

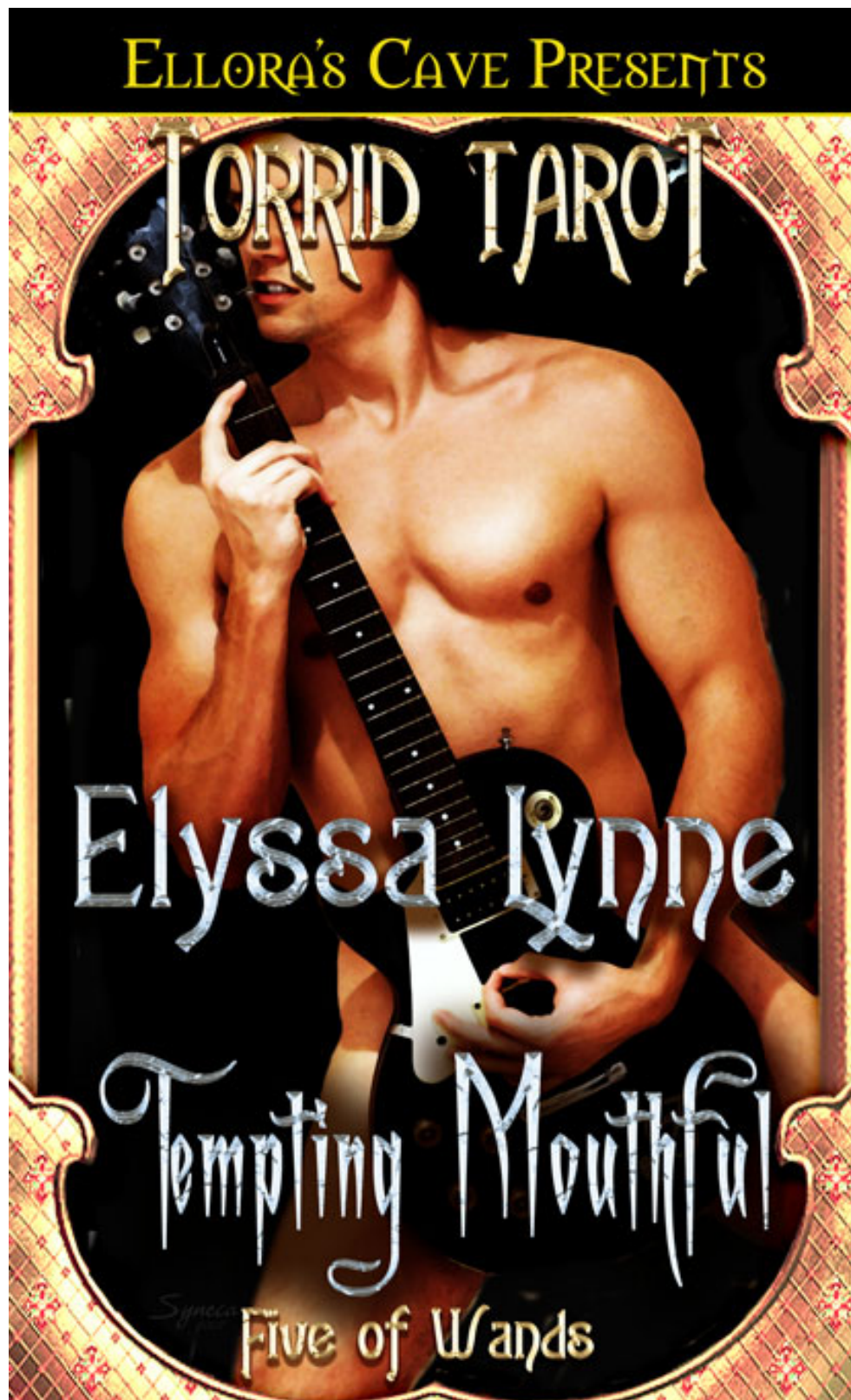
ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

Elyssa Lynne

Tempting Mouthful

Syneca
Five of Wands



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Tempting Mouthful

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TEMPTING MOUTHFUL

Elyssa Lynne

Dedication

For all of us who have too much stress in our lives — may we all find our havens of peace.

