



My Lips Are Sealed

By Mia Romano

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## **My Lips Are Sealed**

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## **My Lips Are Sealed**

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**Mia Romano**

**Dedication**

To my husband, Chris. You will always be my kind of hero.

# My Lips Are Sealed

## Chapter One

Jade Wellington positioned the nail near Austin's fly. Things were definitely going to get messy. Pearls of sweat beaded her forehead as she drew back the hammer.

"Wait! Not there. Move it to the right just a little."

"Here?" Jade tilted her head in the direction of her partner in crime.

"Yes, that spot right there. It's perfect!"

Jade reared back, driving the nail in with the precision of a marksman, then stepped aside to admire her mischievous deed.

She combed her fingers through jagged bangs, closed her eyes, and inhaled a breath of sultry California breeze.

"That should fix him—for *good* this time." He might as well be dead and buried, just like her marriage.

Jade's best friend, Celine, swiped soiled hands across the back of her designer jeans. "I could see this working. I mean, how many women in the town of Cranberry would be willing to fork over this much cash just to get their hands on him?"

Jade stood back, reading the poster she'd nailed to the light pole. She was proud of her cleverness.

"Missing husband—last seen running out of the neighbor's house zipping up his pants. If found, please send a \$500 reward and keep him! Please call 123-6782. P.S.—~~All major credit cards accepted.~~ CASH ONLY."

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Celine brushed a newly-perked red curl from her face. "You know, I think marking out the credit card deal was an excellent idea. With so many stolen cards these days, a girl has to be careful."

Jade shifted her eyes towards her friend. "I hate to admit it, but my mother was right in this case. He's entirely too handsome for his own good. As awful as this might sound, I almost wish he was dead." She gave one last look at Austin Wellington's photo on the poster. "One thing's for certain—I should get some interesting phone calls from it. If I'm lucky, my neighbor, Carletta, will pay to keep him, and it will cover part of next month's mortgage payment."

"Hey, he did you a big favor. You just don't realize it yet. Now you can get on with your life the way it should be."

Life. Jade's mind escaped back to her wedding day five years earlier. The same day her mother had voiced her opinion on her only daughter's future.

*"I don't see why you're in such a rush to get married, Jade. Are you pregnant? That's it, isn't it? My daughter has shamed me yet again. This is going to be so humiliating in front of the bridge club..."*

Of course, she hadn't been pregnant. Austin had made it crystal clear he didn't want children. In fact, he'd even taken extreme precautions during sex by wearing an extra condom. She'd referred to it with a giggle as his "double-coated bullet" right before he'd take aim and fire.

The memory was as fresh as the taste of salty tears now sliding down her cheeks.

Tugging at the tail of her red T-shirt, she pulled it up over her midriff and wiped away the tears in anger. A failure... she was nothing. Perhaps her mother had been right about more than Austin's good looks. She'd been a disappointment to her mother when she'd dropped out of college in the last semester of her senior year to "find herself," only one credit away from her degree. At twenty-eight, she still hadn't found what she was meant to do in life. She'd never live up to her parents' expectations of seeing her in the limelight like her cousin, Sarah, the famous Hollywood screenwriter who made thousands of dollars and didn't depend on anyone. And now she could strike one more black moment in life on her chalkboard of failures.

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Spinning on her heels, she spotted the police cruiser parked a block down the street.

Shit, shit, shit, this was just what she needed. Cops were nothing but trouble. She'd secretly dated one in college, only to have the same cop arrest her on a speeding ticket because she had torn the ticket up and thrown it in his face with a few choice words. That had taken place the day after their passionate rendezvous in the backseat of his cruiser.

She was certain this one would find some excuse to arrest her as well. He'd probably tell her she needed some kind of permit to post a sign, or some other lame excuse just to meet his monthly quota.

"Come on, Celine, let's get out of here. I'm a little nauseated."

\* \* \* \* \*

David Jackson sat in his cruiser observing the entire scene. He reared back with a solid humph spewing from his lips, and pulled the binoculars from his face. No doubt the dark-haired beauty pinning that poster to the light pole was up to no good. Women usually were. Right down to his ex-wife who'd ended up being arrested five years ago for insurance fraud.

This one was definitely going to be seeing him for a similar crime in the future. He was sure of it. Women were trouble, greedy and self-centered. It seemed the prettier they were, the harder they fell. And from the looks of this one, she wouldn't have a chance of surviving even a hint of a tumble. So what had his heart thudding so wildly, and his mind thinking thoughts of taking a good tumble with her in his bed?

He jotted down the license plate number as he watched them. Maybe he'd run a check on it to make sure the car hadn't been stolen. If the woman leaning against the light pole hadn't gotten around to stealing anything yet, she would. He shielded his chest with his hand. Women like her would reach right in and pluck a man's heart out if they wanted it badly enough. And for some odd reason, he'd be willing to let her have *his* any ole' time she'd want it.

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He turned to his partner, Jim Parrot. "So what do you think, Parrot? Want to make a bet on how long it will be before we drag her in?"

Jim reached into the paper bag for his burger. "No way am I betting you, Jackson. The last time I bet you, I had to eat peanut butter sandwiches for a week." He inspected the burger in his hand. "Not that this looks much better." He took a sniff of the burger, scrunched up his face, and slapped a twenty on the dash. "You're on...twenty says you'll have arrested her within a month for something you classify as illegal." He threw the burger back into the bag, balling it up in his fist. "I have a feeling you haven't seen the last of this one, Jackson."

David pulled onto the highway. "I give her one week—maybe less. She appears pretty desperate, if you ask me. And from the expression I saw on her face just now, I'd say she's ready to kill the guy with her bare hands."

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### **Chapter Two**

Jade slid into the seat of her silver Honda and cranked the engine.

"So, what do we do now?" She glanced over at Celine, who was inspecting a chip in her bright red fingernail polish.

"I say we head to your house, get all dolled up, and go out and celebrate your freedom! I hear there's a great band playing down at Hang 10 this evening. It's time to start living again, Jade. And I have just the right man to help you out."

Celine thought about her friend, Buddy Tempo, and giggled. It would be better to let Jade find out about Buddy later. Even though it looked like it would be purely revenge on Jade's part, Buddy would go along with the game plan. At least, he damn well better go along with her scheme. She'd paid him quite handsomely to entertain Jade.

Although Buddy's moods sometimes swung in a dangerous direction, he would keep his cool when it came to Jade. Too much was at stake in Celine's secret little game. She had her own vendetta against Austin Wellington, and was going to do everything in her power to make sure Austin got his payback.

Jade flipped her turn signal on, making a sharp turn into the gated community she called home. "A night on the town it is." She confirmed with a nod, keying in the code to open the gate. "Today starts a new existence for Jade K. Wellington."

\* \* \* \* \*



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"I never get over how massive this house is," Celine said once they were inside Jade's home. She looked at the large skylight in the twelve-foot ceiling of the living room. Shades of light from the evening sun cast a rainbow of color against dark blue walls. "And the kitchen, it's just to *die* for." Her topaz eyes skimmed over the room as she scooted her slender frame onto a stool at the bar.

"I mean wow—at least you got one thing out of this farce of a marriage."

Jade turned from the pot of coffee she was making, brushing a wisp of dark hair from her forehead.

"Keep in mind Austin is one hell of an architect. What else would you expect from a home he'd designed? The damned skunk had style. Too bad his recent taste in females has stripped him of good taste."

"True on all counts, Jade, but now you can decorate this showplace however you want."

"And it's just what I plan on doing when I get back on my feet. Except for the closets. I love big closets. Speaking of which, I think I'll go through all of them and have one gigantic yard sale. It's time to get rid of the clutter and some of the hideous outfits Austin loved to shower me with." She inched her tall frame into the chair beside Celine. "That is, whenever he was on another one of his guilt trips of unfaithfulness."

Celine rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "Oh yeah, that one purple outfit he purchased definitely has to go. What was he thinking when he toted that little number in anyhow?"

"He was thinking of how great the sex had been with Carletta the night before. So great, in fact, he saw a need to spend eight hundred dollars on the little number."

"And that lime green feather boa..." Celine continued.

Jade rested her head on her hands. "Hey, I can get some use out of it at some point. I kind of like it actually."

"So how many posters total did we end up putting out there today anyway?"

"Oh, about two hundred in all, I think, counting the ones at Wal-Mart and the grocery stores."

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Celine gave her a devilish grin.

"That ought to generate some response. Especially the one we posted on his office door."

The ringing phone sent a jolt through Jade's frazzled nerves as she reached for the receiver.

"Hello...who is this? Oh, it's only *you*, my unfaithful soon-to-be ex. What do you want?" Her voice cast a tone of annoyance. She placed her hand over the receiver, mouthing the word "asshole" in Celine's direction.

"You don't say." Jade tapped a slender nail tip against the countertop. "Three months...let me get this straight. You're willing to pay the mortgage in full for three months if I'll just take down the posters?" Her mouth coiled into a smile, showcasing the dimples in her cheeks.

"Uh huh...no, Austin, it's not a done deal. I'll have to think about it and get back to you." She gave a thumbs-up signal to her friend with a grin of pure victory. "Yes...yes, I promise, I will give you a call first thing in the morning. So long, Austin."

"Well, what do you know? Austin wants to pay me enough to cover the next three mortgage payments, if I'll just take the posters down."

Celine gave her a questionable look. "So, I mean, you *are* going to take him up on it, aren't you?" She hesitated. "This is bigger than I'd hoped for!"

"Oh sure, I'm going to take him up on it all right. I just want him to sweat it for a little while. You know, make sure several people see the poster first. I do love seeing him squirm like a worm in dirt. Little things in life can give a girl pleasure."

"But what's to say he won't go out tonight and take all of them down by himself? The deal will be off then. What will you do if that happens?"

"Oh, it's not going to take place tonight." Jade gave her a sly smile. "He was calling from Carletta's. I was staring at him right through her kitchen window while we were talking just now. Looked to me like she planned to keep him very busy for the evening, if her lack of clothing was any indication. Now, what do you think his priority is at the moment?"

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"I get the point." Celine jumped up from her chair. "Let's go get in that great closet of yours and find you a killer outfit for tonight."

They dashed upstairs, giggling like schoolgirls. "I don't know..." Jade sifted through a few outfits. "I just don't feel right about going out to celebrate something like this. I mean, I always took my marriage vows very seriously, you know? I put everything I had into this marriage and then some. I'm not ready for this yet, Celine. I need time to regroup, grieve for awhile, I guess."

"Yes, you did put all you had into your marriage. I can't argue with you there. But your marriage is over now." Celine examined a peacock blue sundress.

She sniffed a bottle of perfume, then waved a hand in front of her nose. "Austin sure didn't have expensive taste in perfume." She took in a breath. "So cheap on some things, don't you agree? And yes, I know how seriously you took your wedding vows. Remember the words in those vows 'for better or for worse'? Well, he's the worst, and you are much better now. So see, you're still in check with the vows thing."

When Jade had married Austin, she'd been eager to be the wife of someone who promised everlasting love. She'd thought he'd loved her at the time she'd said her "I do's." In reality, Austin vowed to be a successful architect no matter the cost—the kind of success which included several attempts to bribe Jade's father out of money to start his own company. True, he'd had real feelings for Jade, but his drive for success was stronger than any emotion for his bride.

Too bad Austin's blueprints for life hadn't included being faithful to one woman.

The rumors had been flying around town for the last couple of years, but Jade had chosen to be willfully blind until a month ago, when she'd caught him red-handed with her neighbor, Carletta.

Carletta, with great curves and curls, and single, had inherited her two-story brick "castle" from her parents. Or so, that's what she'd heard down at Celine's beauty shop. As far as Jade knew, she hadn't worked a day in her life except for working hard at capturing the heart of one Austin Wellington.

*Well, let him have the bimbo; they deserve each other.*

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“Maybe I’ll just skip on the band at Hang 10 tonight and start clearing some of this stuff out for a yard sale. I mean, half of this junk isn’t fit for a garbage truck to haul off. It’s time to unclutter my life. Besides, I need to watch my pennies. Working part-time at the greeting card company just isn’t going to be enough.”

“Why don’t you ask them for something full-time? I mean look at the money you’ve made for True Heart Greetings this past year. I’m sure they’d love to latch on to you full-time. I’ve seen some of the cards you write, and trust me—they are the best in the line.”

Jade nibbled at her lower lip while fumbling with a button on a vibrant fuchsia blouse. “Do you realize how hard it will be to write all those mushy little love lines now? I mean, here I am going through the final step in my divorce, and I’m expected to write about all the wonderful feelings of love? Besides, with budget cuts, they’re only able to give me part-time. The internet greeting card business is killing them.”

“You can do this, Jade. And as far as going to Hang 10, it will be my treat tonight. Is it a deal?”

“Deal.” She gave Celine a half-hearted grin.

### Chapter Three

Jade blew a short wisp of hair from her eyes. One long look in her full-length mirror amounted to a huge unanswered question. What had made Austin not desire her? She gazed at her tall, slender figure—*not bad for a woman of twenty-eight*. Of course, Carletta was younger, and in Austin's eyes, twenty-eight must seem ancient. But last night at Hang 10, Buddy Tempo had seemed to appreciate her looks.

The pair of large brown eyes in her nicely rounded face wasn't so bad. Sure, her breasts were on the small side, but Austin had always told her more than a mouthful was a waste. Besides, it would be less to sag when she got older.

"Well, obviously Austin's mouth has gotten quite a bit larger from the looks of Carletta Gibson's breasts!" she muttered at the mirror.

Jade smiled at her reflection, noting how a small dimple appeared in her right cheek—a dimple Austin had seemed to adore. But that was in the past. She couldn't dwell on it. She needed to stop blaming herself and get on with living.

She shifted into her fuzzy pink robe and matching slippers as a vision of coffee replaced thoughts of her divorce.

Grabbing the morning paper from the stoop in front of the beautiful oak door in her entryway, she threw down the paper and gave the door a good slam on its hinges. *Now, that feels better.*

*Now let me see, what kind of job could I get to increase my income?* She pulled the chair from the kitchen table and sat down with a thump. She thumbed through the classifieds. Then it struck her, right there in bold

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lettering. The entire town thought she was dumber than a coal bucket thanks to Austin, so why not start pretending to be what they expected? She'd apply for a job just like this one.

*Earn a living from home stuffing envelopes. Get paid big bucks for your work. Potential earnings of \$900 per week. Stuff-It Company needs you. Call 1-800-1234 ext. 333 and ask for Jimmy.*

"That's it!" Jade shouted out into the empty kitchen. "I could work from home and make enough to pay the mortgage, the utilities, and even have enough left over to put into savings." Too bad the walls didn't talk back to give her some form of feedback. She'd heard that these types of jobs were usually scams, but it wouldn't hurt to check it out. Maybe this one would be legitimate.

The pet adoption ads caught her eye as she thumbed through the remainder of the paper. Maybe she'd look into adopting a dog. Yes, she needed a dog. One she could name Snickers. A dog was something she could cuddle up with at night. A dog couldn't treat her as if she were a failure or use her for his own personal gain like Austin had. She made a note to check the animal shelter later in the day. Maybe if she had a pet, she wouldn't feel so lonely — wouldn't be talking to the kitchen walls, waiting for a response.

*Oh my, I think I'm losing it.*

Two cups of coffee later, she shuffled her way to the stainless steel sink, noting the beautiful pewter fixtures as she turned on the water. Austin had expensive taste. He'd given her beautiful clothes and a beautiful home, and she'd become accustomed to it. But it was a far cry from what Jade really wanted or needed. She'd wanted love and companionship, to hear the pitter-patter of little feet running down the hallway. But it hadn't happened, never would, and life felt so very shallow.

She grabbed the paper and dialed the number for the Stuff-It Company, then keyed in the extension.

"Stuff-It Company, Jimmy Boone speaking." A monotone voice came over the line. "How may I be of service?"

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"Hi...um...my name is Jade Wellington. I'm calling about the employment ad you have in the paper. The one you have advertised earning up to \$900 a month from home." She hesitated, holding her breath in anticipation. "Is the job still available?"

"Yup."

"Um...could you tell me a little bit more about it? I think I would be really good at it, and...and I'm reliable." Hey, she was getting the ditzzy thing down pretty good here!

"Well, you stuff envelopes. You know, flyers, advertisements, things like that. Then, you take 'em to the post office and mail 'em. It's pretty simple. Fold, stuff, lick, and mail. It doesn't take a rocket scientist or anything."

"Yes...yes, I could do that." She smiled into the phone.

"Tell ya what. Why don't you come into the office here...oh say around noon, and I'll show you what we mail out. Then if you're still interested, I'll give you your supplies and instruction sheets. Oh, you'll need to fill out a W-9 form, too. Uncle Sam always wants his fair share, ya know."

"Noon would be perfect." Jade scribbled down the address, thanking him for the opportunity.

The call waiting light had blinked off and on during her conversation with Jimmy Boone. Finally it had switched over to voice mail. She pressed the button and heard Austin's panicked voice.

"Hey Jade, pick up the phone, would you? You need to get those posters down, and f-a-s-t. People were following me all over the place this morning and pointing, let alone gossiping. Do something, would you? I've already taken down about twenty of them. You put so damn many of 'em up, I can't get to all of 'em. If you want your mortgage paid, you'd better act fast or the deal is off. I'll hire someone else to take care of it. The choice is yours. I can pay someone what I'd pay you to do it, or you can earn a roof over your head for three more months. You're such a screw up, Jade."

*Aah...life's little pleasures*, she thought with a smile. At least she didn't literally screw everything in sight, like he did. Maybe she'd take time for another sip of coffee before returning his 911 call to her.

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Okay, so she'd achieved her goal, and she really needed the money. She knew Austin well enough to know he would do exactly as he said when it came to spending money for his own selfish needs. She hated being dependent on someone; never had she intended to rely on someone else for her livelihood. Yet here she was, hanging by a slivered thread of existence. She swore she'd make it on her own after this. Never again would she be so stupid, so vulnerable when it came to her life. She dialed Austin's cell phone as she went to open the shade on the kitchen window. Three rings brought an answer on the other end, as well as a frustrated Austin standing in Carletta's window.

"So like I was saying, Jade..." Austin raked a hand through his crop of blond hair. "I'll give you the money for mortgage payments if you can have all the posters gone by this evening. You have to do something about this. People are going to run me out of town if they keep tailing me. My reputation will be *ruined*. You know how things go in Cranberry."

"Your hair looks a little mussed up Austin. Rough night?" Jade put her face closer to the window, smashing her nose against the pane of glass. "Carletta must have given you a good toss in the hay last night."

He moved away from the window, reaching back to draw the shade down. "Please...don't make me beg, Jade."

"Look, I'll get the posters down after you slide the money through the mail slot in my front door. And I want *cash*. You hear me, Austin? No checks, no IOU notes, but cash. In return, I promise to take the posters down and let it be known you've been located.

"Yes, that's workable. I appreciate it."

"Oh, one more thing before you disconnect, Austin. You'll be getting a letter at the office from my attorney. The divorce is final. Hope your day goes better. Bye now."

Within minutes, she heard the envelope hit the hardwood floor in the foyer. She tiptoed down the stairs to retrieve the plain white envelope that held her future for the next three months. Sure enough, as promised, the money was inside, all in cash.



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*Wonder how he got a hold of that much cash so quickly? Oh well, not her problem. She picked up the phone to place the found ad in the personals of The Cranberry Times.*

"No...it won't be necessary. Just run the advertisement for one day...yes, I know what I want it to say. Just make it short and sweet...not too expensive. Have it read like this:

*Missing husband, Austin Wellington has been located. He was found yesterday at Carletta Gibson's house, with her wrapped around him in the kitchen like a piece of Saran Wrap on your favorite Tupperware bowl. The reward money has been received.*

"No...I don't want it billed to my house...just put it on my credit card. You should have it on file already. Thanks...yes...that will be all."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jade turned into the parking lot of the Stuff-It Company at five minutes after twelve. She brushed an imaginary piece of lint from her navy linen skirt, doing one last makeup check in her rearview mirror. She hoped she hadn't dressed too professionally, but it was too late to do much about it.

The hallway leading to Jimmy Boone's office was cluttered in boxes overflowing with flyers heaped in a haphazard manner.

She tapped lightly on the door marked with a piece of paper taped to it, which had Jimmy's name scribbled across the front of it in black ink.

"Come in. Door's open," Jimmy yelled from the other side. "You must be Jade Wellington." He stood, extending his hand.

Jimmy Boone was all of five feet of hunter-green polyester suit. If you threw in the two-inch heeled white patent leather loafers, you had a five-foot-two string bean of a man.

"So, you want to be an envelope stuffer, huh?" He glanced down at his notes. "Err...Ms. Wellington. Are you the Mrs. Austin Wellington by chance?" Jimmy scratched at a spot on his balding head.

"Soon to be the *ex*-Mrs. Austin Wellington, if you don't mind." She gave him a weak smile, noticing the signet ring on his left pinky. "Do you know Austin?"

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"I've heard of him—who hasn't?" He left it at that as he shuffled a few papers around on his desk and reached to answer his phone.

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair when Jimmy turned his back to her. He was engaged in conversation with the person on the telephone. He seemed to forget she existed.

The back of his neck turned scarlet and his voice pitched up an octave. "Look, you tell the son of a bitch he'd better be there...he'd better deliver!"

He slammed the receiver down and turned back to Jade with an apologetic raise of his brow.

"Sorry about that, Ms. Wellington. Hard to get good help these days. I hope this little outburst hasn't given you second thoughts about the job. It's not my nature to be like this, but I have been pushed to the limit with this one." The phone rang again, which he chose to ignore with a simple wave of his hand.

"Er...no...I...I need a job." What was she getting into? Obviously there was another side to "Mr. Polyester." "And please, call me Jade."

"Okay, Jade, here's the deal. You get ten cents per envelope no matter how many items go in it. We work five days a week."

"So in other words..." She stopped to do a quick calculation in her head. "If I want to make nine hundred dollars a week, which would be...let's see...it would be eighteen hundred envelopes per day. Is that correct?"

"Sounds about right. Think your tongue can hold out that long? Sure is a lot of spit. Of course, you could get one of those sponge things at the postal store, I guess. But we don't recommend it because they get the envelope too wet most of the time. Makes a real mess."

"Oh, I can handle it. Does this mean I've got the job?"

"Yup." Jimmy grinned.

"Great, when can I start?"

"How about now? Want one or two weeks' worth?"

"I'll take two weeks' worth, if that's okay."

"What do you drive?" He raised his eyebrow.

"A Honda Accord, why?"

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Jimmy rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Well...let's see here. Don't know if the Accord will hold two weeks' worth. Better try one first. When you go to the post office, they have our postage permit on file. They'll give ya a printout to turn in to me. That's how you'll get paid. I just need ya to fill out a few papers, and we'll get ya loaded up."

He shuffled some papers strewn across his desk. The stench of body odor drifted toward her as Jimmy tilted a small desk fan in his direction. "Any questions?"

"None of which I can think of at the moment. I guess the necessary papers are with each box?"

"Yup." He shoved a pen and paper across the desk. "Just pull around back to the loading dock when you're finished, we'll get started."

The loading dock consisted of a rundown building at the dead end of a narrow alleyway. Jade took in a sharp breath when she approached the open doorway, noting the mass of boxes out front.

Jimmy was standing beside them. "Here ya are, little lady. Your first week's worth of work. Give me a call if ya got any questions."

With that, he started the task of filling up not only the trunk, but the entire backseat with boxes.

"The instruction sheet is in the box marked with the orange sticker on it." He pulled out a handkerchief, wiping his brow. "There ya go, little lady."

\* \* \* \* \*

Austin stood in Carletta's window with the binoculars to his face. *What in the world is she doing?* He watched Jade pull into the driveway with a worried look creasing his brow. He could see the words Stuff-It Company on the side of one of the boxes in the backseat.

"Oh...shit!" He blew out a breath. *Please tell me she hasn't been to see Jimmy Boone.* Jimmy ran Stuff-It Company by day and the Tease Her and Please Her Escort Service by night. If she had met Jimmy, he could possibly be toast. Burnt toast. Jimmy was his "boss man," and if he'd told Jade he'd been working for him as a gigolo, he'd never have a chance of

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winning Jade back. And he needed Jade back, needed her for his image. He'd worked hard at being a prominent figure in Cranberry. He'd been so close to getting Jade's father to go in on a partnership with him. But her father had bowed out at the last minute, claiming he had to look out for the days of retirement ahead. What choice was left but to find another avenue for his spending habits and lifestyle?

He'd only done it for Jade and the firm, of course. The architect firm had been in financial difficulties. It was the only reason he'd agreed to becoming a gigolo in the first place.

Things had been working out fine until...well, until Carletta had convinced Jimmy she'd wanted to schedule three nights a week of his services on a regular basis. That's what had started this whole nightmare—the whole divorce thing. He'd just wanted what was best for the company. He couldn't admit to failure.

Now the only thing important was saving what was left of his reputation. To hell with the architectural firm, and with Carletta's bargaining, too. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone. Jimmy Boone had a lot of explaining to do.

"Oh Austin." Carletta's sing-sing voice floated down the hallway. He could hear her high heels clicking on the hardwood floor. "Come here, my little stud muffin. Come to mamma now, baby." The crack of her whip snapped at his nerves. *Oh shit, not this game again.*

"I'm on my way, my little Mistress...ready or not, here I come." He rolled his eyes and hid the binoculars.

## Chapter Four

"So anyway, there I was pulling up to this dumpy building with a shit-load of boxes on it." Jade was twisting a lock of her hair, giving Celine the entire rundown over the phone.

"Are you certain about this Stuff-It job thing, Jade? It sounds like a lot of work to me."

"Well, as Jimmy would say, 'yup'!" She let out a giggle. "Hey, by the way, I have to get all those posters down by this evening since I've received the promised payment. I don't suppose I could interest you in helping out a good friend now, could I? Might be a free home cooked meal in it for you."

Celine's mouth watered. "Homemade French fries and greasy burgers? That would be a welcome change from the greens and sprouts I eat to watch my figure."

"Yup." Jade giggled.

"It's a deal. And would you get off the 'yup' kick, Jade? It's really starting to irritate me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jade sucked in a breath, wiping at the beads of perspiration on her forehead. "Man, this California heat really takes it out of a girl." She threw the last of the posters in the backseat. "I don't know about you, Celine, but I'm ready for a cold one."

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Celine flipped her compact open to powder her face. "I think that could work. Don't forget you promised me junk food, I'm starving! Besides, you know beer is the one weakness I allow for in my diet. Give me a cheap beer, and I'm a happy gal." It was the one and only thing cheap about Celine.

"I was going to see if you wanted to go dog hunting first." Jade cranked the air up, shifting the car in reverse.

"I thought that's what we did last night?"

"Not the *three*-legged kind, Celine. I'm talking about one with four legs, fur, and a tail. I think it would be good for me to have a pet. I've already picked a name out for it and everything. Please? It won't take long, I promise. Then we'll swing by Walton Grocery and grab a six-pack."

"It's a good thing I'm such a great friend. My throat is parched, I tell you. Just go in and pick out something. How hard could it be to choose a dog?"

\* \* \* \* \*

David sat watching from his cruiser. Why he had become so obsessed with the woman taking down the posters was beyond any type of reasoning. He'd learned his lessons the hard way long ago. Yet he continued to punish himself, following her from a distance, watching every move she made. Each time he watched her, he became more infatuated with the woman. He wasn't stalking her by any means, just keeping an eye out for problem citizens in Cranberry. Or, so he told himself.

Maybe he had something to prove to himself. He wanted this woman to be different. Even if she did end up getting arrested, he wanted to convince himself that she would be innocent. She had a magnetic pull that was sucking him in faster than a bolt of lightning striking the ground.

Ten minutes later, he reprimanded himself and pulled out onto the highway. She'd become the laughing stock in this small town, and he

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knew what it was like to be laughed at. That had to be the attraction—pity, pure and simple, nothing more.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Oh, I just don’t know. They are all so cute.” A small Yorkshire terrier was licking eagerly at Jade’s face.

“I’m wilting over here.” Celine brushed a piece of dog hair off her hot-pink Prada shoes. “We’ve been here for over an hour. Can’t you just close your eyes and point to one? I mean, that’s how I usually pick out a man I want to pursue.”

“And might I remind you you’re still searching for ‘Mr. Right’, Celine French?”

“Point well taken, okay? Is that the one you want?” She rolled her eyes, making a movement toward the door. “This place smells disgusting. Hurry up, would you.”

“Yes, this is the one. Isn’t he just the cutest thing you’ve ever seen?” She gave the squirming dog a hug. “Are you ready to go to your new home, Snickers?”

“*Snickers?*”

“Yup.” She gave the dog a cuddle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Celine popped the top on her beer and poured it in the frosted glass. “Aah...” She took a long sip. “I thought my throat was going to close up it was so dry.”

Snickers sat at her feet with a whimsical look on his face.

“What? What is it?” She retrieved a bowl from the cupboard and poured some beer into it. “Here you are, fella.”

“*Hey*, what are you doing? Don’t be feeding Snickers beer! Dogs don’t drink beer. They drink water.”

“Well, this dog sure does like it. I don’t know much about dogs, but I don’t think a little beer will hurt.” Snickers proceeded to lick the bowl clean.

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"No more beer for Snickers!" Jade replaced the bowl with another filled with water and went back to preparing their burgers.

"So what did you think of our hunk, Buddy, down at the Hang 10 last night? Wasn't he just the cat's meow?"

"Are you talking about that Marine guy?" Jade flipped the burgers as grease spattered onto the burner, creating a sizzling curl of smoke.

"He's the one. Buddy really thought you were hot, Jade. By the way, I hope you don't mind, but I slipped him your phone number." Celine raised her manicured brow with an evil arch. "Burgers sure smell good," she said, trying to change the topic of conversation.

"You did what?" Jade questioned.

"I slipped him your number when you went to the powder room. He said he'd be giving you a call later in the week. Hey, I'm just trying to be helpful."

Snickers curled his lip back, baring his teeth with a whimper.

"See, even Snickers is smiling about it."

"I don't think he's smiling." Jade waved her hand in front of her face to circulate some air. "I think he has gas. I told you not to give him any beer."



## Chapter Five

It was nearly midnight when the last flyer went into envelope number three hundred and four. Jade's mouth felt like one big stick of glue, not to mention her tongue. She didn't doubt it'd taken every ounce of saliva which could be stored in her entire body. Jimmy was right. It didn't take a rocket scientist to do this kind of work, just someone who was full of pure spit.

Tomorrow she'd be back behind her desk at True Heart Greetings, trying to compose those cute little love lines adorning the shelves of every supermarket and drugstore across the country. For now, she just wanted a few hours' sleep and a couple of aspirin.

When she'd sat down to stuff envelopes, she'd turned the ringer off on the phones. She hadn't wanted any voice mail messages blasting through the empty house, so she'd switched the message option to text message and store.

She did a quick check, noticing the blue light blinking in tempo with her throbbing headache. Jade pressed the display button, squinting at the text rolling across the tiny screen.

*"Hey there, Jade. Um...your friend, Celine, gave me your phone number. Hope you don't mind my giving you a call, but I just thought you might want someone to talk to. Sometimes it helps.*

*"You met me last night at Hang 10. Don't know if you recall my name, but I'm Buddy...Buddy Tempo. Celine gave me a quick rundown on you, and I just wanted to let you know I'm here for you if you want to talk. My number is*

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*334-1222. Hope you have a good evening...and...um...I think you're one hot babe, if you don't mind me saying so. Night now. Sweet dreams there, babe."*

She promptly hit the delete button, making a mental note to change her phone number and forbid Celine to give it out to anyone.

