

ENJOYING the SHOW

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Dedication

To Jake, for trying something new.

Chapter One

Checking her watch for the fourth time since she left work, Hailey Jennison floored the accelerator of her overworked Celica and snagged the last available parking spot in Block D of the Abberwick Apartments. Shoving the gear in park, she shot out of the car and up three flights of stairs, thanking the cloudless night sky for what promised to be one hell of a night's entertainment.

Panting, she reached apartment 306 and glued her finger to the doorbell, practically tripping over Faith when she suddenly opened the door.

"I'm here, I made it. What did I miss?" Hailey rasped as she entered, her eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness of the living room. Giving herself a minute, she gradually made out the ring of chairs facing the large, streak-free window in Faith's spacious living room.

Three of the four chairs were already occupied. Sydney, Beth and Amy turned as one to glare at her.

"Do you mind? He just sat down to dinner." Amy grabbed a handful of chips and began munching.

Hailey's excitement plummeted. "Dinner? I almost killed myself for dinner?"

"Relax." Her best friend Sydney smiled and patted the chair next to her. "So he's hungry today. It's Friday, he deserves the break. Besides, if I'm not mistaken, he looked particularly sweaty earlier."

"He did. I saw him as I was walking upstairs," Amy chimed in, giddy as a schoolgirl.

Faith dragged another chair to join her friends; the addition of her seat effectively sandwiching Hailey between her and the window. "I still say this is tantamount to stalking."

"Stalking? Please. All the man has to do is shut his curtains," Sydney muttered around a chicken wing.

"I think he likes the attention," Hailey offered. Hell, she looked forward to rushing through Friday night traffic to join Faith and the others for their own private show. "Besides, do you know how much it costs to rent a stripper these days? And I mean a good one, one who doesn't stuff his Jockeys and who isn't gay?"

Beth nodded. "Seventy-five an hour." They stared at her, and she shrugged. "What? My sister just turned forty, and she's been divorced twice. I bought her some quality fun, so sue me."

"The point is," Hailey continued, grabbing a pretzel, "that most normal people don't wander around their house naked with the lights on at night unless their drapes are closed. Hell, I live next door to Ethel and Gertrude—"

"Janice and Roberta," Sydney corrected.

"—the pie ladies, and I still close my blinds before I hop into the shower or wander around the house in my undies."

"But you're a prude." Amy shrugged.

"I am not." Hailey took offense, hearing the truth she wished was anything but. She wanted to say something vulgar for the sheer hell of it, to prove to Amy how much of a prude she was *not*, when Mr. Tool stood and stretched, distracting her. "Come on, baby, give us a show tonight."

Faith sighed, and the women crowded noticeably closer to the window.

"I think he looks tired, don't you?" Sydney asked. "I mean, imagine lugging nail guns and drywall around all day long in the summer heat. He's got to be beat."

"Yeah, but look at how toned he is from all that work." Hailey stared with admiration at the man who haunted her dreams. "So have we found out who Mr. Tool is yet?"

"I kind of like Mr. Tool." Amy laughed.

"Gage something." Faith popped the top of a soda can and slurped. "I finally *bumped* into him and knocked his mail to the ground. I didn't see a ring on his finger."

Beth snorted. "As if that means anything."

“Yeah, but in the past three months, have you ever seen him with a woman at his place?” Hailey asked, waiting on a breath for the answer.

“No,” Faith said slowly. “And if I hadn’t seen him, ah, enjoying himself to a porn movie the other night, I might have thought him gay.”

Hailey sat up so suddenly she nearly kicked her chair out from under her. “What?” she shrieked.

The man across the way paused as if he’d heard them, and they froze when he looked out his window.

Short black hair framed a masculine face full of sharp angles and jagged planes. His chin was firm, his nose strong and straight, and his lips, God, his lips were full and pink and prone to curl wickedly when he was amused. He wore a pair of jeans slung low on his hips and no shirt. The light in his place showed his hardy eight-pack dusted with black hair, and Hailey imagined that hair would feel as soft as down.

Damned if she wasn’t turned on just from looking at him. Of course, the memory of his naked body was enough to set her scorching. They called him Mr. Tool because he worked construction, but once they’d seen said *tool*, they’d kept the name in deference to his massive hammer.

She wanted to fan herself and eagerly watched him stretch and unsnap the top of his jeans. “Uh, Faith? You said something about seeing Gage the other night?”

“Last night I was getting ready for bed when I happened to glance over at his place,” Faith said primly. “Besides, Jeremy had gone home for the night and I was bored.”

Hailey bit her lip to refrain from commenting on how bored she’d be if she had to endure Dr. Jeremy Pichter’s tight ass too. The identical expressions on Sydney’s and Beth’s faces told her she wasn’t alone in that thought. The creep had made a play for her moments after he’d met her, but Faith had shrugged away his lechery by focusing on his money and his looks. Charm and decency, apparently, weren’t on her must-have list.

“What happened with Mr. Tool, I mean, ah, Gage?” Sydney asked.

“He turned on the TV, put in a tape, and then sat back on his couch to watch it.”

“You couldn’t have seen much,” Hailey objected, bothered Faith might have witnessed something from Gage that she hadn’t. Though it didn’t make sense, she thought of Gage as her own personal fantasy.

“Well, it was hard to see much more than his arm occasionally jerking. But I did see two women and a guy getting it on. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to put the ecstatic look on his face and the actors on his big screen getting their brains screwed out to make the connection.”

Hailey wanted to groan. Ever since they’d found Gage a few months ago, she wished she’d never moved out of the apartment complex. Despite her love for the little cottage she’d bought, the quiet and peace of the neighborhood could grow a little tedious.

Faith, however, had the ultimate party pad. Because of the way the trees stood between the wings of the apartment complex, her apartment and Gage’s faced one another at less than a hundred feet, but were blocked from neighbors by several mature, sturdy water oaks. And since Faith and Gage had corner spaces, the woods bordered them to the west.

“What I wouldn’t give to be his bar of soap,” Amy groaned and crunched on a chip.

Gage slowly removed his jeans and returned to the window. He opened it, showcasing bulging biceps—*whoeee, was it hot in here*—and stared up at the night sky. Bracing his forearms against the ledge, he leaned out, wearing nothing more than a pair of white boxer briefs that were unfortunately half-hidden by the low wall under his window.

Hailey’s heart wanted to pound out of her chest. He looked good enough to eat, and the image that thought produced made her want to bang on his door and ride him long into the sunset. Holy hell, did she need to get laid.

“I think I’m going to faint,” Sydney murmured and chuckled when Hailey elbowed her in the side. “Oh, what, Ms. Priss thinks she’s claimed our Gage? Honey, do you even know how to spell the word penis?”

Her friends laughed, and she felt herself blush. Was it her fault she’d developed early, earning too much teasing from boys her age and those much older? No wonder she

was shy. She knew why she didn't like to call attention to herself, but she didn't quite know how to get over it. If she had even half of Sydney's confidence, she'd march over to Gage and wrap herself around him like a piece of duct tape.

Duct tape. She mentally grimaced. No wonder she was still single. She should have used a word like candy, Saran Wrap, hell, even sticky tape was more romantic than—

“Oh my God, Hailey. He's looking right at us!”

Faith and the girls shrieked and dove for cover when a flashlight suddenly passed over the window. Hailey, however, had been too caught up in her fantasy to react in time.

She finally managed to fly off the chair to the floor without crushing Beth, and prayed the glare of light on glass protected her identity.

“Shit! He knows I live here.” Faith panted, then she cursed again. “He's putting his pants back on. Hell, I think he's leaving his apartment!”

A mad rush for the door left Hailey and Sydney standing together blinking at one another. They turned and watched as Gage left his place with the door open, only to return a moment later with a newspaper.

“I didn't know Faith had that much speed in her,” Hailey said stupidly.

“I know. And Beth and Amy were hard on her tail.”

They stared at each other. Then Hailey grinned, prodding Sydney to smile. The sheer absurdity of the moment hit them, and bales of laughter erupted.

“You should have seen your face!” Sydney cried.

“Mine? What about yours!” Her eyes teared, and she clutched her stomach. “As if he could see through the glass at night. And do you think a man who looks like that would really care about a couple of harmless peepers like us, anyway?”

Sydney laughed. “This definitely calls for some wine.” She checked Faith's cabinets and frowned. “She's out. How about you round us up some booze while I call the others back? The least we can do since Gage isn't putting on a show is watch some reruns of *Sex and the City*.”

“Or anything with Russell Crowe or Hugh Jackman in it.” Hailey chuckled and grabbed her keys. “I’ll be back in a jiffy. And tell Beth she owes me one for not landing on her face when I flew off the chair.”

Still laughing under her breath, she left Faith’s at a much more sedate pace. If anything, tonight’s incident taught her she needed to get a social life, one that included a man. Sighing, she wished, for just a moment, that she could have Gage all to herself.

“Hell, what would I do with him?” She rolled her eyes and tightened her hand on her keys. She’d had sex, even knew the finer points to good sex. But she’d never had killer, to-die-for sex. And with a man like Gage, it couldn’t be any other kind.

Sex with Gage? *Yeah, right*, her conscience reasserted, bringing her back to reality. A sudden memory from work made her frown, and she stared down at the keys in her hand unseeingly. Earlier this morning she’d accidentally overheard two of her male coworkers and been mortified to find herself the object of their discussion.

“Come on, Hal. You know she’s the best-looking woman in here.”

“Shit, yes. I’m married, I’m not blind.”

Eddie Flynn had chuckled. “Those tits are killer. Her legs, her ass. Yeah, she’s definitely the one I’d do. But only if I could put a bag over her face.”

Hal had sounded surprised. “But why? She’s pretty enough.”

“Sure, but have you ever looked into her eyes? That’s one frigid bitch. And talking to Jennison is enough to make your dick shrivel up and never come out again.” They shared a chuckle. “So I figure if I don’t have to look at her face or hear her voice, I could do her until I couldn’t breathe any more. She’s that hot underneath that don’t-touch-me glare.”

Hailey had left the nearby coffee room quietly, her head down as she tried to calm her flaming face. Those bastards. After five years with the company, she still had to put up with such immature reactions from the people she worked with. Her first days at work had been hell, but after several months had passed and she hadn’t wrecked any marriages or slept with any coworkers, most of her peers had left her alone. She’d even made friends with Amy and Beth.

But, just like that, a few condescending snickers from the new guys in sales, and she felt all of thirteen again. A young girl on the verge of womanhood, unfortunately toppling into maturity with a body built for sex. Men wanted her, and women mostly disliked her, threatened by her appeal. Hailey snorted. If only they realized she was all show and no action.

The few men she'd dated over the years had complained of her tension whenever sex was involved. And her one serious boyfriend, the lover she'd broken up with a year ago, had left her for another woman, claiming Hailey had too many issues regarding their intimacy together. Apparently, that made it okay to boink his next-door neighbor.

Just thinking about Jerry the Worm made her see red. She'd really thought he might be *The One*. After so much time doubting herself, she'd found a man to love her for herself, or so she'd thought at the time. She ought to face facts. She didn't have what it took to hold onto a man, and especially not a man other women would drool over.

An image of Gage made her frown, depression weighing her down. He was great to look at, and a hell of a man to dream about. If only dreams could come true. What the hell would she say if she ever met him face to face?

Hi, I've seen you naked. You're gorgeous, perfect, and the man I masturbate to nightly. But I'm too nervous about my own body to share it with you. Thanks for playing?

Sighing, Hailey had just lifted the handle to the car door when a large hand covered hers, scaring her speechless. Turning her in his arms, her dream man asked in a deep, husky voice as smooth as molasses, "Where are you off to so soon, honey? You're going to miss the best part of the show."

Chapter Two

Hailey leapt back, crashing against her car, and stared at Gage with wide eyes. “What?” she squeaked.

“Baby, even those honey-brown eyes aren’t enough to make me go away quietly. You and your friends have been watching me. I know it and you know it.” His voice grew louder, attracting the attention of a nearby resident.

Aware she didn’t want this to go any further than it already had, Hailey wondered what to say or do to make Gage go away.

“I’m sorry, but I think you have me confused with someone else.”

He narrowed a gorgeous, steel-gray gaze that made her womb clench and frowned. “Honey, I don’t think you understand. Apartment 306? Faith Sumner ring a bell?” *Crap, he did know about Faith and where she lived.* “Now we can discuss this here, with an audience.” He nodded to several people laughing as they crossed the parking lot. “Or we can go somewhere private and discuss the matter...without getting the police involved. Frankly, I’m tired of being stared at.”

Crossing his arms, Gage looked completely menacing, and mouthwateringly real. Without the distance separating his apartment from the Friday night shows, Hailey’s normally nonexistent sexuality kicked into overdrive. Good lord, but this man was even making her mouth water.

She eyed his irritation, figured what she knew about him after several months of observation, and knew she’d never get another chance to be this close to the object of her fascination.

Nodding, she let him drag her the distance to his apartment, not wanting to appear eager. But as they drew closer to his place, she wondered at her sanity. He’d seen her watching, knew all about Faith and her friends. Why the hell was she going to entertain his questions? Then again, considering the alternative he gave her was to talk to the

police, she had no choice but to take him up on his offer to discuss matters privately. With any luck, Sydney would spot them walking the distance to his wing, or better yet, see Hailey in his apartment and race to the rescue.

Unfortunately, Hailey's worries paled next to her sudden, combustible libido. God, being so close to him was like walking in a wet dream. His rock hard body enticed, demanding adulation. And not wanting to look directly into his burning gray eyes, she was more than happy to focus on his broad shoulders and sculpted delts, his corded forearms, and especially on the taut ass encased in those jeans.

She followed him up the stairs, her gaze helplessly drawn to his powerful thighs. With some difficulty, she swallowed around a dry mouth. She still couldn't believe she was accompanying her fantasy man back to his apartment. Sydney would be expecting her back with the booze, and instead Hailey walked behind Mr. Tool, caught in a firm grip promising retribution.

At his door he paused, his eyes darkening with menace. Instead of appearing scary, he only looked sexier. "Wait right here. You move one step, I'm calling the cops on you and your peeping friends."

Frozen, she nodded and waited. As if she had a choice in the matter. She could just see her name plastered over the local news. *Dull and prudish Hailey Jennison caught peeping at hard-working, blue-collar stiff.* At the word "stiff" she inwardly groaned. She did *not* need to be focused on sex around an angry, half-dressed Adonis who didn't seem to have a woman on the horizon.

He jerked his door open and pulled her inside, locking the door behind her. From what she could see through dimmed lights, he had a nice, masculine place. Up close, his apartment had more charm than she'd seen through his windows. White-washed walls framed a spacious apartment with brown leather furniture. He had oak hardwood floors, dark cabinetry that looked extremely expensive and definitely hand-crafted. His small kitchen was bright and cheery, with an apple-green tile backsplash against white cabinets. No dishes cluttered the sink, and the rest of his place looked tidy, as if he'd recently cleaned.

For a split second she wondered if he had a girlfriend they'd never seen, or worse, if he might in fact be gay. But Faith had seen him watching porn, she remembered, and unconsciously glanced toward his windows. She blinked, noting them completely covered.

"No need to give your friends more of a show than we have to," he said in a gritty voice.

She whipped her head to him, studying him warily. What the hell had she been thinking? She stood alone in an apartment with a virtual stranger, one who seemed in a pretty fierce mad as he glared at her. He towered over her, his muscles clearly outlined in the soft lighting of the room. She took a cautious step back, aware he'd locked his door, and swallowed loudly.

Seeing her fear, his scowl deepened.

Anxiety flared. What did she really know about Gage? He worked in construction, put in a full day's work, and didn't screw around, or at least he hadn't for the past three months. He apparently liked porn—she still had a bone to pick with Faith about that—and despite leaving his curtains wide open at night, had issues with being spied upon.

He took a step closer and surprised her by sighing. "Now, Hailey, why don't you tell me what you've really been doing in Faith's apartment every Friday night for the past few months." He walked toward her and she froze. He mumbled something under his breath, and her gaze followed him as he walked around her to his door, then leaned back against it, blocking any chance at escape. His muscled arms crossed over his massive chest, and he stared at her with an intensity she found unnerving.