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Boy Scout: Boy Scouts of America Corporation

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The Five of Wands

Fives are cards of challenge, of testing. Wands represent passion and ambition. Put them together? The Five of Wands predicts conflict, new and unexpected obstacles that can result in fear and confusion. It predicts a struggle for power both against circumstances and within oneself. Only by accepting the challenges, mastering one's fears and overcoming the obstacles can one grow in strength and personal power.

In *Tempting Mouthful*, Danni's life is turned upside down when her beloved aunt is left in a coma from a car accident and Danni must oversee the completion of the remodeling of an old lodge into a retreat—before the bank forecloses. She has no experience with this sort of management and no legal authority to act on her aunt's behalf. She finds herself surrounded by conflict and obstacles and must search her heart to find solutions. Still she's left in no doubt that even though she might have bitten off more than she can chew, it's a real *Tempting Mouthful*.

Chapter One

Danni slowed the rental car as she rounded the curve that brought her out of the dense stand of trees. Before her, as perfect as a painting, lay the blue-gray waters of Mistral Lake. God, she'd forgotten how beautiful it was, with its rocky shore and the towering cedar and spruce and snow-capped Mt. Rainier hazy in the distance.

Her chest clenched with the emotion and stress she'd had to keep in abeyance all afternoon. She'd do everything in her power—hell, even beyond her power—not to let all this be snatched away from Aunt Zany.

Another half mile of undulating road following the rocky shoreline brought her to the gateway of the century-old stone and timber lodge. The new sign—still in need of a final coat of paint, she noted—renamed the place *Serenity Retreat*. Serenity. That's what Danni needed more than anything. And it was the one thing she wasn't going to get.

A hollow, desperate laugh left her trembling. This was supposed to be a stress-free break for recuperation but it had turned into the exact opposite.

She followed the winding drive lined with lavender shrubs and rhododendrons to the parking lot placed discreetly to the side of the lodge so as not to interfere with the spectacular view. A van with the retreat's new logo splashed across its side stood in the corner nearest the walkway leading to the front doors. A low white sports car sat two spaces away from it. No other vehicles. Well, she hadn't expected any, the retreat wasn't due to open its remodeled doors again until Wednesday. But she'd hoped for a workman or twenty, even though it was a little after seven p.m. Frowning, she pulled in a little farther down and switched off the engine.

She'd arrived. Now she should leap from the car, race inside and take charge of this nightmare before it all fell apart.

Instead she leaned back in the seat, reached for her purse on the passenger side and pulled out her much-worn tarot deck.

She shuffled it seven times then splayed the cards in one hand so she could see and touch each one. For a long moment she sat with her eyes closed, trying to find her elusive center, some semblance of peace that would allow her to know which card to choose, then gave it up as a lost cause. Nothing short of two weeks of stress-free R and R would bring her that. With a wry smile tugging at her lips, she ran her fingers along the edges of the cards, hesitated, reached for one then pulled her hand back and with certainty drew another.

Well, let's see if my fortunes improve. She set the deck on the seat and only then turned over the card.

The Five of Wands. *Damn and bloody damn.* That was the same card she'd drawn that morning just before boarding the plane. She'd hoped it only meant the usual airport madness. A whimper rose within her but she stuffed it down to lurk with all the others she'd repressed of late. The last thing she wanted right now was a challenge. After the three and a half months she'd just endured, why couldn't she draw a card of completion or triumph or—even better—lovers? She needed some love in her life. Hell, right now she'd settle for some great sex. Even mediocre sex was better than the nothing she had now.

Well, she'd just have to overcome all the challenges the damned card predicted. Again. Somehow—and god alone knew how—she had to get this retreat open and running for Aunt Zany. She would, because she had to, hold everything together, put aside her own exhaustion and triumph over that damned card. She would not let her aunt down.

A car door slammed and she looked up, startled. The sports car hadn't been unoccupied, apparently. And what an occupant. A man, tall and lean with dark hair waving below his ears and an afternoon stubble on his chin, strode toward her. His

jeans clung tightly to his thigh muscles and an Aran knit sweater set off his broad chest in a way that sent a pang of longing shooting through her groin, all the way to her clit.

Damn, he's gorgeous. Everything she wanted in a man. At least... Her gaze settled on his crotch where a large bulge indicated he might be just as gorgeous there as well. What she wouldn't give to spend a couple of hours exploring beneath his clothes with eyes and fingers and tongue—

Where is that coming from? Danni dragged her drooling gaze away from the man. That sort of a reaction wasn't normal for her. Or maybe she'd just been so busy lately she'd crowded sex and love from her mind. But right now they were screaming to get back in.