"Come on, Snickers, let's get some sleep." She scooped the dog up in her arms, and another silent little message drifted into the air.

"Oh...that's disgusting. No more beer for you, Snickers."

\* \* \* \* \*

A morning look in the bathroom mirror brought out a scream of panic. *My lips...oh my gosh, they look like a collagen injection gone terribly wrong!* Jade leaned forward to examine the swollen mounds of her mouth. She must have had some type of allergic reaction to the glue on the envelopes.

She gently rubbed some moisture cream across her painful lips. "Ouch!" *Now what?* Maybe if she'd just done half the amount of envelopes last night, she wouldn't be in this situation.

Snickers whimpered at her feet. She'd almost forgotten that he needed to go outside—and fast! She threw on her black silk robe and ran to the kitchen to grab his leash.

"Come on, boy. Sorry. It's going to take a little getting used to, you know, this mom thing. I'm a little new at it." She fastened the leash on his collar before heading out the back door.

"Hurry up, Snickers. I have to be at work in an hour. I don't want one more accident in the house. Now use the potty like a good dog."

Snickers sniffed around, ready to mark his territory. Ten minutes later, he decided on the Azalea bush in the far corner of the lot.

\* \* \* \* \*

Austin's gaze skimmed the lawn outside Carletta's window. *Jade has a dog? And her lips—they look...well...swollen, to say the least.* He leaned against the window for a closer look. *Just what the hell has she been doing to*

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*cause her mouth to look like that?* He thought of the things she used to do to *him* with that luscious mouth of hers, causing a substantial erection to press against his jeans.

"I'm going to run out and get the newspaper, Carletta. Be right back." He bolted out the door, hoping Carletta's shower wouldn't be a quick one this time. He needed to talk to

Jade. He felt he had to explain...but how?

Jade had spotted him jogging in her direction from the corner of her eye, apparently, because he overheard her tell the dog to hurry.

"Morning, Jade. So when did you get the dog?" Austin reached down to pet him.

Snickers took one look and bared his teeth.

"It's okay, boy, I'm not going to hurt you." He stepped back as if he wasn't so sure.

"I got him yesterday. His name is Snickers. And he won't bite. He's just snickering at you, Austin." She turned toward the house.

"Jade...wait...please, we need to talk about a few things." His eyes darkened with hunger when he glanced at the small gap in the front of her robe. *What he wouldn't give to be able to bury his face in...*

"Say it to my attorney, Austin. And watch where you're stepping..."

"Oh shit!" He lifted his foot, making a face at the gooey clump now stuck to the bottom of it.

"That would be the appropriate word for it." Jade walked towards the door with a backward glance. "And you are knee-deep in it, too, Austin Wellington."

A slam of her door confirmed the end of the conversation.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she arrived at work, Tommy from the mailroom sat lurking around as usual.

Jade took in his unkempt appearance. Ever since Tommy'd lost his parents in a car wreck a few months back, he'd been somewhat of a mess. She noticed his clothing had become somewhat drab. His jeans were

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tattered and faded, and a dingy white shirt was half tucked into the loose fitted waistband of his jeans. His eyes looked sunken in and a bit swollen, and dark circles pooled beneath them. The only thing that hadn't changed about Tommy was his sense of humor, which always brightened her day. She secretly giggled at his words.

"Well, lookie at those lips, would you? You must be planning to kiss some ass big time, Jade. Trying to get a promotion?" Tommy handed her a stack of mail from his bag. "Either that or you're puckered up for a big kiss." He leaned forward, smacking his mouth.

"Get back to the mailroom, Tommy. I'm not in the mood for your teasing today. Don't you have mail to sort out in that cracker box domain of yours?"

"Whatever you say, kissy face. Let me know if you change your mind and want to put those lips to the test. Hey," he yelled after her, "one day you're going to take me a little more seriously, cupcake."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jade stared at the blank screen, trying to come up with a clever greeting for the new Love Line series of cards. Her coffee sat cold and half-empty on her desk, forgotten for the last hour. *You can do this...just think...think.* She pounded her hand against her head.

Her fingers struck the keys in an attempt to create. She'd never had a problem with words before. In fact, she thought about the novel she'd written. In her closet, hidden in the leopard-print suitcase, was a steamy romance begging for publication. She'd loved the pen name she'd placed on the title page...Jessica Beaver. And the catchy title, *Fantasies in Fishnet*, had made her giggle. Maybe it was time to seek an agent and actually do something with it.

She blew upward through clenched teeth, wincing when her lips protested the movement. Leaning her head back, she noticed the walls of her office were a depressing gray. You would have thought they could have painted them a different color. It certainly would help produce better creativity, she thought. *Okay, here goes.*

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*I'll be forever blue, now that you've sawed my heart in two ...you monster you. She pounded her fist against the small desk. "This totally sucks. I can't even do this right anymore. Damn it."*

She shut her eyes and reached up to rub them with the hope of warding off a headache. Perhaps she could think more clearly after she'd had some lunch.

\* \* \* \* \*

A call to the phone company during lunch proved to be another disappointment. Thanks to Celine, she had one more thing to deal with. She was still upset that her friend would give Buddy her phone number without asking.

"But I don't understand." Jade was frustrated. "Why is the phone company going to charge a hundred dollars just to change my number?" She slid a spoonful of chocolate ice cream between her lips, enjoying the soothing coolness. "Look, just forget about it right now. I'll just have to suffer through it."

Her mouth was dry despite the mountain of ice cream, and ribbons of pain shot throughout her face. Her lips continued puffing up like a balloon on helium. Talking was becoming difficult, and Jade worried it might interfere with her ability to breathe. What if the swelling got so intense it blocked her nostrils? If she could make it for a couple more hours, she'd stop by the pharmacy on the way home. Maybe they could recommend some type of ointment. And she was definitely investing in some glue sticks to seal those envelopes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours later, the pharmacist took one look at Jade and reached for a tube of cream from the shelf.

"Don't worry. This should have you feeling better by morning. If not, I recommend a visit to your doctor."

She nodded her appreciation, remembering the much-needed glue sticks.

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"O air r ur ue icks?"

"Pardon?" There was a lift of his brow.

"Uno, ue icks." She rummaged through her purse in search of a pen and paper. Finding a crumpled grocery receipt, she scribbled out her request.

*Do you have any glue sticks? And if so, do they come in red, by chance?*

He motioned to an aisle of school supplies.

"Aisle five, and sorry, they don't come in red."

She headed toward the aisle and then turned to thank him.

"Ank eue hairy utch, I aeesheate it."

She saw him nod his head, and overheard him mumble, "Hairy utch, what is a 'hairy utch'? Why, the nerve of some people."

She'd better hurry, get those glue sticks, and head out of the store. He didn't seem very happy.

## Chapter Six

Jade combed a hand through her hair as she passed Celine's beauty shop on the corner of Oak and Seventh Avenue. She really needed a trim, but decided to pass due to the limited amount of cash in her wallet. Sure, Celine would be willing to do it for free, but she'd never been one to take advantage of a friend. She worried that Celine and she weren't in the same league anymore, and wondered if their friendship would survive. After all, Jade wouldn't be able to afford all the finer things in life anymore that her friend worshiped so dearly. Maybe she'd just take a few snips at her hair with the scissors when she got home and make do. How hard could it be to give her bangs a tiny trim?

Rolling down the window, she took in the fresh air of the summer evening. Cranberry was a beautiful town. The sun was setting over the bay with an orange glow streaking across the cloudless blue of the skyline. A ship was docking for the night in the distance. A painter would consider it an artist's paradise. Ten miles to the right was the marine base, and...*Buddy Tempo!* There he was, right in her rearview mirror. He was flashing the lights of his Bronco on and off.

She eased over to the shoulder of the road and watched him follow suit in her side mirror. Was there something wrong with her tire? For the past few miles, it had made funny, bumping sounds. Maybe he'd noticed and was motioning her to the side of the road to let her know.

"Hey lady..." He leaned in through the driver's side window. "Looks like you got a bad tire there. The left rear one's bouncing down the

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road like a rubber ball on concrete. Good thing I happened upon you. A few more miles and you'd have a flat."

He walked to the rear of the car and bent to examine the tire. "Yep, there's a big knot on it—got a nail in it, too. You happen to have a spare and a jack? I'll be glad to change it for you."

Jade's agitation with him turned to a feeling of gratitude. Military men could be so nice. She tried to smile and winced when pain shot through her lips. She popped the lever for the trunk lid. "I ink oh." She got out and walked around to Buddy, who was busy digging through the trunk.

He turned to look at her. "What...Jade, what happened to your lips? I noticed they looked a little funny. Did that S.O.B hit you? 'Cause if he did..." He smacked a fist in his hand. "'Cause if he did, I'm gonna make ground meat outta his face."

She frantically crossed her arms back and forth in the air like a referee in a game of football, and shook her head no.

"Ho on a init." She scrambled for more paper and a pen in the car. She retrieved a paper napkin from a fast food bag on the floorboard, and wrote:

*It's an allergy from envelope glue. I licked too many of them last night.* She paused, then handed him the napkin.

"You're not a glue addict or anything, are ya?" He furrowed his brow, waiting as she grabbed the napkin back.

She signaled with her hand like a stop sign. *What, you think I lick glue to get high or something? Are you nuts?* She scribbled out the words in anger and slammed the napkin into his chest with added force.

Cramming the napkin in his pocket, he bent down to loosen the lug nuts on the wheel. He concentrated on replacing the tire, keeping his head down. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said."

She had to admit she'd never won an argument on a napkin before, but still, she was appalled by his accusation. She bent down, reverting to sign language, and stuck her middle finger up at him before stomping off to her car. Sliding in, she turned the ignition, gunned it, and shifted into drive.



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"You're not going to get very far." Buddy was in the process of rolling the spare toward the car. "I've already loosened the lug nuts on it, so the thing's gonna wobble right off the rim." He yelled as she pulled onto the highway.

About five feet later, the car landed with a plop when the rim hit the pavement. *Shit...oh, shit!*

He doubled over with laughter.

"Now I have to start all over again," he said between fits of laughter while he waited for her to emerge from the car.

She couldn't help but laugh at herself as she climbed out of the car with a smile. "Ooh!" She reached for her mouth.

He walked over to her. "Jade, I really am sorry. I don't know why I said something like that to begin with. Look, let me make it up to you. Why don't you agree to go out to dinner with me tomorrow night? I really can be quite the gentleman." His hand went up. "Honest."

She studied him. She loved the way the breeze blew the spicy scent of his cologne in her direction. He was really kind of sexy if she thought about it. His eyes reminded her of pools of chocolate, darkened with sincerity as they pleaded for an answer. Well, after all, she was a free woman now. Her attorney had said so. But she wasn't ready to date, maybe never would be. "Un...I...ant...I..."

"Please?" He turned, shifting his eyes to the oncoming car approaching them.

She spotted it at the same time. *Austin! What is he doing?* He was pulling alongside of them. With a quick reflex, she leaned in toward Buddy and encircled him with her arms.

"Es...inner ill e ood." She rushed out the words while Austin glared at the two of them.

Buddy acted like he was taken off guard by her sudden change of affection. Hopefully he wouldn't pull away from her in confusion. Even though he probably couldn't understand a word she'd said, her actions spoke for themselves.

He planted a quick kiss on her forehead. "Great, I'm glad you've accepted the invitation." He looked like he'd won a trophy for a heroic deed.

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Austin planted his hands on his hips. "Jade, what happened to your car? And...and who is this guy?" He puffed out his chest, giving Buddy a piercing look.

Buddy moved in closer. "And who the hell might you be?"

*Oh no, here comes trouble.* Jade moved to step between them. "Is is utty, utty empo or ur inforation Autin. He a ood fend."

Buddy held out his hand. "You must be Austin Wellington, I assume—Jade's *ex*-husband?"

Austin didn't extend his hand, but shifted to the side. "And you are Utty, Utty Empo, according to Jade here, which might be her...?"

"Friend...companion, you know." Buddy completed the sentence. "And I don't think she needs your help. I think you've done enough already. By the way, thanks, pal. I think she's found everything she could possibly want now. Isn't that right, babe?" He reached for Jade and pulled her close to him.

She stepped alongside of him, wrapping her arms around Buddy's chiseled frame. "At ite." *Boy was she going to let Buddy Tempo have it.* How *dare* he take the liberty of her not being able to speak for herself? She fumed inside and then gave him a not so gentle pinch in his side.

There was a look of bewilderment on Austin's face when he shifted his eyes from one to the other. He was probably thinking it hadn't taken Jade long to replace him. If he was thinking he could win her back by stopping to help, Jade had news for him. Any chance of reconciling their differences, was dimmer than the sun setting in the distance.

He blew out a long, slow breath and raked his hand over the stubble of his chin. He cleared his throat. "Um...well, I guess I'll be running along. I just saw your car on the side of the road and thought you might need a little help. Just trying to be neighborly...that's all. But I can see I'm not needed here." He gave Buddy a look which could have pierced him like a knife. He walked to his car, jumped in, and slammed his door shut, burning rubber on the pavement as he left. He did a quick U-turn as a second thought, and pulled up beside of them.

"And by the way, Jade, I saw the ad you put in the paper saying I'd been found. Thanks a lot! You've only made things worse than what they

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were when you put the posters up. Good luck there, Uddy, or whatever your name is. You've got your hands full."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jade crossed her arms and leaned against her car. *Well, of all the nerve!* She'd tried to do the right thing, and it had turned around to smack her right in the face. He really was becoming ungrateful...*and* unbearable. She just might have to ask for a little more alimony if he was going to act like that. She made a mental note to call her attorney in the morning as Buddy stood up and brushed off his hands.

"Well, looks like that should do it. I'll just put this bad tire in your trunk. Hey, I'll pick you up around nineteen hundred hours tomorrow night. Oh, sorry, guess I'm used to talking in military terms. I'll pick you up about seven, but I'll need your address." He pulled the crumpled napkin from his shirt pocket. "Here, you can just write it on this if you want. There's still a free corner on it, right under the place where you asked me if I was nuts or somthin'."

She reached for it, scribbled her address down, and added the words "thanks for fixing the tire."

\* \* \* \* \*

Twenty-four hours later, the cream on Jade's lips started working its magic and the swelling decreased. Now if she could just get through the evening with Buddy and send him on his way, she could work on searching for an agent for her novel.

Choosing a red sundress from her closet, she held it up to inspect it. No, it wouldn't work; it was too revealing for a date with Buddy. She tossed it on the bed and headed back to the closet. Nothing she owned seemed right. Maybe she just wasn't ready to date, but Buddy would be ringing her doorbell within thirty minutes.

Finally deciding on a bright teal sundress, she slid it over her head, enjoying the feel of the silk against her skin, and examined her reflection in the mirror. She thought back to the time Austin had chosen this very

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outfit. He'd told her it was one of his favorites. He'd slid the strap off her shoulder as he'd nuzzled her neck and pressed his firm body against hers. She recalled the scent of him while he'd continued exploring the small hollow of her neck with his lips. The smell of soap and cologne waving under her nose had driven her half mad as he'd continued the sensual act of sliding the dress down her hips. Backing her against the wall of their bedroom, he'd pressed in against her, lifting her above his hips as he'd entered the soft folds of her quivering body. Then he'd stopped to look at his watch. She would never forget the comment from his lips.

*"Oh, we have to run, Jade. We can't be late for that ribbon cutting ceremony. Maybe you should go freshen up a bit. We can always finish this later."*

The words had hurt, cutting her to the bone. Nevertheless, it was in the past. She let out a breath, then carefully applied her lipstick. Now Austin had other desires and designs, and she was a mere discarded object, like an outdated dress in a thrift store.

Snickers whimpered at her feet with a plea for a quick trip to the backyard. She slid on her sandals, grabbing his leash as he took off running toward the back door. "You're going to have to make it fast, Snickers. I have to run out for awhile." She patted his head and led him out into what was quickly becoming his favorite corner. The floodlight in the yard cast her shadow against the hedge near Carletta's kitchen window.

It sounded like someone was in the bush next to where she was standing. She heard a rustling sound and someone's whisper.

"Psst, Jade, I need to talk to you. Please, I owe you an apology for yesterday. Don't ignore me."

Startled for a brief moment, she clutched at her heart when she realized it was her ex. "Snickers, do you know what? I think you need to start using this bush over here." She guided him over to where she knew Austin was hiding. Snickers promptly hiked his leg, letting several hours of relief spray through the bush.

"Shit! Jade! What the hell?"

## Mia Romano

"Good boy, Snickers. Now it's time for Mommy's date. Let's get you settled back in the house for the night."

\* \* \* \* \*

Austin was saturated and pissed, to say the least. Damn it, why couldn't she just give him a few minutes to explain? And what was this about a date? Had she lost her mind? Had he meant so little to her after all that within a few days she could just go on with someone new? No regrets, no mourning? He stomped inside the house, swearing under his breath.

"Austin, is that you, my little stud muffin?" Carletta rounded the corner and gasp at the sight of him. "What in the world happened? Have you been out sprinkling the lawn at this hour?"

"Oh be quiet, Carletta." He shoved past her to head to the shower. "I just got royally pissed on, that's all."

She did a ballerina-like shuffle beside him in the hallway, clicking her stilettos. "Does this mean I'm going to have to disinfect the shower after you're done? If I have to disinfect the shower again, I get an extra hour of spanking from you tonight." With a wicked little grin, she pinched his bottom.

"And we need to talk about New York, Austin. We need to decide when we're going to put the house up for sale and make the big move. You know that big architect firm isn't going to wait forever. When I sent them your resume, they were ready to make an offer."

He shifted toward her, anger glinting in his eyes. "Carletta, you may have bought me for your little sex slave, but you're not going to make a decision about my career. You've done enough damage already. Now back off. I just want a hot shower."

"You might be sorry you said that to me." She twisted on her high heels before heading to the kitchen. "Just remember, I know a few secrets that, if leaked, could ruin you. On top of it, I paid good money for you. Jimmy Boone won't be happy to hear you're being so obnoxious. You'd better be glad I let you move in here after Jade kicked you out. That

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wasn't part of the deal, you know. I was supposed to have you for weekend nights and on Wednesdays all night long.

“Oh, there's one more thing, Austin. When you get done with your shower, maybe you could manage to put on that little black G-string I bought for you today. It's on the bed along with the new CD I bought. I'd like for you to do a little strip tease for me tonight.”

## Chapter Seven

"You look like a million dollars, babe." Buddy gave Jade the once-over. His eyes ran up and down her like a yo-yo on a string as he continued to work his way through the entryway. "So, ready for that big dinner? You sure know how to work up a man's appetite."

Was that drool she saw at the edge of his mouth? *Oh yuck, it's going to be a long evening.* "Er...yes, I think I'm ready." She snatched her purse from the small chair in the corner. What had possessed her to agree to this? "If you don't mind, I think we should take separate cars. I promised Celine I'd stop by after dinner this evening to help with some decorating she's doing in her den. I'm sure you wouldn't want to hang around for it." She bit at her lower lip, then gave him a smile.

"Looks like your lips are almost back to normal there, Jade. Want to put them to the test?" He leaned in and brushed the tip of her lips with his mouth.

The smell of too much cologne filled her nostrils, causing her to back away. "Um...I think we just need to be going, if you don't mind, Buddy. My lips are still a little on the tender side." She gave him a gentle shove toward the door.

"I was hoping to spend the entire evening with you, Jade. Perhaps you could give Celine a call. I'm sure she'd understand. Besides, I ship out for three months tomorrow. You wouldn't deny a guy the pleasure of one full evening with a beautiful woman like you, would you?"

"Look, I'm...I'm really sorry, Buddy, I just can't go through with this. I hope you understand. I don't think I'm going to be very good

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company at this point. Maybe we should plan this dinner date for when you get back in town?"

"Now you're not even going out with me? You *are* nuts. How in the world do I get mixed up in these sorts of situations?" His face was chiseled with anger, and he heaved his chest forward. "Just forget about it, period!" He slammed the door shut, causing the antique mirror on the wall to shimmy on its nail.

Jade grabbed at the mirror to prevent it from crashing to the floor. Shaken by the display of hostility, she knelt down in the foyer and sobbed. She didn't know if the sobs were from relief at escaping the situation or from the rejection itself. Maybe she just couldn't do anything right. Perhaps Austin had been right in what he'd done. She wasn't worth having.

She ran up the steps, unplugged the phones, and went to grab her novel. At least she had one thing she could be proud of doing right. She logged onto the internet to start her search for a literary agent.

Five hours later, she'd composed six proposal packages to mail out in hopes of attracting an agent's attention.

Still in her dress, she went to work stuffing envelopes in a frenzy of getting at least half a box completed.

*Damn Austin.* Why couldn't she have married someone more dependable? Someone who would love her unconditionally, someone faithful? Tears welled up in her eyes. It was the first time she'd allowed herself to let go of her emotions. She still wanted him, even after finding out he hadn't been faithful. What was it going to take to get over the heartache?

Snickers started to bark, and he ran to the entryway. She heard a loud knock on the door along with a ring of the doorbell. Her heart pounded in her ears when she ran after her dog. "Stay calm boy, be quiet for a minute." She reached to sooth him. "Whoever it is will go away if we don't answer it." The dog whimpered at her side while she tiptoed down the steps to glance through the peephole.

Even in the dim light cast by the streetlights, she was able to see her doorstep was vacant. Slowly cracking the door, she shifted it open as far



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as the safety chain would allow. She thought perhaps Buddy was playing some kind of cruel joke on her after she'd declined his invitation earlier. It was then she noticed the white envelope at her feet.

Removing the safety chain, she peered through the crack in the door and spotted a letter on the welcome mat. She bent down to pick up the mysterious envelope. There were no markings on it. Puzzled, she relocked her door, examined the envelope, and headed to the kitchen. "Do you think Buddy is sending me some kind of threat, Snickers?" He wagged his tail and went to sniff at his dog bowl.

Her hand shook as she unsealed it and removed the folded note. It was typewritten with no clue as to the writer. Slowly she read the text and placed a hand across her mouth. She crumbled it, then threw it to the floor. *No, it couldn't be. Why was someone being so cruel?* She ran to the bathroom and grabbed a cool towel to place across her face. She wept openly, thinking of the words she'd read. They played over and over in her mind.

*"It is time you know the truth about your ex-husband. Austin Wellington's given pleasure to half the women in this town. He's nothing but a two-bit gigolo. A very good one, I might add. Let me tell you some of the things he's done to me. They were all quite enjoyable. Such a shame you couldn't keep him satisfied...."*

"Buddy...it *had* to be him," she spit out the angry words. Who else besides Carletta would pull such a cruel joke? What possible reason would Carletta have? She already had what she'd wanted all along. Could it be Buddy was gay? Maybe Austin had been with men as well as women. At this point she wouldn't put anything past him.

Jade snatched the cell phone from her purse and punched in her best friends' number. Without waiting for a hello, she blurted out her rage between sobs.

"Celine, you're not going to believe what your so called wonderful Buddy Tempo has done." Another heart wrenched sob escaped her lips.

She could imagine Celine blowing upward through her bangs and holding the phone away from her ear. Jade's sobbing was getting louder by the minute.

"And he's a gigolo!" She blurted.

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"What?" Celine finally interrupted between the crying on the other end. Jade could hear Celine yelling to someone. "You're a gigolo? What the hell do you think you're doing, Buddy Tempo?"

"Is that Buddy?" Jade said. "Buddy is at your house, Celine?"

"Look, Jade, Buddy is a good friend of mine. You know that. He's really upset over your canceling the dinner date with him. Just calm down and stay put. I'm on my way over there."

"I...I just couldn't go through with the date, Celine." Jade said, trying to calm herself. "It's really nothing personal against Buddy, I promise. Maybe it's too soon to be dating someone after my divorce. I get the feeling he thinks I'm crazy."

"I know it's not personal, and so do you. But I'm not sure Buddy does at this point. Maybe you should tell him. Why don't I bring him over with me?"

"Celine, I'm a total wreck! I mean, I'm still in my dress, my hair's a mess, and my face looks a fright. I'd be too embarrassed to let him see me like this."

"Look, Buddy doesn't mind. He won't judge you on your appearance. Trust me. We'll be there in about ten minutes. If it will make you feel better, Buddy will wait in the car while you freshen up a bit."

She disconnected before Jade could object.

\* \* \* \* \*

Celine walked over to where Buddy was fidgeting with a nick-nack on the coffee table.

"Come on, Buddy, we have some cheering up to do." She pulled him up off the couch. "Jade needs us."

"I'm not going anywhere near that woman's house. She's insulted me enough for one night. If you don't mind, just drop me off at the base before you go over there."

"I thought you really liked her?" Celine slanted her eyes in Buddy's direction. "What's the matter there, big guy? Can't take a little rejection?"

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Rejection wasn't the word for it. Something about Jade made him uneasy. He was drawn to her in a way he hadn't been drawn to a woman ever before. Something about the look in those sad brown eyes, or maybe the scent of light magnolia on her hair when she'd leaned into him on the highway. Maybe it had him wanting to run in the opposite direction. Never had he been attracted to anyone like this before. He'd only known her for a few short days. Yet somehow he felt he knew her intimately. The farther away from her he stayed, the better off his heart would be. He didn't have room for heartbreak.

"Well...do you have an answer, big guy?" Celine's tone brought him from his thoughts.

"No...I don't have an answer for it." He steepled his hands, resting his elbows on his knees.

"You're falling for her, aren't you. I knew it, it's written all over your face. You, Buddy Tempo, have it bad for her. You're doing such a great job of acting; you even have yourself believing you have feelings for her.

"I do not! That's the most insane thing I've ever heard. Why, I barely know her. How could I have it bad for someone like her? She's nuts, I tell ya. No wonder her ex took up with someone else. She probably turned him down cold in their bed one too many times. That's my thought on this whole thing anyway. You know a guy has certain needs."

"I am going to ignore your little comment about her being cold, Buddy. If you weren't such a good friend, I'd kick you out on your can about now. Might I add you need *her*, in my opinion? You just won't admit to it yet. Just wait and see if what I'm saying isn't so." Celine grabbed her keys and tugged at Buddy's shirt. "Just remember, if you want your money, keep up the great act. Very convincing, I might add. Now come on...your lady awaits. See if you can't curb your temper and show her a good time."

\* \* \* \* \*

The night shift had been quiet, giving David time to do some neighborhood-watch drive-bys on his way home from work. Strangely,

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he'd ended up on Jade's street just in time to see a man leave out her front door, and a few minutes later another one place an envelope on her doorstep.

He didn't like what he was seeing. He'd seen a similar game before. It was called "pay-the-prostitute". He'd heard about a similar prostitution-ring in New York. The payment wasn't made until after the man left, and then another one would leave money in an envelope at the prostitute's doorstep. That way, it didn't appear that the woman was being paid for sexual favors, because a different person handed over the money.

He gritted his teeth and made a few notes in his notebook. Tomorrow he'd do a little research. Anger filtered through him. He should be the one making love to her. Not some scum who paid her. Had her desperate situation made her resort to this?

## Chapter Eight

"Oh, honey, are you all right?" Celine pulled Jade's face into her hands with a look of concern.

"No...I'm not all right. Look at this, would you?" Jade shook the typewritten letter in Celine's face. "Do you think I'm all right after receiving something like this? How did you expect me to react?"

Celine skimmed the letter in disbelief. "Do you think Carletta dropped this on your doorstep? I mean, she has no morals about her. We knew that when she moved in next door to you. I wouldn't put it past her."

"But what would she possibly have to gain from it?" Jade picked up Snickers, hugging him close. "I mean, she has what she wanted all along. She has Austin."

"She might think she has Austin, but does Austin want her? Don't you think that's more of the question here? Why, just yesterday you told me he'd left in a rage when he'd spotted you with Buddy on the side of the road. If you ask me, I don't think things are quite what they seem. I bet you he still wants you, Jade. In fact, I don't think he's ever stopped wanting you. Guys like him want their cake and all the sweet icing that goes along with it."

"Austin made his choices long ago. I've come to realize this, Celine. It meant more to him to have fun than to work on our relationship. If this letter has any truth to it...well, working at night as a gigolo proves that fact. Don't you think? Or are you sticking up for him now? Is that what you're trying to say? Some friend you are, Celine French! You, the only

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person in the world I thought I could count on, are justifying Austin's actions. Perhaps *you* wrote the letter!" She burst into another onset of tears as the horrible thought hit her. Had Celine been with Austin, too? Why else would she be sticking up for him?

"Jade, you're jumping to conclusions. Look, you're practically hysterical. How could you think such a thing?" Obvious hurt showed in Celine's eyes. "I'm behind you on this one-hundred percent; you have to know I am. Now come on, let's go dry your pretty face. Buddy is waiting out in the car; he wants to see you. I think he wants to make things right for the way he acted earlier tonight. Please don't turn him away, Jade. He's a great guy, and he cares. Really he does, his intentions are honorable. Just give him a chance. Would you?"

Jade felt like such a fool. Maybe there was a bit of truth to what Celine was saying. Perhaps Buddy was only trying to be nice. Or maybe he was doing it as a favor to Celine. Well, if that was the case, it was the last thing she needed or wanted. Sure, Buddy was handsome. Who wouldn't be glad to go out with him? But, there were too many memories of Austin, still strong and too fresh in her mind. The wounds were going to take more than Buddy could offer her to heal. Buddy was like a live salt well pouring into those wounds.

"Jade? Are you there? You act like you've gone into some kind of trance or something. What is it?"

"It's just getting over Austin, Celine. Maybe it's time to let go. I feel like I haven't been fair to Buddy. I'm the one who owes someone an apology. I didn't mean to hurt his feelings. It's just so hard to move on, Celine. I...I'm really trying. Give me a few minutes, and then tell Buddy to come on in. Maybe it's time to let go for a change."

"Now there's the girl I love and admire. I'll go get him. He will be so happy you've changed your mind about seeing him."

Jade shuffled her way down the hall. Once in her bedroom, she removed the wrinkled dress and tossed it on the bed. With a shaky hand, she took a pair of scissors from the dresser drawer. She released the pain with each snip of the shears, snipping holes in the beautiful silk fabric. She didn't stop there. She reached for a seam of the dress, ripping it into

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shreds. With a swift move to the bathroom, she took a deep breath and tossed it into the trash. A solitary tear slipped down her face as she stamped it down into the trash, then slammed the door behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

What in the hell was she doing? Austin peered through the back window of the house. She'd just cut up her favorite dress, the one he'd bought her only a few months back. He'd spent a fortune on that little number. He bent down below the bathroom window as she reappeared in the bathroom. If he was caught looking in the window, he would be toast. He watched as she rinsed her face, then applied fresh makeup. If only she would slip off the bathrobe she was now sporting. If he could only get a brief glimpse of what used to be his. What he used to take for granted as always being his. He hung his head in shame. He could hear her humming, like she didn't have a care in the world. Then it happened. She slid the robe from her shoulders, revealing soft supple skin in her bra and panties.

He almost lost it then, his foot sliding on the stepladder. "Oh shit!" Austin nearly fell.

He knew Jade heard the commotion when he saw her run to the window. She pulled the shade up and opened the window, squinting through the darkness, unable to see a thing. He hoped.

Austin rolled against the side of the house under the window, clutching the stepladder. His breathing was heavy. He was sure he'd been caught. After what seemed an eternity, Jade slammed the window shut, snapped the lock in place, and closed the shade.

