

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

# TORRID TAROT

A shirtless man with a muscular build and a serious expression stands against a dark green background. Overlaid on his chest is a glowing, golden zodiac wheel with twelve signs and a central sun-like symbol. The entire scene is framed by an ornate, arched border with a red and gold pattern.

Jessica Darian  
After Hours

Wheel of Fortune

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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

After Hours

ISBN 9781419913013

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

After Hours Copyright © 2007 Jessica Darian

Edited by Kelli Kwiatkowski.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication October 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

# *AFTER HOURS*

**Jessica Darian**

### *Trademark Acknowledgments*

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Godiva: Godiva Brands, Inc.

Gonzaga Bulldogs: Corporation of Gonzaga University

### *Wheel of Fortune*

The Wheel of Fortune is one of only a few cards in a tarot deck that I've always found very intriguing. It represents the wheel of life and the many opportunities life presents us with—the good, the bad and the ugly. This wheel is always turning and completely out of our control. The beauty, however, lies in the power we have over our reaction to where the wheel eventually lands. It asks us to respond—and not just react—to the constantly changing cycle of life. The unpredictability of this card is what makes it exciting. Will the new cycle begin with a positive opportunity or a negative one? That depends completely upon you. The outcome can be encouraging, but there is a catch. You must live your life passionately and grasp each change, each opportunity as they come. Don't look back, but continue to move forward confidently.

Samantha knows how to do exactly that, and it has paid off more times than she can count. She knows that the Wheel of Fortune can bring amazing things if you just know where and how to look for them. Living your life without regrets is the motto she chooses to live by. And with each spin of the Wheel of Fortune, she continually gives herself the chance to find the opportunity of a lifetime.

## **Prologue**

“Are you sure we don’t want to put in a movie?”

Sam and Kelli glanced over at Paige, who had asked the question with a look of mild unease.

Kelli laughed and continued shuffling the cards on the coffee table. “Are you kidding? This will be fun.”

Sam rolled her eyes and shrugged at Paige. “It won’t take us long. We can watch a movie after. Let’s just get it over with and get Kelli off our backs.”

Paige smiled slightly and walked over to the couch where her two friends were sitting. “I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.” Sitting down in one graceful motion, she tucked a leg under her and watched Kelli with the weariness of the long-suffering.

Like a seasoned pro, Kelli shuffled the cards. Not for the first time, Sam wondered why in the world they were doing this. Three single, fresh-out-of-college girls should not be cooped up on a Saturday night reading tarot cards. But as she watched the cards flipping on the table, she had to admit she was curious.

When Kelli had first mentioned they should try their hand at the tarot cards and see what was in store for their future, Sam had laughed. It had taken Kelli a full fifteen minutes to convince her she was serious. Paige had been just as dubious.

They’d been planning and working on future business partnership ideas for some time, and with graduation behind them, they were ready to tackle the world with all the innocence of youth and all the misplaced bravery of the naïve. Basically, they had no real idea of how exactly to accomplish that goal. So Kelli had bought a deck of tarot cards and was now convinced the cards would give them answers. Sam was convinced it’d be entertaining, if nothing else.

Kelli’s ideas always were.

Bringing her mind back to the present, she looked at Kelli. "So explain to me again the purpose here?"

With a final shuffle, Kelli slapped the cards onto the coffee table in a neat stack. "We each cut the deck and draw a card."

"And...?" Sam prompted.

Kelli smiled. "And then we know."

Paige frowned at both of them. "Know what?"

Heaving a sigh, Kelli continued in an exasperated tone, "Look, the cards are going to help us understand where we need to go and what we need to do."

Sam raised an eyebrow at the deck. "One card is actually going to tell us all of that?"

"No. One card is going to tell us just enough," was Kelli's cryptic reply. She always got vague when she didn't have an answer.

Paige, who was sitting on the other side of Kelli, leaned around and whispered to Sam, "Shall we put in that movie now?"

Before Sam could answer, Kelli pushed the cards toward her. "Cut."

With a resigned look at Paige, Sam leaned forward and obligingly cut the deck. Kelli then pushed them toward Paige with a pointed look. Paige also cut the deck without comment. After Kelli had cut the deck, she pushed them Sam's way once more. "Now we'll each pick one card from the top of the deck."

"Don't we have to do a special layout of some sort?" Paige asked.

Kelli gave her a considering frown. "We could, but I think we should each just draw one. How did you know there are special layouts?"

Paige studiously ignored the question as Sam chose the first card. The Wheel of Fortune. Kelli gave Paige a long considering look then reached down and turned over The Sun. With a shake of her head, Paige drew the Eight of Swords.

Curious now, Sam looked at the card in her hands. A large wheel took up most of the face of the card. Lines dissected the wheel into eight sections, like the pieces of a pie, and each section had a slightly different picture of the same figure. At the top of the card, the face of the figure was smiling, each consecutive section showing the smile slowly changing into a frown. Sam turned the card in a clockwise motion, studying the face as it moved from smiling, to frowning and then back to smiling. *Interesting.*

Glancing over Kelli's shoulder, Sam saw a large sun on the face of Kelli's card. Bright rays of light shone from the golden globe onto the ground below. The card radiated warmth. They both leaned over to look at what Paige held. A woman stood blindfolded in the midst of eight swords, each stuck in the ground. Judging from the grimace on Paige's face, she didn't care for her draw. Sam couldn't blame her. The picture was a tad disturbing.

Her curiosity piqued, Sam had to ask, "What do these mean?"

Kelli grabbed a small booklet from her lap in response to Sam's question. "Let's see..." As she flipped through the pages, Sam looked back at her card and studied the positive and negative connotations of the picture. It certainly didn't seem to outline a future business plan, but something about it really got to her.

"Okay, Sam, your card is the Wheel of Fortune, which means a change for the better. The wheel of life is always turning and bringing opportunities, both positive and negative." Kelli paused as she read in silence. She looked up and met Sam's gaze. "Basically it means life is going to throw both good and bad things your way. How you deal with them is up to you, but the positive is always there for you to grasp."

Sitting back against the couch cushions, Sam had to wonder if life was really so simple. And yet, why couldn't it be?

Kelli continued, "My card stands for triumph, feelings of youthful energy and is an overall positive card." Turning toward Sam, she flashed a grin. "Cool, huh?"

Paige cleared her throat.

"Oh, sorry." Kelli looked over at Paige's card and then back to the book in her hands. Flipping through the pages, she found the Eight of Swords. "Yours stands for overcoming fears and moving out of a stagnant situation. It's really not as bad as it looks."

Paige merely raised an eyebrow to convey her doubt with both eloquence and a bit of disdain.

Kelli waved a hand in dismissal and stood up with a flourish. "There's only one thing left to do."

Suddenly wary, Sam cocked a brow at Paige. Turning back to Kelli, she was almost afraid to ask, "What's that?"

"Tattoos!" Kelli cried, clapping her hands in excitement. "Let's all get tattoos so that we never forget the messages here."

Paige shook her head vehemently. "No! No, no, no. Not in a million years. I'm not putting a freakish picture like that anywhere on my body."

Sam had to agree. "I'm with Paige on this one. I'm not keen on putting a wheel with faces on my body either."

"Jeez you guys! And I thought you were supposed to be the creative ones in the group!" Kelli picked up the cards once more and pointed to the Wheel of Fortune. "Sam, this is an important message for you. You could do something simple like a wheel divided into eight sections. You don't have to make it detailed and you don't have to make it big. A cute little picture on your ankle or hip." Grabbing the Eight of Swords, she turned to Paige. "And you can do...I don't know, a sword and the number eight or something. It doesn't have to be a weird picture. It's the message that's important." Kelli's look was earnest and for her, very serious. "Look, I know you both think I'm crazy, but I know we're onto something here. We've got the world ahead of us and these simple reminders will help us to stay on track. Would you just trust me?"

"I don't see why they need to be imprinted on our bodies forever. I doubt I'll be able to forget that card anytime soon." Paige looked down at the card with a frown.



As Kelli and Paige continued to bicker, Sam tuned them out and really looked at the card lying on the table.

Opportunities.

Wasn't she always looking for the next opportunity? That next chance to move forward with her life? So maybe, just maybe...

Coming to a sudden if somewhat hasty decision, hoping she wouldn't regret it, Sam interrupted her friends. "Oh what the heck, I'm in."

"Woo-hoo!" Kelli pumped her fist in the air. With a smug grin, she turned to Paige. "Well?"

With a reproachful glare at Sam, Paige huffed out a breath. Grabbing the card from Kelli's hand, she stared grudgingly at the picture. As the seconds ticked by, her frown smoothed into a thoughtful look. "I suppose..."

Nearly dancing with impatience, Kelli nudged her. "You suppose what?"

Sighing in obvious resignation, Paige threw the card down on the table. "I suppose I could get a small, *very* small tattoo on my hip. It has to be a tasteful one, however. Maybe a sword wrapped inside a figure eight."

"Atta girl. I knew you were too artsy-fartsy to resist." Trying not to look too victorious and failing miserably, Kelli ushered them out the door. "I know a great place we can go. They're clean, reasonably priced and..."

Kelli continued to ramble on as she closed the door behind them. Sam had the strangest sense that the wheel was beginning to turn for her already.

## Chapter One

*Five years later...*

"Would you just screw him and give us all a break!"

Blinking at the exasperated tone, Sam looked up from her untouched plate. Her best—not to mention most dramatic—friend Kelli had a sharp, accusing eye trained on her.

When Sam didn't answer immediately, Kelli heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Oh please! You've been twitchier than a nympho with dead batteries for the past week and you're not getting any better. So do us all a favor and screw him and be done with it."

Faking a negligent shrug, Samantha Eckhart continued to poke her fork at the salad in front of her. If only it were really that easy. Under her breath, she couldn't help but mutter, "He'd probably make a simple night of sex into something difficult, tedious and ultimately unsatisfying."

"Care to repeat that a little louder for the group?" Kelli prompted loudly.

With a sigh, Sam looked up, glancing from Kelli to Paige, her other best—and thankfully quiet—friend. Her gaze returned to Kelli. "You think everything can be solved with sex. Unfortunately, for those of us living in the real world, it's not usually a viable option."

An inelegant snort was the only reply from Kelli. It was a longstanding argument between them.

Ignoring her this time, Sam continued to poke at her salad. It wasn't the food or even her friends she was irritated with. It was the topic of conversation.

She'd been best friends with Paige and Kelli since junior high school. Over the last fifteen years their friendship had grown into a lucrative business partnership. Architect, contractor and interior designer, they were the perfect entrepreneurial trio. Together

they'd set out and bought an older building in the downtown area of Spokane, Washington. After renovations and some design work, the building was now a base for their respective businesses. Of course, more than one person had told them they were crazy. How many female architects and contractors do you see listed in the book? Not many, but that hadn't stopped them. They weren't out to prove a point and none of them professed to be hardcore feminists, but they had leaped eagerly into male-dominated industries. Fortunately they'd done their business research beforehand. They knew the market and they were all damn good at what they did.

Kelli was the contractor. Glossy black hair and pixie blue eyes complemented a curvaceous, petite figure. At only five foot two, she certainly didn't look like your average contractor. Sam had learned early in their friendship that Kelli had not only the know-how, but also the drive and capability to see that a job was done and done perfectly. It took guts, quick wits and a lot of backbone to work in the field she did, but Kelli handled it well. For as long as Sam had known her, Kelli had possessed a devil-may-care attitude and a zest for life. Her passions ran deep for everything from her business to sex. And Kelli refused to believe there was a whole lot in between.

As an interior designer, Paige was the true artist of the group. Gifted with a sharp eye for detail and a knack for color, she could take a plain ten-foot by twelve-foot room and turn it into a showroom-quality exhibit. Soft, strawberry-blonde ringlets spilled down her shoulders and around a delicate, heart-shaped face. She was tall, graceful and willowy. Paige had dark gray eyes with flecks of green that looked out on the world with a naïvety and purity that never failed to amaze Sam. Her soft-spoken words and shy smiles proclaimed her to be exactly what she was—a proper, classy lady with not a mean bone to be found in her body. And Sam loved her for it.

Last, but certainly not least, was Sam. Dark brown hair styled in a sleek pageboy cut framed her oval face. High cheekbones and a small, straight nose lent a classic look to her features. Five-feet five-inches put her height somewhere in between Kelli and Paige. They always joked she was there to help balance them out. Oh how true that was.

At an early age she'd been fascinated with planes and angles. Her first attempt at design had been at the tender age of eight—a doghouse designed for her beloved collie, Moe. The cardboard hadn't held up so well, but the love of creating had. She pursued a degree in architecture and turned her dream into a reality.

Founding a business together had seemed natural after graduation. Their goal had been to offer their clients one-stop shopping for the creation, construction and interior design of their homes. After five years in business, numbers were up, clients were happy and they were starting to make a name for themselves. Every day their doors were open, they considered it to be progress and a blessing.

There were days that Sam still walked into her office and looked around in amazement. A small, thankful smile played at her lips as she thought about it. She never took it for granted, that was for sure.

"You know, I'd have to agree with Sam." Paige's soft voice interrupted Sam's thoughts.

"Oh please." Kelli shook her head at both of them and rolled her eyes.

"No, seriously." Paige leaned forward. "Kelli, he's a client. Sam has pointed that out numerous times. What do you really expect her to do?"

"Him! She's supposed to do *him*! She'd be happy, he'd be happy, we'd all be happy!" Kelli waved her hands to encompass the diner patrons.

With a sigh, Sam once more stared down at her plate and the smile vanished. For a moment she'd actually managed to forget about *him*. The only moment since she'd first met him, which was sad.

Between Kelli's obvious skepticism and her own frustrations with the man in question, Sam wasn't enjoying their regular Friday lunch date much. Damn him anyhow.

A quick image of Aidan Masters flashed through her mind briefly, bringing a flush to her cheeks. Screw him? Sam grimaced in self-derision, trying to squelch the heat that had suffused her body. "If he wasn't such an ass, I'd seriously consider your idea, Kelli.

But as it stands, Paige is right. He's a client. And an ass. End of discussion." She pushed her plate of untouched food away, determined to leave before Kelli continued. "I have to get back to the office. Are we still on for tomorrow night?"

Once a month they tried to plan a Saturday girls' night. A movie, snacks and a pedicure, it was the perfect way to spend a Saturday night—especially when you were a dateless workaholic like Sam.

Paige nodded. "I'll bring the chocolate." Thankfully she seemed willing to let Sam drop the subject. Kelli, on the other hand, was too busy making chicken noises to answer.

The waiter chose that exact moment to bring their checks. Ignoring the curious glances from other diners, Kelli continued to cluck away, flapping her arms for emphasis.

Outrageous behavior was Kelli's forte, and she never disappointed her audience. Sam turned to the waiter, who was watching Kelli in horrified fascination, and somehow managed to hide her smile. "Don't worry. This is just how she shows her appreciation for the food. The chicken strips must have been fabulous today." She dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "If you think this is bad, you should see her after a Thanksgiving feast."

The poor man took a step back and looked at Kelli with wide eyes. "Oh. I, ah...I'll just go give your compliments to the cook."

They all laughed as he hurried away.

"After a Thanksgiving feast, huh? That's nothing. You should see my reaction after a night of great sex!"

Paige and Sam both groaned. Holding up a hand in protest, Sam begged, "Please, spare us. I really need to get back to work and that's way more information than I want to hear right now."

Kelli smiled, completely unfazed. Her eyes still sparkling with mischief, she said, "Maybe you should schedule a meeting with the sexy Mr. Masters. Tell him you need to

get a better feel of his measurements.” Reaching for her back pocket, she pulled off the tape measure that was her constant companion. “Here. You can even borrow this.”

Kelli was never without some type of tool. And Sam was fairly certain she’d managed to find a sexual innuendo for each and every one of them. It was just one of many of her more dubious talents.

“Don’t you mean she needs to get a better feel *for* his measurements? And why would she need a tape— Oh!” Comprehension dawned before Paige could finish her question. Her fair skin colored with embarrassment. It was amazing how Paige could remain so naïve and so literal after being around Kelli for so long. Sam just shook her head at both of them.

“Thanks anyway, but I already have his measurements. Tall, lean and a big pain in my behind,” Sam replied dryly as she pushed her chair back and stood, smoothing her skirt down as she straightened.

Kelli shrugged. “Well, if you need any suggestions...”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” With a small wave, Sam headed for the cashier. Her mind already on other matters, she paid for the food she’d hardly touched and left the diner. Walking back to her office, she was irritated to find herself once more thinking of Aidan. *He’s a client*, she reminded herself firmly. Her head understood that, but her body couldn’t have cared less. Despite his unpleasant demeanor, he’d still managed to disturb her days and haunt her nights since he’d walked into her office nearly three weeks ago. Unfortunately, Kelli hadn’t been far off the mark with her suggestion. Her body was hot, wet and more than ready for action. Dead batteries or not, she needed to relieve a little tension. And since her last date had been over six months ago, relief didn’t seem to be in sight.

A sigh rose in her throat as she reached her office, the door swinging open easily beneath her hand. She’d simply do what she always did.

