was, doing what he wanted. Taking a real risk. One that involved her heart. And him. Shoving open her car door, she prayed she wouldn't regret her decision.

If she let Ray inside her walls would he take her heart and trample on it?

She wasn't sure she was completely ready to find out. But taking a baby step, and at the very least, reinitiating a relationship, was a place to start.

She'd decide how far in he was allowed later.

Pulling her shoulders back, she stepped forward, feeling the crunch of gravel under her feet as if it was a warning signal. Step by step, she was closer to the ultimate risk.

Letting herself fall even further for Ray.

Yet she kept walking, unable to ignore her need to see him again. The man was making her crazy.

When she stepped inside the office door, she found Ray standing at the counter, looking deliciously manly in his flight suit.

A flash of surprise flashed across his face before he became coolly impassive. Clearly, Jennifer had kept Sheila's visit confidential. Which was exactly how Sheila had wanted things.

Wetting her lips, Sheila couldn't resist letting her eyes slide down the length of Ray's well-muscle, too-tempting body. Even his dirty cowboy boots had a manly sexy appeal.

When her eyes made their way back to his face, he gave her a knowing look. "Do I pass inspection?"

She thought about denying her perusal, but since

they were the only two people around she figured what the heck. She gave him a flirty smile. "Actually, you do. Even more so than I remembered."

He leaned against the counter, crossing his arms in front of his chest, and staring at her. Slowly, his eyes slid the length of her body.

She wore slim-fitting black pants, her favorites, because they made her feel curvy in all the right spots. A white baby tee with a nice push up bra underneath complimented the sexy cut of the pants. Despite her desire to shift positions, she stood with feigned confidence and let him look his fill.

When he was done, he gave her a wink. "Not bad, darlin'. Now, why don't you tell me why you're here?"

Sheila gulped. Had he just dismissed her?

It was all she could do not to cut and run. No! She yelled at herself in her head. She *would not* chicken out. "I'm your first jump."

His eyes narrowed, before he shook his head, laughing in disbelief. "Jennifer left the name blank. Guess I know why. Forget it. I'm not taking you up. Schedule with Bobby or Jason."

Cool exterior gone, she shoved her hands on her hips. "Why? I'm a paying customer."

He pushed off the counter, and shut his book. "I don't want your money, Sheila." Turning on his heels, he walked out of the room, leaving her standing there alone staring after him.

For a moment, she wanted to cry with mortification. Maybe he was through with her. Maybe

he didn't want her? But she had sensed something between them, something she was afraid to acknowledge. With the prospect of the things she thought existed between them being false, she felt a strong feeling of emptiness and loss.

She had to know if it was real. Had she hurt him? Had she pushed him away? Thinking back, about her reactions to his insight into her personality and needs, she thought maybe she had.

That meant the ball was in her court.

If only he would make this a little easier on her. But he wasn't. So she had to take an aggressive stand, and be willing to get smashed in the process. Blowing out a calming breath, she stepped forward.

Better act before she had time to talk herself out of it.

She found him sitting behind his small metal desk, looking bigger than usual, and far less approachable than he ever had before. Diligently doing paperwork and acting as if he didn't know she was in the building. His strong jaw, cleanly shaved, still had the dark tone of his whiskers.

Watching him, she took in his dark skin and hair, feeling the familiar rush of heat only he seemed to create in her. Her eyes flickered to the paleness of her arms and then back to him.

Something about the warm brown of his skin turned her on...and though he wasn't looking at her, she knew the depths of those dark eyes. They drew her in, and made her feel lost, and at the same time, found.

Sheila found herself getting more determined than ever to get his attention. And though he acted as if he didn't know she had entered the room, never even looking up, she knew he did.

Awareness hummed off of him like a second skin.

The realization made her more confident. Sheila firmly shut his door, making sure it closed rather loudly. Not a slam, just an obvious thud.

He looked up, those sexy brown eyes alert. Energy tensed that big, broad body of his, though not a muscle flexed. Perfectly still, he simply fixed her in his intense stare.

Then, ever so slowly, perhaps calculated, he sat his pencil down. "Something you need?" he drawled a bit arrogantly, but she knew it was an act.

He wanted her to.

"Yeah," she said with a defiant tilt to her chin. "There is."

Sheila started walking towards him, a deliberate slow strut to her movement, a sway to her hips. She let herself feel feminine and sexy. After all, this man was the ultimate and he wanted her.

Why shouldn't she feel every bit a woman?