His heart fell as darkness from the lit window crawled across the lawn. With a limp in his step, he sauntered across the yard back to Carletta's domain. Somehow he had to make Jade understand. He was loosing ground on his chances while she prepared to go on with her new life. He'd tried to confess his sins by placing the letter about being with another woman on her doorstep earlier. He couldn't face telling her the truth in person. Perhaps he was a coward, but he would risk his pride just to have her back. He needed her for his career, and now that it was too

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late, he realized maybe he loved her. Sometimes the lessons in life dealt a dirty hand.

Would she think of him when she closed her eyes tonight? Or, would she dream of someone else? Perhaps the man whose shadow he saw sitting in the car in front of the house.

Austin limped into Carletta's kitchen, placed the stepladder in the closet, and went to be at her disposal. It was time to take action on the decisions he'd made in life. Tomorrow he would call Jimmy Boone and tell him he was breaking his contract. So what if Jimmy tried to sue him for breach of contract. He didn't have anything else to lose. He'd already lost the only thing that mattered. Maybe a move to New York for a while would be the best for everyone. He'd be going alone. No Carletta on his trail. A new start to find what mattered. Perhaps one day he could face Jade with a clear mind and open arms again.

He'd let Jade down, more than even he could have ever imagined. Slipping down the hallway, he made a choice. It was painful, but hopefully full of promise. Tomorrow he would close his architect firm in Cranberry for good. He'd catch a flight to New York, and try and salvage something of a life. Austin scribbled a note to Carletta. He placed it in an envelope, and set it on the kitchen table. She'd find it there when she went to prepare their breakfast after a night of sexual fantasy on her part. Tonight he would put meaning into the sex he gave her. It would be a night she wouldn't forget, and he would be thinking of the woman he loved in the process. He would pretend it was Jade in his arms. Just one last time.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, how many rooms are in this house anyways?" Buddy walked down the hallway. "Quite a house for one person, don't you think?"

"Oh, it's got around fifteen rooms if you include the basement area. Austin designed this house just for us." She bit her lip immediately after blurting out the bit of information. Jade looked at the ground. "Sorry, I didn't mean to bring up the past, Buddy."



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"Hey, no problem." He turned and reached for her. "I understand. It's going to take some time to adjust. I was a total ass earlier tonight. I hope you'll forgive me. The house is beautiful."

"Yes, I like it quite well, regardless." She motioned for him to follow her. "Come on, I'll finish giving you a tour of the upstairs. It looks like Celine's going to be tied up on the phone for a while anyway. That one never quits working, I tell you. She's so excited about finally getting in the new spa system down at the shop."

Celine's voice blasted through the intercom system. "Hey, Jade, I have to run down to the shop for a little while to take some measurements. If I'm gone too long, would you mind dropping Buddy off at the base? He's leaving his car at my house while he's gone, and I promised him a ride."

*Great, now what am I going to do?* "Sure, no problem." Jade pressed the button on the intercom.

She gave Buddy a smile. "So as I was saying, here is the master suite. It's a little messy right now. I'm afraid I've been in a bit of a tizzy."

Buddy noticed the papers scattered on the bed. He walked over and picked up the title page to her manuscript. "Hey, you write? Wow, care if I read a few pages? I've always admired people who could write. Bet this is a great story."

*Damn.* She'd forgotten about the manuscript on the bed. "Er, I don't know, I'm a little shy about my work, I'm afraid." She tried to pry it from his eager hands. "Maybe you can read some of it later."

"Oh, sure, I didn't mean to be a snoop, but I like the title. It sounds like it's a pretty steamy book."

She blushed, retrieving the precious pages from his grasp. "Well, time will tell, I guess. No one knows about my writing. I'd appreciate your keeping it that way, Buddy."

"You can count on me to keep a secret, babe. My lips are sealed. So what's behind this huge-ass door?" He reached for the knobs to her closet.

"It's my closet. Sometimes I escape in there to write. Sometimes I just sit in there and think."

"Care if I look at it? Sounds like a pretty neat place to me."

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Jade opened the door slowly. It was a big step, letting him in to what she considered a part of her private world. "See, it's quite a place."

Buddy let out a long, slow whistle. "Wow, it's enormous! I've never seen a closet this big. Man, I love big closets. You could put a truck in this thing or something."

"You really like big closets? Usually men don't think much about the size of a closet." *Maybe this Buddy guy is going to be all right after all.* "I have a particular weakness for large closets." She looked at him with a newfound interest, feeling somewhat bold. "Want to step inside my world?"

"Sure, I'd love to." He stepped in, admiring the lighting fixtures, and thumbed through a row of her dresses. "You have great taste. I bet this looks great on you." He held up the lime green feather boa. Buddy walked to her slowly, placing it around her neck, and pulled her against him.

She felt the warm breath of his mouth close to her own. Her heart skipped a beat, giving her a strange sensation. Was he going to kiss her right here in her closet?

Something in her wanted it to happen, while another part cautioned her to back away. A few hours ago, she'd sent him away from her doorstep. Now her heart was pounding out a warning in a strange and exciting rhythm. What was wrong with her? She was still in love with Austin, wasn't she?

Maybe the slight brush of a man's lips against hers had been too long ago. Yes, that had to be it. She just craved a man's touch. She wondered why Buddy backed away, releasing her while acting confused at his own actions. Maybe it wasn't like him to be carried away so quickly. Had Celine paid him to give her some attention? She placed her hand over his heart, feeling the rhythm pounding against her palm. The tight swelling in his jeans was quite apparent and stood at full attention like it was saluting her. Finally, he spoke.

"I'm sorry Jade, I just got a little carried away." He finished, backing away another step.

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She blushed slightly, secretly happy she could still cause a man excitement. It was something she'd thought herself incapable of for several months. This was just the thing she needed to boost her confidence in herself again.

"Thank you, Buddy, you don't know what this means to me." Jade gave him a look of appreciation, her eyes darkening with a strange feeling of passion.

"Um, sure, I try hard to always be a gentleman. I hope you'll forgive me for getting carried away for a minute there."

He'd misunderstood her meaning. "No, I didn't mean that." She moved closer to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "What I meant was...um, thanks for letting me know I'm still alive. I mean, I can still stir some type of sexual emotion in a man." She grabbed the feather boa again and placed it around his neck.

He looked like he was taken off guard by her actions when he reached out to grasp her wrist. Buddy knelt down, brushing his mouth lightly at first against hers, then deepened the kiss and explored her mouth with his tongue.

She pressed her body more fully against him and tightened her grip around his waist. She could feel the shaft of his cock pressing against her thigh. A low moan escaped her as she pulled back to nibble at his neck.

He acted lost in passion, but stiffened like he couldn't continue what he'd started. Maybe he thought she was on the rebound and didn't want any part of it. He didn't seem the type to be played for a fool. She could have sworn he mumbled that he was only doing this for the money, not the feelings or the pleasure. But she'd been so lost in the moment; maybe she was hearing things. She was sure she'd heard him wrong.

"Jade, I think I'd better get back to the base soon." He pulled her from him. "I have to ship out pretty early in the morning. Not that I wouldn't like to continue this, but..."

She knew his willpower failed him when she saw the longing in his eyes as they glazed over the tips of her breasts pressed against the fabric of her shirt. They were standing at attention, begging for his touch.

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*Damn, if this woman wasn't making him hard as a rock.* He cleared his throat, thinking of being out at sea for three long months without the touch or even the scent of a woman. Maybe he needed this as badly as she needed it, even if the reasons were selfish ones on both their parts.

It didn't take much more to convince him. Buddy pulled her back into him with a heated embrace. He nibbled gently on her ear while he eased her down on the carpeted floor of the closet. "Are you sure about this, Jade? Um...do you have any protection by chance?" He hated himself for not being prepared as he should have been.

"Over in the nightstand, first drawer to the left. If you don't find them in there, maybe we could improvise." She said softly.

He noticed how her cheeks colored with a blush.

"Ah, here they are," he said.

Buddy walked back to the closet with the important packet between his thumb and forefinger.

"Now, I believe we were about at this point right here." He placed his mouth on hers and trailed his tongue down her throat, then further down between her breasts. He raised the thin fabric of her shirt, taking his fill of the soft mounds awaiting him.

Jade hadn't known such pleasure like what she was feeling from the warmth of his tongue. He reached to unhook her bra, then quickly lifted the shirt off over her head.

There was one thing certain about Buddy Tempo. He knew how to use that wonderful full mouth of his.

Jade was on the edge of explosion as she fumbled with the zipper of Buddy's jeans. His moan at the release of tension against his throbbing cock shattered out in the closet.

He pulled her hand around his cock, and she rubbed his shaft up and down. He opened his eyes to look at her, cupping her face with hands that felt like velvet. "Jade, I don't think I can wait much longer, it's been quite awhile for me." In fact, it'd been over a year since he'd last felt the supple body of a woman.

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With a silent motion of agreement, Jade reached for the packet and gently tore it open with her teeth. "Let me do it. I want my hands on you as much as possible."

It aroused him to feel her slide the condom on him. He lost control. His release was immediate upon entering her. Screaming out her name, he filled her, lying breathless to the side afterwards. "Jade, I'm sorry, I got carried away. I guess it wasn't so great for you, was it?"

Without waiting for her answer, Buddy placed his hand on the throbbing sensitive area between her thighs, bringing her to climax.

He could tell something burst inside of her, something wonderful and confusing from the look on her face. Perhaps it was something she'd never remembered feeling. Possibly she'd never recalled having an orgasm when she'd been married to Austin. It thrilled him to show her what it could be like.

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### Chapter Nine

The moment stood still while their bodies pressed against each other. Jade could feel Buddy's heart still pounding against the palm of her hand on his chest.

"I've never felt anything quite like this. Don't think I'm disappointed...not in the least," she said.

She could tell the words delighted him. He told her a woman had never made him lose control the way she had. Maybe it was his way of expressing his desire to climb back on top of her and experience the sexual bliss of ecstasy. But he couldn't look at her when she raised her head from his chest to look him in the face. And he wouldn't mount her again for another round of mind blowing sex, much to her disappointment. Could it be he'd used her to satisfy his sexual pleasure and didn't want to hurt her?

He stood, unsteady at first, reaching to remove the condom. "I'm just going to run in here and grab a quick shower before we head back to base." He backed away, acting like he needed to regain some composure.

Jade grabbed her blouse to cover herself, suddenly shy of her nakedness. She suppressed a giggle. She couldn't help it.

"What? What is it?" Buddy's face colored the shade of her red dress hanging beside him.

"Oh, nothing." She laughed again. "Let's just say you have quite a boa hanging between your legs, Buddy Tempo."

"Is that all?" He looked relieved and almost proud. "Well, I guess you could call it quite a large snake." He grinned, and considered asking her if she wanted to go another round before he hit the shower. If she felt that way about it, who was he to deny a lady more pleasure?

"No...um...I mean my lime green feather boa hanging between your legs. It's...well, it's kind of stuck to your testicles, Buddy. It must have gotten tangled up when we were, well...you know."

He would have blushed under other circumstances. But she looked so darn cute when she'd laughed, he couldn't deny her the small pleasure at his expense. Chances were it'd been a long time since she'd had a good laugh. Jade deserved one, and for the life of him, he couldn't find it in

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himself to be embarrassed. Instead, he headed to the shower after removing the long lime colored feathers between his legs. He had felt incredible moments ago. There was something he couldn't quite explain about Jade that made him feel complete.

But it scared the hell out of him, too. He wouldn't allow his feelings to become serious about a woman on the rebound from a long-term relationship. No way in hell was he going to get involved. He wouldn't be used for sheer sexual pleasure. Although he'd done it more times than he cared to count with other women. No, this guy was going to get on his ship in the morning, count his cash, and forget all about Jade Wellington.

He had too many other fish in the sea to feel this way. He loved his playboy lifestyle. He'd just lost his head for a few minutes. Now he had it back on straight, and wouldn't turn it around for anyone—not even Jade. The emotions he'd been feeling all evening were just from pent-up sexual tension. He'd known better than to wait so long to satisfy his needs, and wouldn't make the mistake again.

Jade went to the guest bathroom to freshen up while Buddy showered. She was confused at what she'd felt moments before. Never had Austin made her feel so beautiful, so sexy. Damn Buddy Tempo for unleashing something in her she hadn't known existed. She didn't want to like him so much, and certainly wasn't ready to admit maybe there had been more to it than sex. The faster she got him back to the base, the better things would be. She couldn't afford a broken heart. Not now, not ever again. She had her whole life in front of her, and she intended to make the best of it without any complications, which included Buddy Tempo.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sooo...did you and Buddy make your amends after I left the other night?" Celine was filing her nails, shaping the tips of her French manicure. "I think that phone call was perfect timing, all things considered."

"We got along okay." Jade crossed her legs cozily in one of the new dryer chairs at Celine's shop. "These new chairs are great. I love the hot pink color. Bet they set you back a small fortune." She rubbed the pink

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leather in envy. "And the new spa is coming along nicely, too. You'll be the talk of the town. Every woman in Cranberry will be flocking to your door."

"That's what I'm aiming for." Celine stopped filing her thumbnail. "I hope to make it like one of those posh get-a-way vacation spas you see in those travel magazines."

"I envy your success, Celine. I wish I had some business sense. Since Austin disappeared, it looks like I'm going to have to ask Jimmy for a few extra boxes of envelopes to stuff. Rumor has it Austin's left for New York for good. His architect firm has a sign on the door saying he's out of business. It doesn't look like I'll be receiving that alimony check in the mail anytime soon. I should have known he wouldn't come through when it came right down to it."

Celine positioned her nail file in midair. "He's in New York? You didn't tell me he went to New York. What in the hell is he doing there? I thought he was enjoying being kept by Carletta. What happened to that?" Celine's face went pale. *Now, I won't be able to recover the damn money Austin owes me.*

Celine worried Jade wouldn't be able to keep the home she lived in. She might be in danger of losing her best friend if Jade had to move away to find work outside of Cranberry.

"Earth to Celine." Jade cleared her throat, bringing Celine out of deep thought. "I'm getting ready to have that huge yard sale I was telling you about. I figure with all the junk and some of the furniture I'm going to sell, I should be able to clear enough to make next month's house payment. Mind if I put up an ad in your shop?"

"Of course I don't mind, Jade. But...you're doing a yard sale? Do you really think many people will show up?"

"I'm hoping so. I've got this really brilliant idea. You see, I thought I'd advertise it as sort of a Christmas in July thing. You know, offer free gift-wrapping, play Christmas music to get everyone in the spirit, and make it really cold inside the garage, sort of like a winter wonderland theme. So what do you think?"



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"You plan on selling some of your furniture? Oh Jade, don't you know you won't even get half the value of it in a yard sale? Can't you do something else besides sell off some of your furnishings? I mean, I hate to see you do something like that. Why don't you let me lend you a little money? I don't have much to spare right now due to Austin's miscalculation on all the renovations, but hey, I'll be glad to help all I can."

"No." Jade hung her head, toying with the chipped polish on her nails. "I couldn't possibly ask you to do such a thing. I won't be a charity case. I appreciate the generous offer, but I have to do this my way. I hope you understand, Celine."

"Look, Jade, don't have so much pride. There is nothing wrong with needing a little help now and then. What do you think friends are for anyway? Please, let me lend you some cash. You can pay me back when you get in better shape."

"Celine, I love you like a sister, but I refuse to borrow any money from you. This is something I have to do on my own. No hard feelings, okay?"

"Well, at least let me help you with the yard sale. I have a few extra fold-up tables in the back I can bring. And come to think of it, I have a bunch of leftover Christmas wrap in my attic."

"Sounds like a plan." Jade's gloomy face lifted.

Celine went to open the door for her morning appointments. "And you still haven't told me how you and Buddy ended up getting along. You did get along okay, didn't you?"

"You could say that." He's not such a bad guy, I guess."

With a lift of Celine's brow, she shot a knowing glance towards Jade. "Something else you'd like to share with me? You know I have a great need for information, right?" She wiggled her fingers in devil-like fashion above her head.

"I'm not ready to talk about it yet." Jade glanced at her watch. "If I don't get going soon, I'll be late for work. The boss is already on my case for the lousy cards I've been coming up with lately." Her face fell again. "As a matter of fact, he gave a warning last week. He said if I don't

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improve, he's not going to have a choice except to demote me, maybe even let me go."

"After all those years of faithful service and the wonderful cards you've designed in the past? Look at the money you've made for them, Jade. What the hell are they thinking?"

"They're thinking I'm washed up and out of fresh ideas. That's what they thinking. Gotta run." With a swift raise of her hand, she hurried out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"No pucker in those pretty little lips today?" Tommy sorted the stacks of mail into bins. "The big boss man said to tell you he wants a word with you when you arrive." He looked at Jade with his I-think-you-might-be-in-deep-shit look.

"Great, just what I need, Tommy. Have you been eavesdropping again? It's been nice knowing you, Tommy."

When she saw the sullen look on his face, she was sure he'd overheard the conversation that their boss, Gavin Simmons, had with some of her superiors.

"What are you talking about? You think he's going to can you just like that? Everyone has a slump in their career at some point. I know you, Jade, you'll get back on track soon. You can do this." Tommy walked over to where Jade stood looking out the window, seeing her fate before her eyes. With a gentle hug, he brushed a kiss on her forehead.

"Come on, Jade, things can't be that bad. You didn't do anything to deserve this. Now go get 'em, tiger. Show 'em what you're made of." He gave her a wink and went back to sorting the stack of mail.

"You wanted a word with me, Mr. Simmons?" Jade tried to steady her hands in her lap as she sat in front of his desk. "Tommy said you wanted to see me as soon as I arrived this morning."

Gavin leaned back in his plush leather chair, steepled his hands, and cleared his throat. "Yes...yes, Jade, I did. As you know, your

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performance as of late hasn't been up to par. We've had this conversation in the recent past. It shouldn't come as a shock to you."

"No...no sir, I understand." *Don't cry, Jade...don't let him see you cry.*  
"I'm really trying Mr. Simmons, really..."

"Jade, Jade, I know you are. You're quite capable of better performance. Your past records indicate that quite clearly." He shifted out of his seat to pace in front of the window, brushed his hand through thinning hair, then turned to her. "This hasn't been an easy decision for me, Jade..."

"I know, sir, but please give me one more..."

"Chance? Is that what you were about to say?"

"Yes...yes, another chance to prove myself to you. I can be good at this again, I promise. Please, Mr. Simmons." She braced herself, holding the arms of the chair. She hated begging. She had never been good at it. But at this stage in her life, she was desperate...desperate to prove not only to herself that she could survive after Austin, but to the world as well.

The silence was maddening. He cleared his throat, moving back to sit behind his desk. "Jade, as I said, this is difficult, down right tough, but I've made my decision. I've decided to hire someone to..."

"To replace me, I know." She hung her head, brushing the tears away with her hand.

"As I was saying, I've decided to hire someone as sort of, well, sort of a mentor for you. I think she'll be able to help. I was really impressed with her during our interview. In fact, I think you may know her. Name's Carletta, Carletta Gibson. I think she might even be your neighbor, according to the address on her application."

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### Chapter Ten

Celine rubbed over the tension forming at the back of her neck and paced across the floor of her shop.

"What! Carletta is your boss? You are kidding me, Jade. Please tell me you're making all of this up. This can't be happening. You don't deserve this."

Jade grabbed a hairbrush and pulled it roughly through her hair. She could see Celine's reflection in the mirror, shock written all over her face.

Tears spilled from Jade's eyes. "I tell you, if I hadn't needed this job so badly, I would have walked right up to Gavin Simmons and told him exactly what I thought of True Heart Greetings *and* his decision. I've never been so humiliated. I'd almost rather he'd fired me on the spot."

"So when does this little 'mentor' program start? Is Carletta going to be sharing the same office space with you? This is incredulous."

"Yup, she's going to be sitting right beside me. The bitch! Full of so-called 'good advice', I'm sure of it. Like she knows anything about designing greeting cards. This is an insult. The only thing she can design is how to take someone's husband from them. She certainly had designs on Austin. I wonder what she's up to with all of this get-a-job stuff?"

Jade blew into a tissue. "When have you ever known Carletta to work a day in her life? That is, at anything honest. Maybe it's all a conspiracy. She took Austin from me, and now she wants my job. As if taking my husband wasn't enough. What have I ever done to deserve this? Do I look like an easy target? Like I have the words 'kick me in the ass' written across my back or something?"

"Jade, I'm sorry...so sorry. It seems like you are certainly on a run of bad luck. Why don't you come by the shop later this evening? Let me treat you to a nice new haircut, maybe go back in the new massage room and get a massage. You know, Carlos is a superb massage therapist. All the women in Cranberry are raving about what the man can do with his hands. He came highly recommended, you know. I was lucky to nab him from that New York salon he was working for."

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"If you don't mind, I'll pass, Celine. He reminds me too much of Austin. Apparently all the women of Cranberry were secretly raving about what Austin could do with his hands, too, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, sorry. I'd forgotten for a minute."

"Maybe Carletta will stop in for a massage. I'm sure once she hears about how wonderful Carlos's hands are, she'll be breaking down your door in no time. If you don't mind, I'll skip on the free hair cut, too. I really have to get ready for the yard sale tomorrow. I'll see you around six in the morning."

The ride home was bleak. Somehow Cranberry was losing its appeal. Maybe she could blame it on the foul mood clouding her brain, but the day's events had her thinking of putting her house up for sale. A new start in a new town might be the magic cure for her problems.

The gloom hanging over her head thickened as she pulled some of the lighter pieces of furniture to the garage. She had too many memories. She had to get out of this house to rid herself of them.

She felt as though she and her best friend were in different leagues now. Celine was going on with renovations to improve her shop. Business was booming for her. It wasn't that Jade wasn't happy for her, but her own life seemed to be taking a downward spiral.

She couldn't do the things she once did, like going shopping for the day over in Hamblin in the finest of stores. Days of Dillard and Zach's were a thing of the past. They were too pricy for her wallet. Celine, on the other hand, continued to thrive. She wasn't jealous of her friend's accomplishments, because Celine had worked hard at achieving success. But it was difficult watching her spend money as if she could just snatch more from a money tree in her backyard.

Austin was long gone, probably never to be heard from again. Carletta was going to shift right into her seat at work, and Buddy hadn't even said he'd call or write when she'd dropped him off at the base. Of course, she couldn't blame the guy. He'd probably forgotten she even existed after the brief fling in her closet.

What did she have to offer anyone anyway? A big house with a huge mortgage attached to it? No money in savings and a dog with

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gastronomical problems out the yen-yang? Yeah, that made for a real attractive package, didn't it? No wonder men steered clear of her. Who wanted a walking town ditz in a pair of outdated high heels?

Jade took a hard look in her bathroom mirror. *Quite the self-pity kick, Jade Wellington!* "You are worth something, and not a single person is going to make you feel differently about yourself. Just because you're at an all time low right now, doesn't mean you should be standing here beating yourself up. You have brains and good sense, regardless of what crisis is going on in your life, right?"

If Austin didn't want her, well, it wasn't her fault. She'd tried to be the perfect wife. And, if Buddy Tempo had intended for their sexual encounter to be a one-night stand, so be it. There were plenty of others out there who would eventually see her worth. "Stand up and brush off the internal bruises, Jade, show them what you're made of." How much worse could things get?

She worked for three non-stop hours preparing for what she determined would be the most successful yard sale in Cranberry. People would flock from miles around to get such wonderful bargains on high quality items. She'd made a point of listing several valuables in her ad for the Cranberry Times. Jade even spent extra-precious cash on advertising in the bigger paper of a nearby town. Every penny counted these days. Hopefully she'd hear back from one of the literary agents she'd mailed a query letter to about her novel. She was learning patience. That was certain. Being published was a slim chance, but she believed in her work even if no one else ever saw the value in it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Would you like this gift wrapped?" Shivering, Jade sipped at her third cup of coffee that morning. "You know, that would make a wonderful gift for someone."

The gentleman purchasing the crystal vase had sifted through the items in her yard sale for over an hour. He'd only made his purchase after shuffling and rummaging through over half the contents in her sale. Jade

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became uncomfortable under his gaze. There was something about his eyes. Something that was unsettling, but familiar. He'd come prepared for the cold atmosphere of winter. She'd created it with the use of a couple of portable air conditioning units in her garage. Sporting a hat and long coat, he approached her.

"Do you happen to come gift wrapped by chance?" They were the first words he'd spoken.

An eerie feeling slithered up Jade's spine. *That voice, there's something far too familiar in its tone.* For the life of her she couldn't place it. "I'm afraid I don't." She shifted toward where Celine was standing at the far side of the table.

"That's too bad. You would make a man such a wonderful warm present." He gave her the brief glimpse of a smile. "Well, if I can't have you, I guess this will be all." He pulled a roll of bills from his wallet, handing her a twenty. "Oh, here's a little extra for putting up with me for so long. I'm afraid I've made somewhat of a mess of your items." He slipped another twenty from the roll and tossed it in her direction. "Thanks again...um, if you change your mind about gift wrapping yourself..."

"I don't think so." Jade tried to smile her sweetest smile while attempting to give him back the extra twenty. "Here, thanks, but I couldn't possibly take this."

He'd already made his way to his car by the time she'd tried to hand him back the money. He sped out of the driveway without a backwards glance.

"Celine! Did you notice the customer I just finished up with? The man in the hat? You know, the guy who'd been lurking around here for over an hour."

"Yes, I did notice him. I even overheard him talking to you. Was it me, or did he sound familiar to you, too?"

"Very familiar, but I just can't place him. This guy gave me an extra twenty and refused to take it back. He really made me feel uncomfortable." Jade's hand shook as she reached for her coffee cup. "Do you think I should call the police or something?"

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"And tell them what, Jade? That some stranger showed up at your yard sale, asked if you came gift wrapped, and left you a little extra cash? Do you think they will actually take it as any kind of threat against you? Why, they'll laugh after you get off the phone with them. He didn't commit any crime or cause you any harm, did he?"

"Well, no, he just made me feel uncomfortable."

"There you go. No harm done, even if I agree with you. By the way, it's freezing in here. Can't we go back to summer for a while? After all, it is July outside. And what's up with the snow-blowing machine?" Celine exaggerated an eye roll.

"Jeeze already, I'm going to have to run by the shop and sit under one of my new hair dryers to thaw out. I need to get all the mileage out of them I can, thanks to your ex. I should never have listened to his ideas on tax credits."

"What ideas?" Jade sounded suspicious.

"I really don't want to go into it. The sooner I try to forget about it, the better off both of us will be."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Seven-hundred fifty-eight dollars and thirty-six cents. Not bad for a day's work, huh Snickers? Let's go put this in a safe place until I can get to the bank tomorrow. I hope they don't mind counting out a couple of hundred dollars' worth of change!"

Jade was exhausted from the sale, but pleased with the results.

"Let's go, boy. We'll stash it in here with my diamond until tomorrow." She reached for the box under the bed. "Oh! No! My diamond, it's gone! Snickers, did you see anyone come in the house? It was that man. I just know it. I knew there was something suspicious about him. No wonder he was so generous with giving me extra money."

Snickers fell to the carpet, letting out a whine, eyes blinking up at her.



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"Oh Snickers, this is awful. That diamond was worth a couple of thousand dollars. I was hoping to hang on to it. It is one of the few things Austin bought me that was actually paid for."

That's what she got for keeping it in the house. She knew she should have pawned it off down at Jake's Pawn and Swap shop. At least she would have had some extra money to live on. It was stupid not to call the police right after that man had left.

She put her hands up in disbelief. "I give up! I can't win for losing!"

As she reached down to pat Snicker's head, he started rolling around on the carpet. His whining was becoming somewhat of a howl as he continued rolling vigorously on the floor.

"Snickers? What's wrong? Are you okay, boy? You act like you're in pain. What are you trying to tell me? Did someone kick you or something? Did you try to defend the house during the sale from that strange man? Did he come back here in my bedroom, Snickers?"

Jade was frantic; never before had her dog acted like this, not even when he had the worst case of a stomachache. "Snickers? Maybe I should call the vet."

Her hand shook as she dialed the vet's office. The minute the emergency service answered, Jade started spilling out the frantic message.

"From the sound of things, I think you better bring him on in, Ms. Wellington. I'll get Dr. Drake on the line and have him meet you down at the office."

"Yes, please, thank you. We're on our way."

If something happened to Snickers, she'd just die. Snickers was the only thing that loved her no matter what. She couldn't imagine not having him around. "Oh Snickers, come on boy, don't give out on me. Just hang on. I'll have you to the vet in no time."

The dog lay lifeless in her arms as she carried him to the car in a panic. His breathing had become shallow, and she felt for a heartbeat in his chest. "Come on. You have to pull through this...please...don't die on me."

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### **Chapter Eleven**

The three-mile drive to the vet was the longest Jade had ever traveled. Snickers lay lifeless in the back seat, gasping now and then for breath. What could possibly be wrong? Only a few hours ago he'd been prancing through the house and scooting his dog bowl around the kitchen floor.

She screeched to a halt in front of the vet's office, noticing the night lighting still on and the parking lot vacant. "Come on, Dr. Drake, where are you?" She pleaded into the dark silence. She didn't care what the cost was. It would be worth it if he could save her dog. After-hours calls were bound to be expensive and more than she could probably afford. But some things were worth any price, and Snickers was one of them.

The headlights of the van pulling into the parking lot put her mind at ease. Dr. Drake jumped out, buttoning his shirt front. "What seems to be the problem with Snickers? The night service said he was rolling around in pain when you were on the phone with them. Any coughing or choking sounds?"

"I don't know, Dr. Drake. Everything was fine one minute. The next thing I knew, he was rolling around on the floor."

"Let's get him inside and take a look."

He pulled a big ring of keys from his pocket while he opened the door to her car. "Here, you unlock the office. It's this one." He pulled a key from the mass, thrusting it in her hand. "I'll get Snickers inside. His breathing is extremely shallow. We don't have much time here."

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It seemed hours passed as Jade sat in the waiting area. But she trusted Dr. Drake. He'd been her neighbor when she was growing up and was the best in his field.

There were no sounds except the magnified ticking of a clock on the wall. A loud howl filtered from the back hallway. She knew that sound. "Snickers?" She went running toward the back.

"Well, it seems Snickers has a taste for the finer things in life, Jade. I think he'll recover." Dr. Drake held out her diamond ring. "Seems Snickers decided to grab himself a snack at some point during the evening. This ring was lodged in his throat. Nearly cut his windpipe off."

"How in the world?" Jade reached for the ring. "It was in a box, hidden away under my bed. I don't know how he would have gotten hold of it."

"I'm afraid Snickers is going to have to stay with us for a few days while he heals. He's had a pretty rough time of it."

Something in Dr. Drake's eyes frightened her. He looked as if there were more...maybe something he wasn't telling her.

"Is...there...there something else, doctor? Is Snickers in any danger of not recovering?"

"Jade..."

"What? What is it, Dr. Drake? Tell me...please."

Dr. Drake guided her to a nearby chair. "Why don't you sit down here for a minute? I'm afraid I have some bad news."

She didn't like the look he was giving her, his brow creased in a gesture of concern.

"Have you had any friends or relatives in your house today?"

Jade gave him a look of confusion. What an odd question. "My friend, Celine, was there, but she never went in the house as far as I know. Why?"

"Then, I suggest you stay with friends tonight, Jade. You see, the ring isn't the only thing I found. A piece of human skin was lodged in Snicker's throat along with some yellow and white food substance as well. That's probably how the ring got there. My guess is you had an unwelcome visitor this evening. Snickers bit someone."