"How do you know my name?" *And how did he know about Fridays at Faith's?* She stalled, trying to think of a way out of this mess. It was one thing to fantasize about doing a guy this hot, but another to actually *do* it. Should she apologize nicely, flirt, or maybe offer some kind of financial restitution?

He smiled, a lazy grin that widened as he glanced from her eyes to her mouth, and lingered over her breasts. "I know a lot about you, Hailey. I know you used to live in

Abberwick before you moved across town. I know you're good friends with Faith and your three other pals, the women who hang around Friday nights watching me."

She flushed at the accusation in his tone. "If you didn't want to be watched, you should have closed the curtains." A pitiful defense, but it was all she had.

"Tsk, tsk." He shook his head. "Never admit to the crime. And especially not to your victim, unless you mean to make things right."

His voice ended on a husky note, and the predatory gleam in his eyes had her breathing hard. The fact that her nipples immediately knotted into beads and her panties grew damp only worried her further. It didn't seem normal to be turned on and frightened at the same time.

"Look," she began in a shaky voice, "I'm sorry if you think I did something you object to. You're a good-looking man. And if I happened to glance at you a time or two through Faith's window into your *brightly lit, exposed apartment*, I apologize."

He grinned, and her heart raced like she'd run a marathon. God, why couldn't he be an arrogant jerk with no sense of humor? Her fear faded as if it had never been there, and suddenly her sex drive shot into high gear, shocking the crap out of her.

"Hailey, you have one hell of a fire in those hot, whiskey-brown eyes."

Sure, but have you ever looked into her eyes? Frigid bitch, resounded in her thoughts, and she wondered how Gage saw her as someone so different from the woman her coworkers saw on a daily basis.

"I think you've made a mistake, Mr., ah..." she paused, waiting for him to fill in the blank. When he continued to grin, his hungry gaze wandering over her body, she froze him with the look she regularly gave Eddie at work.

Unlike Eddie, however, Gage didn't frown or glare back in disgust. His mouth quirked at the corner, and to her bemusement, she had an almost irresistible urge to kiss him there.

"My name's Gage. And if you want to know my last name, you have to take me to dinner."

"Take you to dinner?" she repeated blankly.

“Yeah, if you want to stay out of jail for being a Peeping Tom, and if you want to know exactly who you’ve been spying on.”

“I told you, I wasn’t spying—”

“Save it.” He held up a callused hand. “Dinner or jail? Your choice, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart? The annoyance she should have been feeling at the inappropriate pet name was smothered under another wave of lust. On his lips, the endearment sounded like a come-on. One she was all-too-willing to hear all over again.

What the hell am I doing? He’s locked me in his apartment, and now he’s blackmailing me into dinner? That or jail? Is this how he gets all his girlfriends? A glance over his superbly conditioned body made her rethink the notion. And then, to her astonishment, she found herself nodding hesitantly while her mind shrieked at her to say no.

The satisfaction on his face made her shiver. *Would he look like that while making love? And why can’t I stop thinking about him naked and in bed?*

“Tell you what. I’ll meet you at Kincaid’s on the corner of 8th Street, tomorrow night at six. And don’t be late.”

While she stared at him with her mouth open, her thoughts a muddle of confusion, desire and surprise, he unlocked and opened the door, and gently pulled her out into the hallway.

“Like I said, Hailey. Don’t be late, or I’ll make that police report. Have I mentioned my cousin’s on the force?” He closed the door with a sly grin, and Hailey could only stare in puzzlement.

She’d been caught by the man she ogled every Friday night. Caught and blackmailed into dinner. And she had a vague sense of happiness over the situation.

It was only as she left the complex for the nearest liquor store, where she should have been heading in the first place, that she realized she hadn’t come off as a frigid bitch for once. And she’d spoken clearly and firmly to a man who should have scared the hell out of her, but for some reason didn’t anymore. As if in a dream, she drove to the store,

purchased a few bottles of wine and one of brandy, and returned to Faith's, curious as to Sydney's take on the matter.

The minute he shut the door in Hailey Jennison's face, Gage Warren sagged back against it, silently groaning.

For months he'd been dying to meet her, and then she'd moved out of the damned building. By chance, he'd been working on a job a few doors down from her new place when he'd seen her and her redheaded friend entering an older home on The Hill. An inquiry online had shown him she'd purchased the quaint home herself, no other names on the listing but hers.

He'd known she wasn't married, and after a few carefully placed questions around the complex, he'd learned she wasn't currently dating either.

"I just forced the woman to dinner," he said stupidly, realizing what he'd done. "Hot damn."

He grinned widely and shucked the rest of his clothing, heading for the shower with an urge to suddenly rid himself of the day's grime. The hard-on he'd been sporting since touching Hailey had only grown, and with some discomfort, he realized he could still smell her on his skin.

She wore some kind of perfume, nothing floral, but a sensual scent that made him think of sultry nights and slick sheets. He groaned and stepped into the shower, turning the water on cold, his dick still throbbing as he envisioned Hailey from top to bottom.

The first time he'd seen her, he'd fallen in instant lust. She had a centerfold's body—large breasts, a trim waist, long, long legs and a firm, round ass. And her face...high cheekbones, almond-shaped amber eyes and lush lips he'd imagined time and time again wrapped around his cock.

He groaned and began soaping his body, his arousal almost painful. How was it he'd finally found a woman who interested him, and he'd had to force her into a date? The thought might have been depressing had he not caught her watching him. He smiled, aware she'd been one of his admirers from day one. Hell, that's why he'd strutted around his apartment while being ogled by a bunch of women in the first place.

It didn't hurt his ego that most of the women across the way were attractive. The redhead he'd seen enter Hailey's house that day had been interesting, but not nearly as much as Hailey. A woman who looked that good should have been married, or at least attached to someone. But, from all accounts, Hailey shot down any guy stupid enough to ask her out. For that reason, he'd bided his time, encouraged she'd at least liked the look of him.

But after several months of still no contact, he decided to take matters into his own hands. Confronting her had been difficult, his surprising fear of rejection making him wonder just how the woman had gotten to him so hard, so fast. He didn't really know much more about her than that she didn't date, and that she was hot as hell. But something he'd seen tonight in her eyes, a shaky wariness, made him think twice, forced him to slow down when all he'd wanted was to shove her up against the wall and fuck her brains out.

He groaned at the image and finally allowed himself some relief. Grabbing his painfully hard shaft, he began pumping. His large fist clenched tight, and he found his rhythm, easily envisioning Hailey's hand, then her mouth, wrapped around his cock. Her tongue would slide smoothly across the head, licking at the come gathering at his tip. She'd suck him deep, stroking, unrelenting with those cherry-red lips as she played him with her seductive tongue.

And she'd be naked, her breasts round and soft and white. Her nipples would be stiff, arousal flushing them pink as she fingered herself, as hungry for his cock as she was for climax. He panted heavily, his hand quickening as he envisioned her crying out, her orgasm intense as she sucked him harder, deeper into her mouth, then fondled his sack with her soft hands...

"Shit," he rasped and shot hard, his orgasm intense. He closed his eyes as he came, ropy jets of come marking the blue tile. Damn, but if she was half as good as his fantasies, he'd never take another woman in his life.

As he rinsed off and toweled dry, he wondered just what it would take to penetrate the icy wall surrounding Hailey. She had a thing for his body, that he knew. But what the hell did he need to do to get her to open up to him?

He grimaced. He knew he was good in the sack. There he could persuade Hailey to give him a chance. But how to get her there? His poor rapport with the opposite sex notwithstanding, he knew he came across as the rough type, less than a gentleman for sure. But hell, he wasn't like the twins, his older brothers. Both of them could pass for Romeo, held doors for women, and knew every which way to compliment them. He, however, did his best work with his body. His mouth had a tendency to screw up even the easiest of relationships.

Frowning, he threw on a pair of shorts and grabbed a frozen dinner from the freezer. After nuking it nearly inedible, he wolfed down the cardboard-tasting meatloaf and gritty potatoes and decided to make it an early night. He'd worked his ass off today, nearly finishing the trim work inside their latest project. Derrick would have a hell of a time criticizing the work he'd accomplished.

Smiling at the thought of finally muting his outspoken brother and business partner, he lay back in bed and folded his hands behind his head. Studying the ceiling, he idly noted a few cracks needing repair around the light fixture as again his thoughts lit on Hailey.

Sighing, he decided to seek help from the sources closest to him, and prayed they'd help him reach the flesh and blood goddess who'd finally fallen right where he wanted her.

Chapter Three

“So, I still don’t understand,” Sydney said, swallowing another mouthful of Zinfandel. Sydney, God bless her, liked to indulge. Wine, chocolates, men. It was a wonder the woman didn’t weigh four-hundred pounds and have six kids. But she possessed great genes and had a head when it came to the opposite sex. Unlike Hailey.

“He blackmailed me to go to dinner with him. What’s to understand?”

“Why you didn’t offer to take him to dinner as an apology. He had to blackmail you into it? Honey, something is definitely wrong with you if you need to be forced to date *that* man.”

Hailey blushed. “I’m not good at men. You know that.”

“You’re not good at believing in yourself,” Sydney began, making Hailey sigh. Not this again. “Your mother didn’t do you justice. Too many men and not enough time for her daughter. Trust me, I’ve been there.” Anger glittered in Sydney’s green eyes. “But that’s another story. Don’t think you can distract me from a date with Mr. Tool.”

“His name is *Gage*.”

“Gage what?”

“I don’t know.” Hailey frowned and took a sip of wine. A sip, a nibble of a cracker, a forced date with her fantasy man. She sighed. She and Sydney were as different as night and day. “That’s another condition of our date. He won’t press charges, and when we’re done the date, he’ll tell me his last name.”

Sydney hooted and choked on her next swallow. “My bet is Gage has the hots for you, like any other guy with a pulse. And I think it’s telling he didn’t do anything to you in his place. He could have tried something, you know. But instead he’s meeting you at Kincaid’s. That place is awesome.”

“And expensive.”

“Like you can’t afford it,” Sydney snorted. “You don’t spend money on anything else. When’s the last time you bought some new clothes?”

“I just bought some hose yesterday.” *Ha. Take that, Sydney.*

“With your taste, control tops. Hell, Hailey, you’re verging on old age and you’ve yet to reach thirty. Grab yourself some thigh-highs and a garter belt. Go sexy and grab that fine man before someone else does.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, *oh*. Before someone like me grabs him,” Sydney challenged, a sparkle in her eyes. “I’ve been in a dry spell lately, and a night with Mr. Tool would definitely ease my frustration.”

Jealousy suddenly overwhelmed her and Hailey blinked, confused at her feelings. Sure she’d dreamed about Gage for months, but that didn’t make him hers. Sydney and the others had watched him just as long. So what made her feel so possessive? And why did his hungry gaze not turn her off as so many others had?

“Sydney, let me ask you a question.”

“Shoot.”

She took a deep breath. “Do you think I’m an icy, ah, frigid bitch?”

“*What?* Who the hell called you that? Mr. Tool?”

“No, no. I overheard one of the sales guys at work the other day.” She repeated the conversation. “I’m happy now, with my life I mean. I have a decent job, a great new house, and wonderful friends.” She eyed her friend up and down with a grin. “And you.”

“Funny girl.”

“I’m not lonely, exactly, but—”

“You can’t help wondering what it would be like to have a special man in your life.”

“Does that make me desperate?”

“Hell no. I’m there too.” Sydney flashed her a grin. “And I’m not desperate. Frustrated, like I said, but I’m choosy. When I find the man worthy of giving up Friday nights with my girlfriends, then I’ll know he’s someone special.” She paused. “I think you should give Mr. Tool, I mean Gage, a shot. We know he’s gorgeous, but he sounds

interesting. Now most women would call him a pig for forcing you into a dinner with him. But me, I think it's flattering."

"I kind of thought so too, after I thought about it a while. And he could have called the cops."

"Do you think? After all, would they believe him, or a houseful of attractive, single women?" Sydney grinned. "You have to admire his intelligence, and his craftiness. So you spend one dinner with him. It's not sex, and it's not forever. Relax and enjoy yourself." *For once*, Hailey thought she heard Sydney mutter.

Glaring at her best friend, she took another sip from her glass.

"Are you going to nurse that thing or what?" Sydney asked, exasperated. "You're as bad as Amy, nibbling at the pretzels. And speaking of Amy..."

Footsteps sounded outside Faith's apartment and the doorknob rattled.

"Don't tell them about Gage and me, okay?" Suddenly, it seemed imperative that her big date with her fantasy man be a secret.

"Fine by me. But I want every juicy detail on Sunday."

"Deal."

"Welcome back, ladies," Sydney said with a mock toast as the door finally opened. The women poured in with arms full of liquor and snacks. "Don't worry. Hailey and I spent the past two hours being questioned by the police for being stalkers."

"What?" Beth squeaked, and Hailey laughed.

"She's just teasing. Now how about some *Sex and the City*, girls?"

Everyone began talking and laughing at once, and Hailey settled back into her Friday night routine, doing her level best not to think of the man across the complex.



Saturday morning, sitting in his mother's spacious kitchen, Gage stared at his brother Dylan with a scowl. Derrick, Dylan's twin, sat with a cup of coffee halfway to his mouth before he began laughing like a loon.

“You’re telling me to skip dinner and take Hailey back to my place for a quick fuck? This from Mr. Romance?”

Dylan shrugged. “Sorry, but you asked for my professional opinion.”

“Hell no, I didn’t. I asked for advice from *my brother*, not Freud’s worst nightmare of a psychiatrist.”

“I resent that.”

“You resemble that,” Derrick murmured. “I’m still not quite sure. Are you gay, straight or bi? And do thoughts of our mother make you long for the professional couch, or for the Oedipal bed?”

Gage chuckled as Dylan glared at Derrick. Good. Now they were attacking each other and leaving him alone.

“I like sex, and I love people. Why do you have to label it, Derrick? Some homophobia going on in what passes for that brain of yours?” Dylan taunted.

“Yeah, I’m homophobic,” Derrick sneered. “Get away, oooh, you’re scaring me.”

“Asshole.”

“Hey, twin schmucks, hello? Remember me? I came for some advice. And if the best you have is bag and tag her, Dylan, I guess I’ll have to listen to Derrick.”

The horror on Dylan’s face was priceless. “Okay, forget I said that. You have a thing for this woman, right?”

Suddenly uncomfortable, Gage shrugged. “I guess.”

Derrick scoffed. “You guess? You’ve been trying to summon up the guts to ask her out for over six months! And you all but stalked her, talking up her friends, her coworkers and her realtor, for God’s sake.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“I used to date Amanda, and she mentioned you’d been asking about that house on Delcourt.”

“Bullshit. I said hi to Amanda the other day, but I looked up the listing info online. You’re the one with a thing for Hailey’s friend. That’s right,” he said as Derrick frowned.

“I saw you eyeing her like a piece of candy. And I didn’t want to say anything then, but you had one hell of a boner while staring her way.”

Dylan smirked, and Derrick shoved at Gage’s chair with his foot, making him almost fall over. “So, you two are in quite a tangle, eh? Gage wants the blonde, and you the redhead. But at least Gage knows his heart’s desire.”

“‘Heart’s desire?’ Who the hell talks like that?” Gage shook his head.

“Men who get lucky, that’s who. Instead of acting like a coarse laborer who doesn’t know his left from his right—”

“Which he is,” Derrick muttered.

“—act with some couth and compliment the woman, and on more than her tits and ass.”

“Dylan Jacob Warren, what did you just say?” Barbara Warren entered her kitchen with a stunned look on her face.

Dylan grew bright red. “Oh, hi, Mom. We were just waiting here to meet you for breakfast. And I was, ah, giving Gage some advice.”

She eyed the three of them like the troublemakers they were. “Well, Gage, at least you didn’t ask Derrick for advice. He’s the king of uncommitted.”

“Hey.” Derrick looked wounded for all of three seconds, and then he grinned. “Want me to do the eggs?”

“Oh, just sit over there with your brothers. You can pour me a cup of coffee though.”

Gage settled onto a stool as he and his brothers watched their mother cook. It had become a tradition for them to gather once a week, usually Saturdays when possible, in their parents’ home for a meal. Personally, Gage loved the idea. He had a decent, home-cooked meal and saw his mother, with his brothers as buffers. They all loved her, but when she turned on the shrink within, she could grate on even a saint’s nerves after mere minutes.