Work late.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam blinked her eyes, hoping the blurred vision would clear. When her screen refused to come into focus, she glanced over at the clock. Seven-thirty in the evening. Weary of sitting, she stood and stretched, trying to ease the kink in her back. She had lowered the blinds on her windows hours ago, but a quick peek behind them confirmed what the clock said. Night had fallen.

Paige and Kelli had left long ago, and Sam's assistant Cari had stopped by a few minutes ago to say good night, which was her usual routine. The young woman was in college and worked afternoons and some evenings for Sam, mostly doing filing, preparing renderings for mailing, and organizing portfolios and blueprints for her client meetings. They were tasks Sam hated and she was more than happy to pay someone else to do them.

Cari usually left long before Sam on Fridays, but always checked in—mostly to see if Sam wanted the front doors locked and if she planned on staying much later. Sam had promised to leave and lock up herself before eight.

Rolling her neck from side to side, Sam closed her eyes. Her in-box was now empty and the schematic design of Aidan's home was almost finished. She should have been satisfied getting that much done, but a restless unease kept her from going home to an empty condo.

The computer blinked at her repeatedly, earning a baleful stare. With decisive movements, she shut it down. She'd done enough work for one day. Besides which, it was Friday evening. How pathetic was it to be stuck at the office this late on a Friday?

Dropping back into her executive leather chair, Sam put her head in her hands. Yes, she was officially pathetic. Even more so because her body remained tight with tension. Most of the tension could be directly linked to Aidan, and she hated to admit the majority of it was sexual.

Sam had always been proactive. If there was a problem, you fixed it. By whatever means necessary. If you had help, great. If not...well, sometimes a woman just had to take things into her own hands.

Now was probably one of those times.

Sam unlocked her lower left desk drawer. Reaching toward the back, she grabbed the locked metal box that contained her emergency items—a small box of Godiva chocolates, which she had to replenish on a weekly or sometimes bi-weekly basis; a few safety pins to repair wardrobe malfunctions; a spare tube of her favorite lipstick. A packet of breath mints because there was nothing worse than huffing bad breath across the desk at clients. A bag of chocolate candies, in case she forgot to replace the Godiva. And last but certainly not least, a vibrator. A small vibrating bullet that got the job done while remaining inconspicuous hidden away in her desk drawer.

Some might consider it odd to have a vibrator in your desk, but Sam worked long hours during the week and usually into the weekend. It was hard to get a date when you were chained to your desk. Not that she was too upset about that. Her business was her baby and needed to be tended as such. But still, there were times when she got a little edgy.

When Sam needed a little tension reliever, she usually reached for her box. She always started with the Godiva, though there were times when chocolate just wasn't going to cut it. As unbelievable as that might sound. It also didn't help that a certain annoying yet very sexy client kept creeping into her thoughts as well.

Because the Godiva hadn't lasted past Wednesday, she was now going to go with plan B.

Her three-button jacket had long since been removed and the sleeves of her oxford shirt were rolled up to her elbows. Her pencil skirt hit right at her knees, but the slit in the back gave her a little room to move in. Peeling off her pantyhose, she sighed in relief and wiggled her toes. Sam hated pantyhose with a passion, but a professional



appearance was a must at the office, so she dealt with them. With barely restrained loathing. It was one of the necessary evils that came with the territory.

Standing leisurely, she paused to stretch, grabbed her box and vibrator and then wandered over to the small loveseat that sat against one wall of her office. Her office was professional, yet she'd set it up to allow comfortable interaction with her clients. Discussing plans across a desktop had never suited her well. Sam instead preferred to sit with clients on the small leather loveseat and discuss plans laid out on the large maple coffee table. Photos of homes graced the walls of her office, some of which were her designs while others were simply ones she admired. A handful of plants were spread throughout her office as well, to add a little greenery as well as a cozy feel—a professional touch from Paige.

When the backs of her knees hit the leather, she sank onto the loveseat with a grateful sigh, dropping her goodies onto the table. It had been a really long couple of weeks.

Almost three weeks ago, Aidan Masters had walked into her office for his first appointment. She'd been referred to him by a previous client, and apparently no one had bothered to tell him that the Sam Eckhart they were raving about was a woman. He'd scheduled an appointment with her assistant and when he'd strode into the room, Sam had instinctively known things weren't going to go well.

His dark blond brows had drawn down and he'd looked around the office in a distracted manner. He'd tersely asked to see Sam Eckhart and in the same breath, asked if she'd track the man down and while she was at it, could she grab him a cup of coffee. Black. Preferably fresh.

Sam had known she would receive resistance in this profession, probably until she retired, but it never failed to frustrate her. Her answer was usually to respond with cool professionalism and then wow them with her skills.

Aidan hadn't been wowed when she'd explained who she was. Nor had he been the least apologetic about his mistake.

Instead he'd eyed her up and down with those incredibly rich, dark brown eyes of his. They'd stared at her intently, as if taking her measure and already knowing she'd fall short of his expectations.

Finally he'd shaken his head in resignation and sat down on the loveseat. His only comment had been, "Well, I'm already here and I don't have time to find another architect. I've heard you're good, so you'll have to do. How quickly can we get this thing done?" His eyes had leveled at her then while he'd waited for her to respond.

Once she'd recovered from her initial irritation, she'd offered him her best professional smile and had gotten down to business. Sam could have sworn she'd seen a flash of relief in his eyes when she hadn't ordered him out of her office. Even now she wondered if that hadn't been a mistake on her part.

It had taken her just shy of two hours to extract the information from him that she needed to get started. Normally she preferred to get to know a client, their wants and their needs, before sitting down to do the initial layout. Trying to get anything out of Aidan had been like pulling teeth. While he hadn't been outright rude, he had seemed distracted and a bit edgy.

The worst part was that he was by far the most attractive man she'd ever dealt with. Client or otherwise. It was also unfortunate he hadn't been an egotistical jerk, which would have made things a lot easier. Impatient, yes, and aloof to say the least, but Sam had wondered if part of that stemmed from the fact the man was practically a hermit and obviously unused to social interaction.

Being a famous writer worth millions would probably do that to a person. Aidan Masters was none other than the mysterious A. Matherson, mystery writer extraordinaire. Sam had about choked when he'd let that tidbit slip.

Gorgeous *and* successful. And still a pain in the butt. A very hot, drool-worthy pain in the butt.

Sam laughed softly with chagrin. "I suppose we can't all be perfect," she muttered into the quiet of her office.

His image rose to her mind, unbidden yet not wholly unwelcome. Aidan stood at about six feet, one inch tall. He was a little on the lean side, but his short-sleeved shirt had shown off sleek muscles reminiscent of a martial artist's. He had thick, dark blond hair that he wore a little too long. It had brushed the collar of his shirt and Sam had alternated between wanting to suggest a haircut and wanting to slip her hands through the silky strands. Foolish, fickle lust, anyhow.

Angular features made him striking to say the least. High cheekbones and a hooded gaze gave him a sexy, edgy look. A look that would surely sell even more copies of his highly successful books if placed on the back cover. One of A. Matherson's greatest mysteries was his identity.

He would do the occasional written interview for various writing publications. He held contests on his author website for loyal fans. He even signed copies of his books to be sold for charity. But he *never* made public appearances. And rather than tarnish his image with fans, it only made him more popular.

Amusement curved her lips as Sam thought about how Aidan's popularity would skyrocket with his female readers if they only knew what he looked like.

That was part of *her* problem. She knew what he looked like and it was driving her crazy.

Sitting back against the soft cushions of the loveseat, Sam picked her feet up and rested them on the edge of the coffee table. Slowly wiggling her toes, she let her mind continue to run through the thoughts muddling her brain.

Aidan. He was really the only thing running through her mind. Aidan and his bedroom eyes. Aidan and his somewhat rough and raspy voice. Aidan and his sexy, unhurried stroll and nice tight buns.

Sighing again, Sam closed her eyes. This was getting ridiculous.

She sat forward long enough to grab a handful of chocolate candies. Popping a few into her mouth, she let the chocolate melt on her tongue. Focusing on the smooth, sweet flavor, she settled farther into the cushions.

After finishing the few candies remaining in her hand, Sam reluctantly pulled her feet off the coffee table and sat forward to pick up her vibrator. Tapping it against her leg thoughtfully, she let her gaze begin to lose focus as she turned her attention inward. Aidan truly was a fine male specimen. His features were striking, all planes and angles. When she spoke with him in person, his expression was always aloof and a little distracted. She couldn't help but wonder how his face would change when he was aroused. Would the angles become more pronounced? Would his lips possibly curve into a smile?

With a small sigh she sat back, rolling her spine into the back of the couch, feet propped up on the table once more. Her eyes slowly drifted shut as she let a picture of Aidan take shape in her mind. Tall and lean, he'd been dressed in jeans and a T-shirt the first time she'd seen him. His jeans had been snug and well worn. The black T-shirt had fit like a second skin. The sleeves had hugged his biceps in way that had accentuated them every time he'd moved. She'd been secretly drooling over them ever since.

Pressing her spine farther back into the cushions, Sam shimmied her hips until her skirt sat high on her thighs. Lacy, light blue Brazilian panties peeked out from underneath her skirt. Keeping the image of Aidan in her mind's eye, Sam sighed, the corners of her mouth tilting up as she turned on her vibrator. It was definitely time to take the edge off.

## **Chapter Two**

Aidan stopped breathing. No way in hell was she going to do what he thought she was going to do. His muscles tensed as he watched her slowly draw the pulsing silver bullet up her leg.

Breaking into a sweat, Aidan couldn't move.

It had been pure chance that he'd found Sam still at the office. He lived the life of a recluse. For him, creativity was at an all-time high late in the evenings, so he usually slept until noon and stayed up late into the night working on his latest chapter. It was a lifestyle that suited him just fine.

Aidan had scheduled an appointment with Sam on the recommendation of a friend. No one had bothered to inform him Sam was a woman. He'd mistakenly assumed she was a secretary when he'd first seen her. Lacking tactful conversational skills, he'd stupidly asked her to get him a cup of coffee. Working late the night before—even late for him—coffee had been essential. Aidan usually didn't function well without it. He'd been shocked when she'd told him who she really was. And he'd felt like a huge jerk. Too embarrassed to apologize, he'd covered his discomfort with a gruff attitude and managed to piss her off even more.

It was an unfortunate talent he seemed to possess.

On the other hand, it had given him the opportunity to study her. Her glossy brown hair was shaped in a sleek cut that framed her face. Her eyes were a light shade of brown and framed with long lashes. But those long lashes couldn't hide the intelligence of her direct stare. Her attire had been professional, as had her demeanor. Aidan had been instantly tempted to mess her up a bit. Curious about the personality hidden under the tailored suit, he'd watched her deftly run their meeting. Which had been a disaster, incidentally.

For three weeks Aidan had mulled over the encounter. They'd spoken on the phone a few times since then and visited his property once, but the conversations had been brief and centered solely on the design of his home. No more, no less.

So this evening when his muse had been frustratingly quiet, he'd decided to drive by her office. Doubting she'd be working so late, he'd been surprised to see her assistant exiting the building as he'd pulled into the parking lot. He'd been informed Sam was still hard at work in her office and her door should be open.

Surprise had soon turned to outright shock.

Only now questioning the intelligence of his decision, Aidan stood on the threshold of her office, partially hidden behind the door that stood ajar. Unable to look away, he hungrily watched her move the vibrator closer and closer to the sexy little panties playing peek-a-boo beneath her skirt.

Her long legs were stretched out, her feet resting on the coffee table. He was surprised to see a small tattoo adorning the top of her foot. He couldn't make out what it was, but just the sight of it was unexpected and damn sexy.

He knew he should turn and walk away as fast as he could, but his feet refused to move.

A soft sigh slipped past her lips, causing his gut to clench and his eyes to shift back up.

One hand pushed her skirt higher while the other moved the vibrator against the delicate cloth covering her curls. Once the skirt was up around her waist, she slowly moved her hand down to her panties. In languid motions, her hips rocked against the small bullet as it pulsed against her cleft. The hand at her panties deliberately grasped the small strip covering her curls and pushed the material to one side.

Aidan carefully leaned against the doorjamb for support. If he were in his right mind, he'd make his feet walk away and he'd pretend he'd seen nothing. Desire and eager anticipation held him in place.

Sam's small moan had him clenching his teeth to keep from moaning aloud as well.

Dark, tight curls were exposed to his gaze as she moved the vibrator so it lay against her clit. He watched her hips buck slightly in response. She slid the vibrator up and down her cleft slowly and Aidan intently watched its progress. Her movements unhurried, she dipped the vibrating shaft into her wet heat. He closed his eyes briefly as his imagination ran wild. She'd be hot against his dick. So wet he'd slide effortlessly into her. As deep as he could possibly go. His erection throbbed in agreement and need.

Another small moan brought his attention back to the present. Opening his eyes, he saw her draw the vibrator out, now glistening with her moist pleasure. She brought it to her clit once more.

The hand holding her panties let go long enough to quickly undo the buttons on her dress shirt. When her hand fell away, Aidan drew in a quick breath. Her breasts were encased in a lacy bra, the same color as her panties. Her hardened nipples peeked through the material that managed to entice more than conceal. Aidan slowly licked his lips, which had suddenly gone dry.

He should really, *really* walk away now. Instead of moving away from the door, he felt his feet take an involuntary step toward her.

Rubbing the vibrator against herself, Sam slowly reached up with her left hand to cup her breast. Pushing the lacy material aside, she rolled her nipple between her fingers as her hips worked against the vibrator. Aidan felt his chest heave with a quickly indrawn breath as he listened to her small gasps.

He might rot in hell for not walking away, but there was not a damn thing that could make him leave now.

In a daze, Aidan stepped into the room, shut the door behind him and locked it with a deliberate twist of his wrist.

Sam's eyes flew open and she yelped in surprise.

Acting on pure instinct, Aidan crossed the room swiftly, deciding against words and instead pressing his lips to hers. He used his body weight to keep her from jumping up from the couch.

For a moment, she sat still underneath him. His heart thumped wildly against his chest as he silently prayed she'd go with it. He didn't think he'd be able to step away. There wasn't a single time in his life he'd ever, *ever* been this turned on.

As her lips finally softened under his, he felt a wild surge of desire. Moving his lips gently against hers, he took a moment to simply taste her. The faint sweetness of chocolate lingered on her lips. His tongue deftly swept it away. Without deepening the kiss, he nipped softly at her chin. More than anything at that moment he wanted to slide into her. He wanted to take her over and over until they were both too exhausted to move. But first things first...

"What would happen if I begged you not to stop?"

His whispered question tickled her cheek.

Sam couldn't think. One minute she's fantasizing about him and the next he's here and she's...she's...masturbating! And most humiliating was that she wanted to continue. To beg him to finish what her imagination had started.

She opened her mouth to attempt an explanation, apology, anything at this point, but he stopped her.

Pulling away slightly, Aidan stared at her intently, his dark eyes imploring. "Please don't stop. I'm asking you to finish what you started. For both our sakes." His eyes dropped to his lap, where his obvious arousal strained at his fly.

Was it just her imagination or did he sound a bit...desperate? Her eyes dropped to his lap and...oh my *god* was he built! Her heart was racing at the idea of having an orgasm with him watching. It was more wicked than anything she'd done before and it was painfully obvious how much she needed the release. And Aidan. Flicking her glance from his erection to his intense stare, Sam drew in a breath.

Words were stuck in her throat.

Unable to deny him or herself at this point, Sam brought the vibrator back to her clit. Aidan's breath hitched as she began to move her hips once more.



Aidan's hand crept down to her thigh and squeezed lightly before smoothing over her skin with small strokes. She knew it was an unconscious gesture and it was gratifying to know she wasn't the only one not in their right mind.

Sam watched his eyes. His gaze was riveted on her hands and the vibrator. She saw his throat working as he tried to swallow. His hand eventually stopped moving and gripped her thigh firmly as her breath quickened. Sam could feel her orgasm building, fueled by nothing more than the gorgeous man watching her, desiring her release. She could feel the heat rolling off him in waves. She imagined his dick pressing against her, into her. He would slide in slowly then increase the pace as the delicious friction built up.

The rhythm would be perfect. He would be perfect.

Her back arched as the crest rippled through her, tearing a low cry from her throat. She could have sworn she heard him moan along with her. The grip on her thigh tightened briefly as she slowly swirled the bullet around her clit once, twice more.

Through heavy lids, she watched him lean toward her. His lips pressed more firmly against hers this time. His tongue swept inside her mouth for a hard, hot kiss. Sam couldn't help the shiver that coursed through her.

"That was beautiful." His lips were pressed to her cheek as he said it, his breath coming in gulps. "*You* are beautiful." Pulling back, he watched her intently. "Thank you."

Then the harsh light of reality hit her like a ton of bricks.

"Holy crap!" She pulled away and moaned, covering her face with her hands. "Oh my god, what did I do?" Working furiously to button her shirt and smooth her skirt down, Sam felt a deep flush rising from her neck clear to the crown of her head. Stumbling slightly, she looked around the floor for her shoes, which she'd kicked off some time ago. What had she been thinking? What had she just done? Was she insane?