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Dr. Drake took in a ragged breath. "I presume whoever was after the ring had it in their hand at the time. Snickers probably went to attack them. They probably reached out just as he bit down, causing the ring to slide into the dog's mouth.

"I wish I had better news, but it's the best explanation I can give you. Might I suggest when you get to your friend's house that you file a report with the police department? I don't mean to alarm you, but I think you've had an intruder."

Jade sat stunned in silence. She tried to speak, but nothing but a sound imitating a squeak passed her lips.

Dr. Drake bent down to her eye level. "Jade, are you all right? I can call someone for you if you'd like."

"Um...no...no, let me think here. Um, I'll go to Celine's house and call the police just like you said. There was a very strange man at my yard sale today. I'd mentioned something about it to Celine, but we kind of shrugged it off as just one of those things. Dr. Drake, you don't know how much I appreciate your coming out in the middle of the night for my emergency. Thank you so much. How much do I owe you?"

"My receptionist will send out a statement in the morning, Jade. There might be more medical attention for Snickers yet. He's not out of the woods by a long shot. I have him sedated for tonight, and he's resting quite comfortably. Is there anything else I could do for you before we leave?"

"No...thank you for your kindness. You don't know how much I appreciate it, doctor."

"Very well then, I'll just make sure you get on your way safely. Feel free to call and check on Snickers anytime during his stay. It shouldn't be but a couple of days."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wine, here, drink it, Jade. You need something to calm you down." Celine topped off her own glass, then handed the other one to Jade. "Just try to relax before the police get here to get a statement. *Shit*, I

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should have taken your intuitiveness more seriously today. I'm sorry. I had no idea."

"I need to run over to the house to pick up a few clothes for tomorrow, but I don't want to go alone. Do you think when the police arrive they'd be willing to escort us over there?"

"I don't see why not. I hope you remembered to take those Christmas lights and the yard ornaments down. I don't think any cop pulling up to your house in July, seeing winter wonderland in action, will take your statement seriously."

"Uh oh, guess I forgot about them. In fact, I think they're still lit. Even the Christmas music is still going."

"And what about those dancing candy canes? Are they still dancing away in the yard?"

"You could maybe say that."

"Great, that will take some explaining. I can just see the cops' faces now. I can hardly wait." Celine jumped at the ring of the doorbell. "Guess that's them. Ready to hit Santa Claus Lane? Hey, if you're lucky, maybe one of them will have a little white beard when they come to the door."

"That is so not funny, Celine."

\* \* \* \* \*

David Jackson's memory flickered back to the day he'd seen this very woman pinning a poster to the light pole. He knew he'd been right about seeing this dark-haired beauty again.

His heart lurched, skipping a beat when he studied Jade's face. She was even more beautiful up close.

He shifted the thought aside while his partner started the routine. "Has anyone been bothering you as of late, Ms. Wellington? Possibly a boyfriend or coworker, anyone like that?"

"No...I'm divorced, and my ex is in New York somewhere. As far as a boyfriend, none...zilch. I don't have a boyfriend."

"So no one is angry with you or maybe feels jilted or anything?"

"No...no one."

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"Well, we'll need to run by and check the place out. It would be a good idea to take a look around. Perhaps they forced their way into your home. We'll check out all the windows and possible entry areas. I'm sorry this happened to you, Ms. Wellington. I assure you we'll be doing extra drive-bys for the next couple of weeks just to keep an eye on things. If you discover anything else missing or have any problems, give us a call." He flipped the cover shut on his tablet.

"Officer, could I ask a small favor? I need to run by and pick up a few things until I can return home. Would it be possible to follow you over and get them?"

"Don't see why not. What do you think, Jackson?" He gave his partner a questioning look.

"No harm in it, I guess. It would be better to ride over in the cruiser with us, though. We don't want your car seen anywhere around your house tonight. It's better to let the intruder think you are gone. Sometimes, they will come back to steal something else. They count on people leaving. If they see your car, it might scare them off, and we want every chance of catching them that we can get. You'll need to wait in the cruiser until we give you the okay signal to come inside."

\* \* \* \* \*

"What the hell?" They pulled up to a stop in front of Jade's house. "Here it is July, the grass as parched as a brown paper sack, and you have Christmas lights on?" David Jackson turned to face Jade in the backseat.

"Lady..."

"Look...I can explain, really, officer."

"Dancing candy canes, huh? Hundreds of them." He suppressed a laugh.

Just as *Jingle Bell Rock* was ending, the entire house went dark. No lights, no candy canes dancing a little jig. Only a dead, dark silence.

Jim Parrot leaned over the steering wheel, inspecting the lawn.

"That's peculiar. I wonder if someone's still inside and just cut the wire on

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the electricity?" He shut off the engine and arched an eyebrow at his partner.

David saw Jade rub at her eyes when he turned to look at her.

"Um...I...I think maybe I forgot to pay the light bill." *How embarrassing.* Here she was with two cops already thinking she was some kind of fruitcake, and now she'd forgotten to pay her electricity bill.

"Jade! Please tell me you at least had the money to pay your electric bill." Celine blew a breath upward at her bangs in disgust.

David shifted an all-too-knowing glance toward his partner. "No money for the light bill, huh? Insurance fraud. I've seen it before. Somebody claims a valuable item is stolen from their home and collects on the insurance money because they're desperate for cash. Lady, do you realize how much trouble you could be in? This is serious."

"Yes, yes, officer, I do. I realize having my lights cut off will go against my credit rating. You are entirely right. I should have paid my bill on time."

"No, I think you know what I'm talking about here. It's called insurance fraud. So, what missing valuable items are we looking for tonight to turn into your home owners' insurance? Maybe you'd like to come down to the station to discuss it further. We have some real nice cots in those little rooms with bars on them.

"Do you want to 'fess up to this now, or wait until you contact your attorney? In my book, anyone who's desperate starts devising some pretty clever ways to make money. The ole false homeowner's claim is a classic."

"What...you're arresting me? You're arresting me for insurance fraud?"

"It's starting to look that way isn't it, Ms. Wellington?"

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### **Chapter Twelve**

"Wait, I can explain." The woman frantically bulldozed through her handbag. "Here...here it is. My light bill. See there. Look at the due date on it. I must have gotten the due date confused with the water bill."

"July twenty-fifth, well, let's see here. Today is July..." Jackson twisted his watch around and hit the illuminate button. "It's only the twentieth. You still have five days before it's due."

"Yes...yes, my point exactly. See there, my electricity should be working just fine."

He pulled his hand across the stubble on his chin.

"Hmm...something's not quite right here. You ladies wait here in the cruiser while we check things out. I think our first hunch was right after all."

Within seconds, he and his partner exited the cruiser to circle around the house and cautiously enter through the back door.

"It doesn't look like anything is out of place in here." Jackson's flashlight cast a circle of light around the rooms. "I bet she's got a blown fuse. We'd better check the fuse box just to be sure. With all those Christmas lights she had going, it wouldn't surprise me. Do you really believe her statement about that stolen diamond, Parrot?"

"Could be true, Jackson. I mean, the lady did say we could verify it with the vet."

They were in Jade's bedroom. "Well, I think she's desperate for cash. Remember that poster she put up a few weeks ago. She wanted a



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cool five hundred then." David chewed on a toothpick. "Hey, look here. Looks as if she must be some kind of writer or something. *Fantasy in Fishnets*." David sat on the bed, scanning the words with his flashlight.

"This explains some of her eccentric behavior. I sure didn't know Austin Wellington's ex-wife was an erotic romance writer. Man, this stuff's spicy. It makes me hot just reading the first page."

His partner grabbed it from his hands. "Put that down. We're supposed to be investigating, you nitwit." Even at that, his partner couldn't help but browse a few paragraphs for himself. "Whew!" He wiped at his brow. "Spicy all right. Let's get moving."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here's the culprit." David held the blown-out fuse in the palm of his hand. "Looks like you just blew a fuse, Ms. Wellington. Don't guess you have a spare one around anywhere, do you? We'd be glad to replace it for you."

"I don't have any that I know of. I guess I can take that one down to the hardware store tomorrow and get a replacement. I've never had to change a fuse before. Is it okay to go inside and get a few things I'll need?"

"I'll walk you in. We'll need a couple of flashlights since your electricity is out." He handed her one from the glove compartment. "I think you can come back tomorrow. We're going to do a couple of drive-by surveillances tonight, like I said. I apologize for accusing you of fraud earlier. It was entirely rude of me."

"I'm just glad things got straightened out, Officer Jackson. Now if I can just get back in my home tomorrow and get my dog back, things will be better."

David cleared his throat and paused. "Um...hope you don't mind, but I couldn't help but notice you're a writer. That's something I've always dreamed of doing myself. Have you had any luck with it?"

"Well, not yet, but I've just recently started sending query letters to agents. I hope my novel will be my saving grace in all of this mess. I'm a firm believer in going after your dreams. Perhaps you should sit down

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and write the book that's always been inside of you. You never know until you try. I guess you could say life's little bumps and bruises have helped push me forward to finally pursuing that dream."

"Well, I wish you the best, Ms. Wellington, and if you see anything strange going on, please don't hesitate to give us a call. If you're ready, we'll give you a lift back over to your friend's place. Oh, and thanks for the encouragement. Maybe I'll just start that killer novel that's been going through my head for years. And please, call me David."

His face held a certain glow that hadn't been there before. It felt good inside to be able to make someone feel as if they had talent and worth in life. Hopefully, in the months to come, she'd find hers.

It was somewhat scary to think a handful of people knew her secret passion for writing. First Buddy, and now Officer Jackson, had gotten a glimpse into her private world. It was a world she'd never shared with anyone. Not even Austin.

If she was lucky, a literary agent would pick up her manuscript with the same enthusiasm. It was all she had left to go on. If not, she'd be contacting a real estate agency instead. Reality struck hard. Most of the contents had gone out the garage door today at her sale. She was quickly running out of options for cash. She would have to sell her house.

Funny, how the things which used to hold such importance, such as fine furniture and up-to-date expensive clothing, didn't seem to matter anymore. Maybe she had pushed Austin into a lifestyle they couldn't really afford. Perhaps if she'd desired less than the finest, he would still be around, still in her bed. Guilt tingled along her spine. She'd failed without meaning to. Now it was too late.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rejection, the fourth this week from the batch of query letters she'd submitted. Only two more chances left. At least the last rejection letter had given her some positive feedback. She was going in the right direction, according to the editor's remarks. But the point of view had been somewhat confusing, and the plot needed thickening. They were things

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that could be fixed with some more editing on her part. They encouraged her to query them again with a revision, if she wanted, so maybe it wasn't a full-blown rejection.

Her mood lightened considerably as she shifted to a comfortable position in her closet. Here she could shut the world out for a few hours and slip into her fantasyland of writing and revising her manuscript.

Two weeks had passed since the incident of her diamond ring. Snickers, happily back home, was once again scooting his dog dish across the tiled floor of the kitchen, enjoying the extra treats he'd been receiving since his return. She'd made her house payment—barely, but she'd made it. Of course, Austin had disappeared off the face of the earth, according to her attorney. He'd come up with zero leads on his address in New York.

She wasn't surprised he'd run from his responsibility. He'd suddenly become quite good at being unreliable.

Enough about the past. She needed to concentrate on what was here and now. She willed herself back to her manuscript. The agent had pointed out some of the weaker areas, one of which was the steamy love scenes she'd written. How could she make it more enticing? After fifteen minutes of thought, she was still drawing a blank. Writer's block...something she'd rarely experienced.

Her gaze did a ninety-degree turn around the items in her closet. There...that lime green feather boa. Memories of her rendezvous with Buddy in that very closet flooded her brain.

A thought took hold. Buddy would be her inspiration for this particular scene in the book. He'd certainly been well-endowed. Come to think of it, if he were a bicycle, his kickstand would have dragged the ground even in the *up* position.

Within minutes, she'd reconstructed the paragraph on the page. She stretched her arms upward. She felt hunger pangs low in her stomach. Twinkies. One of her favorite things that would probably add another inch to her hips.

So what? She deserved a treat for her hard work. She'd worry about the extra pounds later.

"Now where did I stash those?" she muttered with a frantic search of her coat pockets. She always kept a stash in her winter coat pockets.

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Ones she never wore due to the California heat, but Austin had insisted she have. She searched through every wool tweed, every fur, still...nothing. Why she continued to hang on to them, she didn't know. Maybe it was an emotional attachment to Austin that she needed to get rid of and get some cash.

Her emergency stash was gone. Surely someone hadn't gone through her coat pockets!

It must have been the intruder who'd tried to lift her diamond ring last week. They must have done a more thorough search for valuables than what she'd first realized. How could they be so cruel as to steal her stash of snacks? She'd rather they'd taken the Gucci handbag on her shelf. And why hadn't they taken the expensive furs? Maybe they would have been too hard to pawn without suspicion.

Then it struck her like a Mac truck. The yellow and white food the vet had found in Snicker's mouth had been from Twinkies. The intruder must have tried to bribe her dog with them in order to get to the ring! They'd specifically been after her ring.

Should she report it? After all, Officer Jackson told her to report anything else missing. Twinkies might be insignificant to some people, but still, it *was* a missing item from her home. If the intruder had been low-life enough to steal those, it was hard to say what else might be gone.

She ran to the living room, scrounged around for her address book, found David's business card, and dialed his number.

"Officer Jackson, I mean...um David? Hi...yes, this is Jade Wellington. I hate to bother you, but you did tell me to report anything else I discovered missing."

She heard him sigh, but still found his voice to be a little sexy. Hey, maybe she really was getting over Austin!

"Oh, Ms. Wellington...I'm sorry to hear you're missing more of your belongings," he said. "Can't say I'm surprised though. Usually people discover other things missing days later after a break-in. Let me grab your report here so I can add it to the list."

"Yes...yes, thank you, David." She paced across the hardwood floor, scuffing her shoe against the shiny mahogany finish.

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He came back on the line. "Okay, here we are. What seems to be missing?"

"My Twinkies. The intruder must have stolen my Twinkies," Jade blurted.

"Your what? Did I hear you right? You're calling to report missing *Twinkies*?"

Jade could tell from the tone of his voice that he was probably laughing at her.

"Well, after all, you did tell me to report everything."

She heard him sigh. "Ms. Wellington, indeed I did tell you that. You were just doing as you were instructed to do, I guess. But I hope you're not thinking about turning this in to your home owner's insurance."

"Why, of course not. I'm afraid it wouldn't quite qualify due to a high deductible. I suppose I'm just 'out of pocket', so to speak, on this one."

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### **Chapter Thirteen**

"What do you mean, you didn't get the ring?" Austin paced the floor in the small New York flat he'd rented. "You told me it wasn't going to be a problem. You did this sort of thing all the time."

"I had it right in my hand, I tell ya. That was until her stupid canine decided to take part of my hand for lunch. You'd have dropped it, too. My finger hurts like hell. Probably needs stitches."

"Look, Jimmy Boone's expecting some hard cash out of that diamond. If I don't repay him some of the money for breaking that contract I signed for the escort service, he could ruin me for good. Even thought it was an illegal contract, the guy wants his money. Hell, for all I know, he might belong to the mob and send a hit man after my ass."

"Hey man, it's not really my problem now, is it? And don't think you're going to swindle me out of my fee either. I kept my end of the bargain. I can't help that the damn ring slipped out of my hand when I got bit. What did you want me to do? Slice the stupid mutt's throat open to get it out?"

Austin was beyond desperate. He needed access to some quick cash. Carletta would be demanding a refund, he was certain of it. As long as he'd been her sex slave, the money hadn't been an issue. She'd been quite generous. But now that he'd skipped town and her bed, well, that was a different matter. But he'd come here to start a new life. One that didn't include Jade.

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He'd almost convinced himself he'd spent extravagant amounts of cash to keep her up in a manner she expected. But now he had to face the cold truth. He'd done it more out of selfishness. Not because he'd loved her and had wanted to have only the best of everything for her. He'd wanted to prove to the world *and* his parents he'd made a name for himself. Of course, along with that, it'd been important for him to keep up an appearance. After all, how would it have looked to have been seen out with his wife in less than the finest?

Things had begun to go all to hell when she'd started talking about children and baby furniture. He'd never wanted a family. Jade had known that from the beginning. His own family had been a disaster, with his father's unyielding lust for power and status. Let alone the mental problems. His father had ignored his mother's needs and overlooked his only son. His father had never so much as taken the time to attend any of his baseball games in high school. According to his father, kids were a menace. And now, Austin had followed the same pattern. He'd stepped right into his father's footsteps, becoming the perfect cookie-cutter example of him. He hated it and didn't know if he was capable of changing it. So instead, he chose not to try. Life was easier that way.

Perhaps he thought the material things in life would replace the maternal instinct in Jade. That's when it really had started. The escort service, then Carletta, and finally the failing of his business. No longer could he continue the charade.

Sure, he thought he'd been somewhat in love with Jade the day they'd married. But long hours and lust for money and women had finally taken their toll. Up until last week, when he'd seen Jade with another man, he'd convinced his brain she still mattered. The truth was, her dating again hadn't hit him as hard as he'd thought it would.

Austin raised his fist to the wall beside the window, punching it as if he could will the pain away. With bloodied knuckles, he took the steps leading into the alley from his flat. His bleeding hand throbbed with pain.

He was going to be late, and it was only his second day on his new job. The construction crew wasn't going to be happy. They were waiting on the blueprints he'd worked up the night before. Without them, they

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couldn't drive a single nail in the new complex they were building. The twenty minute drive wouldn't help matters.

The drive had taken a full thirty minutes. Abandoning the rules, he rushed into the complex without putting on his hard hat. He shoved the rolled up blueprints into the hand of his boss. "Here, sorry I'm late. I'm afraid I got tied up with a phone call. I'm still trying to tie up some of the loose ends on my business back home.

"Not a problem, Austin." His new supervisor shot a glance at his head. "It's a problem when you don't follow proper safety rules, though. You better get out to your truck and grab your hard hat."

"Yes, sir." He headed out to the work truck to grab his hat.

Having a boss was going to take more than a little getting used to. He was a man accustomed to making his own set of rules. A man used to being in charge. But for now, it was as good as it was going to get.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Have a nice hot cup of coffee." Carletta sat the steaming cup on Jade's desk. "Coffee always gets those creative juices flowing." Her chipper voice drilled a headache into Jade's brain almost immediately.

Carletta's voice droned on, like a buzzing bee waiting to sting its victim. "Now I know this is going to be difficult for you and me at first. But in time, I think we'll make a wonderful team. I already have an idea for our new line of greeting cards..."

Jade shifted her eyes to the doorway where Tommy slipped by, only stopping long enough to roll his eyes at her.

"Um...thanks for the coffee, Carletta, but I think I've already had my three cup quota today." *Besides, you've probably dropped some kind of poison in it.* She forced a smile. "But thanks anyway for the nice thought." Jade frowned. It was going to be one hell of a long day.

"Fine. I know what you mean. Too much coffee can make you a little jumpy sometimes." Carletta took a deliberately slow sip from her cup. "I thought we could start with these." She pulled a file from her tote. "I was so excited about starting work today, I sat up nearly half the night



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drawing some of these designs and matching up some cute little sayings to go with them. So, what do you think about taking a look at them for me, Jade?"

*I think you're a stupid, husband-stealing bimbo. "They look like...well, like a good possibility, Carletta. So tell me, when did you inherit an interest in the greeting card industry?"*

"Oh, I've had an interest in this for quite some time. I have a degree in graphic design."

"Oh, really?" *So, Carletta really is after my job. "So you've decided to put it to good use?"* She shifted in her chair, knocking the coffee cup over by accident in the process. "Oh...oh, I'm so sorry. Clumsy of me, let me get that wiped up." The designs Carletta had laid out on the desk were absorbing the coffee.

Carletta was visibly upset. "I'm going to assume you did this accidentally, right?" Steam was ready to burst from her ears. "After all, you can't afford to jeopardize your job now, can you? So I know it was just an unfortunate accident. Am I correct?"

"Yes...yes, an accident. I'm sorry, Carletta. I'm so very sorry." Visions of a pink slip danced through Jade's head.

"Not to worry. I always make a back-up copy of my work. We'll just get a fresh start on it again in the morning. You do know you'll be working full-time this week, don't you?"

*Full-time. Did she actually say full-time, as in a forty-hour workweek?* The company probably wanted to make sure Carletta was trained properly to take over her job. "Why, of course I know." Jade brushed back her hair, forcing a smile. The money would come in handy. She could stock up on some extra groceries and more expensive dog food for Snickers.

But what about the phone bill? What if Buddy happened to call and her phone was disconnected? Not that he would, but one could always hope, couldn't she?

Or, even worse, what if a literary agent was trying to reach her to hammer out a multi-figure book deal? So much for the gourmet dog food. It probably wouldn't be a bad idea to place a call to Jimmy Boone this week too. She was going to need all the envelopes she could get to stuff

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and mail. She scribbled a quick reminder down on a scrap of paper beside her computer.

Carletta stood over Jade's back, reading the note. "You know Jimmy Boone?" She exclaimed with a look which could have easily passed for shock. "How do you know Jimmy?"

"It's a bit of a small town, isn't it?" Jade tilted her head up a notch, proud of the sarcastic comment.

Carletta's eyes turned to ice. "The Jimmy Boone?"

Jade was enjoying this. "Yup, is there some sort of problem with knowing Jimmy?"

"Err...um...no, I...I guess not." Carletta paled. "I just didn't expect you to be associated with the likes of him, that's all."

Jade was never so glad to see the end of a work day. There'd been several tense moments between her and Carletta. But she had other things to worry about at the moment. She'd tried to call Jimmy during her lunch break, only to hear a message that the line had been disconnected. She really needed some extra work to meet the bills flooding her mailbox.

\* \* \* \* \*

Curious, she made the short drive to Jimmy's office. All the lights were still on. That was a good sign, wasn't it? Jade noticed a car still in the parking lot.

She jiggled the lock on the door, and was surprised when it swung open. "Hello, is anyone here?" Uneasiness vibrated in her voice, echoing down the normally cluttered hallway. She noticed the light shining from underneath Jimmy's doorway. When Jade approached it, the piece of paper on his door had a new message written across it. Disbelief slipped into her eyes. The message was simple and direct. *No longer in business.*

"No, it can't be!" she shouted. What about the money he owed her for last week's mailing? Now what was she going to do?

Jade jumped with fright when a woman's voice echoed in the hallway. "Can I help you with something, miss?" An elderly lady rested her broom against the door. "If you're looking for Jimmy Boone, I'm

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afraid you're too late. He took off a couple of days ago. Made the owner of the place real mad, too. He never paid the rent for last month."

"I don't suppose you'd know where he went, do you?" Jade asked, trying to remain calm.

"Now if I knew that, I don't guess the owner of the place would be tracking him down for the rent money." The woman gave her a grin that was missing a few teeth. "I just clean up around here. I don't keep track of 'em...just pick up their mess. Course, if you asked around, people in this town would tell you I'm a real busybody. Hah! Like I care what people think."

Jade smiled. "Of course, you wouldn't know where to find him. How silly of me. He owes me some money for some work I've done."

"Jimmy owes everybody money, sweetie. You ain't any different. Of course, from the looks of ya, I wouldn't have pegged you for a prostitute."

"I beg your pardon?" Shock radiated from Jade's face.

"Sure, everybody knows Jimmy ran a cathouse on the side. And that ain't all. Ran an escort service for the ladies in town, too." She gave Jade another near toothless grin. "Yep, I hear ole' Austin Wellington was one of the town's favorites when it came to the ladies."

The woman cackled, elbowing Jade in a jovial manner. "Yep, I wouldn't have minded a little romp in the sack with him myself if I was about twenty years younger. Of course, when Carletta struck a deal with Jimmy for him, he was off limits to everyone else. She paid a pretty penny for him, that one did. I heard she lost a lot of money in the deal. Reckon it was worth it to her though. Hah...lucky little..."

Jade cringed. "Enough! I've heard quite enough, thank you. I really don't care to hear about this. And by the way, I wasn't one of Jimmy's so-called prostitutes." Her voice shook and her body trembled as she ran out of the building.

So it was true...Austin really had been with several woman in Cranberry. And Carletta had bought him. Her marriage had been a sham. It hadn't meant anything to Austin. She was just a handy convenience he'd sported around to make him look like an upstanding citizen of the community. She'd been important for his business image.

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A feeling of sadness entered her mind. He'd been a damn good actor. She could have sworn he'd loved her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jade stuffed the last bite of Twinkie in her mouth and licked her fingers. "So to top things off, I accidentally spilled coffee all over her work. I swear the steam curling up in the room *wasn't* from the coffee."

"Poor thing, I can't imagine how that must have felt. To learn all those ugly truths about...well, anyway, things have to get better somehow. Don't you agree?" Celine crossed her fingers while saying it. Telling Jade about her future plans could wait. The news might just push her friend over the edge.

Eventually she would have to tell Jade about Carlos and that she was leaving Cranberry. After all, there were bigger things in New York waiting on her. Things like Carlos and making more money. She'd done all she could for her friend. It was time to move on to something that would increase her status in life. It was a shame she and Jade didn't have much in common anymore.

## Chapter Fourteen

This was it, the last letter of rejection. All her hard work wasted. There would be no multi-figure book offer, no extra cash to pay her bills.

Jade hung her head. She had to face the inevitable. She was going to have to sell her home to get some money. She reached for the phone book, opened it, and then turned to the real estate ads. The list was extensive. With so many realtors to choose from, she wondered if one was really better than the other.

"Well Snickers, we gave it our best shot, didn't we?" She brushed his fur with a shaky hand. "I'm just going to have to accept defeat. That's all there is to it. Nothing's left. No extra income, no book deal, and no furniture left to sell. Let's get this over with, boy. I just hope the house sells quickly."

Jade reached for the phone. It rang just as she was about to place her call of doom.

She tried to answer in a calm voice, though she felt far from tranquil inside.

The voice was unfamiliar, somewhat curt, and professional. "I'm calling for a Jade Wellington." Jade hoped it wasn't one of her creditors calling to demand payment. What could she say to them except she was doing her best?

She hesitated. "This is Jade."

A thousand excuses for making slow payments started flittering through her mind. With luck, maybe they'd give her a break. After all, she'd always been able to pay the bills on time until a month ago. Surely

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they gave customers with a good payment history some special consideration. Jade sighed.

"Am I catching you at a bad time? I can call later if it's more convenient."

*Better to get this over with, it isn't going to disappear.* If she'd been Samantha on *Bewitched*, she could simply twitch her nose and it would all vanish. But...she wasn't. She pressed her finger to her nose just for the hell of it anyway.

"No...no, you didn't catch me at a bad time. How can I help you?"

"Good, good. This is Amelia Jove with Simeto & Simeto."

Simeto & Simeto? She was over ninety-days past due on her credit cards. Maybe a creditor had turned her over to an attorney? She envisioned herself behind bars in some sort of prison. Too bad Martha Stewart had already served her sentence. They probably could have become friends. Why, they might have been able to do crafts together!

Amelia continued. "You received a letter from us about your manuscript. We'd made an offer to review it again once you'd made some minor revisions. Have you done any revisions on it yet, Ms. Wellington?"

"Oh, Simeto & Simeto *Literary Agency*." Relief spread through Jade like the taste of warm cookies from the oven. "Yes...I have completed the revisions, as a matter of fact. I was going to mail them out the first of next week."

"I do hope you plan on mailing it to *us*. We really liked the story. Of course, I'm sure you have others who are interested in it as well."

"Why yes...yes, I do have others wanting to review it." There was Buddy, and oh, Officer Jackson had shown quite an interest in it, too. Of course, Ms. Jove didn't need to know exactly who.

"Oh, please tell me you've not already had another offer from someone. Has a publisher picked it up?"

"No...nothing like that." Jade allowed herself a moment of pure glory. Amelia Jove sounded genuinely worried! Jade stood, dancing in place before continuing.

"I'll be happy to get it in the mail to you first thing in the morning."

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“Wonderful. Could you possibly mail it priority? Oh, and be sure and address it to my attention, with ‘requested material’ written in the lower left of the envelope. If things work out like I hope, we should be able to get a contract on your book in no time. I’ve been in this business for a number of years, and I know talent when I see it. I do hope you’ll seriously consider us as your agent. I’m certain we’ll be in touch again soon.”

Jade couldn’t contain her scream of delight another second as she disconnected. She jumped, letting out a squeal which would have made a pig proud. Snickers flew to the kitchen where he hid behind a chair.

How had she finally gotten so lucky? Had she’d just received what she’d heard other authors refer to as “the call”? It looked as if her ship might come in after all.

She could imagine it. There would be swarms of eager fans just waiting to get their hands on a copy of her novel in every bookstore. There would be the book signing tours and jetting off to exotic places just so fans could get an autographed copy. She could all but smell the tropical scents of coconuts and pineapples and...

“Snickers? Oh no.” She rounded the corner of the kitchen with a frown. The dog hung his head a short distance from her rug by the door. As if he knew, he tucked his tail between his legs and gave her a sorrowful look.

“Oh, Snickers.” She held her nose, glancing down at the little “package” he’d left on the rug. “Well, I guess it was my fault this time. I was so carried away I forgot to take you out for your evening walk.” The rug was ruined, but she didn’t care. It had been a wedding present from Austin’s parents, and it wasn’t as if she really treasured it. Grabbing a garbage bag, she shook it open and stuffed the rug into the large black plastic container, putting it to its death.

“You can quit hiding now, Snickers. Mommy’s made it all better.”

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a special feeling in knowing a requested package was on its way to an agency. Something about handing it over to the clerk at the

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post office held a special thrill. It was like mailing a secret key to her future. An important packet containing her fate rested in her hands. A bar of gold couldn't have been more valuable to her.

Jade moved to the side of the gentleman in front of her. "Excuse me, sir." She pulled a disposable camera from her bag. "Would you mind snapping a picture of me holding my package?"

She saw a look of confusion pass over his face before he responded.

"Um...sure, hand me your camera. I don't take very good pictures, I'm afraid. Want me to take an extra one just in case?"

"Oh, yes, please. This is so nice of you. Thank you." Beaming, Jade posed in front of the counter.

"No problem," he said. "Have a good day."

"Yes, I *will*." She went to take her place back in line.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was going to be late. Again. Jade sucked in her breath and blew it out through her teeth. If the traffic accident in front of her wasn't cleared up in another ten minutes, she'd be more than late. Carletta would be in a tizzy, which was not what she needed right now. Not with the meeting for the new ad campaign getting ready to start. Especially since she had the portfolio sitting in her backseat. The one for the meeting! *Come on, Jade, think of something.* She was supposed to be creative. After all, she was about to become a published author. Authors were supposed to be creative. Then it struck her. She scrounged around in her bag for her cell phone.

"Hello, is this the Yellow Cab Company?" Without waiting for a response, she blurted out her request. "There's been an accident over here on Fairview. Do you think it would be possible to meet me on Center Street to pick me up? You are familiar with Center Street, aren't you? It's one street over from where I am. I need to get to an important meeting. It's an emergency. Yes, thank you, I'll see you there."



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She snatched up the portfolio, grabbed her car keys, and started running. She paused briefly to hand her car keys to one of the police officers on the scene.

"Here, I have an emergency. Would you be so kind as to drive my car to the station? It's the silver Honda with the dog toy on top of it. I put the toy up there so it would be easier to spot. I can pick the car up after I get off work. Oh, and don't lose the dog toy. The squeaking hot dog is Snickers' favorite."