“So what is it you wanted help with, Gage?” she asked.

His brothers shook their heads behind her back, but Gage figured, what the hell? Barbara Warren was a woman, last he checked.

“I’m meeting a woman for dinner tonight and I—”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. What’s her name? What does she do? How did you meet her?”

Gage groaned. “I just wanted to make a good impression.”

“And why wouldn’t you? You look exactly like your father did at your age, God bless him.”

“Yeah, and he has as much charm as Dad did, too,” Dylan added.

“Oh, good point.” His mother scrambled a dozen eggs and scooped them onto four plates. “Keep your mouth shut and listen to *her*.”

“That’s not bad, Mom,” Derrick piped up. “I thought for sure you’d delve into his psyche for reasons behind his commitment phobia. Or maybe prescribe him a set of pills to take his foot out of his mouth so he can talk to the woman without sounding like an ass.”

Dylan snickered, as did Derrick. But their mother ignored them.

“What you need to do is find out what she likes and dislikes. Men always like to talk about themselves, and frankly it gets annoying. But ask her what she likes, what makes her happy, and she’ll respect you for it. And don’t, *do not*, pressure the girl for sex on the first date.”

Gage flushed. He hated when his mother brought S-E-X into the conversation. God forbid he tell her he’d been showcasing his dick for the women across the quad, teasing the woman he’d been dreaming of banging for the last six months.

“Mother, now you’ve embarrassed the boy.” Dylan shook his head, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his Nautica pants, his dress shirt perfectly pressed and tucked into his slacks as if he were a mannequin at Macy’s. A regular clothes horse.

Gage stared down at his ragged jeans and T-shirt, then glanced at Derrick’s shorts and tank top and had to grin.

“Shut up, Mr. Nautica. Damn, Dylan. Don’t you own any clothes that don’t have a name of their own? And quit picking on me. At least I’m trying. Why don’t you tell Mom about your last boyfriend? Talk about commitment issues.”

Dylan stammered when his mother suddenly turned on him, and Gage shared a smile with Derrick.

Younger than the twins by four years, Gage had always looked up to his brothers as larger than life. Both handsome and athletic, intelligent and witty, the Warren twins had, to this point, walked a charmed life. Gage, on the other hand, had plenty of rough edges, like his father before him, but, for some unknown reason, never had a problem attracting women. Now keeping them, that was another matter.

He didn't like flattery, playing games, or catering to a woman's every whim. His parents had loved one another until the day Andrew Warren died, and his mother still carried a torch for the old man. Now if Gage found someone he could love as well, maybe he'd act differently. But the women he'd dated in his thirty-two years had been pretty, but so superficial. Most of them had wanted him for sex, of course, and to either meet the twins or get their greedy hands on his money. And the ones who hadn't, frankly, had bored him within days. What the hell did that say about his taste?

Grinning at Dylan still trying to finagle a way out of his mother's haranguing, he caught his brother's dark look promising retribution.

Bring it on, he mouthed, scoring a direct hit when Dylan flushed and clenched his fists.

Oh, yeah, Gage had definitely saved himself grief at his mother's hands. Funny that his mother and brother shared a love for mental health, while he and Derrick had followed in his dad's footsteps. They'd worked with their father at Warren Construction Company right out of college, and when their father had passed, they'd made WCC into a *very* decent living. Picking and choosing their jobs, he and Derrick worked hard and long, by choice, not necessity. While Derrick preferred the administrative tasks, Gage liked working with his hands.

He supposed he fit the crude construction worker mold, but his looks, and his money, seemed to make him an acceptable catch for any woman wanting the better things in life. For that reason, he'd kept his last name from Hailey a secret. Not like she wouldn't find out soon enough, but he wanted to figure her out before she turned those wiles on him.

Despite her aloof demeanor, he didn't believe a woman who looked like she did could be so naïve. Like the rest of her sex, if she knew his vulnerabilities—how hot she made him by just being near him—she'd grab him by the balls and never let go. And lord help him, he was just weak enough to enjoy being helpless in her clutches.

"So where's this date of yours going to be?" his mother asked, interrupting his erotic thoughts.

"Kincaid's."

"Good choice. Romantic but not too fancy. And the food's wonderful. Don't order for her, and don't grimace if she orders something expensive."

"Everything there's expensive," he muttered.

"I know. And like the good boy I raised, you'll no doubt be paying for the meal since you asked her out."

"Actually, he blackmailed her into going out with him," Dylan said with a sly grin.

Derrick, bless him, came to the rescue. "Yeah, right. She took one look at Gage and said yes faster than she could think no. Women love the kid, Dylan. Don't be jealous. You're just as cute."

Dylan muttered under his breath but their mother laughed. "I do love you three. But I'd love four or five even better. A daughter-in-law, a grandchild..."

Gage and his brothers paled.

"So, Derrick, why don't you tell me who you've been seeing lately? I don't remember the last time you brought a girl home with *you*."

Gage and Dylan shared a glance.

"Gosh, Mom," Gage said quickly. "Sorry, but I have things to do before my big date tonight. And Dylan promised to help me with some errands."

Derrick shot them a panicked look, but they left as speedily as they could.

"Okay," Dylan said as he unlocked his Mercedes. "Pulling me out of there makes us even, but if you ever sic Mom on me like that again, I'll sucker punch you, hard."

"Fair enough." Gage grinned. "Did you see the sheer panic on Derrick's face? Awesome."

Dylan smiled. “Good one. And good luck tonight. If she means as much to you as I think she does, don’t blow it. Your best bet? Take Mom’s advice. Ask her to talk. Don’t stare at her breasts the entire night. And think before you speak, jackass.”

Words to live by.

Chapter Four

Hailey sat across from Gage feeling more nervous than she had in years. She'd changed her outfit six times before settling on a light blue floral sundress, one that covered her respectably while still making her feel feminine. To her surprise and delight, Gage stood when she met him at the table, waiting for the waiter to seat her. He wore a short-sleeved red polo and tan slacks, his muscled forearms and biceps doing strange things to her pulse.

In the dim light of the restaurant, he seemed a virtual Adonis. She'd never dated a man this good looking before, and despite not liking to attract attention herself, she felt a moment's pride to be with someone so handsome. The moment she thought it, she wanted to kick herself. Geez, that's what she hated about the men who came on to *her*. They only wanted her for her looks and were disappointed when sex wasn't on the menu. She needed to see past Gage's face and body into the heart of *him*. If her freaking lust would let her.

He cleared his throat. "You look nice."

"Thank you. So do you."

He nodded, then stared at the menu. *Great conversation, Hailey. Just stimulating.*

"It was a nice idea to come here, to Kincaid's. I mean." She flushed, suddenly recalling just how she'd been coerced into attending.

He grinned, his lips inviting. "I'm a clever guy. Don't let the looks fool you."

She chuckled, surprised by his humor. The waiter arrived and took their drink orders. After much thought, and her discussion with Sydney, she'd decided to enjoy herself tonight. Gage wasn't a regular date, and he'd been in her fantasies for longer than any man ever had. What could be the harm in a pleasant dinner, anyway?

She ordered a glass of wine and noted he ordered a beer. Good, no hang ups about alcohol. Her nerves jittered, and she admonished herself to calm down. *Relax, have fun,*

dammit. Then he leaned closer and she inhaled a whiff of his cologne, and her vision seemed to swim as arousal pooled between her thighs.

“So, Hailey,” he said in that deep, gravelly voice that made her tingle. “What prompted the Friday night get-togethers?” He chuckled. “I just have to know.”

She flushed a bright red, and hoped she didn’t look as foolish as she felt. But hell, she owed him the truth. “It started innocently enough. The five of us are single and get together to laugh and have a good time. Faith, my best friend Sydney, and a few girls from work. TV or movies and some good food. Then one night I looked out the window and accidentally saw you nak—ah, readying for a shower.”

The waiter brought their drinks and waited while they ordered. When he left, Gage took a long drink of beer and smiled. “So I had you hooked on my naked body, eh?”

She frowned. “I didn’t mean to see you undressed. It was an accident, at first. But I made the mistake of telling the others, and then we started looking for you on Fridays, which you always seemed to show up for.” She paused, fighting her blush. “This is really embarrassing, you know.”

“Think about how I must feel,” he said, though he sounded less than sincere with laughter bubbling in his throat. “Like a piece of meat.”

“Oh, please,” she muttered, grinning slightly when he laughed. A small silence descended over them while he stared at her over the rim of his glass.

“So, tell me, Hailey. What do you do for a living?”

She sipped her wine, calming a bit at the mundane question. “I work for a logistics company, where I run the transportation department.”

“Do you like it?”

She paused in her answer, aware no one had ever asked her that before.

“I guess I do. I like feeling needed, and I’m very good at my job.”

He pursed his lips. “You probably know I work construction.” She nodded. “Does that bother you to be out with a blue collar kind of guy?” His words were light, but the intensity behind his gaze made her wonder.

“Why would it? Of course, I was blackmailed into this date,” she teased, “so I’m not sure my answer qualifies.”

“Good one.”

“However, I respect anyone who holds down a steady job.” She stared into his eyes, delivering the truth. “Contrary to what it seems, I’m not into appearances. I’d rather go out with a trash picker who’s caring and kind than a millionaire who’s nothing more than a womanizing jerk.”

“Ouch. Okay, I get it. I promise not to stare at the hostess’ ass while I’m with you.”

She chuckled, feeling oddly at ease with the gruff man. “Considering she’s old enough to be your grandmother, I’m sure your attention would only encourage a heart attack.”

“Or a stroke. And I’m no good with hospitals. When my dad died, it was all I could do stomach the pine-scented hallways.”

“Yeah,” she nodded, remembering her mother’s last year. “I felt the same way when my mom passed.”

After a moment, he shrugged. “Sorry I brought death up at dinner. I’m not really a conversationalist. Or so my brothers tell me.”

Death at dinner. He sounded as socially inept as she felt. The thought made her smile. “Tell me about your family.”

“Uh, wouldn’t you rather tell me about yours?”

“My mom died four years ago, my father left when I was seven, and I have no other family. Now, how about yours?”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine. You asked for it. My dad’s gone. My mother and older brother Dylan are psychiatrists, and spend too much time analyzing the rest of us. Derrick, my other older brother—and did I mention he and Dylan are twins—and I work together in construction.”

“That’s nice to be so near your family. I used to wish for a twin sister, but then I thought we’d fight over each other’s clothes.”

“And boyfriends?”

She smiled and shook her head. "I'm not a very social person, Gage. I don't date much."

"Why not?" He looked puzzled, and as his stare slowly traveled over her face and breasts, she felt the temperature in the room rise. "I have a hard time believing you lack for men."

"Oh?" She couldn't help sounding frosty.

He sighed. "What, I offended you for hinting at your beauty? Sue me. Remember, I'm the one who felt like meat."

"A walking, prancing hamburger," she muttered and tucked into the food the waiter brought.

Gage laughed loudly. "Come on, Hailey. Admit it. You wanted me doused in ketchup, with you being the bun. Or maybe the pickle?"

"Shut up," she said, trying not to smile at his joke.

"Or maybe mustard? You're blonde, and you seem more spicy than sweet. Yeah, mustard. I like mustard."

"Anyone ever tell you you talk too much?"

He frowned and looked like he wanted to say more, when suddenly he lifted his fork and began eating. Silently, stoically.

Taken aback, she paused. "I was just kidding. I like mustard too," she said softly.

He glanced up, studying her for a moment, then smiled, his grin putting her at ease. "Good. Because I changed my mind. One dinner's not going to cover my feeling like a walking hamburger. I want desert too, at my place. Nothing more," he said quickly, forestalling a possible rejection. "Your friend's across the quad, and if you like, we can eat it in full view of her place."

Hailey thought about Faith looking in on her private, intimate time with Gage and quickly quashed the notion. "No, that's okay. I suppose I should trust you, considering you could have turned me in before now."

He grinned, the sensual twist on his lips making her shift in her chair. Had to be his cologne or something. Around Gage, she felt in perpetual heat—and that was *so* not like

her. “Come on, Hailey. Do you really think a guy would admit to a bunch of cops, let alone his cousin, that a bunch of women were watching him walk around his place half-naked?”

“Um, I guess not.” She wanted to correct him, to remind him that he’d walked around *completely* naked, waving that impressive penis like a magic wand, and casting a spell over her. Instead she forced a grin and continued to talk with him about a variety of subjects throughout the dinner, constantly amazed at how easily the conversation flowed.

Arriving at his home, each having driven their own cars, they walked together, close but not holding hands, up the stairs. Whereas before, their evening had been filled with wry laughter and interesting conversation, now Hailey felt a sexual tension that refused to let her go. Sure, she’d been drawn to him from the first. But she felt downright edgy, aching for him in the most carnal of ways.

The hot stares he kept giving her when he thought she wasn’t looking didn’t help, especially since she’d been staring at him, and none too subtly, since they’d arrived at the apartment complex.

He opened the door and followed her inside, his breath hot on her neck as he trailed her through the foyer. She couldn’t help a shiver, nonplussed when he noticed.

“Cold?” he asked quietly, his eyes burning.

“A little,” she lied, embarrassed to be so reactive to his presence. Good lord, but he made her as jumpy as a cat.

“Then I guess hot fudge sundaes are out of the question.” He looked disappointed, like a small boy told he couldn’t have a favorite treat, and she smiled.

“Well, I guess I could make an exception for chocolate and ice cream. I’m not a monster, you know.”

“I know,” he murmured, staring at her. He shook his head and turned into the kitchen. “Sit at the counter and prepare to be amazed.”

Unable to eat more than half her bowl, Hailey sighed and leaned back, staring woefully at her uneaten chocolate sundae.

“That’s a waste.” Gage echoed her feelings, his bowl licked clean.

“Sorry. But I honestly don’t know where you put it all.” She couldn’t help staring at his lean torso, still in awe of his perfect body. He was all tendon and muscle, whereas she still had an extra five pounds spread between her ample thighs. And she didn’t want to think about her butt.

“I could say the same about you,” he murmured, his gaze riveted to her face, wandering from her eyes to her lips.

Her nerves tingled and she felt her nipples bead into stiff points of arousal. Damn. And she’d been doing so well. She’d spent a good twenty minutes with him without thinking about sex...much.

“Hailey, about the other day,” he began, and she immediately pictured him in nothing more than boxer-briefs.

Her heart thumped wildly. Hailey had never wanted anyone so much, and it scared her to feel so intensely about a man she barely knew. She quickly stood and placed some distance between them. “Look Gage, this was fun. But I need to head back.”

“Hailey, what’s wrong?” he asked quietly. He traced her face with his eyes, and his gaze roamed further down, resting over her taut breasts with what looked like satisfaction. Then he glanced at her face again and frowned in thought.

His quiet did little to ease her tension, and in fact irritated her that he felt so damned calm around her.

“Look. We had our dinner and our dessert. It’s been fun, but I have to go.” *Before I jump you, acting like one of the desperate sleazebags I work with.* He leaned closer and she took another whiff of his cologne. Angered at her faltering control, she snapped. “This is really your fault anyway.”

“Oh?” he asked coolly, his eyes flashing. *Good. Not so calm now, are you?* “How so?”

“If you didn’t want to be watched, you really should have closed your curtains,” she said primly, aware she was acting like a complete idiot. But how was she supposed to act when her blood wouldn’t stop rushing to her breasts, to her loins? She throbbed as she

watched him, wondering how to handle her reactions, let alone this man. “Just like a man to blame a woman for something that’s his fault.” *Come on, Gage, get angry. Tell me to leave before I jump you like a starving woman.*

She took a hasty step back when he pushed off the kitchen stool and approached her slowly, carefully, like a predator stalking prey.

“Now, honey, who said I didn’t want to be watched?”

Her eyes widened, and she gasped when he caught her in a tight embrace.

“I knew you were looking at me, Hailey. And I could only imagine those honey-brown eyes wide with desire, those full, cherry-red lips slick and open, just waiting to be filled by my tongue, or even better, my cock.”

Before she could protest, he ravaged her mouth with enough heat to make her melt, while stealing her very breath. He tasted like chocolate, and his lips felt like velvet. Gently prodding, he entered her mouth with his tongue, sweeping the moist cavern with delicious licks that set her heart hammering for more. She could feel her womb pooling with want, her clit pulsing from just the touch of his carnal mouth on hers.