Never, ever in her life had she been so absolutely mortified. Emotions churned through her at a sickening pace. Embarrassment, shame, anger, shock—and most of all,

a sense of sexual satisfaction that felt wonderfully, deliciously wicked. What was wrong with her? Her career would be in the toilet after this. How would she ever live this down? The answer was simple — she couldn't.

Lost in thought, she nearly jumped out of her skin when Aidan stood and moved toward her.

Warily she turned and watched him.

"I...ah..." He stopped and raised his hands in a helpless gesture. It seemed so out of character for him, Sam felt a small measure of comfort. At least she wasn't the only one uncomfortable here. She was now merely the biggest idiot.

Still quiet, she waited for him to speak.

Clearing his throat, Aidan tried again. "Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have...that is, I didn't mean... Oh hell." His brows drew together in a frown. "Okay, how about this—I shouldn't have stayed, watching you. I happened to be in the neighborhood and I thought, what the hell, I'll stop by and see if she's in. I really didn't expect you to be, but your assistant said you were working late." He shrugged and continued. "The door was open, I started to walk in and I noticed you were...ah...busy." A slight flush darkened his cheeks.

"Busy," Sam repeated dully, knowing the word was woefully inadequate, which just made it worse.

"I really intended to walk away!" He sounded earnest, but Sam couldn't help but wonder when the other ball would drop. He opened his mouth and shut it again.

*Here it comes,* she thought.

His voice was quiet when he finally said, "I couldn't." His intense stare swung to her face and he leaned closer. "I couldn't make my feet move. I've never been so turned on in my life."

His stark words caused her stomach to drop. Of all the things he should be saying, that wasn't it. *You're fired*, or maybe *what were you doing*, but certainly not that he was turned on.

Confusion rolled on top of the embarrassment as she stood there. She had no idea what to say. So she started with, "I'm sorry. I had..." The words caught in her throat and she forced them out. "I had no idea anyone would be coming this evening. I usually work late and I don't schedule appointments after 5 p.m. and I—"

He interrupted quickly. "I didn't have an appointment. Like I said, I happened to be in the neighborhood and I..." His words trailed off as he shrugged and offered a chagrined smile. "I don't really have a good excuse."

Sam shrugged and offered a sickly smile of her own. "That makes two of us." Dropping back onto the couch, she buried her head in her hands. "How did I manage to make such an idiot out of myself?" Sam wasn't one to sit and wallow. Right now she needed to focus on damage control—the embarrassment could wait. It would have to.

Straightening her shoulders, she looked up at him, took a deep breath and said, "If you want to fire me, I *completely* understand. I'll return your deposit to you right away. I can't tell you how sorry I am for my unprofessional behavior and I...I hope..." She stopped. Laughing nervously, face flaming, she shook her head and looked away. "I don't know what I hope. Regardless, I'm sorry."

When she felt brave enough to sneak another glance at him, he was looking at her with his head tilted to one side. "No."

"No?" she asked in surprise.

"No, I don't want to fire you," he clarified, sitting next to her once more. "And for the record, *I'm* not sorry. Well," he hastily amended, "I am sorry. I'm really not a voyeur and I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I just can't say I'm sorry I witnessed you like that. You're beautiful." He repeated the words softly, the heat returning to his voice.

"Ah..." Sam had no idea how to respond. Where in the world was her cool head and composure? "Okay, well...um, thanks. I think." Completely unnerved and still highly aware of him, Sam shifted uncomfortably on the cushions. He was still obviously aroused and it wasn't helping her frame of mind. The man was too sexy for his own good. And hers.

The regret that should have been beating away at her mind was completely overwhelmed by a fresh wave of lust.

Aidan took a deep breath. "I couldn't force myself to look away. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't have looked away at that moment for anything."

Sam stared into his dark brown eyes and felt herself melt a bit. This was a dangerous game she was flirting with.

Shaking her head slightly, she huffed out a small laugh. "This is so bizarre. I'm completely mortified and you're sitting here complimenting me and you're a client! Oh my god!" She buried her head in her hands once more.

"I want you."

Sam froze at his stark words. Looking up at him, she could only stare.

"I want you," he repeated a little louder. "I know we got off to a bad start, which I'm sorry for," he said hastily when her eyebrows went up. "But I wasn't expecting...you," he finished lamely.

"I'd have never guessed," Sam replied dryly.

Aidan shook his head and asked in a serious tone, "Are you interested in a proposition?"

Cautious now, Sam stared at him. "A proposition regarding...?" Maybe her reputation wouldn't be in tatters after all.

His smile was slow to spread, but oh man did that wicked little curve make her hormones dance, just as she knew it would. "An after-hours affair."

## **Chapter Three**

An affair? Sam let the idea roll through her mind as she considered the potential risks, which encompassed just about everything. And yet the completely insane part of her found the idea gaining momentum as she weighed the potential benefits as well.

The biggest and most important risk was that Aidan was a client. A very wealthy, very frustrating, very sexy client. Providing he was satisfied with her design, there was a distinct possibility that he would be a great future reference. But if something went wrong, and with relationships they habitually seemed to, this could prove to be the dumbest thing she'd ever done. It was her hope that the design for his home would be one she could use as a selling point for future clients.

But at the moment, Sam couldn't seem to care as much as she should about that particular aspect. No, not nearly as much as she should.

Instead, all she could think about was his eyes as they'd watched her with such intensity. The heat that rolled off him as she'd reached her orgasm. And the unmistakable pull she felt when he was near, like right now.

Blinking slowly, she stared solemnly at him. He stared back, his gaze still holding a wealth of intensity and heat.

And that's when she felt her inhibitions go up in flames.

Sam was about to make the worst decision in the history of her career. And quite possibly one of the better decisions of her personal life.

Nodding slowly, she found herself agreeing to his proposition. "Okay."

Aidan couldn't help the slow smile that crept over his face. His stomach had been momentarily tied up in knots and now his gut was twisted up tight with desire. She was staring at him with a mixture of trepidation and need. And damn if that didn't turn him on.

"We have to keep business and pleasure separate."

Her softly stated request wiped the smile from his face. Aidan knew she was serious and he could understand exactly what she was saying. The problem was that his dick wouldn't care, didn't care, about the distinction between the two.

"Okay," he replied carefully. "I'm all for that. However," he moved closer and brought the tip of his nose to hers, "we'll have to schedule my appointments for later in the day because I want to be your *last* client. Every day. And your *only* client on the weekends."

Her tongue came out to carefully wet her lips. "I...I don't take clients on the weekends."

"Perfect. So that means you'll have no trouble fitting me in."

She began to shake her head and he stopped her by cupping a hand under her chin.

"It doesn't have to be as a client. But you *will* take me on the weekends."

Her mouth opened and closed a few times with no sound emerging. Not wanting to miss the opportunity, he quickly leaned the extra half-inch required to slide his tongue inside. After a slight hesitation, she leaned in to meet him. Aidan took his time, leisurely sampling the hot mouth she offered.

God she was sweet! Not in his wildest dreams would he have imagined that behind her professional exterior hid a woman who tasted this damn hot. His arms slowly wrapped around her and drew her closer. He pulled gently on her lower lip, wanting to drown in the taste of her.

She moaned softly and gently pushed him away.

Aidan let his arms drop to his sides and waited, trying not to show his disappointment at the loss of contact.

Confusion clouded her eyes as she looked at him. Just as quickly, her gaze skittered away. "Aidan, I'm not..." Sam blew out a heavy breath between pursed lips. "I just don't know how to do this. I've never...that is, I'm..."

Aidan hid the small smile that tried to curve his lips. It was cute how the normally smooth-tongued businesswoman was having trouble completing a sentence. He could only hope he'd be able to keep her tongue-tied.

"Sam." Taking her shoulders once more, he waited until she looked up at him. "I want you. Period. Let's wait for the how and the why of it to come later. For now, let's just have sex."

The change in her was immediate. In a deceptively soft tone, she asked, "Excuse me?"

"Let's have sex," he repeated in a more cautious tone, wondering how her expression had gone from sweetly unsure to irritated so quickly.

"Let's have sex?" she repeated icily, shrugging her shoulders out of his grasp. "Just like that? You say, 'let's have sex' and I'm supposed to, what, throw myself at you?"

"No, dammit." Aidan dropped his forehead into the palm of his hand, wondering how he'd become so socially inept. "That's not how I meant it to come out. I want to have sex, but I didn't mean for it to...ah hell." With a grimace, he shook his head, finally giving her a sheepish look. "I'm told I lack tact. If my fingers are doing the talking I have a much easier time of it, but verbal communication tends to be my downfall. More often than not." He tapped his head with his forefinger. "Things sound great up here, but by the time they come out of my mouth, I tend to murder the meaning with my tongue."

Her eyes had lost their frosty edge, but the hint of suspicion remained.

"Okay, how about this." Taking her hands, he scooted a bit closer. "I want you. For the past three weeks, I've had trouble writing because you've been in my head. Constantly. Instead of shaping my plot and creating my characters, I've imagined running my hands all over your body and creating new ways to bring you to the edge." His voice lowered as he brought his head closer. "I want you, Sam. I want to know what it is about you that's making me crazy. With need."

Aidan looked down at the couch and touched the soft leather. Whispering almost to himself, he went on, "I want to spread your naked body over this couch. I'd love to see you looking at me with nothing but need in your eyes."

Looking up at her finally, he waited. Hopeful that he'd managed to convey his thoughts adequately for once. Hopeful he hadn't blown his chance with the only woman who'd intrigued him in recent memory. Sam was the only woman who'd been enticing enough for him to take time away from his writing, which was something that worried him. And excited him.

Sam looked up at the earnest, somewhat lost expression in his eyes and felt her resolve soften. A small part of her was still looking for an excuse to run. But a bigger part of her was looking to stay. She knew his verbal communication skills were lacking and thankfully that wasn't what she was attracted to. It was almost endearing how frustrated he'd become with himself. Really, she couldn't fault the guy for not having much skill with conversation. She'd probably lack social grace too if she sequestered herself away from civilization most days of the week.

Smiling slowly at him, she watched relief flash through his gaze, quickly replaced with desire. Want. Need.

Sam's emotions mirrored his.

Realistically, at this point, she knew she had nothing to lose. Dropping her gaze to skim his long, lean body, she could only wonder what amazing things she had to gain.

Falling back slowly against the supple leather of the armrest, she continued to smile with promise in her eyes. "We've warmed up the couch already. It would be a shame to let all of that...*heat* go to waste."

His answering smile was almost predatory. "Wouldn't it though."

Shifting back, he straightened her legs the length of the couch. Crouching down to kneel on the floor beside her, he stared for a long moment.

His hands reached up to smooth her skirt down. Almost absently, he murmured, "This needs to go."



Sam unzipped the back of the skirt and lifted her hips obligingly as he gently pulled it down her legs. She saw a muscle tic in his jaw as he looked back at her.

Keeping her gaze on his face, she began to unbutton her shirt. Tamping down on the slight trepidation that tickled the back of her mind, she shifted her focus completely to the man in front of her.

His expression was so intent upon her. His dark brown eyes had deepened to a shade closer to black as he waited for her to make a move.

Sam wasn't much of a tease, so she decided to make quick work of her shirt. Carefully slipping the last button through the fabric, she pulled the shirt from her arms. Tossing it gently onto the table, she sat back once more, clad in nothing more than her bra and panties.

A slight flush colored his cheeks as he kept his eyes glued to her.

"Now I feel overdressed," Sam quipped softly, feeling only the slightest twinge of embarrassment. It had been way too long since she'd been naked with a man.

Her embarrassment fled as Aidan quickly stood and pulled his T-shirt over his head, revealing all the long, lean muscles she'd only imagined he possessed. She was definitely not disappointed.

Not giving her time to admire his perfectly sculpted abs, he leaned over to pull his jeans off. He moved methodically. His movements were efficient and quick, wasting no energy or time.

When nothing but his boxers remained, he sat on the couch, placing her legs in his lap. Sam was a bit disappointed she didn't get the opportunity to get a good look at him, but then she met his gaze. His eyes devoured her and she saw him swallow hard. Heat began to pool low in her belly.

"Sam, words escape me at the moment, so I hope you'll allow me to show you instead."

His quietly spoken words washed over her a half second before he leaned in for a kiss. With soft lips, Aidan traced the corners of her mouth, nipping gently at her lower lip, his tongue then soothing the slight sting. His right hand cupped the back of her neck as he pulled her closer to deepen the kiss. She rose up to meet him and her tongue met his as he explored the heat of her mouth.

A shiver of desire crept down her spine as he slid the fingers of his left hand under her bra strap. With deliberate movements, his fingers slid slowly back and forth across her back, under the strap. It was a simple caress, but Sam felt it clear down to her toes.

Aidan continued to kiss her, slow and deep. His tongue moved lazily in and out of her mouth, as if he had all the time in the world.

Sam shifted slightly on the couch, feeling the ache of desire intensifying.

Pulling back carefully, she stared at him through lowered lids. "Why don't you sit back and get comfy." It was a statement, and she gently pressed against his chest.

Keeping his left hand on her back, he let his right untangle from her hair and slowly drop to his side. After a second's hesitation, he allowed her to push him back against the cushions.

Sam closed her eyes briefly at the play of muscles under his skin where her hand lay on his chest. His skin was smooth and firm, with a small patch of hair on his chest. For a second, Sam let her fingers glide over his chest. She felt his muscles tense, and looked up with a smile.

He smiled back, though it was a bit strained. And a bit wicked.

Rising onto her knees, she slowly moved to straddle him, keeping her gaze locked with his. She saw his nostrils flare slightly as he drew in a deep breath.

Once she was situated on his lap, she ran her hand all the way down his chest and let it rest at the waistband of his boxers. With a wicked smile of her own, she simply said, "Your turn."

Aidan released the hooks on her bra. Sam hadn't felt him move his hand and watched in pleasant surprise as her bra fell into his lap where her hand rested.

His hand skimmed down along her side, coming to rest low on her hip, right at the waistband of her lacy thong. "Are you attached to this?" His voice was lower, with a harsh edge of desire.

Licking her lips, Sam tried to focus her mind on what he was saying. "Attached? Ah...they're one of my favorite pairs."

He lifted one corner of his mouth in a half smile. "Then I'll have to be careful with them." As he'd done with her bra, he slid his finger under the fabric of her panties right at the top of her hip, and slowly traced the edge down toward her wet heat.

Sam's breath caught in her throat as she waited for what seemed to be an infinitely long amount of time for him to move his finger those few final inches.

His mouth had moved forward and his lips lightly rested against the curve of her neck where it met her right shoulder. Hot breath tickled her skin as she waited. His finger never stopped moving and she was just about to groan in frustration when he finally slid his digits close enough to make her catch her breath.

Long fingers skimmed through her dark curls, beneath the fabric of her panties. Sam was so aroused the fabric was soaked from her desire. Aidan had no problem sliding first one finger and then another inside her.

Sam bit the inside of her cheek as she moved involuntarily against him. He certainly wasted no time now. And she wasn't complaining. His lips moved slowly against the curve of her shoulder as his fingers teased her. His thumb glided gently against her sensitive clit, wringing a soft sound from her throat.

Sam loved foreplay. But tonight wasn't the night for it. She'd been primed and ready before he walked through the door and what she wanted most at this very moment was his cock inside her.

She reached down and grabbed his hand suddenly. He looked up, his heavy-lidded eyes questioning.

“Any other time, the foreplay would be greatly appreciated. But right now, I just want you.” Her words came out throaty and a tad bit desperate. She released his hand and sat back slightly, allowing her a better view of—and better access to—his straining erection.

Aidan’s head dropped back against the couch as he watched her through half-closed eyes. His hands lay at his sides. He looked relaxed, with only the clenched fists giving him away. With an intense and very interested stare, he simply watched her.

Sam stroked her hands over the front of his boxers where his cock strained against the fabric. With a quick flick of her wrist, she undid the small button at the fly of his boxers. His dick fit perfectly in both of her hands as she smoothed the fabric away from his shaft.

His breath hitched but he continued to watch her. She saw the muscles in his chest flex involuntarily as she moved her hands lower and gently squeezed his sac.

Not wanting to waste more time, she moved closer and propped her left hand on his shoulder. She leaned in close to his ear and could hear his breath coming in shallow pants. Smiling to herself, she whispered softly, “Do you have a condom?”

Muttering inaudibly under his breath, Aidan grabbed her around the waist with one arm and leaned forward to grab his jeans off the floor. Sam held tight, wondering if their combined weight would topple them both to the floor.

The muscles in his shoulders bunched and flexed as he bent forward. Sam felt a rush of heat as she watched the muscles playing beneath her hands. It seemed effortless, the way he held her weight and moved to the floor briefly. With a dexterity and strength that surprised her, he deftly grabbed his jeans, rummaged through one of the back pockets and triumphantly held up his wallet. Settling them back on the couch, he flipped it open and dropped it onto the cushion next to him, pulling out a foil package.

He didn’t say a word as he held it up for her. His eyes said it all for him.

Sam took it, trapped in his gaze. His unconscious display of strength had her nearly purring. She was a sucker for an athlete. Not a typical meathead jock, however. She’d

always been attracted to the runners, the martial artists and the soccer players. Men who were extremely fit without all the unnecessary bulk.