The cop dropped his mouth, shaking his head with a laugh. "Lady, what do I look like, a valet service or something?"

Jade started to run, clutching the portfolio for dear life with the cop's angry words echoing at her back.

"You can't just leave your car here! I'll have to tow it in." He yelled above the traffic. "We'll have to impound your car."

"That will work!" Jade huffed over her shoulder. "Oh, and...um, thanks!"

"What the..." Confused, he held up the keys before he shoved them into his pocket.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm here." Jade waved the portfolio in the air as she ran to her office. "Here it is, just in time for the meeting."

Carletta stared in her direction. "I was getting concerned." She made a point to study her watch. "Come on, we don't have time to spare." She grabbed the portfolio from Jade's grasp and pulled her down the hallway. "You're going to have to do better," she scolded before opening the door to the boardroom.

"I can explain..."

"Not now, we're already running behind schedule." Carletta motioned for her to sit in a nearby chair.

"So as I was saying, Mr. Howard, if you take what you'll save in paper alone over a year, this new line would be quite profitable." Carletta leaned back in her chair, crossing her shapely legs with a smile. "I think

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you can see the benefit of adding our line to your website. What do you think, Bob?"

Bob Howard tugged at his ear. "Well, I can see your point. I mean, more and more people are shopping online these days. I like the idea of offering the boxed sets." He examined his fingernails. "Of course, we've always sold custom-made cards. Customers really like choosing their greeting and art to go along with it. I'm just not sure if pre-designs are right for us."

"Tell you what." Carletta was moving in for the kill. Jade could see it in her eyes.

Carletta leaned forward to give him a scenic view of her cleavage. "Why don't we discuss this later this evening over drinks? What do you say, Bob?"

"I guess we could do that. But I'm not making a commitment on this yet, you understand."

"Why of course. I would expect it's something you'll need to think over for a few days. Changing your direction to target the market can be somewhat scary. We've all had to focus on a new target at some point or another."

*New target, my ass.* Jade shifted in her seat. She bet Carletta had more darts up her sleeve than twenty people. The question was, which bull's-eye was she aiming for?

"Sure you won't join us?" Carletta was jotting something down in her calendar. "It might help you to get out a little more, you know. What harm could a few drinks with a client do?"

"I'll think I'll pass on this one. I have to go pick up my car down at the police station."

Jade saw the look of relief in Carletta's eyes. She'd only asked to be sociable for the business in the *first* place. And what would make Carletta think she wanted to spend any more time with the woman who'd taken her husband? Although Jade was beginning to think Carletta had done her a favor. She'd become more independent since Austin. She'd just needed a little more confidence in her abilities.

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Carletta looked puzzled. "What in the world is your car doing down at the police station? Did someone steal it, and they've recovered it?"

"No...no, nothing like that. I ended up switching over to a cab for half of the ride to work this morning due to an accident."

"You were in an accident this morning? Jade, why didn't you say something earlier? Are you all right?"

"I'm just fine. I wasn't the one in the accident. I was tied up in traffic..." She noticed Carletta glancing at her watch. No doubt Carletta was ready to escape Jade's endless chatter. "Oh, never mind it isn't important. Have a good evening."

Jade watched her hurry out the door to the cab pulling up to the curb, noting the strong scent of her perfume when she rushed past her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, she found herself face-to-face with David Jackson in the parking lot of the station. He was leaning against her car, swinging her set of keys from his index finger.

"Let's see if I can guess." He continued the maddening swing of keys in front of her nose. Back and forth, like a hypnotist dangling a keychain. "I bet you turned in a claim with your auto insurance company today. Stolen car would be my bet." His eyes brightened like the beam of a car's headlights.

Jade stood only inches away with fury upon her lips. She was tired of his false accusations. She didn't deserve them. The September breeze did nothing to cool her down physically or emotionally. But that smell, the wonderful, hypnotic smell drifting toward her nostrils. It was cologne, a man's cologne. Officer Jackson's cologne, like warm spice, tantalizing and somewhat exotic.

She willed herself out of her trance and back to the task at hand. "I'm not in the mood to play your little game, Officer Jackson. Now *give* me those keys." She lunged toward them with her hand, but he held them out of her reach.

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Fire flickered from her eyes. "You are the most infuriating man I've ever met. Now give me my keys before I march into headquarters and report you to your superior!"

"Is that supposed to frighten me?" He raised his brow. "Because if it is..." He dangled the keys in front of her, only to jerk them from her reach again. "It doesn't," he said just as she slammed into his chest in an effort to reach her keys.

If she hadn't known better, she would have thought she'd hit a concrete wall head on when she grasped him, trying to regain her balance. She made the mistake of looking up into a pair of smoldering blue eyes and powerful full lips. The exact set of lips only inches away from hers. His arms encircled her waist, and heat radiated from her body where he held her. Those beautiful full lips were closing in on hers while another drift of cologne filled her senses. When he tilted his head downward, she could feel his heart beating against her breasts. Her libido kicked into overdrive. Then, within a matter of seconds, it happened.

## Chapter Fifteen

Someone yelled from the door of the station, stopping the possibility for an explosive kiss. "Hey Jackson, get in here. We got an emergency down on Hamilton."

Jade hated that the reality of the situation set in, causing him to release her before he could brush his lips over hers.

"Here are your keys, Ms. Wellington. Drive safely now, ya hear? Sure would hate to see you get a speeding ticket."

Speeding ticket? Was he kidding? She was racing, and she hadn't even started her car yet.

David jumped in the squad car and shifted his hat into position. His heart was pounding from excitement, not the normal adrenalin rush that surged through him when they received a call like this, but a different kind. What had made him want to kiss Jade Wellington so badly? Sure, she was attractive. He'd noticed it the first time he'd seen her. But there was more. Something he couldn't put his finger on. Whatever it was had his heart pounding in his ears.

His partner was tapping his shoulder. "Jackson...hey, Earth to Jackson. David Jackson, come in please. You got a thing for the Wellington lady? Half the town says she's practically turned into a fruitcake since her divorce. The other half thinks she's somewhat of a ditz. What do you think? Is she nuts?"

David snatched his clipboard. "I'll tell you what I think Parrot. I think I'm really starting to like fruitcake."

## My Lips Are Sealed

"Oh yeah?" His partner punched his arm. "Yeah, I thought so. It strikes me as kind of funny though. You've always been skittish around women. You told me once the only thing they're good for is to break your heart. So does this mean you don't have a heart inside ya anymore, or have you finally realized not all women are like your ex?"

David grinned. "Might just mean my heart's finally healed, Parrot. Maybe I see something special in this one. She's different."

"She's different all right. Hey, are you ready to go get these bozos holding up that man at the liquor store?"

David reached for his gun. "Let's go bring them down."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jade smacked the button on her automatic garage door opener as she rounded her driveway. All the way home, her head had throbbed from thinking about the day's events. She'd tried to banish thoughts of one Officer David Jackson, and how he'd been ready to kiss her before his partner had interrupted. She didn't know whether she was thankful for the interruption, or if she was secretly disappointed. Finding David attractive as far as looks wasn't the problem; it was his accusing attitude. Clear blue eyes against olive skin and dark hair had her thinking how nice his kiss would have felt. Why he insisted on treating her as if she were a criminal was upsetting. Confusion didn't begin to sum up what she was feeling. She'd noticed the small scar above his right eye. Not that it took away from the attraction.

If anything, it gave him a bit of a rugged allure. She wondered if he'd gotten the scar from a heroic deed, or if it'd been earned from a hard lesson, or maybe...

A slam of her breaks halted her just in time. Her garage door hadn't opened. Pressing the button again did nothing but cause a horrible grating sound of metal against metal. *Damn, this is the last thing I need today.* She stepped out of the car to open the garage door manually. Turning to get back in her car, she noticed the sign in Carletta's yard. It was a...no...yes,

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it was a local realtor's for sale sign. "How odd," she muttered when she saw the sign above it. "Priced below appraisal."

Strange, it was the very realtor Jade had contacted only the night before to start the process of selling her home. And she'd even told them to add the extra sign saying it was below appraisal. Did Carletta somehow have her telephone tapped? Was she going to try to beat her at this, too? What was this woman's problem?

"Oh Jade, you're being silly. Carletta couldn't possibly have tapped into your conversation with the real estate agency," she mumbled into the evening air. The realtor must have confused the house number when he'd written it down. He simply put the sign in the wrong yard. Well, he was certainly going to have to do better if he was aiming for a big commission. She walked over and yanked up the sign. She'd give him a call first thing in the morning to correct his error.

When she walked back into her yard, she stabbed at the ground with the sign. "Now, that should fix it." She brushed off her hands and stood back to examine her work. It was a good thing she'd gotten home before Carletta, who was probably still out trying to cut a deal over a couple of drinks. If she'd come home and found that sign in her yard...well, she would have accused Jade of trying to run her out of the neighborhood.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carletta sat in the corner of the office the next day. "I noticed you've put the house up for sale, Jade. Is there any particular reason?" She gave her a smug look.

Jade leaned towards her, crossing her legs with a swift motion. "Yes, I simply can't afford it."

Carletta drew in her lower lip. "Oh, I see. I'm sorry to hear that. But you're not alone, you know. I contacted the very same realtor only yesterday to put mine up for sale. When I inherited the house, unfortunately I also inherited the mortgage." She let out a nervous laugh. "Funny, I can't afford to keep mine any longer either. I'm afraid I've made some rather bad choices on some...some investments, we'll call them."

## My Lips Are Sealed

Jade inhaled the nutty aroma of her coffee. "What? I'm not sure I know what you mean. What types of investments?"

Carletta blew through her gritted teeth before she answered. "I was wrong, Jade, so wrong in what I did. Everyone makes a bad investment from time to time. Stock market, mutual funds...gigolos."

Jade couldn't believe her ears. Maybe it really was the for sale sign for Carletta's house she'd lifted. "So, which one was it—the stock market, or the mutual funds? I hear the stock market is pretty rough right now."

"Neither one of those, I'm afraid. They were investments in Jimmy Boone and your ex-husband, to be exact." Carletta hung her head in shame. "I foolishly dwindled away my inheritance on simple pleasures." With her cup in hand, she stood and paced in front of the window. "I don't expect you to ever forgive me for what I've done. I couldn't blame you. My foolishness is one of the reasons I'm here working at True Heart Greetings. To be honest with you, I need the money."

A look crossed between them as if each had discovered a dark secret about the other. "Can we call a truce to this whole thing? Please?" Carletta's lip quivered. "I know you think I'm lying...about everything...but I swear to you, it's the truth. I want to be your friend, Jade. Really I do."

Jade studied her, emotions playing havoc with what she could say about the situation. How could she possibly respond to something like this? More than likely, it was an act on Carletta's part.

She drew in a long breath and sat down in her chair, toying with a thread sticking out of the faded blue upholstery. "I don't know what to say, or to believe, for that matter. If what you say is true, then I could find it in my heart to forgive you, I guess. Well, just a small amount, that is. It seems Austin used both of us in some form or another." Her voice pitched. "But to outright try to *buy* him, well..."

"I know, believe me," Carletta interrupted. "What I did was practically sinful. No, it was sinful *and* selfish. I got what I deserved from it. I deserve to be in this situation. Like you, I feel like such a victim. Why, I would almost strangle him to death if I could get my hands on him. He's a real con-artist, that one is. Death would be so becoming on him."



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Vengeance was the only way to describe the tone Carletta used. It was frightening to watch the way her eyes slanted into narrow slits, like slivers of glass waiting to inflict pain.

"You feel that strongly about it?" Jade stood and reached for a file on the desk.

"Why wouldn't I?" Carletta hissed out.

She grabbed the folder Jade was holding. "I'll start on this. Why don't you go down to the cafeteria and grab us a couple of fresh cups of coffee? I think we both could use a good martini about now, but coffee will have to do." Smiling with a wicked gleam in her eyes, she handed Jade both of their cups.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, has Carletta got you at her beck and call now?" Tommy shoved his hands in his front pockets and leaned against the counter.

"Hardly, Tommy. And why aren't you up in your cracker box domain since the mail just arrived? Isn't this your busiest time of the day?" Jade arched an eyebrow.

"I just thought I'd follow you down here to the cafeteria to get the latest gossip first. I couldn't help but overhear Carletta when I walked by your office. So, who is she planning on killing anyway? She after the boss' job now? Maybe gonna kill him off so she can step into it?" He teased.

Jade scooted him from the front of the coffee dispenser with a gentle pull of his arms, catching a hint of alcohol on Tommy's breath. "She just wants to murder my ex, that's all. I can't say I don't agree with her on one thing anyway." She shimmied past him balancing the steaming cups. "See you around."

When she arrived back in her office, Carletta had vanished. Jade read the note taped to the front of her computer monitor.

*Jade, I'm afraid I've developed a bad headache. I think I'm going to take off for the rest of the day.*

*See you,  
Carletta*

## My Lips Are Sealed

"Odd," Jade muttered, setting the coffee cups on their coasters. Maybe Carletta really did need a martini.

Dwelling on the morning's event wasn't getting her work done. The new deal Carletta'd made required her full concentration. So much, in fact, that when she next glanced at the clock, it was nearly seven. Her office contained the only light left burning on the entire floor. She rubbed at her eyes and reached to shut down the computer. Thank goodness September still had some extended daylight hours. Unfortunately it also brought out the soaring heat of California. She removed her jacket as she headed out the door, enjoying the warmth against her bare shoulders. The smell of freshly baked bread lured her down the street to the local bakery and deli. Maybe she'd splurge on a wonderful loaf of rye bread.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Evening there, Ms. Wellington." The storeowner raised his hand in time with the jingle of the bell on the door. "We have some wonderful croissants fresh out of the oven." He reached for a bag. "Care to try some of them?"

David saw her from the opposite side of the room. He'd stopped in to pick up some bagels on his way home from the gym. He deserved them after his rigorous workout. Sometimes, you just had to treat yourself for being disciplined after a one-hour strain of lifting weights. Should he approach her? Say something to her?

He swiftly inventoried her backside, starting with the way her hair curled at the tips in just the right little flip. Then those beautiful shoulders, creamy soft and perfectly rounded. Not to mention those shapely hips and her legs. Yes, those long, slender legs in those little high-heeled pumps...

What was he thinking? He'd made a fool of himself the other day when he'd bent to steal a quick taste of her lips. His partner had saved him from it just in time. Besides, he was all sweaty in his workout clothes since he hadn't bothered to shower before leaving the gym. He brushed his hand across the stubble on his chin. Then he combed his fingers through his tousled hair, noticing his feet already moving in her direction.

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He found words spilling from his mouth as he stepped behind her and inhaled the delicate smell of her hair. It smelled like fresh rain and flowers. His heart accelerated, stirring the adrenaline running through his veins. "The bagels are excellent."

He watched her turn in his direction, startled, examining him as if he were under a microscope. "Oh." She put her hand across her chest. "You startled me. Officer Jackson? Is that you? You look...um, different." Jade studied his face—a beautiful face and a hard, chiseled chest in a tight black muscle shirt. "It took me a minute to recognize you out of uniform." *And I'd like to recognize you naked. And what about the buns, I bet the buns are excellent too.*

"So, what are you here to arrest me for now?" The words escaped from her mouth before she could catch them. *Uh oh.* It must have been that for sale sign she'd lifted out of Carletta's yard. He was probably going to arrest her for theft! Could an officer arrest someone when they were out of uniform? "I just got off work, I haven't done anything," she explained as he closed the gap between them.

"Should I be arresting you for something?" He gave her an odd grin, which sent a strange flutter in the pit of her stomach.

"No, no." She backed away, catching the musky, sensual smell of him wafting in front of her.

"Well then, I guess I'm not arresting you now, am I? And, call me David...please. That is, if you want to."

She'd love to call him something all right, and it certainly wasn't David. Maybe Delicious. Yes, David Delicious.

Jade hesitated for a second. "If that's the case, maybe I will try the bagels Delicious...er...David," she stammered as a blush crept into her cheeks. "I...I meant the bagels sound delicious."

There he was giving her that sexy grin again, the one which irritated the butterflies in her stomach.

David paused. "Good choice. Perhaps you'd like to add a slice of the cream pie over there to go along with it...for after dinner...the dinner I'd like to share with you."

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### Chapter Sixteen

"Dinner? I don't recall asking you to share my dinner with me. What is it with you? You just assume I'm cooking, and you're invited? You assume too much about me, David. Like assuming I'm the queen of illegal activities."

He shifted to the deli case where pies sat begging to be purchased with all their glorious calories. He stole a glance at her. *You are the most irritating woman I've ever met. And the sexiest one.* Why he wanted to be around her, and what she did to his pulse, puzzled him. Hadn't he learned his lesson with his ex-wife?

He motioned for the clerk. "I'll take one of those cream pies up there on the top shelf, please. Oh, and are those sandwiches over in the cold case fresh? If so, I'd like two of the Reuben on rye bread with a couple of bags of chips." Jade noticed the crease in his forehead as if he were puzzled, while he asked for a couple of deli containers and then handed the clerk a twenty. "I think that about covers it."

Jade watched with amazement when David went to the coke machine and popped in some change. He punched the selection button with more force than necessary, then pumped more change into the slot. How in the world did this guy stay so thin? His appetite was like a horse, but yet he practically had the body of a Greek god.

David moved with deliberate intent in her direction. "Ready to go eat? I thought we might go down to the beach and have a picnic. We can walk this cream pie off afterwards if you're the type who's calorie

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conscious." He reached for her arm with his free hand. "*This* is what I meant by sharing dinner with you."

She gently pulled her arm away. "David...I...I appreciate the gesture, but I couldn't possibly have dinner with you. I have a dog at home I need to take out for a walk. You see, well...he has a bit of a problem...he's kind of well...irregular, if you know what I mean. Every medicine we've had him on doesn't work." She smiled up at him weakly.

"Ever thought about putting the mutt in diapers?" He was getting agitated. "Look you probably need to drop your car off at the house anyway. Why don't I meet you over there, say in about twenty minutes? That will give you time to take care of the dog."

"You know, diapers for Snickers might just be the answer to the problem I'm having with him." She thought about it.. "I'll have to try that." Maybe this Delicious David guy wasn't so bad after all, she thought, grabbing the bag of rye bread she'd purchased.

He leaned on the deli case. "Well, what do you say? Do we have a date for tonight, Ms. Wellington?"

"Yes, I think maybe we do." She curved her lips warmly. "And please, call me Jade. I'll see you in about twenty minutes."

"That sounds great. Don't disappoint me and not be home when I get there. I don't think I could take it." He gave her a warm smile. "I'm going to grab a quick shower at the gym, then I'll be on my way."

\* \* \* \* \*

Arms full, David rang Jade's doorbell with his elbow. He still hadn't figured out why he was standing here on her steps when he needed to be running in the opposite direction. She was intriguing, to say the least. Perhaps the package he'd picked up on the way would serve as a sort of truce between them. Now if he could get his heart to stop jumping when he looked into her eyes, he'd be okay. She had the most beautiful eyes—like pools of melted chocolate. He could get lost in them if he wasn't careful.

She answered on the second ring. When he took one look at her face, he forgot about running. She'd changed into a pair of cutoff blue-jean

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shorts and a midriff tank top in ocean blue, which showed off her shapely legs and trim waist with the cutest little belly button. He could imagine his mouth caressing it, licking it with his tongue. The tightness in his jeans displayed his thoughts, arousal bursting at the seams. So much for keeping his heart from jumping. It was flipping inside his chest like a sophisticated exercise that would have made any gymnastic teacher proud.

"Here, I brought a little something for your dog." He handed over the bag. "Go ahead, open it." He watched her face, concentrating on that pair of lips he wanted a chance to taste. And when she brushed her tongue across them to moisten them, he almost came undone.

She seemed delighted that he'd been so thoughtful.

"Diapers...for Snickers?" She smiled. "This was *such* a wonderful idea, David. Thank you, I'm going to go put one on him right now." She laughed out. "Maybe my carpets will be safer now. I'll be right back."

Her laugh rang through him like a pair of chimes in the breeze of summer, light and pleasant to the ear.

When she bounced back into the living room with the dog in her arms sporting its new diaper, the dog seemed as happy as she did.

"Meet Snickers. Look how cute, would you? I actually think he likes them. And they have the cutest little cartoons on them," she said.

The dog jumped from her arms, wagging his tail through the small hole she'd cut out in the back of the diaper. He lunged toward David, jumping to lick his face as David knelt to pet him. "Hey there, boy, I bet you and your mommy will be a lot happier now."

"I can't believe Snickers has taken up with you so quickly, David. He usually doesn't like men. In fact, I've almost had a fear he'd bite a man given the chance."

"Hey, I love dogs. Used to have one when I was a kid. I miss having one around. We could take him to the beach with us, if you want."

"I would take him, but sudden changes in environment seem to make him a little jumpy. He'll be fine. He's used to spending time alone."

"In that case, I guess we're ready. Hungry?"

"You bet I am."

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Jade slipped off her sandals, letting the warm sand sift between her toes. Being on the beach with David was such a warm, wonderful feeling. It was almost too comfortable. She scolded herself. She couldn't fall for him. It would be too risky to be in a serious relationship again. Her heart simply couldn't allow it. But when she felt the brush of his hand against hers, clasping it in his, her heart opened a door it refused to shut.

Words weren't needed between them, both lost in thoughts of each other. She wondered what David really thought of her deep down. Would he ever reveal his inner self, his past? She didn't know why, but she wanted to know more about David Jackson. Not the Officer David Jackson, but the man. He released her hand to spread the blanket they'd brought.

"This looks like a good spot." David said. "You can see the harbor from here. I love to come down here sometimes just to watch the ships coming in and out of port." He seemed to lose himself in her eyes. "Have you ever done that, Jade?"

"No, believe it or not, even though I've lived in Cranberry all my life, I can't say I have. It's really beautiful here, isn't it?"

He touched her chin, tilting it upward, pulling her face closer. "Beautiful doesn't begin to describe it."

He was going to kiss her. She could see it in his eyes as they darkened in passionate need. She leaned closer. She wanted that kiss...wanted his wonderful warm mouth to explore every inch of her. Then, as if he had second thoughts, he pulled away.

"We'd better dig into those sandwiches. They won't last much longer out here in this heat." He handed one of the containers to her.

If he wasn't careful, he wasn't going to last much longer in the heat radiating between them. He was struggling with the thought of wanting nothing but to cradle her against him and explore her, taste her mouth on his and so much more. What if she resisted him? Rejected his feelings? Could he afford to be so vulnerable to a woman again? He made a

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decision in that moment. Yes, Jade Wellington was worth taking such a risk.

He reached over, pulling the sandwich from her hands, and setting it back in the container. "Damn it Jade, you have no idea what you're doing to me." He cupped her face in his hands, swiftly drawing her mouth to his. A burst of emotions raged through her, his searing mouth deepening the kiss. His tongue explored hers recklessly, eliminating any control.

The sun began its slow descent in the distance, casting an orange and purple haze over the abandoned beach. Neither noticed the glorious sunset as their bodies, now tangled on the blanket, cast a shadow of two lovers against the sand.

David shifted slightly, moving his mouth down the small hollow of her neck, tasting, exploring the delicate feel of her body, and continued the descent of his mouth to her shoulder. He hesitated there, taking in the smell of her hair as it brushed against his face. The now-familiar scent of warm fresh air after a summer's rain filled him as he buried his face in the strands of darkened silk.

"David," she whispered huskily.

"Don't, Jade, please." He arched his finger to her lips, willing her to silence. He didn't want to hear her say she couldn't go through with what was happening between them.

Instead, she pulled his finger into her mouth, suckling it, wrapping her tongue around it seductively, and released it as he cupped her breasts in his hands. She moaned out with pleasure. Within seconds, he reached for the front clasp of her bra under her shirt. His hand seared against the pink nubs that stood at attention.

"I want you so desperately," his voice huskily whispered as he replaced his hand with his mouth. He would burst from passion any second if he couldn't come inside of her. He rose, ripping his shirt from his body.

She ran a hand along the rippled muscles of his chest, admiring the firmness, moving her hand lower, then stopping above the snap of his jeans. As if she'd read his thoughts, she reached down, unzipped the fly of



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his jeans, and rolled him over onto his back. She placed her hand along his shaft, causing a sharp intake of his breath.

As gentle dusk like deep velvet settled across the sky, she encircled him with her mouth, taking in his length, and teasing the tip of his cock with her tongue. Jade gave openly and unselfishly.

It was like no other feeling he'd ever experienced when a woman had taken him in the past.

The strength of his emotions punched him deep within his loins. *Damn it, now what am I going to do?* He was half in love with this crazy woman.

He climaxed before he'd intended, shaking uncontrollably, screaming out her name above the cry of the seagulls. A moment of stillness fell over them as they lay tangled in the blanket.

Reaching over her, he placed his hand along her thigh and under her cutoffs to find the moist, supple opening he craved. "Come for me, Jade. I want to watch you come."

She crooned out his name as he brought her to release. His mouth descended on hers and stifled her cry.

The blare of his pager fractured the magical moment between them, and he cursed. "Sorry." He brushed a quick kiss on her lips while she adjusted her clothing. "Duty calls, I'm afraid."

David punched the dim light on his pager to read the message that required an immediate call to headquarters. Grabbing his cell phone, and hit the button to turn it on, then dialed the number of his partner.

"This better be pretty damn important," he growled into the phone. "Your timing really sucks, partner." David paused to listen to Parrot's words. His face paled as he shifted a cool glance in Jade's direction. "Thanks, I'll take care of it." He slammed the lid of his cell phone down, standing abruptly as he grabbed his shirt and finished dressing.

"What is it?" Jade looked confused with his change of actions as she went to fold the blanket.

He reached for the containers of uneaten food, then grabbed her arm and started to drag Jade toward the car.

"I'll tell you what it is. It's Austin, Austin Wellington."

## My Lips Are Sealed

### Chapter Seventeen

"I'm going to have to bring you in for questioning, Jade."

This was the last thing he'd needed. First he'd been married to a con artist; *now* he was in love with a woman who was suspected of murdering her ex-husband. He'd seen enough, felt enough of her, and had a taste that left him craving more. Far more. Now what was he supposed to do? Just turn off his feelings? Even knowing what he did, he was getting hard again just looking at her.

Jade was looking at him with disbelief showing in her face. "Bring me in for questioning, whatever for? I don't understand." She placed her hands on her hips.

A moment of compassion washed over him. "Jade, look." He reached out to her as if to comfort her. "I have some really bad news. Maybe you'll be shocked, maybe not. That's part of the reason I have to take you in for questioning. I don't quite know how to say this, but it's concerning your ex-husband. NYPD just called..."

"My ex-husband? What does Austin have to do with this? Has...he been arrested for something? Perhaps something you think I'm involved in. Which, I might add, seems to be a usual thought process you have when it comes to me." She moved away, refusing to be comforted by him.

He threw his hands up in exasperation. "Just head back to the car, and I'll explain. I don't want to stand out here in the middle of a beach talking about it."

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This wasn't the way he'd wanted their evening to end. He'd hoped to end it holding her in his arms the entire night. Sometimes he hated his job. Now he was taking a woman he'd developed feelings for into the station for questioning. It was another reason to hate his job. To top it, he was supposed to be off work this evening. Well, so much for enjoying it with someone for a change.

He wanted desperately to believe Jade hadn't been involved in this nightmare. But they'd told him on the phone she could have plenty of motives. The cop in him was required to find out. The man in him wanted to take her to safety miles away. She, of course, would never believe a word of it, especially due to their past history together. He'd practically accused her of something every time he'd come face-to-face with her.

Jade's voice intruded on his thoughts. "Well, I'm waiting." He noticed her gaze dart in his direction as they sat in the car.

"Whatever it is, I can't say I'd be surprised, not when it comes to Austin. That snake. One of these days somebody's going to want to kill him for the tricks he's pulled. And let me tell you, I'm not the only one out there that would love to strangle him."

David leaned his head back and closed his eyes. After an awkward silence, he blew through his teeth and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Jade it's..."

"Bad, really bad, isn't it?" She leaned into him, waiting for his eyes to open. He opened them slowly, revealing a dull look of pain. "I knew it. I'm not going to like what I'm about to hear." She scooted toward her door and grabbed for the handle to get out.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." He reached for his keys, shoved them into the ignition, and looked away from her. "Jade, Austin is dead...murdered, and right now you're the prime suspect. I don't know how else to put it except to tell you like it is. Things don't look very promising for you right now. They found him murdered in his apartment about an hour ago. They said he'd been dead for at least a day. Maybe more. Done any traveling to New York?"

"Aus...Austin...he's...he...he's dead?" She stumbled over the words. Her face grew as white as a summer cloud. Her heart pounded in

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her ears. She felt as if she was going to pass out any second. She shut her eyes and inhaled a painful breath. She needed to sort out her thoughts.

Austin was dead and David thought she'd murdered him! A mixture of emotions ran through her, sending a chill up her spine despite the humid summer evening.

Finally she sat up and looked at David with fear-filled eyes, a fear of trying to prove her innocence to the police, but more so to David. "You...you think I did it? You think I killed Austin?" She waited for his reaction, but saw nothing, heard no response from him. His silence confirmed her fear...David thought she was guilty. He thought she was capable of murder.

He shifted the car in reverse with a hard set to his jaw, one of anger and mistrust. "Jade, I don't want to hear anything, understand? Just do me a favor and don't say a word until we get to the station. Keep in mind you might want to call your attorney before you tell them anything."

Anger boiled in her throat, which left a bitter taste in her mouth. Her words were laced with sarcasm. "You don't have to worry about my saying *anything* to you, David." She slammed her seat belt across her lap, then snapped it into place. "My lips are sealed."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do you really buy all this crap she said about her neighbor, Carletta?" David's partner punched the coffee machine in an attempt to get the cup upright. "Damn machine never works right. Don't know why I continue to waste my money." He pulled the cup out, and drank what had managed to land in the bottom. "Gonna be a long night, Jackson." He tossed the cup in the overflowing trash, watching it land on the floor.

David studied the discarded cup. "I want to believe her. After all, she did say Carletta had made the comment about wanting to strangle Austin Wellington. Guess Carletta feels she had a valid reason to murder..."

"And so did Jade Wellington." Parrot finished the sentence. "So Jackson, what are you going to do about this assignment the chief gave

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you? You gonna be able to keep an eye on her and keep your hands *off* of her?" He let out a snicker, elbowing David's rib cage. "I know that look when I see it. You got it bad for her, don't you, ole buddy?"

David hesitated. "I told the chief I wasn't accepting the assignment. I can't. Not under the circumstances. The further away from Jade Wellington I stay, the better off both of us will be."

"So what reason did you give the chief for not wanting to follow his orders? Bet he's real sore over that one. I gotta hand it to ya, Jackson. You've got more balls than I would have. So...what'd ya tell him?"

"I told him Jade was innocent. I said she couldn't possibly have murdered Austin at the time indicated. When he asked how I could be so sure, I told him 'because Jade Wellington had been with me that night...at my place...in my bed'. Of course, until she's proven innocent, either by having another witness come forward about her whereabouts, or they find the killer, the chief has her on twenty-four hour surveillance."

David's partner let out a cough. "You did *what*? Have you lost your mind or something? What would make you stick your neck out there like that and jeopardize your job on top of it? Man, I've heard it all now. You were with *me* that night, down at the pool hall place. Remember?"