“Mmm, better than I’d imagined.” He chuckled throatily. He increased the pressure of his kiss, taking and plundering, making her knees weak and her head spin. The feel of her breasts pushing against his unyielding chest thrilled her. And when his large, callused hands moved from the small of her back to her ass, she almost sobbed his name as he pulled her tight against that most impressive part of him.

Heavens, but he was large, much larger than what she thought she’d seen watching him from a distance. Granted, the sight of his penis had definitely hinted at male strength, but nothing so grand as *the feel* of the steely rod pressing hot and hard against her belly. She couldn’t stop wiggling against him, needing to feel his reactive tension.

“Yeah, baby, that’s it,” he crooned and ran his lips over her throat. He began thrusting against her, and her traitor of a body immediately responded to his seduction. She wanted to drown in him.

As if he could read her mind, he snaked a hand down her belly and below her dress, running his hands up her thighs toward her pelvis. Before her mind could wrap around the thought, his hand slipped beneath her panties.

“Christ, you’re wet.” He groaned and nipped at the pulse at her throat. “Hailey, you’re killing me.”

Thrusting a finger between her folds, he sighed her name and stared into her eyes. “This is it, baby. This is the part where you either hightail it out of here, or you spread those thighs wide. Because if you stay, I’m going to fuck you ’til you can’t walk.”

His gravelly voice raked over her, dampening her further. He added another finger and began priming her, stretching her.

Her breath coming fast, she had a hard time hearing what he was saying.

“Damn it, Hailey. Yes or no?”

Much as she wanted to run out of the room, astonished at her own promiscuity, something within her refused to back down. For once, Hailey wanted to ignore her unlucky history with men and enjoy herself, and who better to share such an experience than with the man of her dreams? A man who, even after catching her peeping, left the choice to have sex in her hands, *in spite of* the iron erection straining his pants.

“Yes,” she sighed into his mouth as he swept her away on another kiss.

Chapter Five

Time suspended as clothing flew everywhere. She could only focus on his mouth and the hands that sought out and touched every sensitive spot on her body. The feel of his satiny erection sliding over her skin aroused her to no end, like a heady aphrodisiac affecting her with abandon.

“Oh man.” He groaned and shoved her against a wall, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to make her excitement palpable. “I love your tits. They’re so big, so full.”

She couldn’t think to blush, for his mouth stole her embarrassment. He pushed her breasts together and began feasting, latching onto her nipples as he sucked and nipped from one to the other, fueling her rise toward orgasm.

“Gage,” she moaned. “That’s so good.”

“And you know my name,” he teased. “So we’re nearly even. But not quite yet.”

Kneading her breasts, he fused his mouth to hers. The chemistry between them was combustible, and she felt so sensitive she expected to fly apart at any moment. He swelled against her belly, and the more she squirmed, the harder he pressed his thick shaft against her.

“You on anything, Hailey?” he breathed into her ear.

“What?” She could barely think.

“Birth control,” he rasped. “You taking anything?”

She nodded. “Pills, every day.”

“Thank God.”

Without warning, he lifted her off her feet and brought her over his penis, her back still to the wall. Instinctively wrapping her ankles around his waist, she gasped when he suddenly shoved hard up into her.

“You’re so thick,” she groaned, closing her eyes at his intrusion. She felt stretched, full, and incredibly aroused at his hardness.

“And you’re so tight, so hot and wet.” He cursed and began pushing, thrusting deeper and deeper into her. “Shit, I can’t wait. Not the first time.”

Reaching between them, his slick fingers pressed hard, rubbing her clit while he pounded her against the wall. Animalistic need surged within her, as Hailey fought to seek the release just out of reach.

“Gage,” she cried, coming closer. She gripped his head and plastered her mouth to his, becoming the aggressor in their battle of wills.

He moaned and fucked her harder, his penis swelling impossibly large. She felt his balls slapping against her ass and thought it the most erotic thing. She, Hailey Jennison, was having sex standing up, with a man any woman in her right mind would want.

And like she’d imagined, sex with Gage was to-die-for. The pressure building within her grew to unbearable levels. His mouth, the friction of his hard body against hers, the heavenly feel of him buried within her...she felt as if she’d explode in a million pieces. He pinched her clit and thrust at a new angle, and she came so hard she nearly blacked out.

Crying his name, she squeezed him tight, vaguely aware of his hoarse shout. Still shuddering, she gradually noted the sticky mess at her thighs, the smell of sex that permeated the room. And reality returned in a rush.

“Oh, God. Gage? We shouldn’t have moved so fast. I’m not sure—”

“No, baby, not now. You said yes, and we’re nowhere near to being done,” Gage growled. “You wanted a show? Well, you’ve earned yourself a front-row seat.”

Gage fought the blood pounding through his veins for some semblance of control. But hell, he’d come so hard he was still seeing stars. And she *wasn’t sure*? He glared at Hailey Jennison, the woman who, for the past six months, had been driving him to distraction. He couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep, hell, he couldn’t even come without thinking of her. Now he had her in his arms, a flesh and blood fantasy come to life. And the reality of Hailey far surpassed his dreams.

From the first he'd been drawn to her. And what man could resist? She had a body built for sex—large breasts, a trim waist, long legs and ample hips that fit the cradle of his crotch as if she'd been made for him. Blonde hair framed innocent brown eyes that made him think of fine Scotch, rich and smooth. And those full, pouty lips...

Hell, just looking at the stubborn woman had him hard again, and her eyes widened as she felt him stirring within her.

"The bedroom this time," he rasped, not wanting to move, but wanting more from her than another quick fuck. He disengaged and carried her to his bedroom. No lightweight, Hailey possessed the fleshed-out body of a real woman, one with curves and a faint tan line from her bathing suit. He'd memorized every detail of her body when he'd stripped her, and his mouth watered at what she looked like wearing the clever two-piece that made such tantalizing outlines on her skin.

Gage kept waiting to wake up, to find that this experience was just another dream from which he'd soon awaken. But the warm woman in his arms burrowed her head against his shoulder, and far more than lust flared inside him.

He stared as he lowered Hailey to his bed. "So what does a woman like you fantasize about, Hailey?" She bit her lip and looked up at him through her lashes. Then she licked her lips nervously, and he wanted to groan. God, he wanted to feel that mouth around his cock. But he knew if he did, he'd come way too soon, and he wanted this time to last.

"I, ah, Gage, I think maybe you have the wrong impression." A pink flush stained her cheeks and carried down to her breasts.

"Hmm?" He couldn't stop staring, completely enthralled with the perfect, round white globes. Her nipples puckered, rose-colored beads of flesh that demanded attention.

"I didn't mean to, well, okay, I've seen you naked. On purpose. But I'd never intended for us to...you know. Be here, together, like this."

He narrowed his gaze, studying the embarrassment on her face, and marveled at the sincerity there. Hailey really was discomfited by what they'd done. Oh, he'd known some of what to expect. But how the hell did that play into the nymphet he'd wished her to be in his mind?

“So you didn’t like it?”

“I didn’t say that.” Her face turned beet-red and he chuckled.

Joining her on the bed, he straddled her and leaned close, placing his hands around hers that had reached up to stop his descent.

“Hailey, let’s put our cards on the table, hmm?” At her hesitant nod, he continued, “You’ve been watching and fantasizing for months, and now the wait’s over. We fucked and we came. And it was incredible, so much better than I could have imagined.”

He lowered his face to nuzzle alongside her cheek, his hands pinning hers to either side of her body. “And you wanted me as much as I wanted you. Admit it.”

She swallowed loudly and her breathing quickened. “I did.”

“And you want to do it all over again, don’t you baby?” He began stroking himself along her belly, incredibly aroused at the feel of her satiny skin against his cock.

“I,” she paused then swallowed hard as he shifted lower toward the golden curls between her thighs. She closed her eyes and arched into him. “Heaven help me, but I do.”

“Thank God.” Deliberately slowing his movement, he kissed her gently, seduced by the feel of her lips under his. He forced himself to keep the kiss short and leaned up from her. “Let’s suspend reality for a while. Just you and me, two lovers doing whatever we want, with no one to answer to. There’s no woman waiting for me, and I can only assume no man in your life?” He made the question light, but couldn’t help the mad race of his heart as he waited for her answer.

“No. No intimate relationships of any kind. Well, except for you.” She squirmed under him.

Satisfaction warred with arousal as he caught his breath. “Good. Then you and I have nothing to stand in our way. Nothing but time to indulge in some good, old-fashioned sex.”

“You mean to-die-for sex.”

He arched a brow in question, and she grinned, a smile both innocent and naughty that made him imagine all kinds of things.

“I fantasized too, Gage.”

Hailey couldn't believe what she'd just said, but she knew she'd never have another opportunity like this one. For years she'd longed to be the racy bad girl men drooled over, instead of the awkward woman trapped inside a stripper's body. For the first time, she felt strangely free of constraint lying under Gage. And, wonder of wonders, she wanted him with her every breath.

His stare darkened as he looked from her eyes to her lips, and his breathing deepened. His shaft stirred against her, and she was thrilled. *She* made him hard, not a porno, a magazine or another woman, but Hailey. And when he glanced down at her breasts, he groaned.

"You have no idea how much I want to fuck you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. But if I do what I've been dreaming about, it'll be over in like three seconds." He swallowed audibly and stared at her mouth again. "Why don't you tell me what you like?"

"What I like?" She arched up against him, pressing her erect nipples against his chest, and sighed. "I like that, and I like how you feel against me, all hard and throbbing." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, going for the gold. *I can do this. I can talk dirty and not sound like an idiot.* "I love your cock inside my pussy."

Gage growled and plastered his mouth to hers, and that quickly, all doubt left her. His lips sought hers, his tongue sliding along her flesh before delving inside and searching the moist cavern. Her breath left her when he began thrusting his tongue in time with his penis, sliding his thick erection between her thighs but not penetrating.

"Oh...Gage...don't stop," she gasped, amazed at the erotic feeling. A huge tease, his erection rubbed at her clitoris, making her swollen and needy in seconds. As if she hadn't just come with enough force to nearly pass out, she wanted him all over again, deep inside her.

"I couldn't stop now if you begged me," he said thickly, gritting his teeth as he rocked into her. "I want to eat you, Hailey, to suck the hard little clit rubbing against my cock." She shifted, and he cursed. "You've got me way too hard."

He eased off her, and she moaned, unable to help herself.

"Hold on, baby. I'll be right back." He dashed off the bed and returned a moment later, a damp washcloth in his hand. As she leaned up on her elbows to watch, she noted his killer grin.

"I can't believe you're really here." He shook his head and joined her on the bed, bringing the washcloth between her thighs. Slowly cleaning her, he began rubbing the course terrycloth in slow circles, staring at her all the while. "Ever since you moved away, I've been kicking myself for not asking you out sooner. And then I saw you hanging with your friend Faith one day. It was late on a Friday night, and you two were standing at her living room window staring out at the sky."

That was the first night she noticed Gage. She and Faith had been stargazing, arguing about Orion's position in the sky, when Hailey turned to see Gage across the commons, clad in nothing but skin, silhouetted by the moon and the dim light of his apartment. She'd sworn he hadn't noticed her, but apparently he had. *Thank you, Orion.*

He pushed the cloth deeper, entering the mouth of her vagina. She should have felt embarrassed, uneasy that a stranger had his hand between her legs, but Hailey could only focus on his smooth words and the erotic sensation of his fingers under the cloth sliding into her.

"I wanted to call out to you, but hell, I was naked, and you stepped away from her window too quickly for me." He tossed the cloth aside and lowered his head to her sex. Spreading her folds with his hands, he blew a warm breath over her clit, making her shiver. "Oh, yeah. I definitely need to kick myself for missing out on you for so long."

Lowering his face, he breathed in the scent of her and groaned. "So good," he murmured before putting his mouth over her. He suckled her clit, pulling on the taut flesh with a tightness that made her cry out. "That's it, Hailey. Give it to me."

His lips kissed and caressed. His tongue licked and smoothed, and when he added the light press of his teeth, she thought she'd go out of her mind.

"Gage." She groaned, trying to increase his pace. His fingers moved in and out of her slowly, and he was making her dizzy with the need to hug his thick penis within her slick walls. "I need you inside me."

"Not yet. Not until you cover my tongue with come."

His words had her body working to fulfill his demand. Surges of lust overtook all sense. And then he added another finger. Pumping in and out with wicked slowness, he readied her. She could smell the hint of mint in his aftershave, could feel the calluses on his fingers that made every touch, every feel of his skin a tease in itself.

She wanted him so badly she thought she might lose her mind.

"What's wrong, baby? Too much? Or not enough?"

"You're a tease. Dammit, fuck me!" Hailey couldn't believe what she'd just said, but the ache in her womb took away any further protestation. "Please, Gage. You're killing me."

Her moans only made him prolong the agony, and as much as she wanted to feel him inside her, she knew she couldn't wait much longer.

His fingers stretched her, promising more that would soon fulfill her desire. And then he did something that shot any last remnants of her control to hell. He pushed a third finger along her cleft, but instead of joining the other two in her vagina, this one eased toward her anus.

Slowly he began penetrating, and the small shock of pain mixing with the overwhelming pleasure in her vagina pushed her over the edge. She cried out his name as she gushed over his fingers and tongue, and she heard his satisfied grunt as he continued to lap up her cream.

"You taste so good, Hailey." He licked his lips and leaned up from her curls, staring like the very devil. "God, you have no idea what I want to do to you."

Lost in a dreamy haze, she said the first thing that came to mind. "Is it anything like what those women were doing in your porno the other night?"

He blinked in surprise, then gave her wide grin as he pushed his fingers deep inside her. “You know about that, hmm?” Finally withdrawing, he slowly slid up her body, resting his erection atop her mound. “Did you know the blonde in the movie looks like you? The one who lets her man fuck her seven ways to Sunday?”

Hailey stared, speechless, into gray eyes so clear they looked like the clouds guarding heaven’s gate. “You’re kidding me.”

“No, baby, I’m not.” Gage shifted, pressing the head of his penis into her moist entrance. “And I’m not going to wait another minute before I take you all over again.”

He slid into her, one glorious inch at a time. And, all the while, he continued to tease her with words and images, making her so aroused she felt like liquid silk around his steel-hard penis. “That’s it, Hailey. Move with me.”

Sweat beaded on his forehead, and he braced himself on his elbows as he began pistoning his hips. “You are so fucking hot.”

Amazingly, he continued to sink deeper and deeper with each thrust, riding perilously close to the G-spot she’d always thought a myth.

“How do you do that?” she gasped, sliding with him.

“I...dream...a...lot.” His thrusts increased. “In...color. About...you.”

She cried out as he hit her nerve center again and again, coming around him as he shot inside her with a feral yell.

They remained joined, linked by lust, and something more Hailey couldn’t understand.

“Hell, I don’t think I ever want to move again.” He groaned.

She chuckled. “Me neither.”

He lifted his head to look down at her. “I still can’t believe you’re here.”

“Ow.” She rubbed her arm where he’d pinched her. “That hurt.”

“Sorry. Now I know it’s not a dream.” His grin made her want to hug him tight, and surprisingly, the intimacy of the moment deepened. “But I have to know. What took you so damned long?”

Chapter Six

Hailey blinked into the clouded gaze of a satisfied male and couldn't help sighing. The perfection of tonight would surely end if she told him the truth. Yet how could she lie to the man who made her feel like a real woman? Who stoked a normal, healthy desire that grew stronger with each moment they spent together?

"What can I say? I don't have the best luck with men."

He stared, his eyes narrowing, and said nothing.

"It's me. Despite the blonde hair and the boobs, I'm a wallflower. I'm boring, dull, and quite frankly, until you, I didn't really like sex. My friends call me a prude, and my coworkers treat me like the invisible woman, unless they're the creeps who won't take no for an answer," she ended with a huff.

"Can't blame a guy for trying." He grunted when she tugged at his chest hair.

"It's one thing if *you're* lusting after me and I return the favor, but another—"

His grin made her realize what she'd said, and she blushed. "I'm attracted to you, obviously. But this is all just a fantasy, a sexual dream come to life." The thought of stepping outside his apartment and ending it made her want to cry. "I'm not perfect, and you can't possibly be this great, and tomorrow, this will all be a memory."