So why now, of all times, did I have to draw a conflict card?

And thinking of conflict and peculiar reactions, none of her city-bred instincts to fear an approaching male stranger sprang into action. No, she had a very different response, a tingling in her clit, a pooling of moisture in her cleft, an aching longing that flooded through her.

Then he stopped beside the door and smiled at her and she melted into a helpless puddle of craving.

She switched the key and rolled down the electric window.

"Ms. Laurent?" he asked in a voice to die for, deep and with a bit of a rumble to it.

I'll be anybody you want me to be. But she wasn't Ms. Suzanne Laurent even though she had to take over her aunt's responsibilities for the immediate future. With an effort she pulled herself together.

"I'm sorry, the retreat isn't officially open yet, not until next week." *But if you need a spot to sleep, I'll gladly find you a bed. Mine, possibly? Hell, get your mind off sex!* She hadn't even been inside yet, she had no idea what might be ready and what wasn't. She didn't even know if any staff would be on hand.

He grinned and she fought against the whimper of pure lust that raced through her.

"Do you work here?" he asked.

"I'm..." Her voice trailed off as she dragged her gaze from the gorgeous hunk beside the car to the beautiful old building and back again. "In trouble," she finished.

His grin broadened.

Pull yourself together, she ordered herself. "I'm sort of the interim manager."

He gave a short nod. The grin remained. "Then you ought to be expecting me. I'm Alec Wallace." A note of calm confidence sounded in his voice, as if he hadn't a doubt about his welcome.

Anyone who looks like that is bound to be confident.

"I don't know what or whom to expect," she admitted. She looked down at the card she still held.

"Conflict." He pursed his lips. "A real opportunity for growth and personal power, though, if you accept the challenge."

"Only obtained through struggle," she reminded him. "You know tarot cards?"

"My mother." He said it as if that explained everything. "Brought me up on them. Though she always said the card was of less actual importance than the relevance you saw in it, and that comes from your own subconscious."

Oh damn. Devastating to look at and metaphysically aware. "I don't suppose you have a black belt in some martial art too?" she demanded before she could stop herself.

"No." He laughed, a deep rich sound that washed over her as he opened her car door for her. "Only brown," he added as she climbed out.

She shot him a suspicious glance and saw the teasing light that hovered in his deep blue eyes. It made her want to crawl into his arms and find comfort. "Seriously?"

"Scout's honor." He gave her a jaunty three-fingered salute.

She let that pass. "I still don't know what brings you here." As much as she might wish it, she knew he wasn't a present for her from her aunt.

His brow creased. *God, even that's sexy.*

"Didn't Ms. Laurent tell you?" he asked.

Danni shook her head.

His frown deepened. "I had the impression she was a pretty savvy business woman. If you're the manager, Ms. —" He raised his eyebrows.

His inviting expression made her pussy weep with longing. "Colbert. Daniella. Danni." *Oh damn, I'm babbling now.* "And I'm only an interim manager," she added quickly. "Look, my aunt was in a car accident this morning." Aunt Zany was in the hospital unconscious at the moment, but she didn't think she ought to elaborate. "And since I was coming today anyway, I'm temporarily taking over getting the place ready to open next Wednesday."

"But she didn't tell you I'd be coming today?"

"I honestly had no idea there'd be a guest." She looked around, feeling helpless. But if Aunt Zany told him he could stay, that must mean the place had at least one habitable room.

"No. I'm —" He hesitated over his choice of words. "An advisor."

An advisor. That was what she needed more than anything. Relief flooded through her. She wouldn't have to face this alone after all. A smile spread across her face. "My aunt hasn't been able to tell me anything. She — she hasn't been able to talk."

"God, is she going to be all right?" he demanded.

Danni fought against a rush of emotion and to her annoyance felt her eyes fill with tears. She stared hard across the lawn with its scattered rhododendron and lavender bushes until she could control her voice. "The doctors are hopeful. She — she's had a head injury but they started acupuncture as soon as they read the medical instructions she has on file with them. They say that increases the chances when there's head trauma —" She broke off, dismayed by how much she was telling this stranger. But if Aunt Zany had hired him as her advisor, he'd better know the worst at once.