David plopped down in a nearby chair. "Yeah...yeah, I remember. And I also remember you won every damn game that night, too."

"So what made you do it, Jackson? Come on, spill it."

"Look...I'm in *love* with her, all right? Is that enough information for you? I didn't mean for it to happen, it just did, you know? Kind of blindsided me, I tell ya."

Parrot placed both hands over his heart, yelling out as if he were in pain, twisting and swaying around the room. "Oh, man, I think I've been shot or something...right here in the ole' ticker. I sure as hell hope it ain't one of those cupid's arrows or something." Uncontrollable laughter echoed throughout the room. "You sure one of 'em ain't bounced off of ya over there?"

"Go ahead and laugh. It's not *that* damn funny. Guess who gets the assignment now? You do, Parrot. And you'd better make fucking sure to keep a good eye on her. I don't want anything to happen to her. You got it?"

## My Lips Are Sealed

His partner sobered immediately, straightening as he hitched up his gun belt. "Okay...okay, so maybe it wasn't so fucking funny. I'm sorry, Jackson. Can't somebody else do this?"

David's gaze did a sharp turn toward his partner. "You got a problem with it?"

Parrot swallowed hard. "No...no problem, man. I just don't want to be on your bad side if she ends up being guilty. That's all."

"She won't be." David glared at him. "I believe in her. And by the way, I've been assigned a new partner during this investigation due to my personal involvement. I have orders to stay away from her until this thing's solved. So do me a favor, pal. When you're watching her, maybe doing a drive-by, keep me posted on how she's doing, would you?"

"Yeah, sure buddy. Looks like you've finally gotten over your belief all women are guilty even if proven innocent." He smacked at his arm. "Congratulations there, my friend. It's about time, though I can't say I totally agree with your choice. But, hey, it's your life."

## **Chapter Eighteen**

A month had passed since the news of Austin's death. Jade came to the realization that, although she felt sorrow over the incident, it hadn't had the effect on her she'd imagined. Somehow, she felt relieved in an odd sort of way.

Other things about that particular evening affected her much more, like David Jackson. He'd all but disappeared since the night on the beach, which had started out as something warm and wonderful, leaving her hopelessly in love with him. In love with someone who really hadn't wanted her.

She was getting used to David's partner stopping by for more questions concerning Austin. She was even able to ignore the constant drive-bys the local police were doing. Nothing had developed on Austin's murder investigation, according to the information she'd been able to gather. The brunt of the world seemed to be on her shoulders these days.

The one thing keeping her going and giving her hope was agreeing to work with Amelia at Simeto Literary Agency. Amelia had been thrilled when Jade had signed a one-year contract with them. In fact, the night before, Amelia had left a message that she thought Jade might've already had a contract with a major publisher. If things worked out as she hoped, production would begin as early as next year. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be in time to help her keep her home.

She'd had an offer on it, but it was far below the appraisal, and Jade hadn't made a final decision on it. Except when she looked at the dwindling balance in her checkbook, she figured the offer might just be

## My Lips Are Sealed

appealing enough to sell. After all, it wasn't as if she really wanted to live in the house anymore. There were too many memories inside its walls. Most of them not so pleasant. She'd told the realtor she would give him an answer within the week. That answer was due tomorrow by noon.

She'd looked at several small apartments, but found only two who were willing to take pets. Even though she'd explained Snickers wore diapers and there'd be no carpet damage, most landlords refused to budge on their policy.

Some refused to show her an apartment. They didn't feel that renting to a murder suspect would be a good idea; other tenants would be extremely upset. News hadn't taken long to spread over Cranberry's gossip wire. It was looking as if she'd have no other choice but to leave town once she was cleared. The interrogation was the only thing holding her here besides the hope David would one day reconsider, and she didn't see the likelihood of that happening.

He'd made that quite clear yesterday in town when he'd seen her walking toward him on the sidewalk by the bakery. He'd pulled his cap down low and crossed to the other side of the street. Angry that he would treat her so harshly, so casually, she'd almost called after him. She'd disciplined herself, though, and instead slid into the bakery, still trembling with emotion.

The final blow had come when Celine announced her rapid departure to New York with Carlos. Funny how the announcement had come soon after Celine had learned the news of Austin's death. Celine had called and left a lengthy message on her answering machine.

*"I've been meaning to break the news to you about this, but...well...well...I'm going to be leaving for New York in the morning. I know this is going to come as a shock to you, but Carlos has insisted I look for a place to open a shop up in New York. He said I'm wasting my talents here in Cranberry. He said I can make a fortune there.*

*"I know you need me here right now, but, well, I hope you'll understand sometimes a girl just has to move on. He loves me, Jade. Heaven knows, I only want what's best for you. It's time for you to move on, too, you know, after this*



## Mia Romano

*whole murder thing is over with. Anyway, I'll be back in a few weeks and we'll talk about all this."*

The message had gone on, but in the end, Jade felt betrayed. Did Celine think she was guilty? She pretty well insinuated it in her message.

Jade felt alone, let down by her best friend and the entire town. What had she ever done to deserve this? Not to mention, Carletta wasn't speaking to her these days. Naturally it was due to the cops questioning her extensively about Austin. Jade felt she was hanging by a thread at her job.

Bending down, she pulled Snickers' face close to hers. "Snickers, you believe me, don't you? Right now you're the only thing that loves me. Aren't you, boy?"

He responded with a thorough face licking and a wag of his tail. He ran to grab his favorite chew toy. Upon his return, he released it from his mouth and dropped it at her feet. Next, he ran to get her favorite fuzzy pink slippers, and then placed them beside her chair.

"Okay," she smiled. "We'll go out and play a little. I think the fresh air would do both of us some good. Better enjoy this big yard while you can, Snickers. Tomorrow I'll be calling the realtor to confirm the sale of this place."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Yes, you heard me right, Jade. One of the biggest publishing houses in the country is ready to negotiate a contract on *Fantasy in Fishnets*. To the literary world, you'll be known as Jessica Beaver, soon-to-be famous author. I can feel this one, Jade. Trust me." Amelia hesitated. "There is somewhat of a downside to it. Of course..."

Jade held her breath and calmed down some. "What is it?"

"Well, since you are a first time published author, I'm afraid they don't give any type of promotional benefits to you. You have to do it on your own. There won't be any touring, book signing schedules, in-store displays, or anything like that. All those things cost money. Big money. It will be up to you to make this book a final success. They can publish it and put out several copies in print, but you are the key to marketing it."

## My Lips Are Sealed

Jade's face fell in a moment of silence. *No trips to warm tropical beaches...no big displays in the stores...no...*

"Jade, are you still there?"

"Er...yes Amelia, I'm still here. I was just thinking. Have they agreed on an advance amount?" She could feel the beating of her heart.

"I'm asking for a five-thousand dollar advance. That's pushing it, but if they like the manuscript as much as they say they do...well, they shouldn't have a problem with it. If they do, there are plenty of other publishing houses out there who would love to snatch it up. Part of my job is to negotiate the best deal for you...and my agency, of course. If they won't go for five thousand, I think we should look at other offers. What's your input?"

Jade thought momentarily. She could use the advance regardless of the amount, but her business sense told her differently. She needed to start looking at things from a business standpoint, instead of a desperate attempt at survival. After all, she'd worked hard on that manuscript and poured her heart and soul into it hour after hour.

"I agree with you, Amelia. I think five thousand is a fair amount, considering the promotional cost involved."

"Good, very wise decision, Jade. I'll negotiate it today and get back with you as soon as they give me their answer. And by the way, congratulations. This is fabulous, just fabulous."

After she hung up the phone, Jade pulled Snickers into her arms. "Oh Snickers, this is just the greatest thing. It's exactly what we needed." She waved her hand in front of her nose. "Oh, you need a diaper change."

She felt as if she were in a dream, thinking about the possibility of five-thousand dollars. She wanted to shout to the world she'd done it. She actually was going to make it on her own. Her thoughts sobered when she realized she didn't have anyone else to tell. Buddy had never contacted her after he'd left, and she doubted or really cared he would. Celine was in New York with her lover, ready to move on with life. Her parents were on the latest traveling adventure to who knew where. Not that they would have shared her excitement anyhow. They always thought her life choices were foolish, to say the least.

## Mia Romano

David would have been thrilled at her accomplishment. But that was before he thought she was a murderer. Now he couldn't even give her the time of day. She had to dismiss it. What choice did she have? Besides, if this thing went off like she hoped it would, she'd be too busy with promotional responsibilities to give him a second thought. *And ice cubes melt in Alaska!*

In anticipation, she found the phone book, and looked up every bookstore listed, jotting down numbers and names. Then the local news stations, until she'd exhausted every possible listing within the area. It was never too early to start preparing.

Now, for promotional items. She would need something to match the theme of her book. "Let's see. I've got it, Snickers." He wagged his tail, then jumped onto her lap.

"I'll get some of those adorable little packets of fishnet hose as a giveaway to the ladies, say, maybe the first ten or so. Oh, I could use the theme 'get hooked on a book', and hand out little packs of fishhooks to the men. Brilliant! We are going to dazzle them, Snickers. Let's make a few phone calls to some bookstores and..."

\* \* \* \* \*

David pulled away from the curb one street over from Jade's house. He knew he was taking a chance by being even *this* close to her. But he had to see her, just a glimpse for a few minutes. Staying away from her was killing him. He'd almost broken down the other day when he'd crossed the street to avoid her. He had to steer clear from the gaze of those beautiful pools of chocolate-colored eyes and the drift of her scent.

He'd seen her slip into the bakery. She'd sported a look on her face which could only be described as one of intense pain. He'd wondered if the look scribbled across her face had been put there by none other than himself. Or maybe this was wishful thinking. Thinking she cared for him was definitely a hopeful thought. But he was giving himself far too much credit.

He watched through the binoculars as she'd thrown the toy around the yard for Snickers. He took in the bright smile on those beautiful lips of

## My Lips Are Sealed

hers. It certainly looked as if she were happy now. Extremely happy. Without him.

Dammit, why was she being so stubborn about releasing information critical to solving the case? He'd remembered the shock on her face when they'd questioned her about her whereabouts. Even Jade's attorney hadn't been successful in prying much information from her. That's when he'd decided to take matters into his own hands, telling the chief a little white lie about Jade being with him.

What *had* she been doing the night Austin was found dead? He'd put his neck out there for her, and he wanted answers. Damn it, Jade owed him an explanation for things. Including her feelings for him.

He jumped as his radio came to life, requesting he head to the station to pick up his new partner. With a quick glance at his watch, he realized he'd lost track of time. If he took the shortcut over on Billing Drive, he'd just make it. Regretfully, he shelved thoughts of Jade into the back of his mind and prepared for what promised to be another boring night shift.

That's when he heard the call come in. The dispatcher was ordering his old unit to respond to a call received from an elderly woman. A woman who claimed she had some information about Austin Wellington's murder.

## Chapter Nineteen

A rush of adrenaline pumped through David's veins as he listened to the request. He mentally jotted down the elderly woman's address. If this woman had something that would clear Jade, he wanted to be the first to hear about it. Then he could approach Jade and explain why he'd stayed away and how he felt about her.

He knew if he got caught interviewing the elderly woman, he'd be risking his job. His chief had said, due to his personal involvement, he wasn't even permitted to inquire about what was happening in the case. Was Jade Wellington worth risking his career? A career he'd worked hard at for the last ten years? Without hesitation, he did a sharp turn off Billing Drive and headed in the direction of the woman's house.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I have bad news, I'm afraid to say."

Jade could hear Amelia tapping something against her desk. "Big Book Publishing won't go the five thousand on the manuscript. They did make a counter-offer of three thousand. Of course, as you and I discussed, we won't settle for less. You are still in agreement on that, aren't you?"

"Yes...I'm still in agreement, I guess." A long pause passed. Jade thought about the beating she'd taken on the sale of her home. "Amelia, you know I just took a huge loss on my house. I could really use the money right now. Maybe we should reconsider their offer."

## My Lips Are Sealed

“Unfortunately Big Book Publishers doesn’t care about your current circumstances, and neither will any other publisher for that matter, Jade. It’s just the cold hard facts of business. We do have another offer on the table. I just didn’t think it would be of interest to you since we’d agreed on an amount the last time we spoke.”

Jade felt a ray of hope. “Well, what is it? What kind of offer?”

“It’s with a much smaller publisher—Krimsen Books. They are really itching to get their hands on it. They made a much smaller advance offer, but they said they would push it to the top of the stack for publication. They’ve made an offer of fifteen hundred, plus a publication date of six months, which is unheard of in the publishing business. Usually you’re looking at a one to two year release date. Six months doesn’t give you much time to start your marketing, I’m afraid.”

“I’ll take it. I’ve already started preparing my press release, bookmark ideas, things like that. I can *do* this Amelia. Please...it’s a start.”

“Of course, you have the final say in this, Jade. I really wish you’d think it over a little more. You know, publishing a book involves a tremendous commitment by you *and* the publisher. These things take time. Don’t sell yourself short here. That’s all I’m saying.”

“No, I’ve made up my mind. Call Krimsen and have them send the contract over for my signature. We’ll have Big Book Publishers wishing they’d made that offer. I promise, Amelia. I won’t let you *or* Krimsen Publishing down.”

“I have the contract here in my hand. I’ve reviewed it, and it looks fine, if it’s what you really want. I’ll have my secretary drop it in the mail for your signature. Just remember, if you see anything, anything at all you don’t agree with or have a question about, give me a call.”

Jade ended the conversation, determined to make it in the publishing world. She shouted through the house, “Look out Cranberry, California...here comes Jessica Beaver.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## Mia Romano

She had an extra spring in her step when she entered her office at True Heart Greetings over the next few weeks. Even Tommy had noticed the lift in her spirits when she went to the mailroom to ask him to start saving boxes for her move to an apartment she'd found.

He shoved his hands down in his pockets, leaning against a tray of mail, and let out a long whistle. "Man, I don't know what's going on with you, but I don't believe I've ever seen you this radiant, hot lips. Want to let me in on the little secret? You know, I could do things to put a smile on your face even brighter than that one," he teased. "If you ever want me to prove it, just let me know."

She turned with a laugh. "Tommy, you are such a pervert, you know? Just a pure pervert. It's a good thing I like you and don't take your little flirtations seriously. And don't forget to start saving me some boxes, would you?" She tweaked his chin and snatched the envelope in her box. "So why is it you've quit delivering mail to my office lately?"

He grinned. "Hey, that woman you share your office with these days looks meaner than a rattlesnake at me every time I walk by there. She *bites*, you know. And until she gets a space of her own around here, I'm not stepping in your doorway."

"Oh Tommy, she's not that bad. Although I do have to admit, Carletta can slither her way around a bit." She giggled. "I'll be sure and let you know when the 'snake' gets put in her new pen."

"You do that." Grinning, he winked. "And about taking me seriously, maybe you *should*," he shouted after her. "Perverts need love too."

"So did you find out why Tommy's not been delivering our mail to us?" Carletta asked while filing one of her tapered nails.

Jade laughed while she threw the mail down on the desk. "Yup...seems he thinks there's some kind of snake in here or something. Tommy is deathly afraid of snakes. He swears he saw one when he walked by the office the other day."

"A *snake*? In *here*? That's impossible, totally ridiculous," she hissed, filing her nails again with fury.

## My Lips Are Sealed

Jade held back a giggle. "Have you had any luck on selling your house, Carletta? I'm so thankful mine sold. Of course, it's going to be a bear moving, but I'll manage."

"No, I haven't. But I don't plan to take a loss like *you* did. I have enough cash left to hold out for another couple of months. If they don't clear me of being a suspect in Austin's murder by then, I don't know what I'll do. I'm ready to get out of this stinking town. Why you want to stay here totally baffles me, Jade. After all, the whole town is practically laughing at you," she said snidely, turning to the computer monitor.

"I still haven't forgiven you for telling them my remark about Austin. If you hadn't opened your big mouth, I'd be outta here by now. With my skills, there are plenty of places that would hire me." She snorted, reaching for her coffee cup. "You, on the other hand, are limited in so *many* capacities. I think I'll slide down to the cafeteria and grab some of the rubbish they consider coffee around this hellhole."

Jade's eyes sparked in Carletta's direction. "You just might be surprised at my capabilities one day, Carletta." She thought about her publishing contract. "Cranberry hasn't seen the real Jade Wellington yet." *Two can play this game, the snake.* She turned, aiming a wicked smile at Carletta's back like a poisonous arrow.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jade circled the living room. How in the world was she going to haul all of her belongings over to her new place? It would take a thousand trips back and forth in her Honda to get it done. Thank goodness the new owners had wanted to purchase a few pieces of furniture. It had been a blessing. She could always replace it little by little. She'd start hitting some of the thrift shops for some furnishings next week. For now, the dilemma of moving everything alone, and trying to keep up with Snickers in the process, overwhelmed her.

An idea struck. "That's it," she yelled out among the boxes. "I'll be back in a little while, Snickers." She reached for her car keys. She was delighted with her cleverness. There was such a simple solution to all of it.



## Mia Romano

Cousin Ed owed her a huge favor. She'd kept her mouth shut about his little indiscretion she'd caught him in with Minnie Jones one night. And it just so happened, Ed worked at a Ford Dealership.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Yes, this one sure is a beauty." Jade was running her hand against a new fire red pickup. She raised her brow in the direction of her cousin. "And how much did you say this one would be including tax, tags, and title?"

Ed rubbed his double chin. "Well, let's see here." He scribbled the amount on a piece of paper. "That should about cover it. Top of the line, this little beaut' is." He kicked the tires as if needing to emphasize his words, "solid as a rock."

Jade couldn't afford half the figure he'd scribbled on paper. Of course, she'd known that when she'd come up with the idea of looking at trucks. Besides, she only needed it for the move. Why would she need a truck again?

"I'm sure you wouldn't mind my taking it for a rather vigorous test-drive, would you? After all, you said it's solid as a rock. I think with such a large sum of money involved I'd need to be sure it would serve my purpose." She gave him the sweetest smile she could muster. "I have insurance, and here's my license." She flipped it in his direction.

Cousin Ed beamed. "Why certainly you'd want to take it for a test-drive. I'd be disappointed if you didn't. Never knew of anyone who was considering purchasing a vehicle and didn't test-drive it. I'll just go make a copy of your license and grab the keys to this here baby." He shuffled along the lot towards the building, adjusting his wide red tie. When he returned, Jade noted he'd switched out his name tag. It now had the words "Power Seller" above his name.

Jade hoisted herself up in the driver's seat, then cranked the engine. "Powerful." She smiled at him.

"Sure is. Take all the time ya need there, Cuz. Just don't tell anyone I let you drive it alone. We're supposed to go with you, but I trust ya, and

## **My Lips Are Sealed**

I'll be right here when you get back. Be careful, though, because the thing gets up to eighty before you know it. It's a real smooth ride for a truck."

She shifted into reverse, happy with her choice. If she could just get all the things moved within a couple of hours, she would return the truck to the lot and tell Cousin Ed she wanted to sleep on her decision. What a perfect plan. She would pretend to test drive a truck in order to move her belongings.

"I'm such a genius," she muttered, glancing at her reflection in the rearview mirror. But now what was she, the 'Genius Jade', going to do about the blue lights flashing behind her?

## Chapter Twenty

She clamped down on the steering wheel in panic and pulled over to the side of the road. Had she been speeding? She hung her head and placed it on the top of the steering wheel. Just what she'd needed today. A speeding ticket. She heard the tap on the window and raised her head to face her fate. "David"?

A puzzled crease crossed his forehead. "Jade?"

Her heart pounded, more than it had seconds before at the mere thought of paying a speeding ticket. Along with it, a strange sensation of warmth tickled her spine as her cheeks flushed.

There was something unreadable in his eyes. He examined her face, cleared his throat, and leaned in the open window. "Ms. Wellington, do you realize you're driving without a tag on this vehicle?"

*We're back to Ms. Wellington, are we?* "I...I couldn't possibly be. I just left the dealership down the road. I'm test-driving it. I'm sure he's put a dealer tag on it someplace." She started rummaging through the truck as if she could produce the required tag, then gave up in frustration. Great, he thought she'd stolen a truck. She picked at a chip on her thumbnail. "This looks really bad, doesn't it?"

He stepped back, hoisting his gun belt up and chomping on his chewing gum. A muscle in his jaw tightened. "You could say that. So, what are you doing with this truck?"

*"I told you. I'm test-driving it."*

## My Lips Are Sealed

"Something wrong with the Honda? This is an awfully big truck for someone like you...and expensive. Somehow it just doesn't fit your style, Jade."

"Style? What do you know about my style? Can't a woman choose whatever she wants to drive?" She turned up her nose indignantly. "Now if you don't mind, I'm in a hurry. I have lots of things to do today." She pulled a business card from the dash. "Here's the card from the dealership. You can verify it with the salesman." She reached forward to turn on the switch while making a shooping motion with her other hand. "Excuse me, officer, but you are in my way."

Oh boy, now she'd gone and done it. When was she going to learn to keep her big mouth shut when it came to the law? He would probably arrest her for sure now. Heaven knew she'd just given him a possible reason.

She watched him step closer to the truck window and reach in to cut off the ignition, causing his arm to brush against her thigh.

"For the last time, what are you doing with the truck?" His voice held a husky undertone that sent a butterfly twirling in the lower pit of her stomach. He looked like he wanted to kiss her.

Jade veiled dark lashes over her eyes. "I...I'm using it to move a few items. I'm moving, and I needed something larger than the Honda to haul things in."

The abruptness of his laughter caused her to jump, snapping her eyes to attention. "You...you think that's *funny*?" She cranked the engine again, satisfied with the smooth purr of power as she threw it accidentally into reverse instead of drive.

He crushed his lips against hers, causing the truck engine to race as her foot hit the accelerator with a punch.

He was literally knocked off his feet when the truck went backwards right into the front of his cruiser.

Jade screamed, threw the truck into park, and shut down the engine. She could see steam spewing from the radiator of the cruiser, which was smashed in the front like a jammed accordion.

## Mia Romano

She saw David get up, brush himself off, and run back to where the truck and his cruiser met. Their bumpers were twisted around each other like a tangled mass of two lovers.

"Shit..." He removed his hat and raked his hand through the dark waves of his hair. "Are you okay?" He gave her a concerned look and slammed on his hat.

She smiled up at him. "I'm fine. I can't say as much for your cruiser though." She took another quick glance backwards. "You know, the man at the car dealership was right. They sure do build these things like a rock." She placed a comforting hand on his arm. "Don't worry, David. I have insurance. Here's my agent's number. Just give him a copy of the accident report when you get it written up and things will be fine. Or, I hope they will be. I'm really sorry." Maybe if she gave him her big, brown puppy-dog-eyes look, he would go easier on her. She bit at her fingernails.

His fingers pinched the bridge of his nose. "Don't remind me how fine you think things will be. Look, we're going to have to do something about this. I'm going to radio in for a wrecker. We've got to get these bumpers untangled and haul my cruiser in." He blew between his teeth. "Boy, is the chief ever going to be pissed about *this* little incident. I don't know how I'm going to explain it."

She rubbed her hand across her bottom lip, noting the pleasant tingling sensation left from his kiss. Why had he kissed her? The man didn't make any sense with his actions. He'd purposely avoided her, then crushed his mouth over hers, causing a considerable amount of damage in the process. And the damage to the cruiser wasn't the only thing he'd put a kink in. He'd nearly caused her heart to jump out of her chest. It *still* thumped erratically.

After a moment's hesitation, she did something she knew she would probably regret. She threw the truck in drive, and with a squeal of tires onto the highway, towed David's cruiser behind her.

A couple of miles down the road, the cruiser fell off the truck's bumper. Shit, what had she been thinking when she'd taken off like a mad woman down the highway? Now she'd left the scene of an accident before she'd thought about the consequences. She'd only been thinking of those warm set of lips on that handsome, uniformed man. Maybe David really

## My Lips Are Sealed

*did* have reason to arrest her. She'd better call the police station and explain she was trying to help out by towing the cruiser in for David.

She'd better go back and get the set of keys out of it too. What if some bum came along and tried to steal the police cruiser? She'd just have to stop by the station to deliver them. It was another delay she didn't really have time for.

Ten minutes later, Jade pulled into the police station, blowing the truck horn loudly.

Jim Parrot threw up his hands and ran outside to meet Jade. He grabbed the door handle of the truck, peering in at her. "Where's Jackson? What the *hell* happened? You called saying you were trying to tow his cruiser in due to an accident."

"I'm in a real hurry here, officer." She shoved the set of keys across the seat of the truck. I thought I'd better bring these by. Never can be too safe you know." She let out a nervous laugh. "Jackson said he was going to have to tow in the cruiser, so I just thought I'd give him a little help. He pulled me over for no tags on my truck."

She thought about the way David had lunged into her lips. "Apparently he lost his brakes from the way he crashed into me. He's on the edge of Highway 45, and I have to get this truck back to the dealership. It's a really long story. Officer Jackson can explain it to you."

She hoped the little white lie she'd told wouldn't come back to haunt her as she crossed her fingers beside her lap. "Make sure and tell Officer Jackson I'm real sorry about the malfunction of his brakes."

"Yeah...sure, I'll do that." Parrot looked stunned as he watched her squeal her tires on the way out of the station.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jade had a bit of a problem explaining things to her cousin at the dealership. Finally convinced she hadn't done any real damage to the truck, he'd let her off easy. She'd also given him her insurance agent's number to file a claim for the bumper.

## Mia Romano

She hadn't been able to use the truck to move. But when she arrived home, she was surprised to see a rented moving truck in her driveway.

A quick line of scribble was written across the folded sheet of paper taped to the driver's window.

*Jade,*

*I feel responsible for what happened earlier today. Please accept this as my apology.*

No signature appeared on the note, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out who had left the moving truck for her. She was delighted as she loaded the last of her belongings in the back of the truck around ten that evening.

Exhausted, she pulled into the apartment lot and leaned her head against the cool glass of the window. Snickers paced nervously back and forth on the bench seat of the truck.

Jade rose up slightly and brushed his back with her hand.

"Welcome to our new home, boy. Things are going to be a little different for us. It will get better, though, I promise." She patted him again, then rested her head against the steering wheel for a well-deserved bout of crying.

## My Lips Are Sealed

### Chapter Twenty-one

"Just what were you doing, Jackson?" Parrot paced in the break room. "You *know* you aren't supposed to be involved in this case. Yet, there you were when I pulled into ole' Lady Simpson's house. We finally get a break in this case, and you almost blow it. It's a wonder it didn't frighten her off when she saw a swarm of cops surrounding her house. We just got damn lucky she agreed to talk at all after that."

"I just wanted to ask her a few questions. That's all. It's personal." David walked over to the window and plucked a dead leaf off the potted plant on the window ledge. "So, what'd you find out?"

"You know I'm not supposed to be discussing this murder case with you, Jackson."

David turned from the window with a determined raise of his brow. "And you know how I feel about this whole mess."

Parrot turned on his heel. "And that's why I'm going to tell you. You were right about Jade. She's innocent. The ole' lady said Jade was at Jimmy Boone's old place that night. She came by to see him about not getting her paycheck.

"Apparently, Mrs. Simpson cleans the building. She said Jade was embarrassed about the line of work she was in. Said she denied being...being one of Jimmy's...um..."

"Jimmy's what?" David went over to his partner, grabbed his shoulders, and proceeded to push him up against the wall. "Finish it, dammit." He shook him, almost violently. "Jimmy's what?"



## Mia Romano

"One of Jimmy's...." He blew out a long breath, shoving David off of him in anger. "One of Jimmy's...call girls," he blurted out. "Happy now, big guy?"

If emotions were a freight train, David's was flying down the track at a thousand miles per hour. His face paled as he absently moved toward a chair and slumped into it.

David could tell the silence in the room grated at his partner. Parrot grabbed his coffee cup and rubbed at his eyes as if they had sand in them.

"I'm sorry, man...really sorry about this. However, you did ask. Look at it this way, she's no longer a suspect, and that's what the main goal was here, wasn't it? In fact, I'm getting ready to run by her place to tell her the news."

David didn't answer. Stunned, he sat in his own little world. He slowly rubbed the stubble on his chin and stood. Without a word to his partner, he slammed through the door and jumped in his car, heading toward the beach. He didn't care if he was still on duty; nothing mattered. Jade had been a prostitute. No wonder she'd been so exceptional at the sex they'd shared on the beach that night. It also explained why she'd refused to tell him about her whereabouts on the night she'd been questioned. Shame and guilt had held her back from clearing her name.

That's why the chief hadn't looked shocked when he'd said Jade had been in his bed the night Austin was murdered. The chief knew exactly what Jade Wellington was...nothing but a whore.

Still, as he walked along the deserted beach, something nagged at him and tugged at his heart. She just didn't seem the type. She wasn't flashy, nor did she cover up all her natural beauty with all those cosmetics so many women loved to plaster on. She seemed pure...almost wholesome. Maybe that's the way he'd wanted to see her. David sat in the sand, mindless of his uniform getting the fine sandy grit into its seams. Reaching for a handful of the warm glittering sand, he let it sift through his fingers. His gaze shifted toward the harbor; where he and Jade had watched the ships sail out at sunset.

Something didn't make sense about all of this. David jumped up and forcefully brushed off the coating of sand from his uniform. He was going to find out, damn it. He'd find where she'd moved to. He'd pry it

## My Lips Are Sealed

out of Parrot if he had to. But, by fucking hell, she owed him an explanation.

First, though, he had a stop to make. First, he was going to pay a visit to Mrs. Simpson. There was something in Jimmy's old office David wanted, and he had a good reason to justify it. If Jimmy Boone had been running a prostitution ring, then there were records packed away somewhere. David was willing to bet his last dollar on it.

He radioed into headquarters, yelling at Parrot to get a search warrant and meet him over at Jimmy's warehouse. His partner was one step ahead of him.

"Look, Jackson, I already have one right here in my hand. By the way, the chief has been looking for you. You're back on the case now that Jade's cleared. Welcome back, partner."

\* \* \* \* \*

Celine had returned from New York toting Carlos by an invisible leash. "Jade, what are you doing living in this...this *dump*? Look at this, Carlos! Our Jade is living in a...a..."

"Place of her very own," Jade finished for her. She crossed her arms with determination. "It suits Snickers and me just fine. I don't see why you have such a problem with it."

"Paleeeze..., tell me this is only temporary, just until you get that great novel out there you've told me so much about. By the way, how is the deal coming along?" Celine cautiously opened one of the kitchen cabinets. "Does it have bugs? You know how I hate bugs." She brushed off the finger she'd used to open the cabinet. "If I had known they were this dirty, I would have used a paper towel."

"Celine, you've been my best friend since before I could even remember. What's gotten into you?"

Carlos looked at the ground, clearing his throat. "I think what Celine is trying to say," he droned in his heavy Spanish accent, "is you deserve much better than this...this place, as you call it." He waved his hand around the room. "You are far better than this."

## Mia Romano

Celine patted Jade's hand. "Carlos is right." She continued with the motherly concern. "Why don't you move into my...um...our place for awhile?" She batted her long lashes in Carlos' direction. "We'll be in and out to New York so often we won't even know you're there."

Immediate anger overtook Jade. "Celine, you'd forgotten I was even *here* long before this. You took off to New York right in the middle of one of the biggest crisis of my life. To be quite honest with you, I think you even thought I might be capable of murder the last time I spoke with you. Am I right? And since you got that fancy new beauty shop, and...and Carlos here..." She shoved her arm in his direction. "You've gotten so snooty, even your cat is turning up its nose at you!"