Aidan was extremely fit, extremely sexy and extremely ready. And so was Sam.

Carefully holding the packet, she tore off one side and pulled the condom out. Scooting back, she dropped to the floor, kneeling in front of him. Rolling the latex down along his shaft, she watched his jaw clench. His eyes never wavered from her hands as he watched her intently.

Sam gave him one last, loving stroke, making sure the condom was snug, and crawled back onto his lap. His hands gripped her waist as she grasped his cock, guiding it to her wet heat.

Still wet from her earlier orgasm, Sam let her head fall back as he slid easily inside, one delicious inch at a time. They both groaned as she moved her hips down, burying him deeply inside her body.

His hands crept up to her neck and pulled her close for a kiss.

His mouth moved hungrily against hers as she began to rock her hips against him. Aidan sucked on her lip, drawing it into his mouth and flicking it lightly with his tongue. Sam moved rhythmically, creating a hot friction that was drawing small growls from Aidan's throat.

Keeping his left hand around her neck, he continued to kiss her, deepening the pressure. His tongue pressed into her mouth, in rhythm with her hips. His right hand moved down to cup her breast, gently rolling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Sam felt a shiver sweep up her spine.

Aidan pulled away slightly and stared at her through half-closed eyes. When he pulled lightly on her nipple, she couldn't help but gasp with pleasure.

His head dropped and his mouth closed around her nipple. He tongued her lightly then flicked his tongue back and forth across the sensitive flesh with a little more pressure.

Sam lost her rhythm and began to move wildly against him. His shaft slid deeper and deeper inside as he thrust up to meet her hips.

“Soon,” he demanded hoarsely, his mouth skimming along the skin of her breast with fleeting kisses.

Sam couldn’t respond when he moved his attention to her other breast, sucking the nipple deep into his mouth. She felt his teeth scrape lightly against her and felt herself spiral out of control.

His hands came to her hips and he pressed her down on him as he surged upward. Sam let her head fall back as she rubbed herself shamelessly against him, letting the waves of pleasure crash into and roll over her. A few seconds later, Aidan let out a hoarse shout and nearly lifted them both off the couch as he slid in as deep as he could go.

Sam watched the corded muscles in his neck stick out as he threw his head back with his release. She’d never seen a more beautiful sight than this man letting go.

Her legs shaky, she let her weight fall completely onto his lap as she dropped forward to rest her forehead on his chest.

His hand came up and gently stroked her back once, twice, before dropping back onto the cushions in exhaustion.

After a few minutes had passed and they’d both begun to breathe more normally, Sam sat back and stared at him. His eyes were closed, but he wearily opened one and peered at her.

Sam just smiled, knowing he’d understand.

His answering smile showed her he did.

## Chapter Four

"Oh sweetie, I'm so proud of you!" Kelli clapped her hands together in front of her face and peered at Sam over her fingertips. Glancing at Paige, she nudged her with an elbow. "Can you believe she did it?" Practically bouncing on the couch, Kelli fairly dripped with mock maternal pride.

Rolling her eyes, Sam popped another piece of chocolate into her mouth, savoring the delicate sweet as it melted on her tongue. Too intent on her treat, she didn't bother to reply to Kelli's teasing.

Paige merely lifted a pale brow at Sam. "Well?"

With a sigh, Sam put the box of chocolates back on the coffee table. She was going to have to spill all of the gory – make that *glorious* – details.

They were gathered in Sam's living room for their monthly Saturday girls' night. The menu consisted of chocolate, which was Sam's vice, popcorn, which was Kelli's addition, and a great bottle of merlot that Paige had brought. They'd decided early on that girls' night was about indulging your taste buds and lounging in the comfiest clothes they owned. Sam preferred her baby blue flannel pajama pants and matching T-shirt. Kelli had on a pair of ragged sweats and a worn T-shirt with some phrase that had been nearly obliterated with one too many washings. Knowing her penchant for raunchy phrases, Sam was thankful it wasn't legible. Paige had chosen a pair of gray yoga knit pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt in a sage green. They looked ready for the gym. Or bed.

But Kelli had other ideas.

"So spill already!" Kelli's words tumbled over one another. "What was he like? Did he storm into your office, sweep your papers off your desk, hold you in his manly arms and ride you like the horny stud he is?"

Sam stared at Kelli in shock and unwilling amusement.

Paige took a sip of her wine before placing her glass on the coffee table. Catching Sam's gaze, she smiled. "Allow me." Picking up a pillow off the couch, she threw it at Kelli, hitting her square in the face. Dusting off her hands, she retrieved her wineglass and sat back, staring at Sam expectantly.

They both ignored Kelli's grumbling and Sam shook her head. "No, Kelli." Throwing her a look of mock exasperation, she sighed. "He left the papers where they were. It probably would have made less of a mess if we had thought to move them first."

Now it was their turn to stare at Sam in shock. Unable to keep a straight face, she dissolved into laughter. Kelli and Paige exchanged a look and began to giggle with her.

Once she regained her breath, Sam rolled her eyes again. "Oh please, Kelli. That whole he-man act isn't my thing and you know it."

Kelli nodded and tried to adopt a serious expression. "You're absolutely right. We all know you wouldn't let wild, unbridled passion interfere with the papers on your desk. God forbid you let go and have a little fun. On a Friday night even! You probably would have had to stay late to organize everything."

Waving away her words, Sam turned away and grabbed a handful of popcorn. Throwing a kernel into her mouth, she chewed thoughtfully. "Actually, Miss Sex Snob, you'll be shocked to know he walked in on me."

"Oooh!" Kelli held up her hands in mock fear. "Don't tell me, he caught you in the middle of an intense session of Design That Home!"

Sam felt her cheeks redden as she remembered. "Ah...not exactly." Clearing her throat, she looked at her best friends sheepishly. "I was, um, scratching an itch."

"Scratching an itch?" Paige's brows turned down as she frowned in confusion. "Why would that be surprising?"

"Not *that* kind of itch," Sam said with a little more emphasis.



"Well, if it wasn't..." Kelli's voice trailed off as understanding dawned. Hooting loudly, she clapped her hands and leaned forward. "You have got to be kidding me!? Aidan caught you playing with your toy? Get out!" Jumping up, Kelli did a little jig around the couch, laughing hysterically. Stopping when she got to the coffee table, she bent over to catch her breath. Looking up at Sam through the cascade of dark hair, her eyes twinkled mischievously. "Did you invite him in for a play date?"

Her embarrassment subsiding in the face of Kelli's teasing, she flashed a half smile. "He actually invited himself in."

"Atta boy, Aidan!" Kelli pumped her arm in the air.

Paige cleared her throat, bringing their attention back to her. "Were you really...?"

Sam nodded slightly. "Awful, isn't it?"

Paige stared at her for a second and then allowed a broad smile to curve her lips. "Actually, I was thinking you're quite the wild woman. And look how it paid off."

Kelli nodded her head vigorously in agreement. "Talk about an opportunity."

Sobering, Sam looked at the framed card hanging over the entrance to her kitchen, across the living room. Above the doorway hung the tarot card she'd drawn from the deck five years ago. She'd kept the picture of the Wheel as a reminder. Daily, she walked past the symbol that never failed to remind her to seize each and every opportunity that came her way. It also reminded her that with the bad came good and with the good, sometimes a person also found the bad. Regardless, she'd made a promise to herself to never look back and regret not following an opportunity. She'd found, even in her short time on Earth, that even the most unlikely paths could lead somewhere amazing. And on the other hand, what might look like a great opportunity could lead to something unpleasant.

But Kelli was right. This was an opportunity she'd decided she couldn't miss out on.

Shaking off the sudden, serious mood, Sam smiled again. "Mr. Masters definitely surprised me. He offered me the opportunity for an after-hours affair."

"Ooh, sounds kinky." Kelli dropped back into an overstuffed chair to the left of the couch.

Paige snorted indelicately and flashed a disgusted look at Kelli. Turning to look at Sam, she patted her shoulder. "I think it sounds romantic."

Ignoring Paige, Kelli nodded. "And it sounds hot! What's your next move?"

"My next move?" Sam furrowed her brow. "I was going to wait for him to call."

Slapping her forehead, Kelli groaned. "Oh no, no, no! Haven't I taught you better than that?" Turning an imploring gaze on Paige, she asked, "Back me up on this one, okay?"

With a regretful glance at Sam, Paige sighed. "She's right. I have to agree. I don't think you should wait for him to make the next move."

"What happened to 'but he's a client'?" Sam asked, wondering at Paige's about-face.

Lifting a shoulder, Paige responded, "That was *your* hang-up to begin with, I merely agreed with you. And I haven't seen you look this happy in a while. I figure if he can put that smile on your face, he might be a keeper. For as long as you want him, that is."

"The smile on her face is from—" Kelli's words were cut off this time when Sam threw a pillow at her.

Grabbing another handful of popcorn, Sam hated to even ask. "So what, exactly, do you *love* experts suggest I do then?"

They both ignored the sarcasm in her tone. Kelli rubbed her hands together in glee. "If you're having an after-hours affair, then you need to plan an after-hours rendezvous."

Sam waited, knowing Kelli was sure to elaborate to the point of too much information. Far too much information.

Kelli didn't disappoint. "You have so many things in your office you could get creative with." Using her fingers, she ticked off a number of items. "That big leather executive chair probably hasn't been broken in properly, the drafting table is at a very convenient height and if you didn't use the desk last night, it could sure stand to see some action aside from the mounds of boring paperwork."

"It doesn't have to be all in my office," Sam protested. "I said *after-hours* affair, not an exclusive sex-in-Sam's-office affair."

Tapping her chin thoughtfully, Kelli glanced at Paige.

"There's always the job site," Paige offered helpfully. "Didn't you say he has quite a few acres he's going to build on?" At Sam's affirmative nod, she continued, "You could pretend you want to take him to the job site to talk about layout and such and then surprise him with...whatever came to mind."

"Just make sure you have a soft and very cushioned blanket and maybe some fun props," Kelli chimed in.

"Okay, okay," Sam held up her hands in surrender, hoping Kelli wouldn't elaborate on what type of props. "I get it. I'll call him and invite him to my office or the job site."

"Or you could do both. At different times, of course," Kelli clarified.

Shaking her head, Sam could only sigh. She was more than ready to change topics. "Paige, what movie did you bring?"

Thankfully her friends allowed the subject change. Paige got up to rummage through her bag and came back holding the latest Will Ferrell release. "I thought this might keep Kelli occupied."

Laughing, Sam watched Kelli make a grab for the movie. She was a Will Ferrell addict and had made them watch all his movies. Though Sam didn't mind. The comic relief was always a welcome change of pace. Sitting back, she grabbed another handful of popcorn and waited for someone to hit play.

Halfway through the movie's antics, she began to tune out, bringing her thoughts back to something infinitely more interesting.

Since last night's surprise, Sam had done nothing but think about her decision. Not with regret, but with curiosity, anticipation and questions. Curiosity because it had come out of the blue. She'd expected her Friday night to be the same as it had been for months. Working into the wee hours of the morning, only to go home and crash into bed knowing she could sleep late the next day. Instead, she'd been surprised by her sexy new client and had the best sex of her life. Thus the anticipation.

Armed with suggestions from Kelli and Paige and not knowing what Aidan might have planned, she could only guess at what might come. And all of her guesses—make that wishes—fell into the X-rated category.

Sam wasn't as nonchalant about sex as Kelli, nor as innocent as Paige. She fell somewhere in between. But coupling her dating dry spell with a gorgeous and unpredictable man like Aidan, she was pretty sure she might even be able to make Kelli blush at her thoughts.

Pausing for a moment, she laughed quietly to herself and shook her head. No, probably not. But she'd at least have Kelli cheering her on, which was something that always made Sam blush.

After finishing the movie, she and the girls chatted a bit more about what Kelli called her sex strategy. Which was merely a nickname for the various positions Kelli thought everyone should try out at least once in their lives. One too many ideas and way too much information later, Sam was ready to call it a night. Unable to hide her yawns, she sheepishly caught Paige's eye. With a subtle nod, Paige took the hint and dragged Kelli to the door.

"One more thing, Sam, you can't forget to try—"

"Good night, ladies," Sam said and gently shut the door on yet another of Kelli's outrageous suggestions. She could hear giggling on the other side of the door as her friends walked away.

Shaking her head, she laughed softly and began to clean up. As she cleared the popcorn from the table and grabbed the empty glasses, she once more glanced at the card hanging above her kitchen as she moved toward the sink.

It was a small picture, five inches wide, seven inches high. And yet the small graphic displayed on it had been so powerful to her. Starting out as one of Kelli's many harebrained suggestions, the message of the card had quickly become Sam's personal motto as well as her goal in life.

When she'd initially drawn the card, all she'd seen was a simple wheel. Kelli had told her the meaning was about not letting a good opportunity pass. Sam had researched a more in-depth meaning and found the card also stood for luck, change for the better and almost always a positive outcome.

Sam had taken the meaning to heart. So, shortly after college graduation, she had begun to work hard to seek that positive opportunity around the next corner, whatever it might be. So far her strategy had brought her to where she was now. She owned a building with her two dearest friends and they were continuing to make a name for themselves in the ever-growing community of Spokane. Her architectural style had brought in just enough clients to keep her busy and their referrals had secured work for months to come. Every day she was thankful, which is partially why she spent so much time at work. It was her bread and butter, but more than that, it was her passion.

Her career had been one opportunity she'd never regretted and continued to work hard at. Never in a million years would she have guessed her career would have led her to a steamy after-hours tryst with a man like Aidan.

Her cheeks warmed at the way she'd come undone in his lap last night. It turned out she was more in touch with herself than she'd thought.

She absently loaded the dishes into the dishwasher and wiped down the counters in her small kitchen.

What to do next? Kelli had been adamant that she not wait for Aidan to call and she was inclined to agree with her.

She didn't want to sit around and wait. She'd never been the type to wait for fate to come find her. Even though she was always ready for a new opportunity, she was also prepared to work very hard to better her chances of getting what she wanted.

And more time with Aidan was definitely something she wanted.

Rinsing out the washrag, she draped it over the spigot to let it dry and shut off the kitchen light. Meandering down the hallway to her bedroom, she paused as she stared at her bed.

An affair usually required creativity and a regular old bed was not creative in the least. So what would keep him on his toes and keep her toes curled with pleasure?

Smiling to herself, Sam delved deep into her mind to explore the possibilities as she finished getting ready for bed.

She would definitely be calling Aidan tomorrow.

## **Chapter Five**

Aidan usually kept his weekends reserved for picking up around his condo. Spending all week immersed in his writing, he had a tendency to grab food when needed and not worry about the mess until later. Necessities like laundry and general cleaning also fell by the wayside, not that he was the domesticated type to begin with. Which meant Saturdays and Sundays were spent replenishing his food supply, washing whatever clothes he had strewn across the floor as well as the mountain of dirty dishes in the sink.

He wasn't a slob. He just didn't worry about particulars like cleaning and grocery shopping while he was engrossed in his latest chapters. It was all too easy to lose a storyline when you let yourself get distracted by menial, everyday tasks. That was his excuse, anyway. Aidan knew how tenuous the thread of creativity could be and he was loath to lose it right in the middle of a chapter or precious weeks away from a deadline.

It was Sunday morning, ten o'clock, and he was folding up the last of his laundry. Placing his jeans in the dresser drawer, he shut it with finality. Now he could get to the Sunday paper. He used it as his incentive to get his laundry done.

His routine was always the same. Finish the laundry Sunday morning, read the paper, drink a cup of coffee and maybe watch a movie on television. Then it was back to the computer.

Moving to the small kitchen, he looked out the window, which overlooked a small courtyard the adjacent condos shared. The condos were nice. They were in a great part of town, not too far from the Spokane River, walking trails, shopping and just about anything else a body could want or need. But Aidan was ready for some elbowroom.

He was fortunate enough to have quiet neighbors, only hearing an occasional thump or bump in the adjoining homes. Yet part of him craved a little space and the

ability to look out his kitchen window – or any window – and see nothing but land. His land.

He'd hired a realtor, taken time out of his busy schedule and searched for the perfect piece of property. Twenty minutes southwest of downtown Spokane he'd found it. Fifteen acres of land dotted with pine trees and rolling hills, allowing him privacy, peace and quiet and all the elbowroom he'd ever need. Not one to waste time, he'd made an offer on the spot.

Now Sam was designing him the perfect home. Of course, it was still at least eighteen months before he could hope to set foot in it, but he was eager for the change of scenery. It would be a new chapter in his life, so to speak.

With a slight, distracted smile at the thought, he moved to his kitchen table, grabbing a steaming mug of coffee along the way. Sitting down, he grabbed the front section of the paper and settled back into his chair.

His eyes skimmed over the pages without really seeing the words. Sam had been on his mind since he'd left her late Friday night. He was still shell shocked by it all.

In all his wildest dreams, he'd never have imagined his night would have turned out so well. Her professional appearance and attitude were such a turn-on, but when she'd crawled onto his lap, her business suit forgotten on the floor...