"But a pleasant one. And if you think telling me you don't jump every guy who wants you is a turn-off, think again."

She blinked. "Ah, maybe you don't hear what I'm saying. This—you and me—this isn't real. I have a lot of sexual hang-ups. And the real Hailey Jennison doesn't go to bed with a hot guy, *a stranger*."

Would he even believe that, considering they'd had sex against his living room wall a day after meeting face to face? Her cheeks were on fire, and she struggled to put her thoughts into words.

“Hailey, relax.” His grin broadened, and the sparkle in his eyes made her want to melt. Such satisfaction and approval, and all directed at her. “I know this isn’t typical for you. I did some research before we met, and what I learned made me want to know more.”

“What did you learn?”

“That you turned down the jerk in 204B, who is a complete ass when it comes to women.”

Tell me about it. She cringed inwardly, remembering his crude comments.

“And you refused the guy in 313C because he has a girlfriend.”

“How did you know that?”

He cleared his throat. “I, ah, might have overheard you.”

“What?”

“I was eavesdropping around the corner from your unit when he dropped by. You think you have problems with the opposite sex?” He groaned and rubbed his eyes. “I suck when it comes to women, and I don’t mean in a good way. I work hard, and I enjoy working out. I know I have a good body, one that seems to attract the ladies. But when it comes to talking, to forming relationships...” his voice stumbled over the R-word, “I always seem to trip myself up, saying the wrong things, alienating my dates without trying. Hailey, when I first saw you, something in me clicked. I didn’t want to screw things up again, not with you.”

Her heart thundered, and she stared at him with an intensity that probably would have shaken him had he been looking at her when he spoke. But the flush on his cheeks and the way he avoided eye contact more than showed her how uncomfortable he found the topic.

“I’m good at sex. I’m not bragging. I’m just being honest.” When she chuckled, he quickly met her gaze. “Okay, so I’m bragging. Don’t I deserve it?”

“You don’t hear me complaining.”

“But after a while, sex isn’t the end-all it feels in the beginning. I wanted to get to know you. So I asked about you. A few guys who live in the apartments here work with

you. We went drinking, and after a few rounds, they loosened up about Ms. Unattainable. Yes, you. Smart, funny, shy.” He nodded at her apparent disbelief. “They talk about you. And it’s all good. I swear, if you’d give one of them the time of day, they’d snap you up in a heartbeat,” he grumbled, clearly not thrilled with the prospect.

“But forget I said that. I kept trying to find the best way to approach you, and then you moved. About killed me ’til I saw you visit Faith one night. You showed up at her place the week after with a bunch of friends. And then I noticed you and your friends watching me, and I began to perform.” He gave her a wicked, shameless grin and wiggled his eyebrows.

Hailey groaned. “So you really did know all along.”

“No. The first time you saw me I figured it was a mistake. And I didn’t really take notice again until a few weeks later. But Hailey, just knowing you were looking at me made a huge difference in the way I was feeling.”

She glanced down, mentally agreeing with his huge assessment.

“Every Friday, I rushed home from work, doing my best to strut for you and your friends.”

“This is so embarrassing.”

“And so kinky.” He laughed, startling her into laughing with him. “Damn, Hailey. You had me so hard all the time. I didn’t walk around half-naked and fully frontal for your friends. I did it to entice you.” He frowned. “It took you way too long to come over here.”

“If you recall, you dragged me here. I didn’t exactly come of my own free will.”

“But you *came* all the same,” he said slyly, rubbing his stiffening erection against her. “And if you think I’m letting you out of here after one measly day of sex, you’re out of your mind.”

“One day? Try an hour.”

“So far.” He nudged her again, pushing her onto her back and prodding for entry between her thighs. “I suck at talking to women, you suck at talking to men. Seems like a match made in heaven.”

Her womb fluttered, and her heart jumped. “And don’t forget the sex.”

He chuckled and thrust hard and fast, groaning as he sank deep. “And the sex is unbelievable.”

“Yes, it is,” she breathed, clutching him tight.

“So stop thinking and start feeling. Just wait, baby, and see. This show is only just beginning.”

She soon lost all train of thought and sighed his name. For now, she’d play along. But unfortunately, she knew that sooner or later, all good things must end.

When Gage kissed Hailey good-bye Sunday night, it was with the promise of a dinner Tuesday night at her place. So much for wanting to take things slow. He watched her ease down the steps of the complex like a siren flaunting her power. Shit. That dress was killing him.

She reached the ground and turned back to wave shyly at him. Waving back, he finally shut the door. Taking a deep breath, he scowled at his still hungry, amazingly aching cock and shook his head.

“Woman’s got me addicted to her.” Hell, he’d never come so hard or for so long inside a woman. And he knew had she not been on birth control, he’d have done the foolish thing and more than likely knocked her up. As selective as she’d been, and as careful as he was, he didn’t worry about STDs. As much as he wanted her still, he wouldn’t have waited on a condom before fucking her. And that was just plain stupid.

Much as Gage wanted a family one day, he preferred to take it slow. Dating, marriage, a few years, then kids. But with Hailey, he could only think about sex, about the possibility of skipping all the work and cementing her to him right now.

With a kid?

He broke out in a sweat just thinking about it. Then cursed his foolish glands. Maybe it was a good thing she’d be busy Monday night. He needed a breather after a day and a half of steady, mind-blowing sex.

Unfortunately, he knew the woman had snared him with more than her body. For Gage, talking to a woman without offending her took an enormous effort. He always managed to say the wrong thing, not even meaning insult. But with Hailey, he made her laugh. When he called her breasts “tits,” she moaned in arousal. And when he talked even dirtier, she really got into it.

He grinned, recalling how limber she was in bed. Hot damn. Then he recalled how they’d both lost their loved ones, and how they’d talked about that loss cuddled up in his bed. *Cuddled*. He puzzled that he, Gage Warren, had cuddled with a woman voluntarily.

Hopping into the shower, he washed himself good, trying to clear his lovestruck thoughts. Who the hell knew Hailey of the delectable body liked horror and SciFi movies? That she read Koontz and King, as well as biographies about dead presidents? Shit. The woman even liked the way he decorated his place, not a hint or even a comment about how he might better it with flowers or artwork.

Gage remembered the moment he’d first thrust deep, the feeling of warm acceptance and utter lust that had shaken him to his foundation. And when he added all the other heartwarming bits about Hailey Jennison to the mix, he realized he’d fallen in love.

The water streamed over him as he wondered what to do about this mess, and why the thought of such deep feelings for a woman didn’t make him want to run the other way.



“Sydney, I’m sorry it took me so long to call.” Hailey held the phone out from her ear. “Yes, I know it’s nearly ten. Look, I just got home.” She cringed and waited several moments before continuing. “Ah, you might say dinner went well. We spent the weekend together. And yes, I promise to fill you in on the rest of it tomorrow night. Come on over after work. Now I’ve got to get some sleep so I can function tomorrow.”

After hanging up, Hailey dropped her clothes along her path to the bed and slid under the top sheet. She could still feel Gage’s mouth against her flesh, and she shivered with pleasure.

How any man could do what he'd done to her and still make her want him, even now, boggled the mind. Had she not known better, she'd swear she'd become addicted—to Gage. The blasted man still hadn't told her his last name, and had dangled the knowledge like bait to make her agree to a next date. As if she'd refuse him after their time together.

The sex had been one thing. A huge thing, actually. Never before had Hailey been so in tune with another—physically at least. She hadn't had to fantasize to make herself horny, hadn't needed a picture of another, or to ward off her many worries about the daily grind to simply fall in the mood. Instead, she'd been doused with lust just looking at the man. And the feel of him...his penis fit inside her as if he'd been built just for her.

She worried that her immense attraction was making her feel so much more about him. With the way she still wanted to crawl over his body and lay with him, well, forever, she thought she might be mistaking lust for love. A concept she'd mistaken once before, with Jerry the Worm.

Much as she truly liked Gage, she didn't know him half as well as she'd known Jerry, and look how that relationship had turned out.

But wait, one day and night of incredible sex didn't mean happily-ever-after. So why couldn't she stop thinking about him?

Infatuation, Sydney would tell her. *Sex and love are not the same thing at all.* Repeating that to herself, Hailey tried to lull herself to sleep. Yet she continued to see how many things in common she and Gage held. How they liked the same television shows and books, how his crass comments amused her when, by rights, she should have felt offended. Anyone else telling her she had *big bones* would have made her want to cry. But Gage had said it like a compliment, and followed up his comment by sucking diligently on her breasts, those *big tits* that he loved so much.

She flushed with heat and tried to think peaceful thoughts, needing to calm her raging body. Who would have thought that while she'd been fantasizing about him, he'd been doing the same about her? She blushed, recalling the way he'd made her masturbate him, showing her the way he'd fallen asleep night after night, with her in his mind's eye.

She hadn't the courage to share her experiences, but planned to the next time they met. And maybe, just maybe, she'd cater to that unspoken fantasy of his. The one that involved her mouth and his cock...

Six o'clock dawned bright and early, and she found herself immersed in work until the lunch hour. When she entered the small cafeteria downstairs, she bumped into Eddie the asshole. Remembering what he'd said about her on Friday, she smiled. *Frigid bitch, hmm? Tell that to Gage.*

Eddie stammered. "Hi, Hailey. Would you like to share a table?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, Eddie. I'm sitting with Amy and Beth. We frigid bitches have to stick together. Maybe some other time."

Hailey reached her friends and saw them looking past her at Eddie.

"What did you say to him?" Amy asked. "He's still standing there staring after you in shock."

"Nothing." Hailey took a few bites of her salad and smiled. "He's probably surprised I called him on being a complete asshole for insulting me the other day. Though I guess he didn't really know I was there."

"Well, you aren't known for friendliness around the men who work here," Beth commented. "Not that I blame you," she said hastily at Hailey's questioning look. "But not all of them are out to seduce you, you know."

"Trust me. I know. I'm just in the habit of letting people know I don't screw around." She frowned. "Maybe I've taken it too far?"

"Maybe," Amy said, shrugging. "But who cares? Want to hear some real dirt? Anthony Fletcher is going to propose to Meredith later today. Here at work."

Glad to hear some good news, and for the change of subject, Hailey and Beth peppered Amy with questions, and lunch passed by in a blur. While Hailey worked the rest of the day, she wondered why she hadn't confided in her friends about Gage. Only Sydney knew she'd gone to dinner with him. And even that knowledge bothered Hailey on a strange level.

Perhaps she didn't want to share him, she thought, though he wasn't exactly an item she could keep a secret indefinitely. There was no way in hell she wanted to see him naked again, *with her friends in tow*. Uh-uh. No way. She would have to make that clear tomorrow when they met again.

She paused. But would that seem pushy? Too girlfriend-ish? Much as she liked that title, she realized she was supposed to be a modern woman. And sex, even marathon sex, didn't mean commitment in the eyes of the everyday male.

"But he's not an average guy," she muttered.

"What's that?" Joy, her assistant, asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just mumbling to myself."

Joy studied her, a small grin on her face. "You know, Hailey. I have to say, you look really good today. Like you're glowing. And rumor has it you didn't glare and ignore Eddie like you usually do. You gave it to him but good. I have to ask, what gives?"

Hailey blushed. "I'm not that mean, am I?"

"You're not mean at all. Eddie Flynn's a jerk. It's just that you seem, well, really confident lately. And...happy."

She frowned. "I'm not normally happy?"

"You're good at your job. You're nice to me and the women around here. But you don't, ah, glow. It's hard to explain."

Hailey nodded absently and made up some nonsense about winning money on a bet from a friend. Gage, apparently, had had more of an impact on her than just on her rampant hormones. The man was making her *happy*. She chuckled to herself and continued typing, wondering what Sydney would make of this.

Chapter Seven

“Damn. This is what I worried about.” Sydney stared hard at her friend with a frown.

“Sydney? I thought you’d be happy for me. I finally had sex with a guy even you admitted you liked. What’s wrong with being happy at work?”

“Nothing, if that’s who you normally are. Don’t mistake a great lay for more, Hailey. Or you’ll end up getting hurt.” She sighed. “Oh, forget it. Just promise you’ll take things slow. Sex is all well and good, but when you develop into a *relationship*, men seem to forget all about decency.”

“Relax, *Mom*,” Hailey joked. “Gage is nice and sexy as all get-out. We had a nice weekend, and we’re having dinner here tomorrow night. No one’s said *I do*, and I’m on the Pill. No babies coming my way.”

“Good.” Sydney breathed a sigh of relief. “Just keep telling yourself that and you’re all set. Now, I have to know. Does he know what to do with his equipment?”

Hailey just looked at her friend and Sydney cursed.

“Dammit. You have all the luck. I have to go. There’s a triple-chocolate cheesecake out there just crying my name.”

Hailey laughed and hugged her friend, then watched as Sydney left her home. The quiet soon irritated her though, and all she could think about was Gage. What was he doing? Was he still working? No, the sun had set. Was he at home, doing a terrible job of cooking? When she’d seen the vast amount of frozen and pre-prepared dinners in his refrigerator, she’d been shocked. No wonder the man had no fat on him. He could barely boil water.

Maybe she shouldn’t have been so keen to give them space. She could have made time for him tonight. Take it slow, Sydney had said. Hailey sighed. She needed to stop obsessing over the man. Surely he had better things to do with his time than think about her every five seconds.

Suddenly depressed at the thought, she fixed herself a cup of tea and plunked down to finish her half-read romance. The hero had blond hair and green eyes, so maybe she would have a few minutes of her Monday without Gage's face superimposed over everything.

"Put the phone down, shit for brains."

Gage glared at Derrick. "You know, if you'd get a woman of your own, you'd be much less of a pain in the ass. Do you want Sydney's number or not?"

"Not if it's an excuse for you to call your new girlfriend. Damn it, Gage. You agreed to meet her again Tuesday night—*tomorrow* night. You call her before that, you sound desperate."

"I am desperate," he growled. Desperate to be inside her again, desperate to talk to her, to look into her face when she laughed.

"No, you're not. You, my little brother, hold the upper hand. You just spent the past weekend with your dream woman. You want to appear in control, or she'll know she has you by the balls. You'll note *she* hasn't called you, has she?"

No, she hadn't. And the fact bugged the hell out of Gage. Yes, they'd agreed to meet again tomorrow night. But for the life of him, Gage hadn't been able to push Hailey out of his mind. The way she smelled, looked, tasted...

"Shit, Gage, get a grip," Derrick muttered, glancing away. Gage flushed, realizing he had the mother of all hard-ons.

"Please. It's a natural reaction when thinking about a beautiful woman. One you seem to have whenever you're thinking of a certain redhead."

Derrick stared. "You're telling me you have her number."

"Hailey has her number. Sydney's her best friend."

"Hell. Then you can't screw this up. Not until I've at least talked the woman into a date. Look, Gage. Go easy. Meet with Hailey again tomorrow, and for God's sake, don't scare her off."

"Thanks for the concern."

"I am concerned. And not just for myself. You're different about this one. Way too enamored." Derrick frowned. "Maybe you should invite her for a Saturday breakfast, so the rest of us can have our say."

"No way in hell." Gage shook his head. "I'm trying to win her over. Sex will do it, a few hours with Mom and Dylan and she'll run, not walk, away. And then there's you."

"What about me?" Derrick grinned. "Women love me."

"Until you open your mouth," Gage muttered.

"Fine. Do what you want. But hold out until tomorrow. And whatever you do, don't bring her flowers or candy or some shit. You'll look too eager, I'm telling you."

Tuesday night, at ten to six, Gage stood at Hailey's door with a bouquet of flowers in hand.

When she opened the door and blinked at him in surprise, he wondered if his brother was maybe right. But as her gaze fell on the flowers, her eyes misted and she had to clear her throat to speak.

"Follow me."

He grinned. *Derrick, you're the dumbass*. He took a few steps inside after closing the door and found he approved of her place. Like his apartment, she had ivory-colored walls and dark brown furniture. A denim couch and loveseat sat around a scarred, knotty coffee table. She had several framed pictures on her walls, of places, actual photographs.

Noting his attention, she blushed, a becoming rose that made him want to bend her over the nearest table and ride her hard. God, the woman had only to breathe and he wanted her.

"Those are places I've wanted to visit. And I've actually traveled to London, been inside Harrods even."