He leaned back in his chair, hands on the armrests. His eyes were watchful, dark, and if she was correct, loaded with interest.

Stepping around the desk, Sheila positioned herself directly in front of him, carefully avoiding touching him, wanting to build up the anticipation. That meant stepping over one of his legs. She did so with care, and then rotated to sit on the edge of the desk.

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He studied her with heated eyes though she could tell he was trying to seem aloof. He failed. "Why are you here, Sheila?"

She wet her lips. What a perfect opening. "I came for you, Ray."

His eyes skimmed her body, but he didn't touch her. Her body ached to feel his hands. As his gaze moved across her breasts, her nipples tingled with need. Images of his tongue licking her nipples sent a rush of wetness between her thighs.

Their eyes locked. One of his brows inched up. "Did you now? I thought you came to jump?"

She met his gaze with a strong message in her eyes. "I came to see you." There was a husky, turned-on quality to her voice.

He wasn't letting her off easy even now. She could tell from the look in his eyes just before, he said, "Why?"

But he was turned on. She could see the outline of his erection through the thin material of his jump suit. God, the man was sexy. Her hand itched to reach out and touch.

But he had asked her something important, and she had known the answer before she ever arrived. "To show you I'm willing to take risks."

"What kind of risks, Sheila?"

Here was where the buck stopped. She had to prove she was willing to go outside her comfort zone. What better way than...Sheila dropped to her knees, and pressed her mouth to his erection.

He gasped her name as his hand went to the sides

of her head. "What are you doing?"

She looked up at him, fingers still massaging his arousal, feeling him growing beneath her touch. "Being daring. Showing you how much I want you. "Doing something to show you how much I want you."

His voice was laced with passion. "Not now. Not here."

She unzipped his suit. "Yes. Here. Now." Her hand went inside the pants, finding his boxers and the tip of his erection.

His eyes shut, and a soft moan escaped his lips. His lips were firm, tight, as he fought with the heat of the moment. "I can't believe you're doing this."

Pulling away the restraint of the boxers, she ran her tongue across the very tip of his erection. "I want you."

Before he could answer, she rolled her tongue in circles around the head, and then sucked it lightly into her mouth.

"Oh, God," he whispered. His fingers sank into her hair. "Sheila."

She loved the powerful rush that washed over her. To make a man like Ray moan her name in pleasure was a high she could never compare to any other.

It beat jumping out of a plane any day.

Hungry to please him, to taste him, to make him say her name again, she licked him like a Popsicle, taking her time to stroke her last inch of him. Long licks, short ones, and even circles.

When she finally closed her hand around the base

Daring Sheila

of his penis and sucked him into her mouth, she could taste the rewards of her measures. He was on the verge of coming, which would give her the ultimate satisfaction.

Just when she was certain he was about to reach his peak, he moved. Hardly knowing what was happening, she found herself standing before him. He worked her zipper like a pro, and quickly tugged on her waistband.

"Inside you is the only place I want to come."

She was stunned. Didn't every man want to come while a woman was pleasing him with her mouth?

"But —"

His hand went to the side of her hair, inching into it, and holding her gently. "I want to feel you, Sheila."

Something about the words, the way he said them, make her stomach flip flop. She swallowed and nodded as she reached for her pants.

"My shoes," she said in frustration as they became an obstacle.

His hands went to her waist. She was sitting on the desk in an instant with him taking off her shoes, and then pulling her pants over her feet.

Gently he pressed her knees apart, and ran his hands up her back, bending at the knees to bring their chests together. "You feel so damn good," he whispered in her ear. "What is it about you? What do you do to me?"

She clung to him feeling a rush of emotion. "Whatever it is, you do it to me too."

He moved to look at her, his eyes potent in their

directness, overflowing with passion and something more, something intense. "What do I do to you, Sheila?"

Her tongue traced her lips. "You...make me want you even when I don't want to want you."

His penis brushed her wetness, and they both gasped, drawing attention from her words. The urgency of their bodies called to them both.

Ray took his erection in his hand and then moved the tip around in her slick folds. She moaned from the pure pleasure and torture of the action. "Please Ray. Now."

"Soon."

He made little circles with the tip, spreading her juices with his body, making her arch her hips as she tried to get him inside her.

"Now," she moaned, reaching for his hand, and guiding him to her.

A soft rumble of laughter escaped his throat, but he didn't resist. "Now."

Slowly, he slid inside her, filling her with the very thing she had wanted so badly. Him. She wanted him.