Closing his eyes briefly, he rubbed his hand across his stubble-covered chin. Sleep had been elusive last night as he'd imagined how many other ways she might surprise him. The woman had been driving him crazy since day one and he figured it would only get worse. *Or better*, he thought with a wicked grin.

What man could complain about being driven crazy by a sexy architect with a siren's mouth and a polished appearance that all but begged to be mussed up? Next time he visited her office, he imagined she'd greet him at her office door wearing only –

The phone rang suddenly, distracting him from what would have been a very enjoyable fantasy. Irritated at the interruption, he stared balefully at it, debating if he



should even answer. It was a necessary evil he tolerated only for the sake of his family and his editor and agent.

Sighing in disgust, he stood up and reached for the phone sitting on the counter.

"Hello?" His voice was a bit abrupt and he didn't bother to temper it.

"Aidan?" The female voice on the other end of the line was hesitant and familiar.

"Sam?" Aidan couldn't help the heat that suddenly crept over his body. Shifting his stance slightly, he adjusted his jeans to accommodate his welcoming committee, currently standing at attention. All she had to do was say his name. Boy was he in for it.

A slightly nervous laugh tickled his ears, causing him to close his eyes briefly as desire played around the edges of his consciousness.

"Yeah, hi. I wasn't sure if you'd be glued to your computer or not. I didn't interrupt you, did I?"

Not in the least interested in the paper now, Aidan replied, "Not at all."

"I was calling to see if you had plans today."

"Plans?" Aidan repeated. Silence filled the line as he tried to focus on her question. Squeezing his eyes shut in consternation, Aidan barely refrained from smacking his forehead. What was wrong with him?

"Ah, no! No plans today," he replied quickly.

"Oh good. Okay." There was a note of relief in her voice. "I was wondering if you wanted to come to the office and go over some things."

Frowning at the phone, Aidan took a second before answering. He sure hoped "go over some things" was code for "have wild sex in my office again". What he said to Sam was, "Sounds great. What time were you thinking?"

"How about one o'clock?"

"Okay. See you then." Aidan thought for a second and couldn't help but add, "Should I...bring anything?"

Sam laughed quietly, all traces of nervousness gone now. "Only if you feel the need. See you at one."

The line went dead, leaving Aidan staring at the phone, hope warring with confusion. He could swear he'd heard an invitation in her tone, but he didn't want to risk that assumption and end up looking like a jerk. He'd never learned to interpret the female mind and had found himself making the wrong assumptions more often than he'd care to admit. Could she really want to talk about business on a Sunday? Especially after what happened on Friday? Leaning his hip against the counter, he dropped his head back and stared at the ceiling. Was he so secluded he couldn't even read a woman anymore?

Obviously he was.

Thirty-six wasn't so old that he should be so out of touch. Then again, he couldn't remember the last time he'd gone out for fun. Since rising to fame as a mystery writer seven years ago, he'd been nearly consumed by deadlines, characters, plots, subplots, fictional murder scenes and days upon days of research. He spent time with family during the holidays and birthdays, but hadn't spent much time lately catching up with friends or dating. It simply wasn't high on his list of priorities at the moment.

But now things had changed.

Sam had more of his attention than he'd care to admit. And yet a part of him was more than happy for the alluring distraction she was proving to be. The creative side of him could only wonder how this story line would play out.

Shaking his head, he gingerly sat back down and grabbed the paper, briefly adjusting the front of his jeans once more. He had a few hours to kill before one. He might as well make use of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

At twelve-thirty, Sam left her office to unlock the front door of the building. She usually kept it locked when she worked late nights or came in on the weekends. She'd

come in at eleven o'clock to get a little work done, for no other reason than to try to keep her mind occupied.

She hadn't gotten very far with anything.

The preliminary design for Aidan's home was up on her computer screen. She'd made a few changes and had begun the layout for the master bathroom, adding the deeper shower stall and smaller linen closet Aidan had requested. And that was about it.

She'd spent the rest of the time staring at the clock, smoothing her outfit and wondering for the hundredth time if she wasn't a complete and utter fool for trying to do something like this. Before she'd been able to figure out the answer, she'd gathered her shaky nerves and unlocked the front door.

With half an hour yet to kill, she meandered through the foyer of the building. A spacious entrance offered overstuffed chairs and a large coffee table adorned with the latest home design magazines. Paige had artfully designed the exposed brick foyer with rich, vibrant colors and bold artwork. It was tastefully done, yet offered much more warmth than a typical reception area.

The first door on the left was glass and had Paige's logo and name etched into it. Kelli's office was farther down the hall and to the right. Her door was simple and her office was sparse, just a desk and a few chairs. Because most of her work was done onsite, her office was used mainly for paperwork and a few client meetings. Mostly she worked out of her truck.

The hallway turned to the left and Sam passed the restrooms and the small room they used as a kitchen. It housed the necessities, such as a fridge, microwave, utensils and the most crucial accessory they owned—at least according to Sam and Kelli—the coffeepot.

At the very end of the hallway on the right was Sam's office. Her door was wood with a simple brass sign that read "Samantha Eckhart, Architect"—the sign Aidan had missed upon his first visit.

Pushing the door wide open, she moved toward the loveseat. Memories of Friday night floated in her head and she quickly changed her mind, veering toward the window. Leaning against the window frame, Sam looked down at her outfit. A simple black knit skirt hugged her curves, ending mid-calf and moving easily and comfortably with her. Her feet were bare—she'd taken her sandals off to curl up on her chair as she'd worked. Her top was a white wrap-around knit, with short sleeves, the plunging v-neck sexy without being over the top. It wasn't something she wore during regular business hours because the neckline was too low, but today she'd been thinking comfort, ease of removal and the whole enticement factor.

With a small smile, she pushed away from the windowsill and turned around. Her breath caught in her throat on a gasp as she noticed Aidan at the doorway. "I, ah...sorry. I didn't hear you come in."

He was lounging against the doorframe and studying her with those dark, intense eyes. Straightening, he walked halfway into her office and stopped, still watching her. "You were so beautiful standing by the window I hated to disturb your thoughts."

Sam's mouth opened to respond, but no words came out.

Aidan didn't wait for a response. Moving closer, he stopped when he was no more than a few inches away. "Hi."

"Hi." Her voice came out a bit breathless, but she barely noticed.

"I'm not interested in discussing business."

Sam blinked rapidly, a little confused. "Ah, okay. Neither am I."

Mouth turning up with satisfaction, Aidan nodded briefly. "Good. I just wanted to make sure." Cupping the back of her neck, he drew her close for a soul-searing kiss.

Sam felt her stomach bottom out as lust hit her hard.

His lips were firm as they pressed against hers. His tongue swept out as he tasted first her lips, and then moved deeper into her mouth. Sam moved closer as he drew her

tongue into his mouth, lightly sucking. Her nipples tightened as she brushed against his chest.

Aidan pulled back long enough to look down at her. Sam opened her eyes and smiled softly at him. "Definitely not interested in business," she mumbled.

Aidan's laugh was rusty and brief. His lips met hers once more, as he carefully walked her back to the loveseat.

Sam managed to whisper, "Wait."

Brows drawn down in frustration, Aidan just looked at her.

Her eyes met his. "I have a different idea."

Pulling away, she walked over to the leather executive chair behind her desk. Her fingers trailed over the back of the seat as she pulled it away from her desk. Running her hand down along the armrest, she lifted her gaze to his. "I've only had this for a couple months. It was my birthday present to myself. I was hoping you'd help me break it in."

Her soft voice swept along his senses like wildfire and Aidan struggled to listen to her words and not just the cadence of her voice. "Break it in? What did you have in mind?" His voice was gruff and he was having trouble forming words. He shifted uncomfortably as his erection strained against the fly of his jeans. He was unsure if he could even make it to the chair, he wanted her so badly.

When he'd first seen her standing by the window, he'd momentarily lost his breath. Her soft curves had been outlined by the knit fabric of her skirt and top. She'd been unconsciously smoothing the fabric of her skirt, bringing his attention to those sexy, lean legs. When she'd turned, her top had given him a delectable hint of cleavage and his mouth had ached to sample the skin at the swell of her breast. He was so damned hungry for her he hurt with it.

The smile she graced him with sent waves of desire riding along his spine and Aidan clenched his fists to keep from grabbing her. She had an idea and he'd force himself to listen even if it killed him to wait. God, he wanted her under him, over him

and everywhere in between. At this point, he didn't care how it happened just as long as it did.

"I was thinking for starters you could sit here..." Sam trailed off, waiting for him to move closer.

Aidan moved stiffly, dropping down into the chair. He winced and immediately shifted position. There wasn't enough room in his jeans at the moment.

Sam moved around so that she was facing him, dropping to a kneeling position in front of him.

Aidan sucked in a breath and hoped he'd have the strength to survive what he fervently prayed she had planned next. He watched her smile up at him. Her gaze moved to his chin and lingered along his chest. Her hand came up to lightly touch his shoulder, sliding down his arm in a gentle caress. She stopped suddenly, looking unsure.

Then she laughed quietly, nervously, as she stared at his hands, which were fisted on his thighs. "I'm really not good at this sort of thing."

"That depends on who you're asking," Aidan responded, willing her to look up at him. When she finally did, he carefully took her chin in the palm of his hand. "Sam, I wanted you from the second I saw you. I don't know how or why, but for some reason I can't for the life of me get you out of my head. Just thinking about you turns me on. And when you called this morning..." Aidan took a second to swallow and catch his breath. "Anyhow, I'm not very good at this sort of thing either. Hell, I usually avoid people when I can." He smiled in a self-deprecating manner.

Sam placed a finger gently on his mouth when he tried to continue. "I understand," she said softly. With the barest hint of a smile, she lowered those velvety brown eyes and focused on his jeans, her courage restored.

Aidan's eyes closed involuntarily when she brought her hands to the waistband of his jeans. With the button undone quickly, Sam moved her fingers gently up and down

his zipper. Clenching his teeth, Aidan exhaled sharply. Growling low in his throat, he fought to stay still as she finally, *finally* lowered the zipper.

*Thank you, thank you, thank you*, he thought gratefully.

Tugging lightly, Sam wordlessly asked him to lift his hips as she worked his jeans down his legs. Throwing them aside, Sam moved to his boxers and pulled them off just as quickly.

Aidan wrapped his fingers around the arms of her leather chair and waited.

She spread his knees apart a little wider and moved closer. Her hand reached out to curl gently around his shaft before her mouth descended—and Aidan's heart stuttered to a stop for a split second as her hot breath enveloped his dick. Her lips slid around him and began to move in a slow rhythm with her hand. He let his head slump back against the chair and his knuckles remained white against the black leather.

Whatever he'd done to deserve this, he vowed to do it over and over again for the rest of his life.

It felt as if she'd no sooner started than she was pulling away. Wordlessly he reached out a hand to pull her back.

*Please don't stop.*

Her eyes glinted up at him through the veil of her silky brown hair as it brushed across her cheeks. Her smile made him drop his hand back to resume his white-knuckled grip.

Leaning back toward him, her tongue flicked out and lapped at the ultra-sensitive tip of his erection. With agonizing care, she licked her way down the length of him. A groan welled in his throat as she just as slowly came back up.

Her lips encircled him once more and she took him deeply into the heat of her mouth. His grip on the chair tightened imperceptibly. Sam alternated between using her tongue to lick at the head of his penis and taking him into her mouth, while using her hand to gently stroke his shaft.

Barely managing to pry one of his hands from the arm of the chair, Aidan began to brush his fingers through her hair, gently encouraging her.

His fingers fell away as she rocked back on her heels. Aidan stared at her through half-closed eyes.

Her tongue slid along her lips provocatively, as if savoring something delicious and hoping to prolong the experience. "I almost forgot something."

Arching a brow, Aidan had to disagree with a husky laugh. "No, I don't think you forgot anything at all. In fact I'm sure of it."

Grabbing a glass sitting on the desk behind her, Sam took a swallow. At Aidan's curious stare, she put the glass back down and opened her mouth to reveal an ice cube melting on her tongue.

"I've always wanted to try this." Nestling back between his legs, she stopped and looked up. "Are you okay with that?"

Rather than answer, Aidan reached out to brush his fingers through her silky hair once more. Curling his hands behind her neck, he slowly pulled her closer, releasing the light pressure when she placed her lips against his shaft once more.

When she opened her mouth, he jumped slightly at the feeling of the ice cube sliding along his skin as she began to slowly move her lips up and down his shaft. Unable to keep still, he shifted his hips against the icy erotic feel.

It was torture. The finest damn torture he'd ever endured.

Both of his hands slid into her hair as she stroked him with her mouth. What had been hot was now unbelievably cool. Her hand had resumed its gentle grasp at the base of his penis and was slowly working his shaft, in perfect tempo with her mouth. Those cold lips continued to pull him deep and were quickly warming, the ice cube melting rapidly. It was an incredible feeling and Aidan feared it would be over too quickly.

"Sam?" Aidan had to call her name twice before she looked up at him. "You have to stop, otherwise this visit will be much shorter than either one of us would like."



"But I—" Sam's protestations were quickly silenced as Aidan hauled her up on his lap and kissed her deeply. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she snuggled against him, allowing him to take control of the kiss.

His lips and tongue were hard against hers, testament to his damn-near desperate need. Just as abruptly, he softened his mouth, slowly breaking the kiss.

Standing up with little effort, he turned and deposited her into the chair.

"What—"

"My turn," Aidan cut her off as he kneeled at her feet.

Sam automatically lifted her hips as he shifted her skirt, bunching the material and pushing it up to her waist. He pulled her hips forward so that they rested at the end of the seat and Sam allowed her shoulders to fall back against the chair in a reclining position.

Aidan slid a finger along the seam of her panties, staring hard at the silky G-string that left little to the imagination. This woman had a panty collection designed to drive a guy wild.

"Nice," he said without looking up at her, continuing to admire the little blue scrap of material barely covering her.

Sam had no time to respond before he pulled the material aside and leaned closer. He placed one of her legs over his shoulder and pressed his lips to her inner thigh. Her muscles quivered involuntarily as the rough skin on his cheek brushed lightly against the sensitive skin while his lips made a lazy trail up her thigh.

His movements had turned leisurely, belying his impatient need from mere seconds before.

Sam's breath hitched as he moved closer to where she really wanted his mouth. Her fingers twitched, wanting to grab his head when he switched his attention to her other thigh, tracing the same agonizingly slow path closer, closer, and yet still not close enough.

Her eyelashes fanned on her cheekbones as she closed her eyes in response to the heat of his mouth. As if hearing her unspoken plea, Aidan used his thumbs to gently open her folds.

A groan slid past her lips as he began to lightly tongue her clit. The gentle pressure was a provocative tease and Sam felt her hips involuntarily moving closer to his mouth, pleading without words.

His hot breath tickled her skin with his quiet chuckle at her impatience.

In no hurry, Aidan slid his tongue along her folds before moving his tongue inside her.

The sensation brought her eyes wide open as she clutched the arms of the chair for support. "Aidan..." His name was a soft sigh on her lips.

With one hand on the soft skin of her belly, Aidan held her still while he delved deep into her heat with his tongue. Her soft cries of pleasure only fueled his desire to drive her over the edge.

Lifting his head, he reached his hand toward her face and lightly pressed two fingers to her lips. Sam allowed her tongue to wet his fingers before drawing them deep into her mouth. She gently nipped the tips of his fingers as he slowly pulled them back out, causing his stomach to clench with lust.

He was still excruciatingly hard with need, but right now he was enjoying bringing her to the brink.

Holding her heavy-lidded gaze, he brought his fingers back down and slowly slid them inside her. When her eyes closed on the edge of a moan, Aidan lowered his mouth once more, this time to her clit. He surrounded the hot little nub with his lips and lightly sucked. Sam bucked against him and clenched her fingers in his hair.

Working his fingers as he had his tongue, he explored the heat of her pussy using the rhythm her restless hips set.

His name was now a whispered litany on her lips.

Flicking her clit with his tongue, he drew a cry from her. Once more he pulled the hot button into his mouth, this time exerting more pressure. He felt her inner muscles begin to tighten around his fingers as her orgasm built.

“Aidan!” Sam reached behind her, grasping the back of the chair as the climax crashed into her, his talented mouth wringing every last drop of pleasure from her.

Moments passed as she struggled to find her breath. Aidan was resting his forehead on her thigh, breathing heavily as well.

Sam shifted in the chair and Aidan lifted his head, watching her with hungry eyes. A siren’s smile curved her lips as she slowly stood, pulling him up with her. Slowly, she grasped the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head.

When she reached back to unclasp her bra, Aidan stopped her. “Leave it.”

With both hands on her hips, he moved her to stand between him and the desk, pushing the chair away without a backward glance. It skittered into the wall behind them.

The fabric of her skirt was still bunched at her hips and he pulled it higher, exposing her panties entirely. He turned her around and urged her up to the edge of the desk, lightly pushing on her back and forcing her to bend at the waist.

Sam pushed everything to the side, clearing a space on the desk. Her movements stretched her farther, exposing her ass to his view. She reached her arms along the warm expanse of wood and turned her head to send a come-hither glance back at him.