"Harrods?" He felt stupid for asking, moreso when she shook her head and mumbled it wasn't important.

"Would you like something to drink?"

“What I’d like is for you to look at me,” he said gruffly. “What’s Harrods?”

“It’s a high-scale department store.”

“In London, a place you’ve always wanted to go and finally went.”

She smiled at his understanding. “Well, yes.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard.”

Hailey chuckled. “Why is it I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you?” As soon as she said it, she turned scarlet.

He grinned. “Good. I thought it was just me.” He felt harder than a pike, and brought her closer to him. “I would have called you last night, but was told it would make me look stupid.” He kissed her, and all the blood left in his body raced to his cock.

“Hmm.” She nuzzled his cheek with her face, and his heart dipped, fell, and broke at her feet. “Funny. I was told to take it easy. To go slow.”

“So let’s.” He unfastened his jeans and withdrew his cock. “Why don’t you show me how slow you can go?”

She licked her lips and stared down at him, and met the challenge in his gaze with one of her own. “Ten bucks I can get you off in under a minute.”

“Shit. I’d like to take that bet, but...”

She grinned and went down on her knees, like his deepest, darkest fantasy come to life.

“No, Hailey. You have to be naked, so I can watch your tits, see you touch yourself and come when I shoot down your throat.”

“Next time,” she whispered and took him deep.

He groaned and couldn’t help shoving himself deeper, rocking at the surprising expertise of her tongue, of her lips. She fondled his balls, her hands whisper-light, and he felt his climax rushing at an incredible, embarrassingly fast pace. Gage closed his eyes and let out a breath when she cradled him in her hands, and when she increased the pressure on his balls, he hissed his pleasure.

Hailey closed her eyes and began teasing him, sucking on the crown of his penis, licking beneath the head and moaning, as if she gloried in his shudder. She took him deeper and deeper, fitting her mouth to his thickening length.

“Fuck, Hailey,” he rasped. “I’m not going to last long at all, baby.”

She sucked harder, and his subtle thrusts increased as she caressed him. The little witch ran her fingers under his sack, and he felt his balls grow harder. He groaned, and she intensified the frequency of her strokes and licks.

His shaft slid through her lips like butter, the moisture and warmth of her mouth incredibly erotic.

Gage fisted his hands in her hair and began thrusting deeper. “Oh, Hailey, baby,” he gasped. “That’s so good, baby. Oh, yeah.”

She dragged her nails up and down his inner thighs, then circled his muscular thighs to grip his ass, pulling him into her as he thrust.

She was so sexy, so hot, and so his. He pumped and began shortening his thrusts, his ass incredibly taut, his balls impossibly hard.

“Hailey,” he cried, readying to jet.

“I told you I’d win the bet.” She resumed deep-throating him, and her blissful expression and skilled mouth had him shooting his load like a teenaged boy jacking off for the first time.

“Hailey,” he groaned and shuddered, still coming. “Baby, I wanted you to wait.”

“I waited long enough. I’ve been wanting to do that to you since I first saw you waving it around your place.”

He panted and clutched her shoulders, steadying himself. She tucked him neatly back into his undershorts and jeans and buttoned him up. Staring down into her eyes, he thought her the most giving, most wonderful woman he’d ever met.

“I love you,” slipped out before he could stop himself, and he wanted to kick his own ass at the sudden shock and wariness that crept into her gaze.

“Now how about dinner?” he said with a smile, pretending he hadn’t blurted out a potentially fatal truth.

Hailey nodded, saying nothing, and moved into the kitchen. Rolling his eyes at his stupidity and praying he hadn't ruined a good thing by moving too fast, Gage described his day, ending with a funny story about Dylan and Derrick fighting.

Before long, he had Hailey laughing as she shoved a plate in front of him. And he felt so relieved to have things back to normal that he wanted to stand up and shout his thanks to the heavens. Instead, he gave them to Hailey.

"Oh, baby, you don't know how nice it is to have a home-cooked meal. I don't know if you noticed, but the kitchen is not my thing."

"Unless you're making sundaes," she said dryly and joined him at the table.

"Damn. What is this? I love it."

"Chicken enchiladas, the easy way." She nodded at a can of sauce on the counter. "Sorry, but I had such a long day at work I didn't get time to prepare my famous spaghetti."

He perked up. "So I'm being shortchanged, eh? I guess we'll have to save the spaghetti for later this week?"

At his hopeful look, she smiled. "Well, I'm not that busy Thurs—"

"Tomorrow?"

She looked at him, saw him clearing his plate and sighed. "Tomorrow. But dinner's on you Thursday."

Outstanding. She planned on seeing him through the end of the week. Dare he push it? "Sounds good. And if you're not busy this weekend, I know a great little getaway in Atlanta with a fondue place and a piano bar around the corner."

She bit her lower lip. "You said fondue?"

"I did. And did I mention a large, king-sized bed, an A/C unit that makes you think of Siberia, and a down comforter?"

"You're making it impossible for me to say no."

"Then say yes."

"That's not taking things slow."

“Sure it is. I could have asked you to go with me to Atlanta tomorrow. But I’m taking my time.”

She laughed and shook her head. “You must have the lion’s share of charm in your family. Sure, why not? I deserve a little fun, don’t I?”

“You sure do, Hailey. And I’m just the man to give it to you.”

After dinner ended, Gage made sure he did the dishes, hustling Hailey into her living room. After a few moments of silence, Pink Floyd’s “Time” came through the speakers.

“Damn, Hailey. How did you know that *Dark Side of the Moon*’s my favorite album?” he called to her from the kitchen.

“I didn’t. I happen to like it as well.”

“Favorite group?”

“That’s a toss-up between Pink Floyd and Fleetwood Mac.”

“Ah, a woman after my own heart. One who appreciates Classic Rock.”

He glanced at her to see her sitting on her couch, her head tilted back and her hair falling over the back of the couch like a golden waterfall. Once he finished the dishes, he joined her in the living room.

“Hmm. Sorry. I’m sleepy. It was a long day.”

“I had the same.” Mostly because it dragged on forever before he could see her. “You know, I never said thank you for what you did for me when I arrived.”

She blinked into his gaze and blushed, like he knew she would. He loved when she turned all prim and proper after acting like a sexual dynamo.

“A real man would return the favor, wouldn’t he?”

She swallowed, and he saw the pulse at the base of her neck throb. “And you’re nothing if not a real man, hmm?”

Gage grinned. He knelt between her thighs and reached slowly for the fastening of her slacks. When she made no move to protest, instead watched him under sleepy eyes, he stripped her pants and panties from her slowly, sensually. His hands slid over her skin, feeling the satiny flesh glide under his palms. Her breathing quickened, as did his, but this time would be purely for her.

“You don’t have to do this, you know.”

“I want to. Tasting you is as good as it gets, baby. You’re so incredibly sweet.”

She flushed again and closed her eyes, and he spread her thighs wide. She’d trimmed her curls, and he smiled, pleased to see more of her. With warm hands, he rubbed her inner thighs gently, bringing his hands closer and closer to her sex without touching her there just yet.

Hailey squirmed and moaned, reaching for him. But he kept her firmly in place and continued to tease her. By the time his mouth reached her clit, she was panting and begging him to touch her. With a swipe of his tongue, he licked her and she cried his name, like heaven to his ears.

“You taste so good, Hailey. So damned good,” he crooned and began eating her in earnest. His cock pushed painfully against his jeans, but he wanted her to explode, to feel her lose control as he loved her with his mouth, with his mind. Never good with words, he showed her how much she meant to him as he brought her to bliss.

She tensed, her clit near to bursting. He stroked, teased, and pressed with his tongue and lips. And when he added his teeth, nipping lightly at the engorged bud, she shuddered and climaxed.

“Oh, God, Gage, oh my God.”

He continued to suck her as she crested, shoving two fingers inside her and sighing with pleasure as she squeezed her walls around him. It was with much regret that he finally let her go.

When she finally calmed enough to breathe normally, she leaned close, cupping the back of his head. “That was the most unselfish thing a man’s ever done for me.”

Her eyes glittered with feeling and he quickly scooped her into his arms, leaning them both back against the couch.

“Hailey, if that’s all it takes to please you,” he said lightly, kissing the top of her head, “we may never leave your living room again.”

She laughed softly, resting her head on his chest. She placed her palm over his heart. “I can feel your arousal,” she murmured, shifting over his tenting lap.

“I’m always hard around you. You haven’t learned that yet?”

“It’s not too late to fix that.”

“No.” He kissed her again and moved her off of him. Uncomfortable but still in control enough to leave her be, he walked to the door. “That, Hailey, was just for you. I’ll see you tomorrow, babe.”

“Good night,” she said quietly, her eyes soft as she watched him leave.

Hailey watched him leave with stars in her eyes. Her limbs felt like jelly, and she didn’t think she had enough energy to move from the couch to her bedroom. Good lord, Gage had completely worn her out.

Doing her dishes, giving her the best oral sex she’d ever received in her life, for no reason other than to express his gratitude? *His love*, her memory urged. She stilled as she remembered what he’d said earlier. At the time she’d thought it a fervent declaration after a great blow job. But now, she wasn’t so sure.

They’d only been together a few days, but she’d fantasized about him for much longer. And, according to Gage, he’d been wanting to ask her out for as long. Could he have more feelings for her than she thought? Could he, in fact, be feeling much like she did?

Instead of feeling glad, she worried. What if Gage was caught, not in an emotional bond, but in a sexual one? If he’d indeed had a dry spell—and he had from the few months she’d witnessed—he might be mistaking his sexual release for something more and not even know it.

Damn it. She sucked in a breath and stumbled to her feet. Half-naked, she threw off the rest of her clothes and took a long, warm shower, unable to rinse the dread from her mind.

Hadn’t Sydney warned her to go slowly? But not Hailey. Oh no. Instead, she’d admitted to thinking about Gage constantly, and then had another round of mind-blowing sex with the man. Hell, their relationship seemed based on sex. From watching him naked, to watching him perform.

She flushed, feeling aroused at the memory. Could she help liking the way he looked? He was hot, no doubt about it. And he had moves to back up his killer looks and body. The only other times Hailey had experienced intense orgasms had been with a vibrator. None of her other boyfriends had cared enough to turn her on, or to make sure she came when they didn't.

She and Gage definitely shared some natural chemistry. Perhaps that's what soothed a lot of her awkwardness, an inherent need to cling to someone who turned her on? But he'd been so generous. She could almost imagine a lifetime of great sex, of coming home to a man who would do the dishes and give her bliss without asking for anything in return. But what would happen when the sex faded?

She stopped the shower and stood, dripping wet, afraid of the answer.

Chapter Eight

Gage stared arrogantly at his brothers sitting around their mother's kitchen island wearing shit-eating grins. "That's two weeks now, my friends. Pay up."

Derrick groaned and handed over a twenty, while Dylan merely shook his head.

"Betting on your relationship? That's both immature and beneath you."

When Gage merely raised an eyebrow in Dylan's direction, his brother cursed under his breath.

"Here," Dylan barked, handing over his money. "But I still think you should let us be the judge of her. You say it's been two weeks, but what have you done with her besides," he paused, looking over his shoulder, "screwing?"

Gage frowned. "We've been to the movies, hung out at the bookstore, rented videos. I don't know. We do other things besides fuck." He too quieted as he looked around the kitchen. "Where's Mom?"

"She had to run out to the grocery store. Said we're eating her out of house and home again."

Gage glanced at his money and sighed, placing the twenties under the island centerpiece.

"Good boy," Derrick said with approval. "Now tell us again how staying in every night doesn't imply fucking."

"We went to Atlanta last weekend."

Dylan rolled his eyes. "And stayed in a hotel most of the time...doing what, pray tell?"

"Oh, shut up," Gage muttered, tired of feeling the need to defend himself. "You don't understand."

"Sure I do." Dylan slapped him on the back, the glint of his Rolex nearly blinding in the early morning light. "You have a hard time communicating outside the bedroom. So

instead of confessing how you feel, or perhaps telling Hailey how much you admire and love her, you're screwing her into a tired, contented state, hoping she won't get wise and cut you off at the balls one day."

"Honestly, Dylan. How you manage a thriving practice with that mouth is beyond me." Their mother stood in the kitchen hallway with a large scowl on her face.

Derrick and Gage burst out laughing.

"You two might have warned me," Dylan mumbled with a red face.

"But I have to admit, you have a point," Barbara said, shoving one sack at Dylan and the other at Derrick. "Gage, you can't solve your relationship problems with sex."

He cringed, as did Derrick, when she started on the topic. Dylan nodded in agreement. *Stupid therapist.*

"You need to tell her how you feel, honey."

"I did," he gritted, wishing they'd all stay out of what they didn't understand. He and Hailey were happy, and if she was a little quiet lately, she probably had a lot to worry about at work, what with that possible promotion coming her way.

"You did? What did you say?"

"I told her I loved her."

His family stared at him like he'd grown a third eye.

"What? You said to be honest. I'm honest."

"When did you tell her this?" his mother asked quietly.

"Ah, two weeks ago."

"And what did she say?"

He shrugged, wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. He'd forced that awkward moment from his mind, and now they'd brought it to the surface again. He couldn't help feeling simultaneous rejection and relief that Hailey seemed to have disregarded his big *I love you* moment. Had she maybe not heard him, or misunderstood him? He sure as hell hoped so.

"What did she say, Gage Andrew Warren?"

Both his brothers, and he, winced at his mother's tone.

“Nothing. She said nothing.” *But she’d just given me one hell of a blow job, so maybe she took what I said as in the heat of the moment?* The notion hadn’t occurred to him before, and as his mother tried to soften the blow of Hailey’s rejection, he felt lighter, somehow. Maybe Hailey had attributed his declaration to one of those *Oh God* flashes.

“Oh, honey, I’m sure it’s all a big misunderstanding.”

“Yeah, I think it is.”

“Poor guy,” Derrick muttered, shaking his head. “And I still don’t have Sydney’s number.”

Gage grinned, surprising them. “Don’t worry about it. I have it under control. Now how about some hash and eggs?”



Gage whistled as he worked in his kitchen, waiting for Hailey to show. He’d clipped a deep red rose from his mother’s rose garden, and had cut all the thorns off but one. Prickly, the flower reminded him of Hailey. Beautiful, but not to be taken for granted. He’d thought about what his mother had said earlier, and what he’d finally figured out. The time had come to lay it on the table. Why hide how he felt?

Hell, the way Hailey made love to him every night, she had to feel the same way. Sure she’d been quiet lately. Maybe she had begun questioning their future. He knew from their many discussions that she viewed her past as a nightmare in the dating world. She too often chose loser boyfriends, just like he’d chosen loser girlfriends, afraid of a commitment. Actually, he thought she was afraid of being abandoned again, like when her father had split, so subconsciously chose men she knew would never really suit.

Not that he’d ever admit as much to Dylan or Mom, but he did listen when they spoke, and paid attention to the lectures on relationships he’d been forced to attend when younger. A noise at the door called him from the stove.

Answering Hailey’s soft knock, he pulled her into his arms for a deep, breathless kiss.

“Hi,” she gasped. He hugged her, but felt only a lackluster return. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. *Shit*. He could feel bad news coming, and raced through his mind for the last stupid thing he’d said.

“Gage, we need to talk.”

We need to talk—the four words every man dreaded. He stubbornly returned to the kitchen, but remained standing and braced himself for the worst.

“It’s just, well, I’m a little nervous about our time together.”

“What?” Okay, that had definitely confused him.

“Shoot. No, I mean to say, we have fun together, but we always end our time with sex. And I feel like if we don’t have it, we’ll have a problem.”

She spoke so fast he had a hard time understanding her.

“Hold on. You’re complaining about the sex?” He couldn’t help staring in disbelief. Last night he’d given her multiple orgasms, which she’d admitted to being a first. And she’d cried his name as if he’d taken her to heaven. Which he had.

“Not complaining,” she said with a blush. “I’m just worried that if we can’t have sex, you’ll...”

At her silence, he suddenly understood. And he grew angry. Really, really angry. “You’re afraid I’ll what? Leave? That the only reason I hang around you is for your body?”

Shit. All the little gifts, the gestures, doing the fucking dishes, loving her until he felt he’d pass out? And she still didn’t get it?

“You don’t understand,” she said softly, her eyes clouding with tears.