"Head trauma." He sounded solemn. "Are you going to cancel next week's retreat?"

"No!" She blurted out the word, alarmed, then tried to master herself. "No," she repeated more calmly. "We need to open the retreat as scheduled."

His eyes narrowed again. "Huge remodeling loan?"

Danni nodded. Apparently Aunt Zany hadn't told him anything yet. *If only she'd had the chance! If only she could be doing it right now.* "What do you know about the situation?"

"Not much," he admitted. "I know Ms. Laurent inherited this place a little less than four months ago. And that the remodeling had already begun."

A shaky sigh escaped Danni. "She also inherited a mortgage with payments large enough to have given her a heart attack."

Alec grimaced. "Some legacy."

Danni's gaze returned to the old lodge. "This place had been in Georgie Stewart's family since it was built just before the turn of the last century. She always had the most ambitious designs for the place. She loved it so much. And so does Aunt Zany." She swallowed the lump of emotion that threatened to bring fresh tears to her eyes. "My Aunt was Georgie's best friend. They'd been roommates in college and stayed close. Aunt Zany used to bring me with her when she came to visit. Then Georgie got cancer and Aunt Zany quit her job and moved here to help her out."

Aunt Zany had sworn to honor her friend's wishes for the lodge. And now it looked like it would be up to Danni to honor them as well.

Alec studied the building. "The place is really something. I walked around it when I first got here. It's going to live up to its name."

"Serenity Retreat." A half laugh escaped her. "God I hope so. Well, if we can make it serene and a retreat for the guests, even if not for us, I guess that's as much as we can hope for."

"Remodeling's always a nightmare," he agreed.

She tried to repress a shudder. She didn't know anything about remodeling or contractors or builders or organizing staff members and whatever else she was getting into. She didn't know a damned thing about running—or opening—a retreat. The whole prospect terrified her. Maybe—just maybe—if she'd had a chance to recover from the nonstop work and stress of the last few months, she might have felt a little more optimistic.

"Well." She started toward the path. "Let's see what's inside."

"The doors are all locked." Alec fell into step beside her. "I tried every one I found."

"I've got the keys." She'd picked them up at the hospital along with her aunt's purse.

A pang of nostalgia shot through her as they passed through the huge double doors and entered the spacious lobby. So much remained the same—yet there were subtle differences. The color scheme had changed from dark and bright to soft and gentle. The workers had stripped the dark patina from the log cabin walls, which now gleamed with the warm pale yellow-cream of spruce. The massive stone hearth still took up most of one wall, but new oatmeal-colored overstuffed chairs and loveseats now faced it. Woven tapestries hung on the walls depicting mountains, waterfalls and wildlife. A very serene atmosphere. Or at least it would have been if someone—probably a whole army of someones—had not stacked boxes of varying sizes everywhere, covering the throw rugs on the polished cedar floor.

And so far not a single employee.

Slowly she turned to face the reception desk with its office behind it and the door that led to the manager's small apartment. She took a step toward it, but a rustle of fabric made her swing back as a huge gray and white cat landed on the back of one of the loveseats. Danni went to it at once, picking the furry monster up and hugging it close until it protested.

Alec took the animal from her and it at once set up a purr that could have been heard in the next room. *Even the damned cat likes him*, she reflected. But Purrcival liked everyone, the perfect cat for a place like this.

Alec set the animal down. "Sorry, I needed my fur fix for the day."

She couldn't help but smile. "I have to come here to get mine. Now," she added to Purrcival, "are you still eating in the kitchenette? Just let me get organized and I'll check on you. Though my aunt," she added to Alec, "will have left all his bowls full. She's a sucker for that plaintive meow. So first things first." She looked around then headed toward the office. Alec trailed after her.

A great number of papers and folders stood in neat stacks on the desk. Others lay scattered in a haphazard fashion and a few, she saw, had fallen to the floor. Purrcival leaped onto the surface and sprawled to his full impressive length, knocking a pile of letters askew, then rubbed his face along a manila envelope, sending it and several others cascading onto the rug. Danni sighed and picked one up, glancing at the return address. Some Seattle corporation. The paper clipped to it, she saw in dismay, mostly contained questions and requested immediate answers that Danni did not have.