His gaze was riveted on the now-exposed heat of her. Almost absently, he smoothed his hands up and down her back, keeping his gaze glued to her ass and the tiny scrap of G-string that was so perfectly revealing.

Leaning forward, he rubbed his erection along the cleft of her ass. He quickly sheathed his cock before hooking his thumb around the thin string of her panties. Pulling it aside, he nudged her legs into a wider stance before guiding his head slowly into her pussy.

They groaned together in abject pleasure as he began to slide his length inside her inch by inch. Placing both hands on her waist, Aidan thrust hard, burying himself completely inside her.

Sam's breath caught as her body stretched to accommodate his size.

A heartbeat, two—several more heartbeats passed before he began to move again.

Sam propped herself up on her elbows as Aidan pounded a slow rhythm into her folds. She felt him shift and lean forward. One hand moved up her spine in a caress, traced along the edges of her bra. His hand slid around to the front where he grasped the right cup of her bra and pulled down, freeing her breast.

He began to thrust harder, his breath quickening as he cupped her breast. Sam moaned as he gently kneaded her soft flesh. She instinctively pushed back against him, taking him deeper with each thrust.

His fingers plucked lightly at her nipple once, twice, before his hand enveloped her breast once more. The gentle swaying of her gorgeous heavy mounds each time he slid into her was driving him wild.

"Aidan!" She moaned his name, pushing her hips back at him insistently. "God, I'm close again."

Her soft words were all it took to bring him to the edge. Releasing her breast, he brought both hands back to her waist and slid his cock hard and fast into her welcoming heat. His balls drew up tight and he felt the pressure building.

When Sam cried his name one last time, he fell over the edge with her in the most intense orgasm of his life. He continued to thrust inside her, allowing her hot folds to wring every last drop from him.

With his muscles shaking, he leaned forward to press a soft kiss to her shoulder. Then, unable to help himself, he turned his head to inhale the soft, heady scent that was distinctly Sam.

Oh boy—was he in deep with this one.

## **Chapter Six**

Sam woke early Monday morning, stretching luxuriously. When she'd finally managed to drag herself home yesterday after her "meeting" with Aidan, she'd felt very tired. Deliciously so.

Smiling wickedly at the memory, she flicked her gaze to the clock, surprised to find she'd beat her alarm by a good ten minutes. Unable to wipe the satisfied grin from her face, she rolled out of bed, shutting off her alarm in the process. Strolling to her dresser, she reached for the workout clothes she'd neatly piled on top the night before.

Three mornings a week she got up early to use the spinning cycle she'd splurged on. She found it a great way to wake up and even contemplate her latest designs. She called it her moving meditation. Kelli and Paige called it a waste of extra sleep.

A soft chuckle slipped past her lips. Quickly stepping out of her chemise, she reached for the cycling shorts. She hesitated only when her gaze skimmed across the small wheel tattoo gracing the top of her foot.

Sam loved the small, ever-present reminder in her life. She'd had it put on the top of her foot, by her toes, as a reminder to continue taking steps forward in life. Whether Kelli's tarot cards were hokey or not, they'd changed her outlook and she never forgot that. Sam felt as if she had opened her eyes for the first time five years ago.

Opportunities, chance, change. They'd all become irreplaceable concepts in her everyday life. And learning to see the good in the bad and the bad in the good had also become necessary skills.

Sure she'd had things backfire and opportunities turn sour, but more importantly, she'd had few regrets. And she planned to continue that lucky streak. No way would she be one of those people who constantly uttered the phrases "what if" or "if only".

Sam felt she'd achieved a nice balance between the conservative and the foolish when it came to risk taking. She and her friends joked that she was the middle ground while Kelli was the risk-taking extreme and Paige, the conservative extreme. But the payoff was well worth it—fantastic girlfriends, a steady stream of clients walking through their business doors and now Aidan.

Shaking her head and returning her focus to the task at hand, Sam allowed the corners of her mouth to stay in a smile. Yes, Kelli's harebrained idea had certainly turned into more than she would have ever expected. To anyone else, it would seem ridiculous. Sam chose to view it as her private joke. One she could take to the bank, both literally and figuratively speaking.

After pulling on the rest of her clothes and her spinning shoes, she walked to the spare bedroom she'd turned into her exercise room, grabbing a water bottle from the fridge along the way. Cycling in the quiet of her own home was a great way to start the day. And because she'd been blessed with a nice figure, compliments of good genes, the least she could do was maintain it with regular exercise.

Strapping her feet into the stirrups of the cycle, Sam spent the next hour doing just that.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Paige popped her head into her office to tell Sam she was calling it a night, Sam had managed to clear out her in-box, sign a contract with a new client and complete the majority of the main floor of Aidan's floor plan. She just needed his input to finish some of the finer details.

"Looks like you're in your zone, so I won't bother you. I just wanted to say bye," Paige said quietly from the doorway.

Glancing away from her computer screen, Sam blinked a few times to bring her friend into focus. Smiling in welcome, she motioned her in. "Yeah, I've managed to make a productive day out of it so far."

"An understatement as usual, I'm sure," Paige replied somewhat dryly, sitting in the chair opposite Sam's desk. "You're the only person I know who not only looks forward to Mondays but actually turns them into useful days. It's enough to make a person hate you."

Leaning back in her chair, Sam laughed softly, unable to contradict her. "Well, I feel as if I've been more productive today than I've been for the past few weeks. So I guess you could say it's been a makeup day."

Paige flashed her a wry glance but said nothing.

Waving a hand dismissively, Sam nodded. "I know, I know. If you were Kelli, you'd say 'I told you so, blah, blah, blah'."

"Hmm. I don't think I'd go quite that far. I'm usually not much for the 'blah, blah, blah' myself," Paige replied, failing to hide her smile. Which was a trifle too smug in Sam's opinion.

"Regardless, it was a good weekend and a good day back to work. I might even call it quits before seven o'clock tonight."

Paige stood, smoothing her fashionable silk skirt in an unconscious gesture. "Now that I'd have to see to believe."

A paperclip hurtled through the air, missing her friend's quickly retreating back. "Very funny. Go home already!" Sam yelled after her in mock anger.

Paige peeked back in the doorway once more. "Glad to hear the rest of your weekend went well."

"Me too," Sam replied with a wistful smile, though Paige was already halfway down the hall. It was probably just as well. She'd no doubt report back to Kelli who would call and tease her unmercifully before asking for every last detail—then outlining in far too explicit detail just what Sam should do next.

What would a girl do without her best friends to keep her humble? Laughing to herself, she turned back to her computer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Still glued to her computer screen at 7:30 p.m., Sam heaved a weary sigh when she finally spared the clock a glance.

"Guess I should call it a night," she muttered under her breath, hating that Paige had been right.

It took five minutes to shut down her computer, tidy her desk and make her way to the foyer of the building. Shutting the glass doors behind her, she double-checked to make sure they were locked and secure. Satisfied, she headed toward her car, thankful the parking lot was brightly lit, especially with her night owl work habits.

A familiar figure leaning against her car stopped her dead in her tracks.

Aidan straightened when he saw Sam had finally noticed him. He'd meant to stay away for at least a few days, but he'd finally given up that futile fight when he'd thought of nothing but Sam all day. Again.

He'd thought about the way she looked, the way she smelled, the way she sounded... He told himself he was ten kinds of an idiot, but interestingly enough the thought didn't faze him in the least. That particular fact should have scared him more.

He let his gaze travel slowly over her formfitting, v-neck cashmere sweater and slim trousers. This woman made his blood run hot in even the classiest business attire. Then again, it wasn't only the clothes that did it for him. It was all of her.

Aidan allowed his lips to quirk as he took a step closer. "Long day at the office?"

He watched her breasts rise and fall as she took a quick breath. After a moment, he lifted his gaze to meet hers, clearly visible in the fluorescent lights shining down on them. She was staring at him with a mixture of curiosity and desire.

"I was on a roll today and hated to quit before I'd made a dent in my workload." She didn't ask why he was there, but the question was in her eyes.

Half afraid to touch her, Aidan kept his hands hanging loosely at his sides. "Have you had dinner?"



Sam tilted her head in consideration, a smile flirting at her lips. "Not yet."

"Good." Taking his opening, Aidan grasped her elbow and guided her past her car toward his SUV. When she didn't protest, Aidan felt his gut unclench slightly as his jumbled nerves settled slightly.

Settling her into the passenger seat, he dared to place a soft kiss on her lips. Mostly because he couldn't help himself—he just had to touch her, taste her. Even that light brush of his lips on hers sent fire racing along his skin. He hesitated for a moment, hoping to catch his breath. When he finally managed to pull away, she wore a sleepy, seductive look.

He didn't allow his triumphant smile to break loose until he'd shut her door and walked around to the driver's side. Damn he was glad he'd planned this!

He slid behind the wheel and deftly pulled into traffic, which wasn't too heavy this time of night downtown.

Once on the road, Sam looked over. "Mind if I ask where we're going?"

Aidan hesitated for a split second before replying, "On a picnic."

Sam blinked and turned to peer out the passenger side window. "At night?"

The doubt was obvious in her tone and Aidan began to feel the anticipation thrum through him. His only answer was a nod.

When he remained quiet, Sam lightly shrugged her shoulders. "Who am I to question the strange habits of a writer?" she mused in a teasing tone.

A short bark of laughter escaped before he managed to bite it back. "I'm working around the long work hours that *you* keep, actually."

Sam smiled sheepishly at him. "Ah, gotcha."

Aidan continued, laughter in his voice. "To be fair, this is one of the few times my 'strange habits' aren't to blame. There's a good chance you'd find me parked in front of my laptop at this time on a normal day."

Interested in this tidbit from his life, Sam shifted in her seat to give him her full attention. "What sort of strange things do you do?"

Aidan arched a brow but kept his eyes on the road. "Are we still talking writing?"

In the dim interior he couldn't see well, but he could have sworn a blush swept across her cheeks.

"That came out rude, didn't it?" Her dark hair swept across her cheeks as she shook her head. "Sorry, that's not what I meant. Yes, I'm talking about writing."

Not in the least perturbed, Aidan placed his hand on her thigh and squeezed lightly. "I was teasing. I knew what you meant. A lot of people assume that because I write dark mysteries I tend to lead an odd life."

He kept his hand on the soft material of her slacks, loving the feel of her lean muscle encased in such a sleek, sexy package. His grip on the steering wheel remained relaxed as he focused on keeping his anticipation from overwhelming him. He'd spent most of his day planning this evening.

Truth be told, the only thing Aidan had accomplished since leaving her office yesterday was writing a half-assed paragraph that a fifth-grader could have put to shame, which he'd later deleted out of disgust. Oh yeah, he'd also managed to burn a grilled cheese sandwich beyond recognition, spill coffee on his favorite Gonzaga Bulldogs sweatshirt and then—only then—inspiration had hit.

Unfortunately, it hadn't been the literary kind.

No, his muse had been suspiciously quiet today. Instead, he'd thought of Sam. And her soft skin, her talented mouth, her... Aidan inhaled deeply, fighting for control over his crazy thoughts. Somehow, in the short course of one weekend he'd managed to revert to nothing better than a shadow of his fifteen-year-old horny self. *Down, boy*, he commanded silently to himself.

Anyhow, he'd thought of Sam and little else. About their after-hours deal, their previous interludes and how he could get creative with the situation. Namely, how he could get her out of her office and somewhere that they were not only on neutral

ground, but also where it would seem more like a...well, a real date. He held no illusions that he was any sort of Don Juan romantic type. And if he ever turned into that type he prayed someone would have enough mercy to shoot him. On the other hand, he wasn't such a jackass that he wanted this to be completely about sex. Granted, it was *mostly* about sex, but he had never reacted to a woman quite the way he reacted to Sam. The sex was just a really hot bonus. The kind of bonus that kept him wanting more. All the time.

Like right now.

Gritting his teeth, he tried to remember the purpose of picking Sam up at her office. His inspired idea had actually stemmed from their working relationship. To distract himself today, he'd gone to visit his property, surveying the area where his house would sit. As he'd sat looking over the fifteen acres of gently sloped hills and patches of trees, he'd wanted to bring Sam there. Again.

They'd been there once, when he'd initially hired her. She'd wanted to see the land and where he wanted the house, talk about the potential views, angles and assorted information. At the time she'd had her hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail and she'd been wearing a dark gray suit jacket, a demure lace camisole and a simple pencil skirt that had flirted above the tops of her knees. Aidan had been so turned on by the modest attire he'd been unable to hold up his end of the conversation. Frankly, all he could really remember about the day was imagining how good she would look out of the suit.

And as he'd remembered that day, Aidan decided he wanted to create a new memory of her. Of the two of them on his property. Preferably one that required no clothes and nothing but the stars above them.

Realizing she was still waiting for him to speak, he flashed an apologetic smile. "Sorry, sometimes I get lost in my head and have trouble finding my way back out. That can be one of the strangest things about being a writer. Trying to live a normal life when you have so many lives trying to play out in your head."

Sam was resting her head against her seat, watching him. "Is that just a politically correct way of saying you're schizophrenic?"

Shocked, Aidan took his eyes from the road to look at her. He barely managed to catch her lower lip twitching. He had to laugh at her nerve. "You'd think so, wouldn't you?" he mused aloud, charmed by her teasing. "When I'm under a deadline or I'm really on a roll with a scene, I tend to be a recluse who's as antisocial as a person can get."

"Are we talking long beard, no shower, shunning-all-contact-with-people type of recluse?" This time her voice was more curious than teasing.

"Mmm, not quite that bad. I still take a shower, and though I might get a bit scruffy, I usually can't stand to go more than a few days without shaving. And I stay in contact with people via email." Aidan didn't bother to mention that only included his editor, agent and parents. "I do occasionally forget to eat a meal, but that's about it."

"Okay." Sam pursed her lips. "I'm still waiting to hear about the strange habits."

Not wanting to disappoint, Aidan rubbed a hand across his cheek as he thought. "Well, I don't shop. I order everything over the internet and have it delivered, groceries included."

Obviously not impressed, Sam waved a hand prompting him on. "And?"

"Ah, well, let's see. I won't do book signings or make public appearances. But," he heaved a sigh. "That's really because I can't stand crowds and you'd be amazed at some of the groupies out there for writers."

"Especially a writer as sexy as you." Sam's eyes shimmered with mirth and desire.

"Not exactly," Aidan said wryly, more than a little pleased she found him sexy. "It's more the nut jobs who are a little too intense with their interest in the bad guys in my books. You'd be amazed at some of the emails I get from fans wanting more details on the crimes committed, what my sources are, if I've ever committed the crimes myself and the list goes on. Some of these people need serious counseling, medication and maybe some time in the loony bin. Or behind bars."

Grimacing, Sam shifted again in her seat, looking out at the road before them. "I'd never thought of that."

It wasn't something Aidan wanted to think about either. Hoping he hadn't spoiled the mood, Aidan quickly changed the subject. "About the picnic..."

"Our picnic under the moon?"

He had her full attention again. The warm humor, the desire, was back in her voice and wrapped around him like silk. Aidan felt lust grip him at the almost tangible contact.

"Yeah. We're heading out to my property." His voice came out a little rough around the edges.

"Really." She sounded intrigued and a little surprised at his disclosure.

"Yes, really," Aidan replied, daring to look over at her. The speculative gleam in her eyes had his dick at full attention.

Sam looked away first, trying to see where they were at. Aidan had turned onto the Palouse Highway and she made a small sound as she realized they were almost there.

Turning back to him, she placed her hand over his, where it still rested on her thigh. "I can't wait to see what you've packed for dinner."

Aidan swallowed hard. He planned on both of them leaving with sated appetites all the way around. His hand rubbed along her thigh, enjoying the feel of her leg beneath his fingers and her hand above.

He wanted to say something witty or sexy or any damn thing, but his throat closed up. The words in his head sometimes didn't seem to want to come out of his mouth when he was around her. But he sure as hell hoped she liked what he'd packed too.

The next few minutes passed in silence as Sam watched the scenery. There wasn't much to see with the sun already set, but the moon cast enough light to give shape to the rolling hills and trees and every now and then a house set far back from the road.

Turning onto the gravel road that brought them closer to his property, Aidan gave her thigh one last brief caress before bringing both hands back to the wheel. Here was where the road got a bit bumpy. One last turn brought them to the dirt road that would soon be his driveway.

It was a half-mile to the house site and Aidan couldn't have been happier with it. He'd always wanted a house situated away from the road, away from prying eyes. And for tonight's adventure, that was going to be exactly what they needed.

After a moment, Aidan slowed and came to a stop. Once the keys were out of the ignition, he turned to her with a half smile. "Ready?"

Sam peered into the dark, wondering what was waiting, knowing she would be more than pleasantly surprised. She flashed him a smile in return. "Very."

Aidan hopped out and came around to help her out of the SUV. Once she'd set both feet on the ground, he pulled her close and cupped her chin with both hands. He held her gaze right up until his lips touched hers. With a low growl, he tilted his head and slid his tongue between her welcoming lips. He couldn't help but close his eyes against the fierce desire pounding through him. She fit against him so perfectly he had to wonder why he beat himself up questioning what was obviously so right. And just that quickly, he no longer cared.