Celine stood back, holding her hands over her heart as if it would break. "That's...that's...so not true, Jade. Is it, Carlos? Tell her I haven't changed," she pleaded.

"I don't need to hear it from Carlos." Jade stamped her foot in anger, causing Snickers to flee the room.

"Maybe you were right, Celine. People change. They learn to stand on their own two feet. Moreover, I am standing on mine. Now please, I think you should go...maybe head back to New York to get your fabulous new shop opened up that you keep bragging about. Oh, and by the way, don't bother to drop by or call. It's pretty obvious if I don't maintain the same standard of living as you do, our friendship is quite shallow." She moved to the front door where she motioned them out. "Have a wonderful life!"

With the slam of the door after their exit, Jade left the one small piece remaining in her old life behind. She leaned against the worn wood, breathing deep, shallow breaths. "Now, Snickers, we are truly living our brand new life. No regrets. How about you, fella?" A slobbery lick on her chin was all she needed. Well, that and maybe someone to hold her. Fat chance of that happening, though.

## **My Lips Are Sealed**

### **Chapter Twenty-two**

In three more months, her “baby” would be published. Jade couldn’t believe time had gone by so quickly. She’d been busy having bookmarks done with a photo of the cover art they’d sent her. She loved the excitement of seeing her book in print. She couldn’t wait to hold the real thing in her hand and see her name on the cover. The town bookstore had been excited to promote someone local who, in their words, would be “a smashing success.”

John Snitzel, the bookstore owner, had even pitched in to have a couple of promotional posters hung in the window. For the most part, life was good.

She hadn’t seen or heard from David since the day she’d rammed into the front of his cruiser. Not surprising, though, considering how they’d parted. His partner had practically pounded down her door with excitement when she’d been cleared of being a murder suspect. Jade had casually tried to ask about David, but Parrot wasn’t talking. He’d simply said David would be working on the case and may be in touch if it was necessary. The comment had been rather cold and impersonal. Austin’s murderer was still at large, but those were the only words he’d said about the case.

Memories of Austin were dim. She’d buried them with so many other things in her past. Still, she thought of him and hated the cruel fate which had become him. After all, she wasn’t as heartless as some people in the town of Cranberry seemed to think.

## Mia Romano

Fall was setting in, and in California that meant mild, comfortable temperatures. Snickers had finally gotten over his nervousness and no longer needed diapers. Thank goodness. Her budget was extremely thankful.

She'd read an article in the local paper about a warrant for Jimmy Boone's arrest; something about a prostitution ring and money laundering. Jade shuddered, thinking of her meeting with the short, little slimeball. She wouldn't doubt he was somehow involved in Austin's murder. But that was for the police to investigate, not her. She'd been through enough with the local police...one in particular.

\* \* \* \* \*

David poured his fourth cup of coffee. He'd gone through nearly a dozen boxes of paperwork from Jimmy's office. His kitchen looked like a recycling center with strewn papers carpeting the floor. Sleep had become a luxury he couldn't afford over the last few days as he'd dug through file after file looking for something, anything that would prove Jade wasn't what he feared.

He pressed his palm against bloodshot eyes and willed the headache to ease from his temples. Of course, he could have dropped by her place and just point-blank asked her for the truth. But somehow he needed to see it for himself in black and white. It was as important to his future as a heartbeat was to life, the kind of life he'd been dreaming about sharing with Jade. No doubt she hated him. Who could blame her? He'd been a real heel, accusing her of everything from fraud to stealing. Somehow, some way, he'd make it up to her...he'd prove to her he'd changed.

With determination, David opened another box. He pulled out a set of folders with Stuff-It Company written on the front of each one. It was then he spotted the folder with Jade's name scribbled across the tab. His heart skipped a beat as beads of sweat popped from his forehead. This was it...was he ready for what he'd find inside? He had to breath...deep, long breaths as he set the folder on the table. He stood and grabbed his cold coffee, headed to the sink to dump it, then paced back and forth in

## My Lips Are Sealed

front of the window. It was amazing how one little folder, one little piece of paper, could change his life and determine his entire future. He loved her, damn it, no matter what. That wouldn't change. Not even if he found what he feared in the folder. People changed. He was living proof—and so could Jade.

With hope in his thoughts, he grasped the folder and tore into it. His eyes bulged and watered, which he blamed solely on lack of sleep. No way were they tears. He *never* cried from emotions. He read the file, then read it over again. There it was in undeniable black and white. It punched at his gut.

The records of boxes she'd stuffed and mailed along with the postal receipts were all in her folder. She had worked for Jimmy, all right, not as a prostitute, but as a valid employee of Stuff-It Company.

He reached for the phone to call his partner. "Parrot, I found it!" He stopped to throw a stack of papers from the table. "Jade...she's innocent...of everything...everything, man! Tell the chief I'm taking a personal day today. I've got some things I need to take care of."

His partner laughed. "So, what are you telling *me* for? Go tell it to the lady."

"That's just what I intend to do, Parrot." He shoved a paper in his pocket. "Gotta run."

\* \* \* \* \*

He violated every speeding sign and caution light as he headed to Jade's apartment. He wasn't sure what he was going to say when he arrived, but he sure as hell would figure out something.

David whistled a happy tune while turning down Jade's street. Like a bolt of lightning, it struck him. What if she wasn't home? Or, worse yet, what if she refused to open the door and talk to him? A brilliant idea hit him. Since he was still in his uniform, he'd *make* her open the door. After all, this was official business, and he definitely planned to make it something official. He wanted her, needed her, and she needed him, whether she'd realized it yet or not.

## Mia Romano

His heart pounded louder than the fist he was pounding on her door. Smoothing back his hair, he took a deep breath and waited what seemed a lifetime for her to answer.

When she finally cracked the door open, she left the safety chain in place and paled when she saw him standing in her doorway. "W-what do you want? I didn't do it, I swear."

His eyes darkened and his face softened. "Jade, we have to talk...it's important." He held his breath, unable to read any emotion on her face, the beautiful face he wanted to pull to his and embrace with a kiss.

She pursed her lips and begged Snickers to calm down behind her. Snickers was behaving like he'd just found a long-lost friend. "Get down, Snickers," she scolded. "You're supposed to *protect* me from the bad guys...not pee on the floor with excitement. And you'd gotten so much better. So much for my carpet." With that, she closed the door in David's face.

"I'm *busy*," she yelled through the door. "I have a mess to clean up, thanks to you."

"I'll wait, Jade," he yelled from the other side. "I have a bit of a mess to clean up myself, I'm afraid. One of my own doing. I have to talk to you. I'm not going away. Even if it means camping out on your doorstep, so you might as well let me in."

He heard the chain slide from the door minutes later. She cracked it opened again and threw out a sleeping bag.

"Happy camping, David!"

## My Lips Are Sealed

### Chapter Twenty-three

An hour went by, then two. Her nerves were frazzled. She felt like a prisoner in her own house. How absurd David thought she would actually allow him in after their last little fiasco out on the highway.

She hadn't heard him leave, only the thump of his body against her front door, as if he were one of those cute little dolls you put at the bottom to stop a draft. And he was *definitely* cute. So what was she doing keeping him out?

She went to the hall closet, where she rummaged for a sleeping bag, and headed toward the door. She opened it rather timidly, giving him the briefest hint of a smile. "I'd thought I would join you." She plopped on top of the rolled sleeping bag.

He had the most beautiful blue eyes, even with the redness in them from the lack of sleep; he was the most handsome specimen of a man she'd ever laid eyes on. It was foolish to keep pretending she didn't want him...didn't need his touch. She missed him.

He flashed a broad smile in her direction. "I take it you're willing to hear me out now?"

"I'm ready...I'm sorry for the way I acted."

He chuckled, his shoulders shaking along with the laugh. "I'm glad. But do you think it would be possible to go inside? I mean, since you live here and everything. Besides, I really need to borrow your bathroom. Six cups of coffee before noon can do something to a man, if you know what I mean."



## Mia Romano

A blush flooded her face as she laughed at what he must've thought when she'd brought out another sleeping bag. "Yes." She hesitated briefly. "I have other things I'd like to do, too, you know."

David reached to pull her from the ground. He lifted her up and carried her through the door. He slammed it closed with his foot. "First, you have to hear what I have to say. Just as soon as I go to the bathroom." He darted down the hall, then turned on his heels. "Um...by the way, where *is* the bathroom?"

"Second door on the left. I'll be waiting, David."

She went to the kitchen to make some ice tea. Odd, how her hands shook as she wondered what he had to tell her. Why should she be nervous? Well, plenty of reasons, she thought, pulling some glasses from the cupboard. With their past history, he might be tricking her. Maybe tricking her into admitting something she could be arrested for. But she hadn't done anything. Not that it seemed to make any difference in David's eyes. She was still fretting over it when he walked into the small kitchen.

"Nice place." He did a quick inventory of the room. "Not like your other place. That place reeked of stuffiness and felt cold, even if it was huge."

He was keeping his distance, standing on the other side of the room as far as its size would allow him to.

It was all he could do to keep from pulling her to him. He wanted nothing more than to walk up behind her and put his arms around her. Tell her everything was finally going to be all right. Yet he knew if he got close to her, he wouldn't be able to tell her the things that needed to be said. He'd be ready to carry her back to the bedroom, make love to her for hours, days, weeks. An entire lifetime.

"I was wrong, Jade, about a lot of things." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "You're not what I thought you were at all."

He noticed her hesitation before she turned around from the counter.

"Not what you *thought* I was? What exactly do you mean?"

This was not going well. He was already hesitant. Was he getting ready to risk more than he was willing? Close any hope of communication

## My Lips Are Sealed

between them? "Look, maybe now isn't the time to discuss this. I don't want this to drive a final wall between us."

"Wall? I already assumed there was an entire ocean between us." Her eyes widened in question. "Am I wrong?"

"No, not entirely, but I want to close this large gap of misunderstanding between us. I don't want things to be like this. You're important to me, Jade. Not for my career, not for my ego, but for who you are. I've learned that. It's taken me a long time to realize it...far too long, and too many mistakes."

"David, what are you talking about? Tell me, please. I want to understand...really."

He hesitated. "I've accused you of a lot of things, jumped to conclusions. But there's a reason for it...a reason from my past. You see, I had an ex-wife who ended up getting arrested for insurance fraud. So naturally, when I first met you the day you reported your house being broken into..."

"I get it. You assumed *all* women were like her. That's not a very fair assumption. Do you think it is?" She took a sip of tea, staring at him over the rim of the glass, then set it down with more force than necessary. "Why did you take me out on the beach that evening if you felt that way? Was it purely for satisfying a sexual need? Was it?"

A hard line set across his jaw as he gritted his teeth. "Is that what you've thought this entire time? It was nothing but pure sexual need on my part?"

Jade stood from the table, placing her hands on her hips. "Well, rumor in this town has it I worked for Jimmy Boone as a...a..." She couldn't even say it.

"A prostitute. Say it, Jade. Say prostitute. It's why you didn't say anything the night you were questioned. You were embarrassed to say you worked for Jimmy. You naturally assumed no one would believe that you only stuffed envelopes for him. So instead, you suffered in silence...you'd rather be a murder suspect than to have anyone think you were a prostitute."

## Mia Romano

David pounded the kitchen counter with his fist. "What in the hell do you think I've been trying to *do* this whole time? I've been trying to prove the entire town's wrong. I've risked my job on it, damn it."

"Risked your job?" She gave him a look of disbelief and confusion. "So why have you been avoiding me? You acted like I've got some type of plague or something."

He walked to the window, shoving his hands back in his pockets. "I was ordered off the case and told to stay away from you during the investigation. Until yesterday, when the cleaning lady down at Jimmy's verified you were there the night of Austin's murder."

She was suspicious. "So why would the chief tell you to stay away from me?"

He turned from the window, walking toward her with a determined gate in his step. He reached for her hand and swallowed hard. "Because...well, I gave you an alibi for that night. I believed in you, so I told him you'd been with me all night...in my bed."

Anger overtook common sense, and she moved back from him. Rage rose up in Jade's throat. "Great! Just beautiful, David! Way to go. I guess that confirmed to everyone I certainly was a prostitute. You told your chief that I was in your bed? Not only was it a *lie*, it...it was...was..." She stopped abruptly. Tears welled in her eyes. David had stuck his neck out for her.

"You...you believed in me? You risked everything for me?" She smiled, looking at him in disbelief. She realized the sacrifice he'd made. For her. "David, that's the most unselfish, beautiful thing anyone has ever done for me. I'm sorry...I...I..."

He pulled her close to him and willed her to look in his eyes. His eyes were filled with passion and want. Her heart beat with his like they were one as he bent to place his lips on her mouth and explore the taste of her.

With pent-up emotions and needs, she pulled him into the curve of her, enjoying his arousal and feeling like her legs had turned to jelly. She reached to unbutton his shirt. She wanted to explore every inch of him. He pulled off her shirt, moving down to suckle her breasts.

## My Lips Are Sealed

A sharp intake of her breath had him pulling back from her and looking up. "Don't stop." She pulled his mouth down to the soft pink tips while she undid his pants.

Effortlessly he grabbed her up and then carried her to the bedroom. She was lost in passion and couldn't remember how she'd gotten completely naked, while he ran his tongue along the length of her thigh. It was as if she were floating worlds apart from reality. She shuddered as his tongue reached the moist opening between her legs. She grabbed his hair, pulling him into her, craving more. If this was what heaven was like, she wanted in, and badly. He teased, then lifted her and rolled on top of her. She felt the warm hardness of his cock caress the sensitive button above her opening. She screamed, climaxing as if a floodgate had opened, each climax stronger and more intense than the last. Her body shook while she lay back against the pillow and slowly descended from the pure ecstasy of it all.

She lay spent, her breathing erratic as emotions overcame her. A tear trickled down her cheek. It was a tear of pure joy and amazement that a man could stir such passion within her.

She watched him lie back on the bed, patiently waiting for her shaking body to subside. It was evident he was hard with excitement, but he waited.

Jade rolled over to run her hands against the glorious muscles of his chest and slowly moved to his groin. He gasped in pleasure when she rubbed the slick droplet that had formed around the head of his erection. She was enjoying how he tightened with excitement from the touch of her mouth. She licked and nipped in all the right spots until he was ready to explode. Reaching in the nightstand, she hoped she still had the box of condoms somewhere...and if she did, that it wasn't empty.

"We're in luck." Her voice trembled while she tore the packet and sheathed him quickly. She mounted him, sliding down slowly, and he shuddered. She started to ride him unhurriedly with a sensual dance against his cock, then increased the speed and friction. Beads of pleasured sweat covered their bodies when he ran his hands along her hips, guided her, willing her to move with him, faster...faster. He burst with a climax

## Mia Romano

which nearly rocked them off the bed. When he screamed out her name, he pumped one final burst deep inside her, fulfilling her every fantasy. He pulled her down upon him, and when she placed her hand on his chest, she felt him shaking with the raw emotion of passion and need.

She rested her head in the crook of his shoulder with him still inside her. Within moments, he was kissing her neck and gently pulling out of her. His pupils dilated with passion and want. He became hard again. He whispered into the damp curls against her neck. "I can't get enough of you, Jade."

"Nor can I get enough of you." She kissed him, probing her tongue deep within his mouth as an added response. Her body trembled against him, her nipples hard and begging to be licked by his wonderful full mouth and tongue. She rolled over, tracing the small scar on his forehead, and kissed his shoulder.

"I guess you're wondering about the scar." He looked at her lovingly. "It wasn't from anything heroic, if that's what you're thinking. I just did something stupid when I was in college. Stupid. Like getting drunk one night and flying through a plate glass window. Pretty dumb, wasn't it?" He rubbed his finger along the hollow of her neck. "I hope you're not too disappointed it wasn't from something a little more heroic."

"Not at all." She sniffed the musky smell of his cologne, enjoying his scent, and then nibbled at his neck. "I think it's kind of sexy, actually." She giggled. "It's good to know you once had a side to you that liked to have some fun once in awhile instead of all work. Not getting so drunk you crash through windows. But, you knew how to let go just a little back then."

He laughed. "I think I still know how to let go a little. What we just experienced wasn't exactly what I'd call holding back." He kissed her forehead. He wanted her again as he reached to rub her thigh.

A telephone rang somewhere in the distance as they lay in each other's arms. "Ignore it." He pulled her back down against him. "Let the answering machine get it...please."

She couldn't have agreed more as she vaguely heard the message.

## My Lips Are Sealed

Suddenly, David's ears perked up, his body going rigid as he sat up in the bed.

The message was from Buddy Tempo. The long-lost and forgotten Buddy Tempo. Buddy's message filtered in his ears like a fire spreading out of control.

*"Hey Jade, how ya doin', babe. I know I haven't called since I left, but I'm back in town. I couldn't help but think about you. We sure had a great time in that closet of yours, didn't we, babe? Man, the sex was fantastic! No, more than fantastic. It's all I've been thinking about these long months at sea. Anyway, I thought maybe we could get together later this evening, take in a movie and some dinner."*

Jade cringed, pulling herself from the bed, when the message continued.

*"Well, guess you're not in right now, so I'll get back in touch later to confirm things with you. Oh, and get that wonderful tongue of yours warmed up, babe. Man, I'm getting hard just thinking of it."*

\* \* \* \* \*

David bolted from the bed. He ran to the kitchen to grab his clothes and gathered them up while Jade screamed out his name and ran after him. She rounded the corner wearing nothing but the bed sheet wrapped around her. "David...wait...please. It's not what you think, and I know what you're thinking. I swear to you. Buddy Tempo didn't mean anything to me."

"I'm not thinking much of anything right now." He just wanted to get his clothes on. He suddenly felt very naked in front of her, unlike moments before when he'd felt perfectly natural. "You don't have to give me an explanation of your bed partners. But I *will* tell you this. I won't be one of them, sweetheart. You can count on it."

## Chapter Twenty-four

"Jade, Jade, *Jade*. You have to stop *doing* this," Amelia said over the phone line. She was in a tizzy over the book ratings and reviews. "You simply cannot go online to Amazon and Barnes and Noble and keep giving yourself rave reviews under fictitious names. The book has only been out for two weeks, and already there are over thirty-five reviews on Amazon alone."

"B-but..." Jade stuttered, thinking of the last one she'd put on Barnes and Noble only an hour before.

"No, Jade, you have to stop this. I mean, it's ridiculous. I'm sitting here looking at a printout of some of these reviews. For example, this one, 'Geraldine, an avid reader from Virginia' writes: "*Fantasy in Fishnets* was a real knee-slapper, I tell ya. It was so hot, even my hound dog was yelling and panting when I read a passage to him. By the way, my husband thanks you tremendously. He went out and bought me my very own fishnet hose after reading that one love scene.'

"Or, what about this little gem of a review?" Amelia was ranting. "This one is from 'Roxanne' out of New York: 'I'm so amazed at the change this novel has made in my sex life with Geraldo. Just last night, we broke the good crystal as he slung me across the dinner table and slipped a hundred dollar bill in my fishnet stockings. You have achieved the impossible with your novel, Ms. Beaver. Geraldo now reads it faithfully.' Do you get my point, Jade...um Jessica, or whatever?"

## My Lips Are Sealed

"Um...I guess so." *Oh boy, wait until that new one on Barnes and Noble gets posted.* I mean, I just thought it would help. You said to be aggressive in my promotion."

"Aggressive, but not asinine, Jade. You're going to give me a coronary before this is over."

"I'm sorry, Amelia."

Amelia's breath of annoyance came over the phoneline. "And besides, most men do *not* read romance novels. They just don't. And *Fantasy in Fishnets* is just that. It is a work of romantic fiction. It is *not* a self-help manual for great sex. Get it?"

"Got it." Jade's face fell. "I'll try and do better. I guess I just got wrapped up in the excitement of it all."

"Quite understandable. After all, it is your first novel. Now, I must run. Let me know how the book signing goes."

"Yes, I will, Amelia, and thanks for your time." Jade let the receiver slide from her hand. Was anything ever going to go completely right? She had ignored Buddy Tempo's insistent calls. Twelve of them had been within an hour. She had tried to explain to David that Buddy had meant nothing but an unfortunate one-night stand, but it had gone over like an erupting volcano of hot, angry words. Not surprising, considering the conversation they'd had about her status with Jimmy Boone.

\* \* \* \* \*

So life went on for Jade...alone. Her writing became her passion day and night. She worked every spare minute she could find on a new manuscript. And she struggled at True Heart Greetings under Carletta's constant badgering about one thing or another.

Carletta's moods continued to get worse as each day passed. Sometimes she'd come in late, explaining to Jade she just couldn't handle the change in her lifestyle.

During one particular bout, Jade had told her she really didn't care. Carletta, of course, blew up and left for the day with another co-worker...a married, male co-worker.



## Mia Romano

Most of the town whispered about Jade whenever she walked into a shop or down the street. She didn't care. She had a purpose in life. She wasn't going to allow them to run her out of her hometown, no matter what. In fact, maybe she'd just have a little fun with it. Make some of them wonder what she was really up to. After all, they deserved it.

Soon it was Saturday, the big day of days. Jade arrived at the bookstore an hour ahead of schedule. She'd brought her fold-up table and chair, along with two boxes of books and her promotional items.

John Snitzel held the door open for her, but nothing more. She supposed he'd extended all the warmth and hospitality to be expected. He had been nice enough to have the posters made, which she thanked him for over and over until he'd finally told her he had some things to do to prepare for the Mayor. Something about getting another stack of magazines ready for him to autograph. He'd walked behind the counter, pulled a pen from the plastic pocket-protector he wore, shoved up his glasses on his too-skinny nose, and then ignored her. That was, until the big disaster struck.

Jade was pleased with the crowd of people who showed up for the signing. There'd been a line of about twenty or so waiting for the doors to open. She wondered if the crowd was due to the mayor being there to promote an article he'd appeared in for Newsweek magazine. It had caused quite a stir in Washington. Mayor Burns had become a national celebrity over his opinions on underground pornography rings.

She smiled for the local newspaper and cameras, shook hands, and handed out promotional items. She was even able to overlook the elderly lady who refused to buy an autographed copy because 'she didn't care about the damn book, she'd just come in for the free fishnet hose.' But that was only the start of the problem.

An hour later, the elderly lady returned wearing the fishnet hose on her legs. She created such a scene that the crowd went wild. They lurked and laughed as she careened down aisle twelve. The woman became so angry, she ran into a gentlemen in aisle five. The gentlemen happened to be the mayor who was waiting on a staff member to escort him back to his office. Earlier, Jade had given him a pack of fishhooks and thanked him

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for his patience while she'd signed his wife's book. He'd smiled, stuck them in his pocket, and went to browse.

Well...the elderly lady ran right into him, causing one of the fish hooks to pierce his pocket and lodge right into his privates. She screamed, then he screamed...much louder in obvious pain.

The cameras flashed as Jade rushed to the rescue of the poor mayor. She got on her knees and tried to dislodge the fishhook, while his wife stood back in absolute horror. Afterwards, John Snitzel promptly threw her out with her books flying behind her. He told her if she ever came back to his store, he'd have her arrested.

\* \* \* \* \*

Parrot was laughing. "Seen the latest tabloid there, Jackson?" He snickered again as David rounded a curve. "If you haven't, I suggest you pick up a copy. I'm keeping mine." He rattled the paper bag he'd placed it in. "This one's going to be a collector's item for sure, man."

David gave him a sour face. He'd sported quite a few since he'd heard the phone message on Jade's answering machine. "Like I care, man. So I suppose you're going to tell me who's sleeping with who in Hollywood or something, right? I can't believe you read all that trash, Parrot, and to actually believe the stuff!"

David's partner snickered again. "Hey, the *National Enquirer* is the best, man. It's a real source of information. Pull over here, ole buddy. I'm telling ya, you gotta see this one for yourself."

Within minutes, David pulled over to the curb near the bakery. "I think I'm going to grab a sandwich. Want one?" He ignored the tabloid Parrot was pulling out of the bag.

Parrot grabbed at his arm as he reached to open the door. "Hey, hold it. Get me a ham and cheddar. But you gotta look at this real quick." He shoved the tabloid under his nose. "Talk about another political scandal, I think this one is a hoot."

David blew out a long breath, grabbed the tabloid, and slammed his fist against the steering wheel. There it was right in front of him in

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black and white. The headline stood out like a knife piercing his heart, and the photo below it practically stopped it from beating all together.

*Hooking it for a Living-Author Jessica Beaver-Caught in the Act!*

Below was a picture of Jade kneeling down in front of a gentleman, pulling at the man's...crotch?

He shoved the tabloid toward his partner and screeched away from the curb, his face red with anger.

"Hey, aren't we going to get those sandwiches?" Parrot looked at him, shaking his head.

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### Chapter Twenty-five

A week later, Jade wanted to go straight to bed when she arrived at her apartment. She'd seen the tabloid early that morning, and had avoided all the messages she'd played back on her answering machine. Including the frantic message her agent had left. She'd managed to screw up everything she touched. Why not finish it off? Maybe she would have a vent-your-frustration party. Let everyone drop by and egg her car or something. She might just throw a dozen or so eggs herself.

The more she thought about it, the more it actually sounded like a brilliant idea. She smiled. *That's it!* She would advertise it in the paper. People would be required to bring as many eggs as they wanted to throw, but...BUT...they would have to purchase a copy of her novel as a ticket to enter. After all, how many people would jump at the chance to egg her? She didn't doubt the whole town, and maybe even the next town over.

By bedtime, she was in a better mood. She even gave Snickers a special snack. "We *are* going to make it, Snickers, regardless of the odds." She patted him and trotted off to bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is so fabulous!" Amelia's voice vibrated over the phone. "I mean, this kind of publicity is just what we needed, Jade. Don't look at it as a failure. It brings out people's curiosity. They will want to go out and

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buy the book just to say they have a copy of it. In fact, the publisher is so excited about it, guess what?"

Jade could hardly wait to hear *this* one. "What, Amelia?" she said with little enthusiasm.

"They are doing something unheard of in the industry. They are giving you a book signing tour! Imagine it, Jade. I'm in the process of setting it up now. I have calls in to the airlines for all the flight arrangements. You'll be touring six states in the next few weeks. So what do you think, rising star of the literary world?"

Jade hesitated. "I'm in shock. I don't know if I'm ready for all of this, Amelia. Are they sure about this? I mean, look at the way my first signing went. It was a disaster."

"When are you going to realize that little 'disaster', as you call it, has created an explosion of interest in you? Sometimes life's little backfires can move you in the right direction. It's fabulous, I tell you, simply fabulous. Oh, and while I'm thinking about it, have you joined the AA yet?"

"The AA? Why would I need to join the AA? I don't have a drinking problem, Amelia. Hardly touch the stuff."

"No...no silly. I'm talking about the Aspiring Authors, you know, the AA. Did you forget I sent you the application?"

She thought back, wondering if some of her mail had gotten lost in the recent move. "I don't think I ever received it. But of course, there's been so much going on, I guess it could be around here someplace." She looked around the room, wondering if it was in the stack of paperwork on her desk. "Maybe you should send me another one." Her apartment hadn't been in the best of shape lately. She didn't have the heart to care much. Not since David had walked out her door.

"I'll get one in the mail today. It's important you be a member, Jade. They are a wonderful support group. Now about that tour schedule..."

"Amelia, I really have to run. I can't be late for work or I'm afraid I'll be standing in the unemployment line. I can't afford that."

Amelia snickered. "Before long you're not going to need your job at True Heart Greetings. Trust me on this one. I see success in abundance in

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the literary world for you. Why, you'll be on the New York Times Bestseller Lists, I just know it. Well, tah tah for now. I'll get your flight itinerary and the AA application in the mail to you."

"Well, Snickers, it looks as if our ship might just come in after all. It's sort of frightening though. I never imagined one little novel could create such a stir."

\* \* \* \* \*

Carletta wasn't speaking to her again when Jade arrived at work three days later. She simply turned her head away when Jade walked into the office and shoved a copy of the *National Enquirer* in a desk drawer. After a couple of hours of silence, she pivoted, giving Jade a cold stare. "I guess you've heard I'm leaving True Heart." She stated it as flat as a saltine cracker.

"No...no way. What made you decide to leave?" Jade was truly interested. *Wonder what's possessed the new golden girl to take flight?*

A smug look crept into Carletta's overly made up face. "Oh, Bill. You know the guy I took out for drinks? He's offered me a position as executive vice-president of his company. It's simply an offer I can't refuse. He's even offered to purchase my home as part of the deal. So, it's goodbye small town and hello big bucks and city for me. He's going to use my house as an investment. Isn't it wonderful?"

Carletta smiled and turned back to her computer. "In fact, I'll be leaving this afternoon. Of course, that will leave a full-time opening for you now." She pulled the *Enquirer* from the drawer. "Not that you'll need it from what I read here. Looks like you can make far more money as they say... 'Hooking it for a Living'?"

Tommy poked his head in the doorway, giving Carletta a look sure to kill even the largest of snakes. "Why don't you just tell her the truth, Carletta? They canned your sorry ass." He winked at Jade and scooted down the hallway.

"Tommy!" Jade ran after him when he rounded the corner. "Wasn't that a little crude? Even considering it's Carletta?"

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He stuck his head out of his mailroom domain. "Hey, anything for you, cupcake. I know how much you disliked the snake, so I just set up a bit of a rattletrap for her. Worked like a charm. The boss man didn't take too kindly to finding out she'd stolen some of your ideas, especially since she sold them to a competitor." He grinned. "Gotta get this mail sorted. If you decide to um...thank me later or anything, just um..."

"Forget it, Tommy." Jade laughed as she went back to her office. The office that was strictly her own again.

Getting the extra time off for her book tour had been somewhat difficult. Her boss wasn't as enthusiastic now that he needed her there for the extra workload coming in. But deep down, he liked Jade and wanted her to succeed, so he'd agreed to it. She'd had to promise to take some work along with her, but it wasn't a problem. It wasn't as if she were going to have any kind of social life during the long nights in her hotel room.

She packed up her briefcase and headed to her apartment that evening to start packing for the tour. The vet's office had agreed to board Snickers while she was gone, and Dr. Drake had promised to take extra special care of him.

Jade couldn't sleep the night before the flight. She really wasn't fond of flying, and fretted over the new lifestyle she was about to embark on. What if people didn't like her? Or worse yet, hated the book? She needed confidence. She needed David.

When she returned, she was going to swallow her pride and make him understand how she felt. David was more important than anything else she'd ever had in her life, and she wasn't about to let him slip through her fingers. Not ever again. She drifted off to sleep thirty minutes before the sound of her alarm clock blasted through the room.

She got up, took a quick shower, and spritzed on some perfume while making a face in the mirror. A pair of puffy eyes confirmed the fact she hadn't slept well, or she'd been on some type of all night binge. People, of course, would think the latter, she was sure. It was just the way her life had been until now.

Boarding the plane ended up creating yet another chaotic scenario. She was pulled into a room for a full body search after the alarm kept

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sounding at the security scan. They'd loudly announced she would have to consent to the full-body search before boarding the plane. They'd checked her shoes, looked in her hair for bobby pins and on and on. She didn't even think about the tiny bag of metal book clips in her pocket. She'd had them made as a promotional item. And, they were so clever and cute...little clips in the shape of a fishhook to match her theme for her book.

They discovered the clips during the body search. Of course, it was exactly one minute until the last call for boarding her flight. The security guard had seemed to enjoy patting her down just a little too long and too much for Jade's comfort. He finally pulled the bag from her pocket, creating a mess in the tiny room as the clips skidded across the floor. He grunted without apology, gave her a hard look, and left the room.