At the sight of her unhappiness, his belly clenched and he forced himself to calm down. “What’s really the problem, Hailey?”

“I’m the same woman I was before I met you. And now things are different.”

“How?”

“I have never, ever, had an orgasm with a man every time we made love. But with you, I have *at least* one every time.” She threaded her hands through her hair and nervously gripped close to her scalp. “You’re making me different at work. People are

listening to me, actually becoming friendly. And the obnoxious creeps are suddenly leaving me alone.”

He shook his head. “You’ve always been intelligent, gorgeous, and driven. But you’ve been so caught up in caring what others think of you that you’ve closed yourself off to everyone but your friends. Now, Hailey, you’re seeing yourself the way I do. That’s why people are taking notice.”

She stared at him in shock. “That is the longest, most normal conversation we’ve had yet. And you sound like a psychologist. You, Mr. Hard Ass, are actually talking about feelings.”

He flushed and glared. “I told you my mother’s a shrink. It’s hard to suppress, but lately you’ve been pushing my buttons.”

“Me?”

“You.” He snorted and leaned back against the counter, ignoring the pots boiling over on the stove.

“Ah, Gage?”

“Shut up, Hailey. We’re going to have this out.” Anger fumed and built inside of him. He couldn’t believe they were having this discussion, when he’d envisioned a much different way to spend the night. *Fuck*. “You clam up when you become angry or hurt, and now that I think about it, you’ve been looking at me like any day now I’m going to kick your ass out. I hate to break it to you, baby, but as good as the sex is, that’s not why I’m with you.”

She blushed and scowled. “I notice you haven’t made any attempts to abstain, though, have you?”

“I’m not stupid. Making love with you is incredible. But if you want me to prove to you we’re about more than sex, fine. As of right now, we’re celibate.” His gaze narrowed. “That means no sex for *both* of us, with anyone.”

“I’m not planning to seduce the first guy I see on my way home,” she grumbled.

“And that’s another thing. You’re too eager to leave me every night. Why? What did I do that was so damned horrible?”

“Nothing. But eventually this is going to end, and if I get used to sleeping with you all the time, or staying here overnight, I’ll never be the same—”

“—When I leave?” His eyes glittered, and he yanked her to him, holding her in a steely embrace. “Forget what I said about intelligence. You are the dumbest blonde I’ve ever met.” He kissed her hard on the mouth. “No sex until you apologize for being so dense. And I’ll expect you here every day after work next week. No avoiding *us*.” He cursed under his breath. “You are going to be so sorry about this. I’ll expect one hell of an apology.”

On your knees, he added under his breath before the boiling water and splattered sauce caught his attention. As she helped him clean up the mess, he realized he had just agreed not to have sex with the woman until they cleared up her *issues*.

Sex—the one area in which they both had no problems whatsoever. Where he did his best work. Maybe he really was an idiot.

Their first fight. Hailey felt both bad and strangely relieved to have it over. The fact that Gage had been annoyed had been expected. What she’d hadn’t anticipated, however, was the hurt that had lingered briefly in his gaze, or the offer to abstain. To prove a point. For her.

She hugged her pillow tight and fought the warmth pooling within her that Gage would even suggest such a thing. Her other boyfriends had simply broken off with her when sex had been in question, and Jerry had cheated.

At the thought, she paled. Maybe Gage intended to satisfy himself elsewhere. Perhaps he had no intention of going without, but had made the grand gesture to look like the winner in their small skirmish.

But the more she thought about it, the more she disregarded that notion. For one thing, Gage hadn’t rehearsed his little speech. And the man who could barely boil water had been preparing dinner—for her. Not to mention that he’d looked as shocked by his pronouncement as she’d felt.

She wondered how he'd fare, and if he would actually try to enjoy their celibate time together, or punish her for it instead. Hailey distinctly hoped he'd choose the former.

The next night arrived all too soon, and she found herself knocking nervously on Gage's door. After a minute he opened it, dressed casually in shorts and a T-shirt. She had on the same, and entered, hoping their identical dress meant a pleasant evening lay ahead.

Gage cleared his throat, his eyes burning. "I thought about what you said last night. And though I think it's the most idiotic, moronic idea I've ever heard of, I rented a movie for us to watch."

She'd narrowed her eyes at his insults, but widened them when she saw a movie sitting by his television. The cover showed two naked women and one man with a large, erect penis crawling all over one another. "*Belinda's Delights*?"

He flushed and grabbed the video from her hands, tucking it into a nearby drawer. "No. I rented *Stargate* and *Prince of Darkness*." When she continued to stare at him, he scowled, "Well? SciFi or horror? Take your pick, I have more."

She wanted to see that porno, but thought their vow of celibacy made the pick somewhat risky. She had a hard enough time focusing on anything but his luscious body when in close proximity.

Swallowing loudly, and noting the extreme attention he gave her mouth, she croaked, "SciFi."

He offered a huge bowl of popcorn and insisted he sit right next to her so they could share it. To her surprise, and admitted disappointment, he made no overt moves toward her, and behaved like a perfect gentleman. After the movie, they talked about their favorite moments, whether they thought such a thing as alternate universes were even possible, and argued about which program was better, the movie *Stargate*, or the television series.

"Sorry, baby, but you're wrong. The movie has it all over the series. Come on. That's Kurt Russell there."

She shrugged. "Maybe. But the series is ten years strong. The public disagrees."

“The public can kiss my ass.”

She grinned, having a blast. “Now that’s the Gage we know and love.”

He stilled for a moment. “What?”

“You had me worried for a while. So polite and so hands free.” As soon as she said it, she knew she’d made a mistake.

His nostrils flared and his eyes darkened, and it was like looking into the eyes of a wolf about to strike. “I thought you wanted a gentleman.” He edged closer to her on the couch and stared at her lips, his eyes narrowing when she licked at their dryness.

Instantly, her nipples hardened and her pulse raced. “I just want to get to know you, Gage,” she said nervously, aware it wouldn’t take more than a nudge to make him jump her.

He ran his tongue over his lips. “You want to know me? Do you know how much I like sucking your breasts? How I love the color of your rosy nipples, and how you always taste so sweet right before you come? Do you know how much I love going down on you, how much I fantasize about taking you every way? Ever felt a cock in your ass, Hailey? Ever rode a dildo while you blew a guy?”

She stared at him, entranced, her panties growing wetter with his every word.

“My favorite color is red. I like to build things. I built that television stand and those cabinets. I have a thing for breasts and a fine ass and, in particular, for one confused, stubborn blonde with no idea of how hard she makes me by simply breathing.”

He stood, his erection prominent beneath his shorts, and he hauled her to the door. “It’s been fun, baby, really. But I have a long day tomorrow, and an even longer night ahead. So drive safely, and I’ll see you here tomorrow at seven. Wear something old. We’re going fishing.”

He slammed the door in her face, but before she left, she swore she heard his low moan. Caught in her own web of frustration, she drove home slowly, wondering how their evening might have progressed had they watched *Belinda’s Delights* instead of *Stargate*.

Chapter Nine

Days later, Sydney met her at a local bar downtown just minutes after work. She eyed Hailey with sympathy and shook her head. “You poor kid.”

Grabbing the nearest waiter, she ordered them each a Cosmopolitan. “He’s lasted an entire week? Unbelievable. And he attempted to make you dinner again last night?”

Hailey grinned and broke into laughter. “We settled for peanut butter and jelly, which I had to make. His version of baked ziti smoked up the entire apartment and had the place smelling like burnt tomatoes.”

“Ouch.” Sydney shook her head, amused. “You’ve got to admit he’s serious about you, Hailey. He gave up sex to make you see how much he cares. For a guy, that’s like saying *I love you more than pro-wrestling and football*. And not only is he going without sex, but he’s trying to woo you with pathetic culinary efforts. It’s sweet, actually.”

“And incredibly frustrating.” Hailey gulped down half her drink before the waiter had even turned away. “Bring me another.”

“Slow down, Hailey.”

“That’s what you told me before,” Hailey glared. “I had two wonderful weeks with Gage.”

“You still don’t know his last name, do you?”

She shrugged. “I think it’s Warren, but I don’t really care. I know everything else about him. He likes the color red, blondes and boobs. He hates veal, likes coffee without milk or sugar, and is so damned cute when he’s scraping noodles off the ceiling.”

“Off the ceiling?”

“I’ll be the cook in our relationship, for sure.” Just saying the R-word made her heart leap. “I think I love him, Sydney,” she said quietly.

“I think you do too. And I know he feels the same.” Sydney stared at her over her glass. “You know Derrick, his brother, finally called me.”

“Oh?”

“I haven’t met him yet, but we’ve chatted a few times. I have to tell you, he’s concerned about Gage.”

“Why?”

“Glad you asked.” Sydney leaned closer. “Because for the past six-plus months, Gage has been obsessed with a certain blonde—that’s you—living in the Abberwicks. He nearly had a coronary when you moved, and when he manipulated you into your first date, he was beside himself with glee. Derrick said, and I quote, ‘It’s damned embarrassing to see a man make such a fool of himself over a woman he’s never even met’.”

“And this is the guy you’re considering dating?”

Sydney shrugged. “He’s got a great phone voice. Makes you think of sex, wicked and dark. And he’s an architect to boot.”

“Whatever.” Hailey rolled her eyes. “Gage makes his own furniture, did you know that? And it’s beautiful.”

“Mm-hmm. So tell me again what he does for a living.”

“He’s a construction worker,” she said defensively.

“Is that what he told you?”

At Sydney’s somber tone, Hailey sat up straight. “Not exactly. Why do you ask?”

“You said he works with his brother, and his brother’s an architect. Derrick Warren, co-owner of WCC—Warren Construction Company. They make close to a million a year. High-end jobs, with the occasional smaller stuff.”

Hailey stared, incredulous. “Are you serious? Because Gage never mentioned it.”

“I did some research. But whatever he does, the man is seriously hung up on you. According to Derrick, he’s in love, and it’s frightening.”

After a short pause, Hailey admitted, “Gage told me he loved me a few weeks ago.”

“What?”

“I thought he was just basking in the afterglow.” She blushed. “You know. After some good sex? How was I to know he meant it?”

“What did you say when he told you?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You didn’t even acknowledge it? Hailey, you need some serious help.”

“Oh, Sydney. I thought it was just sex talk. Gage...he’s so special. He’s the only guy I’ve ever felt so free with. And I’ve wanted him since day one. But it’s not just the sex. This week together, we’ve had so much fun. And he makes me laugh.”

“Funny, but he never struck me as the funny type.”

“But he is. He’s almost as bad as I am. Hell, our first date he brought up his dad’s death at the table.”

“Maudlin, but not so bad.”

“And he told me that he loves big-breasted women,” she muttered. “With wide, full asses.”

Sydney choked on her drink. “He did not.”

“Yep, just as he was putting the moves on me.”

“And that worked?”

“Have you seen the man or haven’t you?”

“Okay. But is he that bad?”

Hailey thought about it. “I just think he doesn’t try too hard, or at least not with me. And I like that. He doesn’t fake the way he feels. He’s not into games, and we have a good time together.”

“Even without the sex?” Sydney looked skeptical.

“Well, I admit it’s been a week of frustration, but a fun week all the same.”

“So what are you saying, exactly?”

Hailey sighed. “That I’m going to put us both out of our misery, and maybe try out the L-word on him soon.”

Sydney lifted her glass. “To the future, and to you and Mr. Tool.”

“To the Tools. I like that.”

Sydney rolled her eyes. “You would.”



Gage slumped over his mother's counter on yet another Saturday morning, committed to the course he'd set. The past week had been surprisingly enjoyable, and expectedly frustrating as hell. Having opened the floodgates on his libido, stopping sex cold-turkey was harder to bear than going without for months at a time. But he couldn't deny the progress he thought he'd made with Hailey.

Instead of tearing each other's clothes off each night, they'd learned something new about one another. Hailey loved mysteries. He hadn't known that. And she attended aerobics twice a week, hated wearing pantyhose, and had a surprising thing for silk—which he planned on exploiting just as soon as she put an end to this insane celibacy.

He'd been jerking off every night and finding less and less satisfaction. Coming in his hands just wasn't the same as releasing into Hailey. Hell, even the thought of getting her pregnant made him harder than stone and shockingly content. Imagining a little blonde girl with his eyes made his heart hammer, and he could all-too-easily envision Hailey rocking his baby to sleep each night.

Damn, but she had him wrapped around her little finger. And he still didn't know how she felt about him. That "I love you" he'd uttered still hung in the air between them, though she had yet to address it. Instead, they'd watched movies, fished—hell, she'd caught more than he had—cooked together, and taken long walks through her neighborhood and along the Riverwalk. They'd even attended a bluegrass concert, and he'd been stunned to actually enjoy the music.

"You're in way over your head," Derrick murmured. "Sucker."

"Excuse me? Who was it who still owes me some comp time for a certain redhead's phone number?"

Derrick cursed him under his breath. But when Dylan suddenly showed up with Hailey under his arm, Gage was struck mute.

"Hi, Gage. I hope you don't mind, but Dylan invited me."

Dylan grinned slyly at Gage, and gave his woman a thorough once-over when she wasn't looking.

“Have I mentioned my brother is gay?”

Hailey blinked. “Really?” She glanced at Derrick, who stared back incredulously.

“Not *me*, him.” He nodded at Dylan.

“Actually, he prefers that no one label him,” Barbara said as she joined them in the kitchen. “And Hailey, I’m so glad you could come. Gage has been telling us so much about you.”

Hailey narrowed her eyes at him. “Really?”

“All good, mind you.” His mother held out a stool. “Please, sit. What can I get you?”

“I’d be happy to help, if you’d like,” Hailey offered shyly, and his mother beamed.

“Pretty and capable, how wonderfully different, hmm, Gage?”

“*Mom.*” Gage wanted to cringe. Great, why not mention all the other women he’d dated to the woman he’d finally fallen in love with? Like he’d thought, a few minutes with his family and Hailey’d bolt for sure.

“Did he ever tell you how we met?” Hailey asked in a wicked voice.

His brothers both grinned, and he groaned.

“No, as a matter of fact,” his mother said. “He just mentioned he’d met an incredible woman and wanted to know how best to impress her.”

“It was at a friend’s apartment. We were having a party and we took a few quiet moments to look out at the stars.” Hailey’s voice quieted. “I was looking up at Orion and made a wish, and then I saw Gage.” She glanced at him, and what he thought he saw in her eyes made his heart thunder with hope.

“Oh, that sounds so romantic. What did you wish for?”

Dylan shook his head. “No, no, Hailey. Don’t tell us. Don’t you know anything, Mother?” he asked with exasperation and a wink at Gage. “If you tell your wish, it doesn’t come true.”

“Mine finally did,” Gage said in a thick voice, “the minute I laid eyes on a feisty blonde with more brains than sense.”

Barbara glanced at him in surprise and then understanding. “You know, Hailey, I’d just love it if you could help me with these tomatoes. So tell me, where are you from originally? I didn’t catch an accent...”

Within the hour, his mother had all but collected Hailey’s social security number. Barbara passed a plate of rolls to Gage and smiled.

“Did you know, Hailey, that twelve is my favorite number?” She gave Gage a meaningful glance, but it was Dylan who filled him in.

“Do the math. That’s one spouse and two kids per each of us. Hell, do us all a favor and make triplets. I’m not marrying any time soon,” Dylan whispered. And as he stared at Hailey, his expression softened. “Besides, your kids will be so pretty. And smart. I like her, Gage, I really do. She’s nice.”

“You could do much worse,” Derrick whispered on his other side. “In fact, if memory recalls, you have.”

“Keep it up, smartass. I have an in with the best friend. Remember that.”

Derrick grumbled, his frown growing as their mother honed in on his singledom.

After breakfast, Gage offered to take Hailey home since she’d arrived with Dylan.

The drive home was pleasant but silent. All the way, Gage wondered what Hailey thought, if his mother and brothers had perhaps scared her away. Lord knew, Barbara could do it all on her own.

“Gage, I hope I wasn’t intruding. Dylan stopped by work last night, introduced himself, and surprised me with an invite, and I couldn’t keep myself from meeting your family.”

He shrugged. “I’d have taken you to meet them before now. I just didn’t want them to scare you away. My mother can be hard to take.”