Sam's hands clutched at his waist as she drew closer. Long moments passed as she melted into his kiss, his heat. When he finally drew back, she took a shaky breath. "Wow." Her whisper seemed so loud against the quiet backdrop of night surrounding them.

Aidan leaned his forehead against hers, his breath ragged. "I should probably say something romantic right about now but the only thing that comes to mind is *damn* that drive took too long."

Laughing, Sam impulsively hugged him closer, nestling her face into his chest. "I couldn't agree more."

Keeping her pulled close to his side, Aidan walked around back and opened the hatch, lifting out a blanket and picnic basket with his free hand.

"You really did plan a picnic." Sam sounded surprised. "I thought that was guy speak for...something else..." She trailed off.

"The picnic part was true, the rest was merely implied." Aidan smiled in self-deprecating humor. "Writer or not, guys don't usually speak about those things, they just do them."

He led her to a circle of large stones he'd collected earlier in the day. Handing her the blanket, he gestured beside the stones. "Would you mind spreading the blanket out here?"

While Sam unfolded the soft wool, he put the basket down and jogged back to the vehicle to grab the few small logs he'd purchased at a sporting goods store. It took him a minute to arrange the logs and grab a handful of dead grass to start the small fire.

Sam sat on the blanket with her knees curled under her, watching him light the fire and wait patiently while it grew large enough.

Finally joining her on the blanket, Aidan pulled the picnic basket closer. "Food first?"

She didn't bother pretending she didn't know what he was asking. Leaning toward him, she rested her weight on her hand and her hair swept along her neck as she shifted to face him fully. "We'd better. I haven't eaten since noon. I'm sure I'll need the energy." Her lazy smile turned his stomach upside down.

"Ah, right." Aidan looked at the basket blankly.

Food. She wanted him to serve the food.

Moving on autopilot, Aidan unlatched the small leather strap holding the wicker basket closed. Blindly reaching in, he pulled out a bottle of merlot and two plastic wineglasses. He handed them to Sam.

"Corkscrew?"

Aidan peered inside the cloth-lined basket and wordlessly placed it in her upturned palm. Next came the chicken Caesar salad and crusty rolls, followed by the small fruit platter he'd had a café pull together for him.

Spreading everything out on the blanket between them, Aidan looked up to gauge Sam's reaction.

She held out a glass to him. "This is a wonderful surprise."

Aidan glanced at the food before them, a little nervous now. "I hope it will be enough. I should have had them put a few more —"

"Aidan." Her quiet voice carried over the soft crackle of the fire and stopped him mid-sentence. "The food is wonderful. Much better than the can of soup I would have eaten at home."

He was amused by her wry tone, knowing he would have done pretty much the same thing for dinner if left to his own devices.

She took a sip of the wine and closed her eyes. "Mmm. This is delicious." The firelight spread faint shadows across her features, lending her classic beauty a delicate cast. The way she was lounging comfortably on the blanket was far more seductive than she probably realized. He watched her stare into her glass, absently swirling the rich liquid around.

Aidan wanted to throw the food back in the basket and forget about it. He was a starving man, but the Caesar salad wasn't going to cut it by a long shot. Never in his life had he wanted to get inside a woman like he did Sam. Body and mind.

As she took another leisurely sip, Aidan was struck by how right it felt to be with her.

That and how he really, really wanted to get dinner over with.

Needing to keep his fingers busy, Aidan began filling the plastic plates with food.

Sam watched him over the rim of her glass. "Is it hard to converse with mere mortals when you're so gifted with words?"



Startled by the question, Aidan almost lost the spoonful of salad he was trying to put on her plate. "What?"

She offered a negligent shrug. "I just wondered if it was sometimes tedious for you to talk to people when you must have such an expansive vocabulary. Do the 'ums' and 'ahs' that make up everyday conversation grate on you?"

His mouth opened and closed as he tried to think about how to answer. Finally blowing out a breath, he looked over at the fire, searching his "expansive vocabulary" for a suitable response. He offered the truth. "No and no."

She waited in expectation. When he wasn't more forthcoming, her brows drew down in a slight frown. "No, what?"

"No it's not hard to talk to people even though I'm a writer and no, repetitive words don't usually grate on me." Aidan handed her a plate of food and began to fill his own. "My style of writing isn't necessarily reflected in my day-to-day conversation. Does it bother you that I'm not more of a witty conversationalist?"

Sam watched his eyes, which stayed glued to his task. "Not at all. And I wouldn't word it quite like that. I actually appreciate the fact that you don't feel the need to fill pockets of silence with asinine babbling," she said, digging into her food.

Aidan was amused at her dry comment. "Most women are uncomfortable with it."

"I don't want you to think I brought it up because I was uncomfortable." She sat back and bit into her crusty roll. After a few moments of chewing, she looked thoughtful. "It adds to the persona of sexy, reclusive mystery writer. The strong, silent type and all." She waved the roll with a flourish.

With a grimace, Aidan put the lid back on the salad and placed it in the basket. "That's not the image I'm going for. I wasn't trying to portray *any* type of image."

Smiling now to show she was teasing, Sam said, "Oh of course not."

Catching her eye, he finally relented with a rueful grin. "I usually don't have much to say for a couple of reasons. One, I'm working on story lines, character development

and plot twists in my head and am distracted. Being a writer means living in your head more than in reality at times. Or two, I know I'll stick my foot in my mouth and I'd rather err on the side of caution and say nothing. I've repeatedly been told I lack tact and some people seem to find that particular trait offensive."

Laughing outright, Sam put her plate down to avoid spilling her food. "You are a bit blunt at times, but again, I can appreciate that. I think a lot of people out there tiptoe around what they really want to say. It's a waste of time because it takes that much longer to get to the point."

Secretly thrilled she so easily accepted one of his worst traits, Aidan grinned as he selected a strawberry from his plate. "Do you get that a lot in your line of work? People tiptoeing around what they really want?"

She was thoughtful. "I have. Usually though, it's not so much a matter of not *saying* what they want, it's more not *knowing* what they want." She popped a grape into her mouth. "A client can be adamant about how they want their kitchen layout, for example, but when they see it on the blueprints it can suddenly seem all wrong and they'll want a complete overhaul. That sort of thing." She shrugged and nibbled on her roll.

And that was his cue.

He'd only finished half his food but he set his plate aside. She'd thankfully finished most of hers, so he gently took the plate out of her hands.

She watched him with heated interest. Before he could grab her glass, she tilted her head back, relishing the last swallow.

Aidan stared at her exposed neck, remembering her delicate flavor. His voice was hoarse as he admitted, "I know exactly what I want. And I've never had a problem saying it."

Sam turned to place her glass a safe distance away. "And what would that be?"

Raw hunger and naked truth shone in his eyes. "You. I want you and I want this. I couldn't think about anything else today. It scares the hell out of me and yet you fascinate me and I don't want to be anywhere else."

Sam's breath hitched. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip and swallowed, hoping to ease her suddenly dry throat. His words scared her too. But the wild beating of her heart wasn't all due to desire.

On the other hand, she didn't know if she could respond in kind. Not yet.

"I..." Her words caught in her throat. Trying again, her voice broke slightly as she managed to say, "I'm not sure what to say to that." She broke eye contact briefly, needing respite from his honest intensity. After a few shaky breaths, she looked back. "I want you and I want this too."

He seemed to understand she was struggling and he nodded slowly. "All I'm asking of you is to be here, right now." He paused a beat then said, "I needed you to know how I felt."

"Thank you. I am here with you, right now," she whispered, repeating his words.

Aidan leaned forward, closing the distance between them to press his lips to hers. The kiss was gentle and sweet. He needed her to know he was serious, that *she* was more and *this* was more.

She brought her hand to his cheek, a light caress of understanding.

That was the sign that he needed. The tight leash he'd kept himself on was gone and he hauled her into his lap, his tongue plunging past her lips.

Sam met him with equal fervor. He was overwhelming her with his touch, with his words. But she could analyze the situation to death later. Right now she had more pressing matters to deal with.

Moving off his lap, she lay back on the blanket, grasping his shirt and pulling him down with her.

His hand crept under her sweater as his lips resumed their exploration of her mouth.

"Wait." Sam pushed at his shoulders gently and when he moved, she quickly pulled her sweater off. Because she was still half-reclining, he helped her with the clasp of her bra. She placed them away from the fire and turned her attention back to him. "The clothes should probably go now. I'd hate to pull them off in the heat of passion only to let them succumb to the heat of the fire if they accidentally get too close." The husky humor in her voice barely got through to him.

Impatient, Aidan ripped his shirt off and stood quickly, disposing of his jeans as well. They fell into an unceremonious pile, well away from the flames.

Sam took the time to divest herself of the rest of her clothing. She lay naked before him and crooked a finger.

Not wasting a second, he sank back down to her, covering her with his body.

His lips brushed her temple. "Are you cold?"

She drew in a deep breath as he nibbled his way down her neck. "N-not in the least."

Aidan's mouth moved lower to her breasts, taking care not to miss an inch of her delicate skin.

Her head fell back as he found a nipple. She felt his teeth lightly scrape against the delicate skin. His erection pulsed against the inside of her thigh, a hot, heavy weight.

Fingers curled, she brought her hands around to his back, keeping him close.

His attention shifted to her other breast, teasing the nipple in the same fashion.

Sam writhed beneath him. "Aidan, please. Please let me taste you."

He continued his delicious assault, seeming not to have heard her.

She ran her fingers through his hair, lightly pulling until he looked up.

"I need to taste you." Her voice was throaty and tinged with desperate need.

Aidan stared at her, breathing hard. Finally he asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"Kneel beside me," she demanded.

When he shifted so he was kneeling by her head, she turned hers to face him. The firelight emphasized the lean muscles rippling across his body. Sam wanted to taste all of him.

Shifting up on her elbows, she leaned to place a kiss on his abdomen. The muscles beneath her lips contracted as she pressed feather-soft kisses along the ripped six-pack. Her tongue found the light trail of hair that led down his navel and followed the enticing path.

"Ah, Sam," he groaned, threading his fingers in her hair.

She smiled against his skin. Her lips continued their downward descent and she found what she was looking for.

Falling back to the blanket, she felt his fingers slip out of her hair. His cock was heavy with need and she stared up at it.

His eyes glittered down at her, half closed.

Sam grasped the hard shaft in her hand and gently pulled him closer. With a groan he fell forward, shifting so he straddled her on his hands and knees, his dick suspended above her lips in expectation.

Not wanting to disappoint, she wet her lips and ran them slowly along the length of him, moistening the skin.

Aidan shuddered at the contact.

"Are you cold?" she asked, repeating his earlier question.

"God no," he replied tersely.

She placed her lips against the sensitive tip and hummed softly. His softly muttered expletive told her she'd hit a hot spot.

With one hand holding the top of his shaft to her lips, she slowly turned her head from side to side, allowing the wet heat of her mouth to tease the underside of his erection. Her tongue slowly licked along the rigid length of him, wringing another expletive from his mouth.

Turning her head a little more, she gently took his sac between her lips, pulling the soft skin into her mouth. With extra care, she paid special attention to the delicate sac, feeling Aidan's muscles contract as he held himself still above her.

Pressing one last soft kiss to him, she moved her attention back to the head of his cock.

One hand gently cupping his sac, she used the other to pull the tip of him to her mouth, encircling the engorged flesh with her lips. Lightly sucking, she drew him deep into her mouth.

"Dammit, Sam," came the hoarse whisper from above her, which she ignored.

A salty drop had appeared on the tip and she allowed his taste to invade her senses. Her tongue rubbed along the underside of his shaft as she drew him in, again and again.

With a rough cry, he pulled away. "I can't...have to stop...too soon," he gasped. He pulled her up to a sitting position. "I always return the favor."

When she shifted to her knees, he lay where she had. His warm hands grasped her hips, bringing her closer. The crackle of the fire beside them was the only sound to be heard as Sam wondered at what he wanted her to do.

After she hesitated he offered a bare hint of a smile. "You'll need to straddle me, sweetheart."

He grasped her thigh, helping her shift until she was completely exposed above him.

Sam felt much more vulnerable in this position than she had in her office. It seemed far more intimate.

Aidan must have seen the wariness on her face because he looked up at her with those heated, dark brown eyes. "Trust me."

"I...ah..." Any comment she'd hoped to make trailed off along with her reluctance as he pressed his lips against her curls.

His arms wrapped around her thighs, pulling her impossibly closer as his hands moved to gently spread her folds.

True to his word, he returned her favor by placing his lips to her clit and humming gently.

Sam's hips bucked against him at the wild sensations that coursed through her. It was amazing and it was too much all at once.

He whispered something against her skin, but Sam was too caught up in the feelings he was creating within her to make out his words.

His thumbs spread her gently as his tongue traced a leisurely path along her folds, starting at her clit and gliding down until he could plunge his tongue inside her depths. A whimper escaped as he teased her by slowly making his way back up, nibbling lightly along the way.

"Sammm..." He drew her name out, allowing the vibrations to tantalize the sensitive nub.

Her chin dropped to her chest as she moaned.

"Sam, sweetheart, I want you to touch yourself." His tongue plunged inside her once more after the whispered command.

She couldn't respond as her thighs trembled with the effort to remain upright.

"Sam," he repeated when she didn't say anything. "Sam, I want you to touch yourself. Your breasts, sweetheart. I want you to touch yourself there."

Automatically her hands went to her breasts, cupping them.

He rewarded her by sucking on her clit.

Sam cried out, rocking gently against his mouth.

"That's it. You are so beautiful." His murmur was reverent. "Touch yourself like you want me to touch you."

Sam moved her fingers to her nipples, rolling the hardened flesh between her thumbs and forefingers. She pulled on her nipples lightly as his tongue slid inside her once more. Her head lolled to one side as he flicked his tongue back and forth across her clit.

Unable to take anymore, Sam dropped forward. "Aidan, I need you inside me. Now."

He moved his arms so she could shift off him. As she lay back on the blanket, he grabbed a condom from the pocket of his jeans and quickly rolled it on.

Moving above her, he placed his hands on either side of her head. His dick was nestled in the juncture of her thighs and he stilled.

She looked up, wondering why he'd stopped.

He caught her glance and held it. "You are so beautiful," he repeated.

She didn't have time to respond before he slid into her with one thrust.

Her hands pulled him closer as he found the perfect rhythm, rocking against her. She pressed her lips to his shoulder, kissing and nibbling at the corded muscles that moved with him under the soft light of the fire.

His breath was hot against her ear as he began to move faster. He shifted forward just slightly and every time he slid in, his shaft rubbed against her clit.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders at the satisfying friction. Each stroke brought her closer.

Muttering her name, his lips found hers and he kissed her hard. His tongue moved in tandem with each thrust of his hips.

Sam lifted her hips to meet his as he thrust harder, driving deeper. The increased sensation to her clit was too much and not enough.



She broke the kiss, drawing in a deep breath. "Please, Aidan..." She wasn't sure what she was pleading for, but she needed more of something.

Hard and deep, he continued his pace, and she felt her climax building.

Shifting forward yet again, Aidan was able to increase the contact with her clit, tearing a moan from her throat. And that was all it took.

Her fingers convulsed against him as she shattered with the most intense climax of her life.

He followed seconds later, throwing his head back and shouting her name.

As her body continued to tremble with sensations, she could feel him pulsing inside her, his own climax drawn out.

When she was able to open her eyes, she looked up to see him clenching his own tightly shut. Concerned, she touched his shoulder. "Aidan?"

Without opening his eyes, he made a conscious effort to relax and failed. "Just...a sec."

After a minute had passed, he finally let his arms relax and he shifted his weight off Sam, collapsing beside her.

Her hand brushed across his forehead. "Are you okay?"

Aidan couldn't even summon a laugh at her question. Was he okay? Hell yes. Hell no. He didn't know. He didn't think his blunt honesty would be appreciated at the moment and tried to keep his mouth closed. But obviously his brain had other ideas.

The words spilled forth, unbidden. "That was the most freaking amazing experience of my life. And now that I'm completely in love with you, I don't have a damn idea what to do about it."

## Chapter Seven

Once again, Sam found herself alone on a Friday night. And once again, she was at the office working. Or rather, trying to work and doing a miserable job of it.

It had been four days since Aidan had made his shocking declaration. Four of the longest days of her life. And it was all her fault.

Sam visibly cringed as she recalled, for the thousandth time, her reaction to his shocking statement. She had, without a doubt, completely freaked. Never in her twenty-seven years had someone told her they loved her. Not like that. And to hear it after fantastic sex when her emotions were already in chaos had been like getting a face full of ice cold water.

She'd flinched and all but shouted, "*What?*"

He'd looked as startled as she felt.

To cover her fear, she'd quickly grabbed her clothes and pulled them on. He'd moved much more slowly, obviously confused and, Sam was certain, more than a little hurt.

She would have been too. But she hadn't known how to deal with it. They'd only known each other a few weeks and had only been sleeping together for a few days! It wasn't enough time to fall in love, was it?

It had been hard enough to be okay with sleeping with a client, but to have him profess his love had been terrifying.

And she hated herself for pushing him into the impersonal role of a client after what they'd shared. Especially because part of her had been thrilled, elated even, to know he cared. That same part of her had wanted to say something in return, but she hadn't known how.