"Yes," she whispered as he slowly sunk into her, and though her eyes wanted to shut, the image he made gave her the will to hold them open.

His dark complexion, hair, and eyes drew her in the most incredible way. Something about his appearance, and even his mannerisms made her yearn for him.

Everything about him made her hot.

Most especially, seeing him aroused because of her.

His eyes lifted, locking midair with hers. Passion, hot and untamed, burned in them. And then he was kissing her, wildly, devouring her mouth as if he couldn't get enough. He leaned forward so their bodies pressed together, one hand on the desk. She clung to him with one arm, bracing herself with the other, wanting to be as close to him as possible.

They moved together, stroke for stroke, and her legs wrapped around his waist, as she ached for more, and tried to get it. All the while they kissed. She'd never kissed so urgently, so completely.

She felt the first sparkle of orgasm. "Oh. Um, oh. I'm going...to..."

He finished for her. "Come. Now?"

The sparkle was turning to a bright light of nearness. "Yes, almost." *No. Now.* She called his name and then clung, feeling the ripples of orgasm as they washed over her body.

His urgency seemed to grow, and he began thrusting harder, deeper, pushing her orgasm to peak. With one strong movement, he buried himself deep in her core, and then trembled.

Ray's head arched backwards, and he moaned, spilling himself inside her. For long moments they were wrapped around one another, holding on as if they would never let go.

When finally he leaned back, his eyes searched her face. She touched his cheek. "See," she said. "I *can* take risks."

His eyes shut, his expression etched with sudden frustration. "This wasn't the kind of risk I meant." He

reached, and pulled open a drawer, grabbing several napkins. Handing them to her, he stepped back, leaving her empty and confused.

"But I came to you, and I..." She watched him zip his flight suit, his lips now a hard line. Wiping away the evidence of their pleasure, she slid from the desk. "What am I not getting here?"

His hand was on his hip. "Nothing, Sheila. Nothing. I'm obviously the one with issues. A beautiful woman comes in here, and wants to have sex with me, and I'm not happy." He shook his head. "I'm the one with issues."

"I don't understand, really I don't." She shoved her legs in her pants and pulled them over her hips. "I came here because I wanted to see you again. I was afraid, but I came."

His eyes narrowed. "Why, Sheila?"

"Because," she said, wondering what to say. She didn't want to admit how much she liked him, how intense her feelings were. What if he didn't return them? What if he hurt her? "Clearly, we turn each other on. I thought, well, we should see..."

His jaw jumped. "See what?"

She laughed nervously. "I'm not good at talking about sex. You'll have to be patient with me."

"Nope," he said. "No need. This is it. No more."

"What?" She felt sick to the stomach. Getting to know Ray was important to her. She just wasn't ready to say why. "Aren't you going to take me up for a jump?"

"And then back to my place for sex?" he asked

snidely. "No. Ask Jason. He might oblige both requirements."

She gasped. "What? Did you just tell me to ask Jason to have sex with me?" She blinked. "Oh, my God. And to think I thought you were..." She stopped herself as she reached for her shoes.

He grabbed her arm. "I was what?"

"It doesn't matter." She tugged at her arm. "Let me go."

"Last chance. You thought I was what?"

"Let. Me. Go." She was embarrassed, which was lifting into a state of anger. Coming here and reaching out to him had gotten her nothing but rejection. "Now."

He dropped her arm. "Gladly. And to think I thought real courage rested beneath your surface."

Ray stepped around her then, and walked towards the door. When it opened and shut, Sheila squeezed her eyes shut.

"I'm such a fool," she whispered to the empty room. "Coming here was a mistake."

Chapter Twelve

Ray walked past Jennifer as if he didn't see her. In truth, he hardly registered her presence. The two weeks since Sheila had walked out of his life had felt like an eternity. He now thought he was losing his mind.

How could a woman he hardly knew affect his life so drastically?

Yet she had, plain and simple.

He had fallen for her from the moment he had laid eyes on her, in a far deeper way than just physical. She, on the other hand, hadn't been willing to risk her heart.

She had only allowed him access to her body.

And a nice body it was.

But, with her, it wasn't enough.

Jennifer stepped from behind the counter directly in front of him. "Enough. No more walking around like someone ate all your Cheerios."

"The saying is, as if someone pissed in your Cheerios." He attempted humor to get her to back off.

A dismissive wave of her hand told him it didn't

work. "Whatever. Talk," she said poking her slim finger into his chest. "You and Sheila both act like someone stole your dog or something. What's up with you two?"