She hurriedly picked them up, determined not to leave without them. After all, they'd cost her a small fortune. Why did life always have to be so eventful? Just one time, couldn't something be easy? Her nerves were already frazzled without having to deal with this. Flying had never been one of her favorite things in life.

Of course, the local newspaper had noticed the delima she was in within a matter of seconds. They'd apparently been there to do a feature story on her book tour. They'd snapped picture after picture as security had pulled her away to a private room. She could imagine the headlines now.

*Author, Jessica Beaver Nearly Arrested for Carrying Concealed Weapon in Local Airport.*

Somehow she just knew, had come to expect, the worst in any situation that she was involved in. She took a long breath and found her seat on the flight. She would deal with it. But dealing with the two elderly ladies behind her might pose yet another problem. Or she could have some fun with it. They'd been whispering about her since the minute she'd stowed her carry-on in the compartment above her seat. She knew of them. They were the "Queen Bees" of the gossip colony in Cranberry. Everyone knew the elderly sisters didn't miss a thing that took place in



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Cranberry. Harriett and Myrtle Crabtree were never ones to disappoint the ladies down at the local beauty salon.

Jade giggled. *This is going to be entertaining!*

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### Chapter Twenty-six

"Isn't that the woman in town who's an author?" Myrtle whispered. "What's her name? Jessica...Jessica..."

"Beaver," her sister filled in. "Yes, I think it *is* her."

Jade could feel them sneaking a quick peek at her from around the back of her seat.

"I hear she's in AA, you know," Harriett whispered loudly. "Such a shame it is. Don't you think?"

"Certainly," her sister confirmed. "And I hear she's a real hooker, too. I just don't understand how they can let people like her write those awful books. I hear that book she wrote is pretty risqué, you know."

Jade chose that moment to turn around the edge of her seat and extend a hand. "Hello, I believe you might be speaking of me. I'm Jessica Beaver. I do hope you'll pick up a copy of my book."

Both women's faces paled in horror. Jade smiled politely at them. The look on their face was worth every second of agony Jade had endured over the women's snide remarks.

Myrtle's mouth opened with a gasp, and then she spoke. "Oh, Ms. Beaver, could I have your autograph? Here, right here on my cocktail napkin would be just fine. We weren't really talking about you if you happened to overhear us." She gave her sister a sharp elbow to the ribs. "Were we, Harriett?"

"No...no, certainly not." Harriett blushed, pulling a lace hanky from her purse. "We were just discussing some of the things we overheard

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at the beauty shop." She smiled sheepishly. "Of course, we knew *none* of them could possibly be true." She twisted a corner of her hanky nervously. "We just think you're wonderful, absolutely wonderful. Don't we, Myrtle?" She shot her sister a look of warning.

"Why, of course, we do dear. Now we don't want to bother you. We noticed you must be busy working on another novel." She snooped around the seat. "You just go right on back to what you were doing, we don't want to interrupt."

Jade turned back in her seat and rang for the flight attendant. She laughed silently. *I'll fix 'em...the old buzzards.*

"May I get something for you, Ms. Beaver?" The stewardess flashed her bright smile.

"Yes, thank you so much. I'd like a scotch on the rocks, and could you please triple the scotch in it? Oh, and after, if you could be a dear and bring me a rum and Coke. She smiled sweetly. "Flying makes me just a bit nervous."

The stewardess blinked rapidly. "Um...well...I'll get that for you right away, Ms. Beaver." Another batting of her lashes followed. "I'll be right back with your order."

Jade practically choked from the smell of the drink alone as she clanked the ice around. She started to cough and noticed the elderly ladies had become silent almost as if they were waiting, watching for anything they could use for their next gossip fest. Jade coughed again loudly, gagging at the strong smell of alcohol. She grabbed the motion sickness bag and opened it as if she were going to use it. Placing her head near the opening of the bag, she slipped the drink near her mouth and poured it in, clasping the top hurriedly. She could hear the sisters gasping as she silently giggled.

Now to really fix them. She unfastened her seatbelt and stood in the aisle. "Excuse me." She bent toward Myrtle. "But could you be so kind as to give this to the stewardess when she comes back by? I'm feeling rather ill, and I absolutely must get to the bathroom.

Myrtle reluctantly reached for the bag. Her face was ghostly white as she held it between two fingers, staring at it as if she were going to need a motion sickness bag of her own.

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Jade wobbled in the aisle. "Don't worry. They say those bags are quite strong. You shouldn't have to worry about it springing a leak." Jade gave her a weak smile. "Thank you so much."

As she entered the small bathroom at the back of the plane, Jade could have sworn she heard a lady scream. A squeaky old lady scream. Satisfied, she returned to her seat, noticing the two sisters had moved to a different area of the plane.

When the plane landed, she stopped to speak to them. "You'll have to attend the vent-your-frustration party I'm planning on doing when I get back in Cranberry. I'm sure it will be something you won't want to miss. It's going to be such a smash." She patted Myrtle briefly on her arm and headed to the exit door of the plane.

Jade glanced backwards, noting the elderly ladies were speechless while they watched her walking down the steps. Finally, Myrtle turned to the other. "Do you think she's planning on getting smashed out of her gourd again?" Jade giggled at the comment she'd overheard.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tommy hoped Jade liked the roses he'd sent. He wished he could be there to see her face when she found them. He'd taken a sick day when he'd learned she would be in New York. Getting a room in the hotel across from where she was staying had worked out perfectly. He could see her room from his window across the street. Poor thing, everyone in town practically despised her. But not him, he loved her. He'd do anything for her...and he had. She'd never made fun of him like the others.

He fantasized about her day after day in his little domain at True Heart Greetings. Sure, she'd casually blown off his hints and advances with a laugh. Tomorrow, she wouldn't be laughing, and with the stupid cop that had been hanging around her place hundreds of miles away, he'd finally have his chance.

He lit a cigarette and inhaled from it deeply as he brushed his hand against the silver frame holding Jade's picture. "I'd die for you, Jade...in a

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heartbeat. You are my little gem, my world. I will have you once and for all."

He stubbed out the half-burnt cigarette and lifted the shot glass in the direction of her window. "To us. And to our future together, my love. You will belong to me after tomorrow." He downed the whiskey, enjoying the burn in his throat. He absently rubbed the scar on his hand. *Damn dog.* Her stupid dog had bitten him good the day he'd tried to retrieve the diamond from under her bed. Every since, he'd had to shove his hands in his pockets whenever she came near. Jade was smart. If she'd seen the scar, she would've figured it out. That dead snitch, Austin, had promised to pay him handsomely to steal it, and he'd planned to use the money for her benefit. Things hadn't worked out that way, though. Too bad he'd had to kill Austin afterwards.

Of course, he'd had a little heart about him when he'd killed him. He'd placed a drop of cyanide on the rim of his wine glass the night they'd gone to dinner to work out the deal. There wasn't any use in letting someone feel the full blunt of the blow. Austin had become quite ill and disoriented. Tommy doubted Austin had felt the shot to his head that night.

Jade belonged with him, not Austin or that stupid cop. He and Jade both were misfits in the town of Cranberry. He'd just helped things along a little. He'd worked hard to make sure of it. First, he'd set Celine up with Carlos, who was pretending to be looking for a job, which he found in Celine's shop. Carlos had gotten Celine to New York much faster than he'd anticipated. Now Celine thought she was the greatest invention that ever was. Even Carlos believed it, letting her pull him around by the nose. Then, planting some of Jade's work in Carletta's briefcase and tipping off the boss. Yes, that one had been brilliant by far.

As for Officer Jackson, well, Tommy wasn't too worried. He'd watched him slam out of her apartment in anger after the little phone call from Buddy. Jackson wouldn't be hanging around anymore. Ole' Buddy Tempo had loved the extra cash he'd offered him to call her place. Buddy drank too much and gambled the money away for a week afterwards. Good ole Buddy and the urges they got at sea. Tomorrow, after her fabulous book signing, he'd grab Jade and whisk her away to a place

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where no one would find them. Not many would be looking since he'd taken care of everyone who used to care. Funny how almost everyone could be bought for the right price.

He poured another whiskey and settled on the bed to wait out the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

The words rang over and over in David's head. *'You're going to get thrown out by your gun belt if you ask the chief for any more extra time off.'* His partner had argued all the way down the hall of the station with him. *'You're already on the chief's shit list.'*

David hadn't much cared. Let the chief fire him if he wanted to. And that's exactly what had happened.

He walked along the beach with the *Cranberry Times* folded under his arm. He was so proud of Jade and all she was getting ready to accomplish. The Times had done a front-page article on her book tour. He wanted to be there for her. Something wasn't right. Too many things had gone wrong for Jade Wellington, and somehow David didn't think all of them were coincidental. There was no way possible so many things could go so wrong for one person...just no way in hell.

Sure, she was capable of taking care of herself. She'd survived, made it on her own without anyone's help. But if he had to spend his last dime on a plane ticket to be there for her, then that's what he was going to do. He glanced at his watch. His flight left in two hours, and he needed to get to the airport. The news last night had shown the chaos taking place when she'd tried to go through security at the airport. She was bound to be shaken by it all. She might act mighty tough on the outside, but he knew a more tender side of her, one that pulled at his very soul. He figured she was worth every sacrifice he'd made...even more.

He got in his Bronco and raced from the beach toward the airport. He'd been up all night, packing and pacing. He'd opened his bedroom closet over a hundred times, just staring at the copy of her novel he'd purchased. He'd read it so many times, the cover was worn. After tonight

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he planned to have a new copy. It would be an autographed copy, a very *special* autographed copy. It would be a copy that would mean more than anything to him, except Jade herself.

He would make her forget about Buddy Tempo and whatever they'd shared.

## **My Lips Are Sealed**

### **Chapter Twenty-seven**

"Oh, too much makeup." Jade glanced in the mirror through heavily massacred lashes. "It looks like I'm looking through spiky prison bars when I lower my eyes." She continued to rant at her reflection. Why did her makeup look so orange? She glanced up at the dim lighting of the bathroom. It had to be the lighting. One would think such a posh hotel would have better lighting.

She smiled into the mirror and did the best she could. Probably just her nerves, she thought as she walked by the nightstand. She stopped to smell the beautiful roses Tommy had sent. It was such a wonderful surprise. She was going to have to send him a special thank you card when she returned. He was such a nice guy, and he could make her laugh at his silly ways when her stress level at work was going out the roof.

She played the message on her phone, listening to Amelia's excited burst of words. Amelia hadn't been able to make it for the book signing, but had called to wish her the best. She did promise to be there for the dinner she'd planned later in the evening, though.

Jade barely had time to scarf down breakfast before her cab arrived. The butterflies in her stomach were dancing as if a fast tune were playing inside of her.

She couldn't believe it. Barnes and Noble of New York was hosting her, Jessica Beaver's, book signing. She fretted as the cab dropped her off in front of the building. What if another disaster took place? No, it couldn't. What were the chances, right? She took a deep breath, smiling as



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she spotted the posters hanging in the window advertising her book. This was going to be perfect. Yes, perfectly wonderful.

Everyone was so receptive when she walked in the door. She almost felt as if she were a queen. They practically rolled out the red carpet for her. They brought her coffee and donuts and thanked her for agreeing to what they were sure would be a big success. Now *this* was the way things should be. She looked at the line surrounding her table, a line full of smiling faces actually wanting her autograph. Imagine it, her, little ole Jade K. Wellington from Cranberry, famous!

An hour went by. There was only one more autograph she had to do. The crowd was still pouring in the door. Then she spotted him in line, and for a moment, disbelief overtook her. Someone from Cranberry had actually traveled to New York to get her autograph. But it wasn't just *any* someone. It was David Jackson.

Mixed emotions played in her head while she gazed in his direction. Smiling, he gave her a thumbs-up sign of approval. What was he doing here? No matter the reason, boy was she ever glad to see him. She stumbled on her words, only hearing half of what the next customer said. She was thrilled David had come to the signing. She wished the customer best wishes and thanks. When she looked up again, there stood...Tommy. Tommy from her greeting card company's mailroom. He'd taken her off guard. Where had he come from?

"Tommy?" she said with glee in her voice. "I can't believe you traveled all this way to my book signing. And the roses, they are absolutely gorgeous. Thank you so much." Why was he leaning over and giving her an odd look? Where had David disappeared to? He'd vanished from the back of the line. Could seeing him have been wishful thinking on her part? She was confused. Tommy was bending over the table as if he wanted to whisper a big secret in her ear.

His look was almost one of a madman. His smile sent a cold chill up her spine. He spoke, softly and slowly, as if she couldn't understand a normal conversation. "I've waited...waited so long, Jade. Now, I want you to listen to me very carefully." He placed his hands on the table and shook it gently. "Are you listening?"

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She looked downward in fright. What was going on here? What had gotten into him? He acted as if some sort of demon possessed him. She could smell the stench of alcohol on his breath and noticed a strange look in his eyes.

"Tommy, is this another one of your funny jokes? Because if it is, I'm not laughing very much." She released a ragged breath, looking at the customer behind him. "He's always such a prankster," she explained, waving her hand in the air with a nervous laugh.

Tommy didn't smile. He simply whispered in her ear,

"I want you to get up from the table very quietly. You will announce a family emergency has called you away. Then you are going to walk out of here with me. You got that?"

She practically crushed the ink pen in her hand as her knuckles whitened from her grip. She dug the point of it into the table as if it could anchor her down. Jade glanced down at the table and noticed the scar on Tommy's hand. There was no mistaking it was some sort of animal bite. A dog's bite. *Her* dog's! She traced a memory swiftly in her mind. It had been Tommy lurking around the day of her yard sale. He'd been the familiar voice she couldn't quite place. *He* was the one who'd entered her home...reaching for her diamond ring. She was frightened, confused, and furious.

Jade gave Tommy an angry glare. "You...you did it? You did, didn't you? The scar...there on your hand...and Austin..."

He smiled wickedly, bending to whisper again as people behind him looked agitated and confused. "I did it for you, Jade...all for you. Don't worry. Austin suffered very little. He'd betrayed you. You deserved better from him and everyone else that's done you wrong. I'm the only one who's ever really loved you...really cared."

Her eyes widened. She had to be strong, think quickly. *This is no time to faint.* She stood as if she were going to leave with him. He straightened and looked pleased with the progress he was making. He'd said he didn't want to hurt her, just wanted her to go with him so he could show his love for her.

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She pointed at him with a shaking hand and screamed, "MURDERER! This man's a murderer!"

Tommy bolted for the door. Jade jumped the table, sending books and customers flying. She tackled him, forcing all her strength on top of him. It was amazing what an adrenaline rush could do for a woman. She became *Super Beaver*, a.k.a Jade Wellington, and she was ready to rumble.

Tommy was struggling and twisting, nearly gnashing at her with his teeth like a dog. Jade gave him a good punch in his stomach and groin. She flat out cold-cocked him. She wrapped her arm around his neck, which practically cut off his windpipe. Within seconds, he rolled in pain and then passed out.

She punched him again for good measure. Then she looked down. "Oh *damn it*, now I've put a run in my pantyhose."

David stood back, looking amused, arms crossed. "I would ask if you need any help, but it appears you have it under control." He gave her a sexy smile as she glanced up at him.

She smiled back. "Sleeper hold. It'll do it every time."

The crowd was flooding around them, running out of the store. Before she knew it, the police were hauling Tommy away in shackles. He screamed out her name as he regained consciousness. "Jade, I love you. I swear to you, cupcake, we'll be together one day."

"And you owe me a pair of pantyhose, you creep!" Then she promptly fainted, hitting the floor.

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### Chapter Twenty-eight

It took Jade a few minutes to focus on her surroundings in her hotel room. Amelia was dabbing a cool cloth against her forehead. "Jade, are you all right? You gave us quite a scare today. I rushed over here to the hotel just as soon as I received the call. Barnes and Nobles' across the city has been *swamped* with people asking about you. Your book sold out in every store an hour after this unfortunate incident."

She barely heard a word of what Amelia said. "I'm fine. I appreciate you coming here, Amelia. I'm so sorry. Another disaster, I'm afraid. They seem to follow me. I tell you, I didn't see *that* one coming."

Amelia looked relieved. "Oh no, it was fabulous, the news media is having a complete field day with it. You're a hero in a sense. They've got Tommy in custody for murder, and the crowd just loved the way you took him down."

"Really?" She smiled sheepishly. "REALLY?"

"Really." Amelia laughed. "And I have even better news for you. Krimsen Books has offered you a multi-book contract. Can you believe it? This is just so unheard of these days in the world of publishing. You have so much to be proud of."

"I do?" Jade bit at her lower lip and sat up straight in the bed. "A multi-book contract, hmm?"

"That's right, and they have chosen a title for you to work with already. It's going to be titled *Jessica's Adventures*. So, what do you think?" She smacked some papers against her hand. "I have the contract right

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here." Amelia hesitated. "Um...Jade, there *is* something else we need to talk about."

"What...what is it?" She was almost afraid to ask, noting the crease forming between Amelia's brows.

"Well...I...we at Simeto Literary Agency would like for you to consider a move to New York. It would only make sense. We'll be working with you on a continual basis, and, of course, that's going to involve many one-on-one meetings with you. We'd be just around the corner here, not thousands of miles away like we are now. Would you consider it? Please?"

Jade was silent. But what about Snickers and her job at True Heart...her cute little apartment in Cranberry? What about that knock on the door just now?

"Just sit still." Amelia rose. "I'll get it." She smiled back at her. "I have a feeling I might know who it is."

"Oh, David." Amelia extended her hand. "How nice to see you again so soon. Come in, I was just about to leave." She walked toward the chair to gather her things. "David was kind enough to make sure you arrived at the hotel safely after your little incident this afternoon."

Blinking, Jade combed a hand through her hair. "Oh, I see."

"Yes, he was very concerned about you. Here, David, sit." She motioned for him to take the brown leather chair she'd been sitting in. "I'll leave this paperwork with you to look over, Jade. Sleep on it, and give me a call in the morning before your flight. Have a nice evening." She slid through the door, closing it quietly behind her.

Jade licked her lips, thinking about what had happened the last time she'd been alone with David...near a bed. A flush crept into her cheeks. "Um, I hear I owe you big time for getting me back to my room. I don't remember much after my panty hose ripped. Passing out cold isn't very heroic, is it?"

"I think you did it perfectly." He shifted uncomfortably in the chair, scooting to the edge of it while shuffling a copy of her novel from hand to hand. "Yeah...um...no problem. You know, you were really great this afternoon." His eyes softened. "I guess you're kind of wondering why I'm here."

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"Kind of. But I'm glad you are." She noticed the slight twitch of a muscle in his jawline. That beautiful jawline of the man she was so in love with. "I take it you must have some time off to come all the way out here."

"You could say that. Um...it's part of what I wanted to talk to you about...the time off thing." He blew through his teeth and clenched his fist repeatedly. "I got fired yesterday."

"You did what?" She moved from her position on the bed, suddenly forgetting her mused up hair, or that she probably looked like a fright. David was hurting inside, and she couldn't stand to see him like this.

She reached for his hand. "I have something to tell you too, David."

They looked at each other, eyes locked and pupils dilating. In unison they both blurted out the same *exact* words. "I'm moving to New York."

"What?" They said in perfect time again.

He smiled, she smiled bigger, and then, "You are?" they both blurted together.

"Okay...okay." She held up her hand. "One at a time. You go first."

Relief spread across his face. "Well, I was offered a job with the New York Police Department this afternoon. I just decided to go in and fill out an employment application, seeing I was canned from the Cranberry Police Department. They interviewed me on the spot. They've made me an offer that's going to be hard to turn down, Jade. So, what's your story?"

She smiled, "David, I think that's wonderful if it's what you want. You're a good cop. As for me, Amelia has asked me to consider a move to New York due to my new multi-book contract. She thinks it would make a big difference for me."

His grin broadened from ear to ear. "You got a multi-book contract?"

"Apparently so, and I'm still in shock. You know, in spite of everything, I really do love living in Cranberry. It's the only place I've ever called home."

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She noted the questioning lift of his brow. He was probably wondering if she would turn down Ameilia's offer. Would he go on with life without her? Forget the intimacy they'd shared?

He smacked the copy of her novel in his hand. "You know, I never did get a chance to get my copy of your novel autographed, 'Ms. Beaver'." He laughed and pulled a pen from his pocket. "Would you be so kind as to autograph it for me?"

She grabbed the book and the pen. "Why certainly, Officer Jackson. And is there anything in particular you'd like me to write in it for you?"

"Depends. It's totally up to you, I guess."

She opened the front cover and poised the pen against the paper, then stopped, her mouth falling open. "David, someone's written in this already."

"Yes, I know, but *you* haven't written in it. Would you?"

She read the words slowly. In disbelief, she read them again out loud, as if this would make them seem more real.

"To Jade: You are the love of my life. I promise to love you for all time. Will you marry me?"

Tears welled up in her eyes. David reached out and brushed a tear away that slowly fell from her cheek. "Well?" he asked.

She wiped away another tear and scribbled underneath his writing...

*Yes, I would be honored to marry you. I love you, David, more than anything.* She signed it, closed the cover, and handed him the book and the pen.

He just looked at her, didn't open it, but said the words aloud. "I love you, Jade, no matter what your answer."

"Open it." She tugged at his hand with a smile.

David took his time placing the pen back in his pocket. Slowly he glanced inside the book with a look of apprehension before he read the words she'd written.

"Hot damn!" He was ecstatic. "Look out New York. Here we come!"

"The both of us in New York together? This is going to be interesting. Do you think New York is ready for us?" She giggled.

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He smiled that beautiful, dashing smile with those wonderful full lips she loved. "You better believe it."

He lunged for her, throwing her back on the bed with delight.

After an hour of making love, he rose up on one elbow. "Multi-book contract, hmm?"

"That's right," she smiled. "I can think of something else multi that would excite me." She gave him a wicked little grin. "How about another one of those multi-orgasms, officer?"

"It would be my pleasure, ma'am."

Afterwards, she hummed the tune to *New York New York*.

"Dum...dum...dum...dee...dum...dum...dee...dum...dum.... Aah, New York, you gotta love a place like this."

"Oh...David! Oh...oh, ooh...lah...lah," she practically purred as he reached for her again.



## **Mia Romano**

### **Author Bio**

Mia Romano wrote her first story at the tender age of six. Her first grade teacher promptly took her out in the hallway and paddled her for that particular story. Today, she's still writing stories, but avoids the hallway. She lives in Alabama with her husband, Chris, and their mysterious cat, Sherlock.

## **My Lips Are Sealed**

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**Burnin' Down Nash Vegas by Mia Romano © 2006**

### **Chapter One**

Aaron Montana watched the thick cigarette smoke curl around the beautiful woman performing on stage. He wondered if the money she received in tips was worth being treated like a pole-dancing stripper.

Stepping down from the stage, Bailey Carson strummed her guitar, singing her latest country song in the crowded honky-tonk bar in Nashville, Tennessee. Every night that she walked the aisles between the tables, men would stuff a few bills in the pockets of her tight jeans, slurring out a suggestive comment or two.

Aaron sat at the back in his usual spot, wondering if she ever got tired of it all. He loved the way her violet-tinted eyes sparkled when the crowd pounded the tables, begging for one more song. The low sultry twang of her voice soothed him more than any whiskey. Did she go home alone every night to a run-down apartment overlooking the street-lined bars below? Was she trying to support six kids that an ex-husband had abandoned her with? He'd read in a tabloid that she was single, but it hadn't given much more about her private life other than she liked her privacy.

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He knew she couldn't possibly be making that much money as a bar singer. It was part of the reason he always liked to tip her generously. A woman with Bailey's talent and beauty shouldn't have to struggle so hard, walking the lonely path of life. But then again, wasn't he guilty of being a loner himself?

Aaron pushed himself from his table, downed the rest of his watered-down bourbon and coke, and walked to the front to place a twenty in the tip cup. Too bad the drunken fools who padded her back pockets wouldn't remember a word she'd sung by morning.

He didn't need four or five drinks to forget whatever ailed him. Watching the dark-haired beauty as she performed her magic had him walking around in a stupor. So why couldn't he bring himself to ask her to dinner, or even say hello? Hadn't he paid his dues from a broken heart long ago?

\* \* \* \* \*

With each blink of the neon cowboy hat across the street, another teardrop slid down her cheek. She'd sung her heart out tonight, as she did every night, and it seemed no one really paid attention. Sure, she'd racked up on tips, but only after four hours of smoke, lights, and losing a pound of sweat.

Maybe her father was right—it was time to give up on her silly dream and move back home to Ohio. None of her family had ever so much as graced a table at Slick Willie's to hear her sing. According to her mother, she was a disgrace to her family.

The bitter words still stung like rubbing alcohol in an open wound. That's exactly why she'd changed her name, gotten a new identity. As far as Bailey was concerned, she didn't have a family. She'd never been Clair Baker, oldest daughter of Mountain Ridge Church's preacher, Karl Baker.

Shattering glass and an outburst of cursing snapped her out of her self-pity. She should be used to the domestic disputes of her neighbors after six months of listening to the once-a-week brawl-down-the-hall.

She put her ear to her living room wall. Things seemed to be getting violent this time. From the sound of the thud against a hallway

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door, it sounded as if a body-slamming match was taking place. Bailey decided it was time to call to 911 before someone was seriously injured.

Within a few seconds of placing the call, a gun blast rang out, followed by a woman's terrified scream. Bailey fell to the scratched hardwood floor in her living room, trapped in the middle of the frightening nightmare on the other side of her wall. She hoped like hell it wouldn't take the emergency crew long to respond.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aaron was looking forward to a quiet evening at the fire hall. It was the type of night where he could prop up his feet and fantasize about Bailey Carson. He missed the nights he couldn't go watch her sing. But the call that came in changed his plans within the next few minutes.

"Great, looks like another domestic dispute down on Seventh Street." Aaron threw on his fireman's hat. "How many does that make this month?"

His partner, Bill Phillips, shrugged his shoulders and hoisted himself into the driver's side of engine 344. "I know we've had more emergency calls than fires." Bill flipped the sirens. "Not that the lack of fires is a bad thing..."

"Yeah, but this deal over on Seventh Street is getting old." Aaron fastened his seatbelt. "Wonder when Marla Simpson's going to get tired of it and kick this guy's ass out on the street?"

"That's the thing about a lot of these domestic disputes; it's like an addiction with so many of the women. For some reason, they keep hoping the next time things will be different." Bill wheeled out of the fire hall. "I had an aunt who'd go back to my no-good drunken uncle every time."

"Shhh... Listen." Aaron turned up the police scanner in the cab of the fire truck. They've upgraded the emergency call. They're saying there's been a report of gun fire."

"Maybe she's finally gotten some sense knocked into her and done the ol' geezer in for good. I hope she shot him right in the family jewels."

"That's a little harsh, isn't it Bill?"

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"After you've been doing this as long as I have, you kind of develop a cold heart, I'm afraid. Just wait and see—you'll end up cold-hearted too."

There was more truth to the statement than Bill knew, Aaron thought, scratching the stubble on his chin. He'd developed that cold-hearted attitude when he'd found his ex-wife in bed with his boss three years ago. He should have been more attentive, not worked so many long hours. Maybe he'd still have a wife if he'd taken time to be married to something other than his job. Leaving his job as assistant vice president of a Fortune 500 company was the only *good* decision he'd made in his thirty-two years of life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emergency crew and squad car lights flashed along Seventh Street, blinking in time with neon signs. It reminded Aaron of a chaotic carnival of curiosity seekers, reporters and photographers, all wanting their share of the action. It was sad how a tragedy could create such an attraction.

Within fifteen minutes, the rescue squad had covered Marla Simpson's body, pronouncing her dead at the scene. Aaron shook his head, trying to gather his thoughts and calm his nerves. No matter how many times he witnessed such a tragedy, he never got used to it. Maybe he wasn't cut out for this line of work. He'd nearly convinced himself to trudge back into the corporate world where the only death he'd witness would be one of a workaholic.

When he shot a glance back at the building roped with the telltale yellow caution tape, nausea overtook him.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Bill stalked his way beside of him. "You're gonna have to develop a stronger stomach if you plan on surviving in this line of work." He reached in his jacket and tossed a pack of Roloids in Aaron's direction. "I'm going over to listen to what the witness has to say. I think I know the woman. Want to come along?"

Aaron's first inclination was to say no as he looked up, spotting the woman giving her statement to the police. His stomach did a flip-flop, but not from nausea. Bailey Carson was standing there shaking, pointing back

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at the building, and trying to hold a cup of coffee steady.

He removed his fire hat. "Yeah, I'll go." His heart skipped a few beats as he stared at Bailey. "I think that's the woman who sings down at Slick Willies." Aaron studied her harder. "Yeah, I'm sure of it.

"You mean the one you talk about down at the station while lustful drool drips from your mouth?" Bill smacked his arm with a chuckle.

"Naw...you got it wrong. I'm pretty sure that's Clair Baker. Some things don't ever escape you...like her. She was the homecoming queen back at my old high school." He squinted as they approached her. "Yep...that's her alright. I never thought she'd end up living in a place like *this*. Just goes to show you the people you think are most likely to succeed, sometimes don't."

"I think you talk too damn much." Aaron popped another antacid in his mouth.

"All I'm saying, is if she's changed her name to this Bailey woman, she did a right smart thing. I wouldn't want the people in my hometown knowing I lived in a dump like this."

Aaron saw red, punching Bill in the jaw before he even realized he'd raised his fist. Later he wondered why he'd had such a knee-jerk reaction. He'd never been one to lose his temper or be violent. And when Bailey had turned around, she'd looked him straight in the eye with fright and confusion. Damn, if he didn't blow everything he did. He had about a snowballs chance in hell of getting a date with her now.

Why would she want to date someone who, for all she knew, could end up being a personal domestic dispute of her own?

The thought sucked about as much as being on probation for his little public display. He'd probably be fired when the city board members reviewed the incident.

So here he stood, alone in the fire hall and assigned kitchen duty for the next two weeks. Aaron stirred the simmering pot of beef stew with such vigor, half of it splashed from the pan, causing pieces of meat and potatoes to singe on the burner. Of course, the smoke alarm sounded while curls of smoke permeated the air.

"Shit!" He started waving a kitchen towel around the alarm,

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circulating air to silence the high-pitched madness. He combed his fingers through his thick, dark hair. Why had he bothered to get up this morning?

Setting the stew on the back burner, he slammed the lid down, and went to wash one of the fire engines. As he slid down the firemen's pole, a wicked thought crossed his mind. The image of Bailey, privately dancing around that very pole just for him, filled his thoughts. It was a fantasy he conjured up in his mind far too often. One he knew would probably never become a reality. Yet, as he pulled out the water hose, a vivid image of her slithering around in a g-string and black-laced boots, singing in a sultry voice, had his cock hard with longing.

He shut off the water and hooked the hose back in position, then headed to the locker room for an ice-cold drenching. He really needed to get his emotions in check where it came to Bailey Carson. Maybe he needed to stop being a regular at Slick Willies and concentrate on the house he was building on the outskirts of town. He'd been dragging his feet on the completion of it. Somehow, he'd lost his enthusiasm over the project.

If he poured himself into laying the brick and putting up sheetrock, he wouldn't have time to think about those violet eyes, and the way her cute little ass filled out those tight jeans.

So why was he sitting at the back table of Slick Willies six hours later, doing something he never did, like downing his third bourbon and coke?