Instead, the fearful part of her had overruled and she'd quietly asked him to take her back to the office so she could get her car. He'd tried to get her to talk on the ride home, but she had remained unresponsive. And he'd finally given up.

With a twinge of bitterness, she found it somewhat ironic that he had been the one to try to talk about it and she had been unwilling.

She was such a jerk.

And the worst thing was, she still didn't know what to say about it all. Of course, it was probably too late now.

He'd been silent when they'd arrived back at her building. He'd silently watched her get into her car and pull away before he'd disappeared down the road. Nothing more had been said.

And she hadn't heard from him since.

On the other hand, she hadn't tried to call him either. She was scared because she still didn't know what to say. Or do. That and she didn't know if she could face the honesty in his eyes.

Or the truth in her heart.

Heaving a miserable sigh, she focused on her computer screen. She'd found pathetic solace in her work. The design for Aidan's home was nearly complete. She simply needed to go over the fine details with him, work them into the scheme and get his final approval.

It was a call she was putting off until Monday, chicken that she was.

Right now she needed the support and, more importantly, the advice of her best friends.

She stared at her phone for a full minute before picking it up and slowly dialing the number she knew by heart. After two rings, she heard a voice on the other end.

"Paige?" Her voice broke. "I need to call an emergency meeting." It was their code for lots of chocolate, lots of wine and a shoulder to cry on.

"Sure, Sam, I'll call Kelli. We can be at your place in half an hour." Paige's voice was calm, soothing. And conveyed everything that Sam *wasn't* feeling.

"Okay, I'll see you then."

As she hung up, she felt marginally better. Despite Kelli's over-the-top advice about sex, she was always good at giving advice about the practical side of things too. And with Paige's input, she just might be able to get out of this mess yet.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Drink first, talk later."

The order came from Kelli, who stared at her unflinchingly.

Sam was fine with that. She obligingly took the glass of wine offered by Paige and took a sip. Nothing like a little liquid courage.

Her friends were quiet, watching her with concern as she sipped on the wine, allowing the mellow flavor to soothe her nerves. She stared broodingly into the glass, wondering where to start, what to say.

Paige made up her mind for her.

"I'm going to take a stab at this and guess something happened with Aidan." When Sam nodded glumly, she shared a glance with Kelli. "Okay. It's been a week. Are you regretting your decision already?"

Kelli held up a finger when Sam opened her mouth to speak. Without a word, she pointed to the glass. Sam gladly downed what was left in the glass.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath before responding. Before she lost her nerve, she blurted, "He told me he loved me."

The room was quiet as her friends digested that little tidbit.

Finally Kelli asked, "So why have you been working so hard and been so cranky this week?"

Shocked, Sam swung her gaze to Kelli. "Are you kidding?"

Kelli lifted a shoulder in a half shrug. "I was just asking. Most women would be happy and the relationship would progress from there. Other women would be put off by it, end things and move on."

Paige nodded sympathetically. "She's right. But there's obviously more to it, so why don't you explain what's really bothering you."

Fiddling with the stem of her glass, she thought about what was really bothering her. If she wanted advice, she needed to be totally honest.

"I freaked out when he told me."

"Why?" The question came from Kelli, who watched her with a mixture of curiosity and sisterly concern.

"Because I didn't know what to say. Because we'd just had incredible sex. Because I..."

"Because no one's ever said that to you before and it scared you," Kelli finished for her.

Sam wanted to deny it but she couldn't. Kelli and Paige knew better. With a bleak nod, she dropped her gaze back to the wineglass in her hands.

"How do you feel about him?" Paige asked softly.

"I've only known him for four weeks!" Sam wailed. "That's barely enough time to break in a new pair of shoes, let alone fall in love!"

"And so we get to the heart of the matter," Kelli announced to the room. She leaned forward and placed a hand on Sam's knee, waiting until she had her attention. "Sam, how long do you think it takes to fall in love?"

Sam thought about it and then muttered, "I don't know. Six months, a year, five years? I don't have a clue!"

"I think it's different for everyone, honey." Paige rubbed her shoulder, offering comfort.

"But four weeks just isn't..." Sam trailed off, unsure what to say.

"Isn't what?" Kelli wanted to know. "Isn't enough time? According to whose standards? Yours? His? Society's?"

When Sam didn't answer, Kelli sighed. "Samantha. It's time to spin the wheel and see what you get. Since when do you give up the opportunity of a lifetime?"

Paige nodded in agreement. "She's right again. The attraction was there long before you wanted to admit it. What are you scared of?"

"If I tell him I love him, I can't take that back."

"It's definitely not something you want to say lightly, that's for sure." Kelli was unusually solemn.

"I don't want this to end badly." And there it was. She'd finally admitted it out loud. The very fear that had caused her to run, the same fear that had kept her from picking up the phone a dozen times over the past four days.

She could no longer deny that this was one opportunity, one chance that she did not want to end badly. Because if it did, she wasn't sure she could easily let it go and walk away.

And that was the real reason she was so scared.

"If you don't say anything to him, then it already has." With those words, Kelli nailed her point home.

Sam felt sick.

She realized in that moment, with absolute clarity, that her friend was right. And she hoped like crazy she hadn't ended things before they'd even begun.

Closing her eyes, she strengthened her resolve. "Okay." She opened her eyes and felt her shoulders relax. "So what should I do about it?"

"Well..." Kelli grabbed a chocolate from the box Paige had brought with her. "Sex is always a great starting point. And makeup sex is always hot, hot, hot."

Paige and Sam both groaned, though secretly Sam felt a million times better already.

Kelli smiled in smug satisfaction. "You asked." Then she laughed and put up her hands as two pillows were hurled at her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam fell wearily into bed. Paige and Kelli had left a little after midnight and Sam felt so much better after talking about things. Her friends had always been her sounding boards and they'd been right on the money tonight.

Now all she had to do was get things clear in her own mind and then figure out what to do about it all.

But it was too late to do anything more tonight and she was way too tired to think about it anymore.

It was a matter of minutes before she fell into a fitful sleep and began dreaming...

*Sam stood in front of the giant wheel and looked at it with trepidation. It towered over her, at least ten feet tall. It was funny, but she had never before noticed how big it really was. Nor had she ever felt so intimidated. Here it seemed larger than life. And perhaps it always had been.*

*It had always been a source of positive experiences for her. She'd always spun with encouraging results and looked forward to her next chance to spin again, wondering where the pointer would land.*

*But this time was different.*

*She shivered, suddenly feeling chilled. Rubbing her arms, she studied the wheel, wondering what to do. Because this time it was so much different. The stakes were too high...*

*It was ridiculous, really. She knew she had to spin it. But she was afraid of where it would eventually land.*

*Each of the eight sections bore the picture of a face. Aidan's face, she realized after a moment of recognition. At the top of the wheel, Aidan was smiling. That sexy smile that completely transformed his face. Sam felt her own lips curve in response. But as she moved her gaze clockwise along the pictures, her smile slowly slipped away.*

*With each subsequent picture, Aidan's smile began to fade, slowly replaced by the indifferent mask he'd worn the first day she'd met him. And then, the look of hurt and bewilderment after he'd said he loved her and she'd all but run away.*

*She had put that look there. And it made her feel sick. Quickly averting her gaze, she looked over her shoulder, hoping to stall for more time.*

*Opportunities and chance. There were always certain risks involved. And the payoff could be big.*

*She firmly believed that and couldn't let the doubt creep in now.*

*Looking back, she squared her shoulders. The wheel began to move slowly.*

*Round and round.*

*Sam watched Aidan's face run through the various emotions, knowing she had to choose.*

*Long moments later, the wheel finally stopped.*

*Sam stared hard at the picture that had stopped right at the pointer. And finally smiled...*



## **Chapter Eight**

The crick in his neck was beginning to give him one hell of a headache. But it helped to distract him from the fact that he'd made a complete and utter ass of himself last Monday.

It had been a full week since he'd stupidly told Sam he loved her. A full week since he'd spoken to her. Held her. Kissed her. Made love to her.

Aidan felt like an addict being forced into detox. He felt like shit.

As long as he lived, he'd never forget the look on her face when he'd told her he loved her. Granted, he hadn't been at all romantic about it. It had come out completely wrong. He hadn't meant for it to come out at all.

But it had. And her reaction had been like a punch to his gut.

She'd completely shut down and had asked him to take her back. So he had.

He'd tried a few times to explain himself, but her silence had prevented him from saying too much. At that point, he'd already said too much and any more would have just made things worse.

Part of him wondered if it would have really been possible to make things worse.

Disgusted with himself, he pushed away from his desk and the computer he'd been typing away at mercilessly for the last week.

Striding to the kitchen, he poured himself a glass of orange juice and leveled his dark gaze out the window, not really seeing anything.

He was only marginally thankful he'd been able to finish a few chapters ahead of schedule. It was the only good thing that had come out of this mess. His muse was back with a vengeance and he'd taken advantage of it. Mostly to keep his mind off Sam.

It probably helped that he wrote dark mysteries and was able to kill off some of his characters. And he had definitely done that with relish.

The sad part was that it still hadn't eased the ache Sam had left him with.

He hadn't expected to fall in love with her. It had just...happened. Even after everything, he couldn't regret that.

It didn't matter that he still didn't know her favorite food or color. Frankly, he didn't think things like that really mattered in the end. And he'd hoped to have more time to discover those things.

What mattered was that the few times he was with her, he felt alive. Hell, he'd smiled more in four days with her than he had in four months on his own. She did that to him.

Rubbing a hand over his face, he shut off the thoughts that had played through his mind over and over, like a damn broken record. He swallowed the orange juice and put the glass in the sink.

He needed to get back to work and forget about it. It was already late in the afternoon and he still had ten pages to write before he'd give himself another break.

Settling back down at his computer, he re-read his last few paragraphs. His phone rang as soon as his fingers hit the keyboard.

He chose to ignore the annoying ringtone and kept his gaze on the computer screen, watching as words filled the page.

His answering machine clicked on and he listened with half an ear, wondering who was bugging him, hating the distraction.

"Aidan...it's Sam." Her voice seemed to echo in his office.

His fingers stilled as he sat frozen in his chair. He knew he should pick up the phone but he waited, wondering what she would say. Wondering too if he was even ready to talk to her.

"I, ah, was wondering if you were available for a meeting tomorrow at four o'clock. I've finished the preliminary design of your floor plans and need you to look a few things over and clear up a few minor details. Barring any major changes, I expect to have the final design ready for your approval shortly." She paused and Aidan wondered if she was going to say anything about last week.

"Well, I'm sure you're busy. But, ah, let me know if tomorrow won't work and we'll reschedule." Her voice softened slightly. "I'll talk to you later."

The machine clicked. She'd hung up.

Aidan felt a surge of disappointment. So she wanted to keep it all about business. Dammit to hell.

Staring blindly at his computer screen, he shook his head. It was her damn choice. And as much as he hated it, he had to respect it.

Not surprisingly, his muse went quiet.

Aidan shut off his computer and decided to go for a run. He needed to blow off a serious amount of steam if he was going to survive his meeting with Sam tomorrow.

Now he just needed to figure out how in the hell he was going to keep his stupid mouth shut and keep his hands to himself.

## **Chapter Nine**

Sam had been anxiously watching the clock all day. Aidan hadn't returned her call and she hoped that meant he was coming.

She had used the meeting as an excuse to get him here, hoping when he arrived, she'd be able to explain herself. Apologize for being a jerk. Tell him how she really felt. And with any luck, be welcomed back into his arms.

With only fifteen minutes until four o'clock, she felt her nerves getting the better of her. For once, she hadn't accomplished a thing at work. Her in-box was still full, her emails remained unanswered and she had half a dozen phone calls to return.

And she couldn't have cared less.

After her enlightening dream, Sam had realized something. When taking chances and opportunities, she also needed to have her priorities straight, otherwise it was all for naught.

Her career would always be an essential part of her. She loved what she did too much to ever give it up. But she also couldn't allow her career to keep her from having a life.

And if she was lucky—very, very lucky—Aidan would remain in her life and hopefully keep her from getting too serious.

She caught herself drumming her fingers on her desk and decided to get up. Walking out of her office, she strode down the hall to Paige's office to chat for a minute. When she peered in, Paige's assistant indicated she was with a client. Sam nodded and walked out to the foyer, absently straightening the magazines on the table.

She didn't hear the front doors open and was staring at the artwork on the wall without really seeing it.

She jumped and whirled around when Aidan cleared his throat right behind her. Her hand went to her throat as she tried to catch her breath.

They stared at each other in silence.

His dark eyes swept over her, giving no hint to his emotions. When he didn't offer a smile, she felt her stomach sink.

"Aidan, hi." Plastering her best professional smile into place, she gestured toward the hall. "Come on back, I have everything ready to go."

He nodded and followed behind her. Sam felt her heart beat harder with each step she took, her body rigid with tension.

By the time she sat behind her desk, she'd steeled her resolve.

She stared at the face that had come to mean so much to her, so quickly.

He raised a brow. "You said you wanted me to look at the plans?"

With an embarrassed laugh, she got up and grabbed the roll sitting on her drawing table. "Right, sorry." Pulling off the rubber bands, she automatically moved to the loveseat and spread the plans out on the coffee table.

She tried to ignore the sharp stab of hurt when he hesitated before sitting next to her.

Flipping to the main floor, Sam smoothed the pages flat and cleared her throat. "As you can see, I went with the open floor plan as we discussed, leaving most of the amenities on the main floor."

Aidan remained quiet, studying the plans.

Despite everything, Sam desperately wanted him to love the plans. She'd worked hard to tailor them to his exact specifications and it was important that he have the home of his dreams.

"I opened up the master bedroom a bit more and tried to offer a master bathroom that was spacious without being pretentious, as you requested."

Aidan leaned forward to get a better look.

She waited, allowing him to look his fill.

Finally he sat back and shook his head. "This is wrong. It's missing something."

Sam's heart sank as she racked her brain trying to think of what she could have missed. She began to stand. "Okay, let me grab my note pad and pen and I'll just..."

He grabbed her wrist lightly, preventing her from going anywhere. "Sam."

Slowly she sat back down, meeting his gaze.

"I don't want to talk about business, dammit."

His vehement words made her flinch. "Aidan, I don't..." She sighed. "Aidan, I'm sorry."

"I don't care about the plans!" he growled, frustration making his shoulders tense.

"I meant about last week."

Her soft words stopped him. When he said nothing, she dropped her gaze to her lap and rushed on. "You caught me completely off guard and I handled things badly."

"No, it came out all wrong," he protested.

"Oh," she could barely speak past the lump in her throat. "You...you didn't mean it?"

Rubbing a hand across his face, he shook his head. "No, that's not it. Of course I meant what I said. It just came out all wrong, like most things I say. Important things, anyway."

Sam nearly sagged with relief. "Thank God. Otherwise this sham of a meeting would have been for nothing."

Now he stopped, holding himself still. "What?"

Sam offered him a tremulous smile and decided to jump in feet first. "A wise person once told me that love is the opportunity of a lifetime." She leaned toward him, needing to touch him. "I don't want to miss out on that with you."

His mouth opened once, twice, before anything came out. "So does that mean...?" He trailed off in question, hope flaring briefly in his eyes.

"Aidan, I fell in love with you too."

"Well damn," he said softly, a huge grin transforming his face. Hauling her into his lap, he kissed her. A week's worth of pent-up desire had them both gasping for air after a few minutes.

With a shaky hand, Sam tucked her hair behind her ear. She laughed softly. "Does that mean you forgive me?"

His only answer was to nuzzle her neck, pressing a gentle kiss to the hollow of her throat.

She looped her arms around his neck loosely and closed her eyes, relishing everything that he said without words.

Then she remembered...

"What was wrong with the plans?"

Aidan grinned at her and shifted so they could both look at the plans. Pointing at the master bathroom, he said, "There's only one sink. Do you really want to share one?"

Sam just stared at him.

"And the master bedroom only has one closet. I've never had to share a closet with a woman and I'm not fool enough to start now."

Returning his grin, Sam started laughing, feeling happier than she had in a long time. "Those are changes I'll be more than happy to make."

She snuggled close, inhaling his clean, masculine scent.

"Ah, there is one other thing."

Tilting her head back, she looked at him in question. "What's that?"

"I think we're going to need to negotiate working late hours." At her raised brow, he hastily amended, "For both of us. If you have a late night, I want it to be with me, not in front of the computer here at your office."

Leaning into him, she smiled. "Deal." As an afterthought, she added, "Maybe we could go on more of those late-night picnics."

Aidan growled his agreement. “Now *that’s* a hell of an idea...”



## **About the Author**

Jessica lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and two young children. Time is a precious commodity in her house, so she uses it wisely – reading and writing as much as she can! On the rare occasion she has time to spare, she whips up new recipes in the kitchen, adds to her gemstone collection or moves through a few Sun Salutations. She loves to chat with readers, so please feel free to send her an email!

Jessica welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at [Comments@EllorasCave.com](mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com).

## **Also by Jessica Darian**

Hedonist's Paradise

The Panty Episode



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com) for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

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