Sheila was upset? Hope flickered in the back of his mind. He kept his expression carefully impassive. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. Talk to me." She made a face of frustration. "Please." Grabbing his arm, she added, "I made coffee. Come have a cup, and sit and talk with me."

Inwardly, he sighed. He wasn't getting away from Jennifer easily, and he knew it. "Woman, you're a pain in my backside."

She grinned at him over her shoulder. "But you love me, and you know it."

"Yeah, well, that I won't argue." Resigned to talking, he sat down at the small folding table in front of the coffee pot, and watched her fill two cups.

Sitting down next to him, she slid his cup in front of him. "Talk to me, Ray."

He ran his hand over the top of his head. A huge sigh later, he said, "We wanted two different things from the relationship, that's all."

"Wow," Jennifer said, eyes going wide. "You just said the R word."

He blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"In the time I have known you, never once have you referred to anything with a woman as a relationship. You're really into Sheila."

He leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs in

front of him. "Not that it matters," Ray told her. "She's too afraid to let me in."

Jennifer tilted her head to the side and studied him. "And you're going to let her off that easy."

He shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant though he felt far from it. "What's a guy supposed to do?"

"Go to her, talk to her, make her give your relationship a chance. She's got a crazy history with family. No doubt she's scared. Show her she doesn't have to be."

"That's just it. I can't completely shelter her. There is a risk when you open yourself emotionally to another human. To give all you have to give means risking the pain of rejection. I was more than willing to help her through that, but I couldn't get her to admit anything beyond the sex being good."

Jennifer laughed. "Well, at least you got one part of things right. Now you just need the other half."

"Not happening. She's not willing to open up, and I'm not willing to do it any other way. Not with Sheila."

Jennifer leaned forward, studying him intently. "What does that mean? Not with Sheila?"

"She's different than other women to me. I don't know why. She just is. I won't do casual with her."

Jennifer's expression softened, and her hand slid to cover his. "Then don't let her get away."

He met her gaze and held it. "What happened to you being so afraid I was too wild for her?"

She squeezed his hand. "I was wrong. I think she needs someone who opens up her horizons. You're a

Daring Sheila

good guy, Ray. I was just afraid you'd be too much for her."

"And now?" he asked, brow inching upward.

"Now I think she needs a guy just like you to snap her out of her past, and make her see the light. And that guy is you, Ray."

Ray considered her words. "No. It's not me. I'm not willing to settle for what she's willing to give."

Sheila stood outside of Ray's apartment with butterflies in her stomach. What if Jennifer was wrong? What if Ray didn't still want her?

Willing her nerves to calm, she took several deep breaths. She was miserable without him. The risk was worth the possible reward.

And she knew that was what Ray had been trying to tell her all along.

The risk he wanted her to take was emotional. Fear had kept her from revealing her feeling for him. Life was short, and her feeling for Ray very, very complex. Too much so to simply ignore.

Even if it meant risking her heart.

With that thought in mind, she raised her hand, and knocked. She heard the scuffle of cowboy boots and her heart began a rapid thudding in her chest. Her hand balled in between her breasts, as she inhaled and exhaled.

The door opened with an abruptness that caught her off guard. Not only was she unprepared for the

door opening when it did, she hadn't counted on her reaction to seeing Ray again.

Sure, she knew she wanted to see him.

But he overtook her senses like a whirlwind of sensations blowing across every nerve ending with one big whoosh.

She stared at Ray without saying a word, too overwhelmed to do anything else. His hair was loose, just the way she liked it, and in her mind, she could almost feel it brush her naked skin.

His shirt unbuttoned and hanging around his hips, giving her a visual of his well-defined pecs and rippling abdominals.

He looked sexy, manly, and so damned good she wanted to jump him right there.

"Sheila?"

She wet her lips, trying to get the dryness from her mouth to fade. Nerve. She had to have it. "Yes. I, um, wanted to see if you were free right now."

His face, normally hard to read, registered obvious surprise. "Is something wrong?"

"No!" she said quickly. "I just want to show you something. Are you free? Can I take you somewhere?"

He looked as if he wasn't sure how to take this. "Where?"

She swallowed. "I'd rather not say. It's a surprise."

"I don't like surprises," he said in a monotone voice that gave her no indication what direction to take with him.

Desperate, Sheila stepped forward, and laid her

Daring Sheila

hand on his arm. "Please come with me. This is really important to me." She delicately cleared her throat. "And I was terrified to come here. It took courage."