Hailey reached for his hand on the wheel, and in the process her breast brushed his shoulder. Fire lanced through his groin, and he clenched his teeth to keep his cool.

“Your mother is a wonderful woman, and I can definitely see you in your brothers.” She grinned. “You’re all a bunch of smart-asses.”

Laughing, he pulled up in front of her house. He cleared his throat. “Well, we’re here.”

“Yes. We are. Look, Gage, I’d like you to come in for a minute. Do you have the time?”

Shit. He had nothing *but* time. “Sure.”

They entered together when the phone rang.

“I’ll be right back,” she said and left him for the bedroom.

He sat on her couch and flipped on the television. But the sight that met his eyes had him doing a double-take. There on her screen, a familiar blonde actress, *Belinda the porn star*, and her friends cavorted and frolicked through some rousing foreplay, anal and oral sex.

Glued to the scene, he could only stare, totally bemused as to what his video was doing in Hailey’s DVD player.

“Uh, Gage?”

He tore his gaze from the screen only to find himself tongue-tied again. Hailey stood in the hallway looking uncertain. She wore her hair in a twist off her neck, the silky strands clinging to her neck provocatively. A corset pushing her ample breasts together increased her impressive cleavage and accented her slim waist and full hips. He could see the side of her bare ass, and hardened like a stone. *Fuck me, she’s wearing a thong under that thing*. The corset showed a slim expanse of her belly before the sheer red thong she wore took over. And, try as he might, he couldn’t make out any blonde hair below her bellybutton.

“You shaved?” he asked in a hoarse voice.

She nodded and her breasts bounced, her nipples peeking over the lacy front of the material.

“Hailey, please tell me this means our celibacy is over. I’m ready to come in my jeans, and I don’t think I can take much more of your outfit without jumping you.”

She smiled and walked slowly toward him, making him take note of the fuzzy high heels she wore. It suddenly dawned on him she wore a similar outfit to the one Belinda wore in the movie, and he swore.

“You’re killing me, baby. Just killing me.”

When he was a breath away from reaching her, she stopped him with her hand. “Wait. I have something to say.”

“Say it fast.”

“Did you mean what you said that night? When you said you loved me?”

He froze, not sure what she wanted to hear.

“Tell me, please.”

Her brown eyes looked so deep, so pure, that he wanted to drown in her. “Yes,” he answered. “More than I ever thought possible. More than I deserve to, probably.”

Were it possible, her eyes smoked. “Say it.”

“I love you.” The words fell simply, truthfully, from his lips.

“Oh, Gage. I love you too.” She sniffed, and he quickly sealed her mouth with a kiss, distracting her from her tears.

“Baby, you don’t know how long I’ve waited to hear you say that.”

“A week?” she said breathlessly, her breasts nearly in his face.

He groaned and licked the tip of one rosy crest. “How about six months? Love at first sight, Hailey. And the more I’ve come to know you, the more I love you. Warts and all.”

She giggled, a sound he’d never heard Hailey make, and then she groaned as she reached for his jeans. “Gage, I’ve really missed you. But I don’t have the patience to wait for Belinda’s seven-ways-from-Sunday sex. Could you just love me now?”

He shoved his jeans to his knees and ripped the thong from her body. “Sure thing, honey. Because I’m two seconds from losing it, seeing you in that thing. Shit, Hailey. I’ve had dreams about this.”

She grinned, a naughty smile that had him moving with lightning speed. In seconds, he had her shaved pussy bare, her back flat against her floor.

“I can’t wait,” she moaned. “Fuck me, Gage.”

Without waiting another second, Gage thrust hard and fast into her. They both groaned at the sensation of joining, of oneness. His cock stroked. The sensations of her warmth and wetness clinging to him, of her body accepting him all the way, made his orgasm approach lightning fast. And as he pumped into her, she cried out her climax.

“That was quick,” he gasped before following her over the edge. “Too quick.” Rasping until he could again breathe normally, Gage remained within her, loving every precious second. “Damn, Hailey, you really had me worried this week.”

“The lack of sex killing you too?”

“Not as much as the lack of your trust.” He scowled. “That sounded way too much like something Dylan would say. But it’s true. I love you, Hailey. With or without the sex, it’s you who I want to be with. I want you to dog-ear all my books with your saved pages. I want you to cook for me.” He winked. “You to hug in bed, you to argue a movie with. And you’re still wrong about *Stargate*, by the way.”

She pinched him. “I’ll never agree.” She paused, then spoke in a quiet but steady voice. “I’m willing to see where this takes us, Gage. As far as you want it to go.”

“Sorry, honey, it doesn’t work that way. I know how far *I* want us to go. How about *you*?”

She stared up at him and tenderly grasped a lock of hair that had fallen across his forehead, tucking it behind his ear. “I want the whole package, Gage. Forever.”

He let out the breath he’d been holding. “Me too. I love you, Hailey. And I want to marry you, have kids with you. But when you’re ready. I’m willing to wait as long as it takes.”

She smiled with happiness, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Hell, baby. Don’t cry now.”

“I won’t.” She sniffed. “But I can’t marry you unless you agree to give up your side job.”

“Side job?” He suddenly paled. “Oh. Speaking of jobs. I don’t believe I mentioned what I really do for a living.”

“You’re a construction worker.”

“I work construction, yes. But I actually own part of the company.”

“I know. Sydney told me a few days ago. And Dylan mentioned it when he invited me last night.”

“Great,” he growled. “You might have mentioned it earlier. I was worried about how you might take it.”

“What? That you deliberately led me to believe you had little money, that you were a blue-collar stiff?”

“That, yeah. But it wasn’t that I didn’t trust you. Okay, in the beginning it was. But Hailey, I just wanted you to like me for me, not for my money or, God forbid, Derrick.”

She laughed and hugged him. “I get it, believe me, I get it. And don’t worry. Derrick and Dylan are handsome, but not nearly as hot as you are.” She clenched him tight and nipped at his earlobe. “So when do we try all of Belinda’s Delights?”

“All of them?” he rasped, his cock hardening all over again.

“Well, not yet. I’m still in the midst of proposing here. Now about your side job. It has to go.”

He blinked in bewilderment. “*You’re* proposing?” He paused. “What side job are you talking about?”

“No more *Mr. Tool*.” She laughed. “I think it was Faith who first came up with the name after we saw you gloriously naked, and well-hung, that fateful Friday night. That hammer between your legs had us all sleeping with pleasant dreams.”

Gage flushed a deep, fire-engine red. “Hell, Hailey. *Mr. Tool*?”

She laughed harder and he joined her.

“Well, you’re certainly the most *handy* man I’ve ever met. And I plan to keep you around.”

“No problem, baby. This is one show you’re going to enjoy for the rest of your life.” He leaned up to pry her corset open. “Now about Belinda’s Delights...the first rule is to be completely naked.”

“And the second?” she asked, love shining in her eyes.

“Is to never again agree to breakfast at my mother’s without my express permission.”

“Gage.” She laughed, then moaned when his lips found her breast.

“That’s Mr. Tool to you. And *only* to you.”

About the Author

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Duty wars with affection when Racor's greatest spy must decide who to trust, the evidence against her sexy suspects, or her heart?

A Scorching Seduction

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Available now at Samhain Publishing

Lt. Col. Trace N'Tre and Assassin Vaan C'Vail are hiding out in the only place the military can't touch them—on a pleasure planet in an island resort owned by Vaan's cousin. Gathering evidence on the outside, they know it's only a matter of time before they'll have to face their accuser, a high official in the Racor government.

Unbeknownst to them, Myst, Racor's greatest spy, has had her eyes on them for some time. The puzzle of these two alleged traitors doesn't fit, and Myst has made it her mission to find out why. But when the tables are turned and she's caught spying under the planet's hot summer suns, pleasure and affection confuse the issue, making her wonder who to trust—her heart, or the evidence against her lovers.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, frank language, ménage, m/m action, and hot sweaty adventure.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *A Scorching Seduction*:

"She's been way too quiet for way too long," Trace said grimly. He banged on the door and, not hearing anything, nodded to Vaan.

Unfortunately, her door failed to open with the security codes.

"I can't believe she's stalling. What does she think will happen when we open the door?" Trace shook his head.

Vaan scowled. Cursing to himself, he finally overrode her block and opened the door. As he'd suspected, the little liar had run. Before leaving her alone to change, they'd searched her room. Apparently, they hadn't searched well enough. Though irritated, Vaan couldn't help admiring the alluring young woman.

Long black hair, deep brown eyes and a body that made him hard just from thinking about it, Fia had been a temptation he'd done his best to ignore since her arrival two

months ago. Fighting his sweltering attraction to Trace was bad enough, but the timid sex sharer had stirred protective instincts within him he'd been hard-pressed to face. He didn't like feeling such an animal attraction for such a shy, malleable female. And despite a face and body made for sex, something about her had seemed...off.

Like Trace, he'd been suspicious. But after two months of nothing but her stellar service, as well as reports of her amazing fellatio and sweet little pussy, he'd been more than inclined to relax his vigil, at least as far as Fia was concerned.

Now, however, he felt like a fool. And the feeling didn't sit well at all.

"Trace, find her. I'm going to talk to Vela, and do some research into our missing girl."

Trace nodded as he left.

Vaan found Vela lazing about in her private pool with Clea rubbing her shoulders.

"Hey, Cuz."

Vaan shot her a frown, glancing at Clea, but Vela shrugged.

"Honey, Clea knows more about me and this place than the Racor army. So tell me, what has you all hot and bothered?"

"Did you give Fia your security codes?"

Vela sat up straighter. "No, why?"

"Because she used them to break into your quarters, and she somehow vanished from her room without using the front door."

Clea grinned. "That's because she probably went through the armoire to our private room."

Vaan gritted his teeth as he glared at Vela. To her credit, she flinched under his gaze. "Why wasn't I informed of that particular passage? And how many more are there in the compound, that as your head of security, I should know about?" Damn it all to hell. This place could have been crawling with the TAC and they'd never have known it until the shackles fell.

"Come on, Vaan. I can't share all of my secrets, now can I?"

"Vela..."

“Oh, all right. That particular passage connects with the central garden. If you’re small enough to fit through the window, you could conceivably find yourself in the inner courtyard. From there it’s a few more steps before you reach the compound perimeter. But don’t worry. Even if she’s after you, she couldn’t let anyone know you’re right here.”

“Unless she has a communicator, and she knows just where on the island her signals will pass.”

“Oh,” Clea said, biting her lip. “I gave her a map of the island a month ago, and I mentioned that little spot near the mirror pool.” At Vela and Vaan’s frowns, she sighed. “She seemed homesick. How was I to know she was after you?”

“So until this conversation, nothing seemed strange about her? Her side of the room is completely devoid of character. That doesn’t strike you as odd?”

Clea shook her head. “No, I asked her about that. But she said she was an orphan, and I thought she might have been down on her luck. She didn’t do the clients, and seemed kind of out of place here. But she begged me not to say anything. Poor kid. She really needs this job.”

“So if she didn’t service the customers, who did?” Studying Clea, he had his answer. “You did. You both have roughly the same build, the same coloring except for the eyes and lips, and the same proportions.”

“Maybe we should invite Fia back for a third.” Vela grinned, and Clea chuckled, running her hands over Vela’s shoulders to her breasts.

Vaan rolled his eyes. He’d learned all he needed from these two. “I’ll see you later. Vela, Trace and I’ll be out of touch for the next few days, I’m sure. Have Jakes take over the watch.”

She nodded, obviously distracted by Clea’s tongue in her ear.

Quickly leaving, he found Trace pacing at the edge of the compound bordering the tropical jungle covering the rest of the island. He could see the summer heat taking its toll on his friend, but had no time for pity.

“She entered here, not so long ago. We need to find her.”

“Yes, we do.” Vaan relayed his information, and Trace’s eyes darkened steadily until they were burning with anger. “But not you, not now. I’ll track her. I need you to head for

the mirror pool here,” he said, handing Trace a map. “It’s mostly through thick vegetation, so you should be sheltered from the suns. I located it once a few months ago. Use this and your nav guide to reach the pool. That’s where she’s eventually got to be headed for a withdrawal. There’s nowhere closer to communicate from, and since she knows we’re on to her, she’ll want a quick extraction, pronto.”

“Right. I’ll grab some supplies and meet you at the pool. But if I don’t see you there by third moon, I’m coming after you. When you find her, don’t let her go, Vaan. You know what’s at stake.”

Trace handed Vaan a dagger, and Vaan took it and moved out. He surged into the jungle, uncaring of what beasts might lie in wait. He had a new objective to handle, and a burst of excitement spiked his blood. Vaan lived for the chase, for the thrill of the hunt. And now he had new prey and a new thirst for vengeance to quench.

One weekend. His rules. Inhibitions left at the door.

Trust and Dare

© 2007 Shelli Stevens

Angry that yet another military man has done her family wrong, Abby Cook plots sweet revenge. But when her plan goes awry, she discovers that she's targeted the wrong military man.

Mason Tyler is not used to being disobeyed. Yet the curvy blonde has rejected his advances at every turn. When he catches her in the middle of a very destructive—not to mention illegal—prank, he offers her a deal. A deal that will keep her out of jail. And let him exact a little revenge of his own.

One weekend in his bed...no inhibitions, no refusals. But when the weekend is up, will Mason be ready to let Abby go?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Trust and Dare:

“Take off your shirt, Abby.”

Her eyes widened and she licked her lips. “Now?”

She'd given him the go ahead, let's see how far she'd let him take it. “Well, you did agree to play by my rules. You're not going to break that little bargain of ours just yet, are you? I might have to spank that sweet ass of yours.”

Her lips curled upward and her tongue darted across her mouth. “Oh, well now...that might be kind of fun.”

Hmm. Another thing he'd have to remember. She liked the idea of being spanked. He took a step forward and she giggled, throwing her hands up in front of her.

“Okay, okay!” Reaching down, she grabbed the hem of her tank top and jerked it over her head.

The blood in his veins pulsed faster at the sight of her lace-covered breasts. “Now your bra.”

She took a deep breath and reached behind her, unhooking her bra and sliding the straps off each shoulder. She pulled the purple scrap of lace off her breasts and let the bra drop to the floor. Oh, sweet God. He wanted to step forward and touch her, but that would screw up the entire striptease.

“The skirt.” His voice came out hoarse.

Her fingers were shaking as she unzipped the skirt and wiggled her hips so it fell down at her feet. She stepped away from it and reached down for the buckle on her heels.

“Did I tell you to take off your heels, Abby?”

She straightened up. “I just assumed—”

“Don’t assume. Leave the shoes on.” She looked so damn sexy, and the shoes just made the fantasy level go up.

“Okay.” She nodded and started to cross her arms across her breasts.

He closed the distance between them, grabbed her wrists, and gently tugged her arms away from her body.

Now that they were inside and under the lights, he could see every curve and swell of her body. Her breasts were large and crowned by fat, raspberry-colored tips. Her stomach and hips were full and pale, with smooth pink pussy lips peeking out between her soft thighs.

“Don’t cover yourself, Abby. You’re a sexy woman, and I wanna look at you.” He needed to ease her surprising moment of shyness. He lowered his head and brushed his mouth across hers.

She made the sweetest little sighing noise and pressed her body against his, opening her mouth under his lips. He slipped his tongue inside, tasting her sweetness and sucking on her tongue.

The kiss deepened, growing more urgent. He finally jerked away, their ragged breathing just audible over the music. He reached his hands between them to cup her breasts, running his thumbs over the firm tips.

“Mason...” She moaned and covered his wrists with her fingers.

He stepped back, letting her go as he went to the couch and sat down. Crooking his finger towards her, he murmured, “Come here, baby.”

She smiled and walked towards him, her hips swinging as her high-heeled feet moved across the carpet.

When she was standing in front of him, he opened his legs so she could stand between them. Putting his hands on her shoulders, he gently urged her to her knees in front of him. Had he gone too far? His worries were eased when he watched her eyes—sure enough, there was a shimmer of excitement in them.

Without even having to ask her, she seemed to know what he wanted. Her pretty manicured fingernails went to work unbuttoning his fly, and then pulling down the zipper. His blood pounded through his veins and his cock grew harder than it already was.

Lifting his hips, Mason shoved his pants and briefs down to his knees. His erection sprang free and her soft hand immediately wrapped around it. The air hissed from between his compressed lips and he closed his eyes.

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