He looked down at her hand, and then slowly raised his eyes back to hers. Deep, dark eyes that made her want to melt with need right there on the hallway floor.

"Ray?"

"I'll come with you, but I'm driving wherever we're going."

She laughed a bit nervously. "And I thought I had a control issue."

He smiled. "No thought about it. You do. All the more reason for me to drive."

Sheila directed Ray to turn into the small amusement park with more something resembling bats not butterflies in her stomach. The park was closing in thirty minutes. She had called in advance and made sure it was still open. This idea had come to her suddenly. Rather than planning it out, and taking a risk of chickening out, she had simply called Jennifer, gotten Ray's address, and then hopped in her car.

No time to think.

Once Ray saw the sign to the park, he slanted her a glance. "Why are here?"

"Just park the truck, will you?" she asked quietly. "I'll explain everything."

His expression was curious, but he did as she

asked. The parking lot was near empty, and he parked in a far corner under a tree. When he turned off the engine, the shadows of the night embraced them, making the setting intimate, the cabin small.

Turning in his seat, he angled his body towards her. "Talk to me," he said in a soft voice that was gently prodding.

She sighed, and turned towards him. Their eyes met across the seats, but the poor lighting made his expression hard to read. Unmistakable awareness danced in the air, thick and alive, and very real. Nerves made her words come slowly.

She swallowed. "Do you remember me telling you why I didn't ride rollercoasters?"

"Lack of control."

She nodded. "Right. That's why I brought you here. I want to ride a rollercoaster, and I want you to go with me."

She felt rather than saw his eyes narrow. For long moments, he said nothing. It felt as if she could hear the clock ticking as she waited for him to speak.

His voice was steady, even calm, but it held the slightest hint of urgency. "Why, Sheila?"

"Call it symbolic. My willingness to reach beyond my comfort zone." She hesitated and then added, "Emotionally."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying? Because if you are, I need you to be very specific, Sheila. No games. No word puzzles."

She took a deep breath. This was it. Time to walk the tightrope. "I was a fool for not telling you how I

felt before. It's just that I was afraid you would feel uncomfortable, or that I would get hurt. There is no one in my life I can trust completely, but my Mother, and we are so far apart, we—"

He grabbed her hand. "How do you feel, Sheila?"

"I'm not sure, I—" He dropped her hand, a grunt of frustration coming from him. She reached for him. "Wait. Please listen to me. Hear all of what I have to say." He didn't give an inch. Her voice softened. "Please."

Slowly he nodded, and his hand folded around hers. She wet her lips and continued, "What I do know is, it's far more than physical attraction. I feel something for you, something I've never felt for a man. I'd like to find out what it is."

She hardly had the words out before she found herself sitting in his lap, straddling him. Their mouths connected, hungrily exploring, making up for lost time. His hands moved along her back, and she pressed her chest against his.

Time passed, she wasn't sure how long, before he leaned back, his chest heaving just as hers was. "I've wanted to hear you say that. There is something unique between us, Sheila. Something it would have been a damn shame to walk away from."

Her eyes burned with the possibility of tears. Never had she felt so drawn to anyone. Fear of being hurt was there in her gut, but the joy of their feeling for one another was stronger.

A sense of not being alone for the first time in her life slowly washed over her. "I'm scared, I won't lie,

but I really feel something for you, Ray. Just please, try not to hurt me."

A single tear dropped down her cheek. He leaned forward and kissed it away. "Ah, sweetheart, I'm scared, too, but something tells me we're worth the risk"

"I know we are," she whispered.

His hands slid up her back. "Now, I'm going to make love to you, as in not have sex with you. How do you feel about that, Sheila?"

Make love. It sounded amazing. "What about the rollercoaster?" she asked a bit breathlessly.

He grinned, pressing his body against hers, and letting her feel how aroused he was. "I'll be your rollercoaster if you'll be mine."

She wet her lips. "I think its sounds like the best ride in the park."

He brushed his lips across hers. "Warning. Ride at your own risk."

"I'm beginning to like living dangerously."

He laughed, low and sexy, and she swallowed it with her kiss.

About Lisa

Lisa Jones lives in Austin, Texas, a college town where sexy cowboys and UT Football players almost seem to be the harvest. The eye candy produced stimulates the, um, well, mind.

Needless to say, Lisa doesn't have trouble conjuring up new men for her books.

Having spent years in the corporate world, Lisa laughs at the shocked reactions her ex-peers have when they read her writing. Her response....every good girl has a fun, slightly naughty one dying to get out.

Hers is loose and loving it!