Alec stooped beside her and gathered a few more stray sheets. They both reached for one at the same time and his fingers brushed the back of her hand. The contact sent a shiver through her and she looked up, startled, intensely aware of the man at her side. He stared back at her, surprise in his expression. His eyes seemed to darken—or was that merely imagination on her part? Her stomach tightened and a heaviness settled in her breasts, accompanied by a tingling in her clit and a sudden rush of moisture in her pussy.

Why is my body doing this? That was a ridiculously strong reaction to a man she had only met minutes before. Terrifyingly strong. Yet he seemed to be reacting to their touch too.

He moved away slowly as if loathe to break their contact. His gaze burned across her, touching her face, her breasts beneath her light sweater, her hips and her jeans-clad

legs. It returned to her face and for a long moment she allowed herself to sink into the darkest blue eyes she had ever encountered.

"Check the computer," Alec said, his voice oddly tight. "Maybe you'll find a file that can tell you what's going on without having to wade through all this paper."

"Right." The single syllable quavered and she turned away, embarrassed, so aware of him she had trouble focusing on her immediate problems. *Concentrate*, she ordered herself. *And not on sexy long legs and broad shoulders and a chin with dark stubble. And those incredible melting eyes.*

She pulled out the desk chair, seated herself then reached across to the CPU tower. She could feel him moving close, standing just behind her shoulder. If she leaned back she could rest her head against his abdomen. She bet the muscles there were solid, defined. Would they be smooth and gleaming or covered in the same dark hair she could see just peeking above the crew neckline of his Aran knit sweater?

"Don't use computers much?" he asked.

She realized she hadn't pressed the button yet to turn the damned thing on. Heat flooded through her as he leaned across her to jab a finger at the on-off switch. She had already reached it and his finger covered hers.

"I'm just—" She broke off. She was just what? Imagining tearing off all his clothes and fucking him right here on her aunt's desk? Thinking about how she'd like to get him out of those jeans, find out if he wore boxers or colored shorts or even tighty-whities? Hell, she didn't really care. She just wanted to see what was under them.

"Hello?" He spun the swivel chair around until she faced him then leaned forward to place both hands on the arms on either side of her.

That brought his generous mouth within a foot of hers. And those damned mesmerizing eyes...

"You all right?" His gaze lingered on her, concerned, sexy as all hell.

She wanted to throw her arms around him and just cling. She caught the merest breath of a musky scent – pure him, she realized. He didn't wear anything chemical and smelly. He didn't need it. He was perfect just as he was.

She tried to push the chair back but it only gave an inch before stopping against the large wooden desk. She heard another stack of papers shift. "Sorry. Jet lag." Sex lag, more like, as in from needing it, not from getting too much. "Stress lag," she corrected herself. "San Jose and Seattle might be in the same time zone, but they're different worlds."

Those marvelous eyes continued to regard her with concern.

"Right." She twisted partway around. "Let's see if we can figure out what's going on here." Not likely when all she could think about was him, how his warm breath fanned her ear as he bent over her shoulder, how his arm brushed hers, how she wanted to lie back on the desk, spread her legs and welcome him inside her aching pussy. Maybe if she got a good fucking she'd be able to relax enough to let her brain instead of her libido do the thinking. Being alone with this man was playing havoc with her senses. She glanced through the door into the box-crammed lobby. "You'd think there'd be someone here."

"It's Friday night. Probably everyone will show up first thing tomorrow."

"Probably," she agreed and could only hope that was true.

She tried to turn the chair the rest of the way to face the desk and he stood back, letting her. She turned on the monitor while the computer continued its warm-up routine until finally the opening screen flickered into position. She leaned forward and felt Alec do the same. With an effort she concentrated on the various icons indicating programs and files that cluttered the screen.

"You don't like computers, do you?" A touch of amusement sounded in his voice.

"Hate them," she admitted. She glanced up to find his stubbly chin disturbingly near. "They're what I do for a living."

That throaty chuckle sounded again, causing her pussy to tighten and her nectar to pool.

"What, destroy them?"

"Don't think I'm not tempted. On a daily basis. I'm a database manager for a manufacturing corporation. Which means I'm a glorified coder and everything that goes wrong is my fault." A shaky sigh escaped her. "Or you might call me the grunt who has to fix all the bugs in the overpriced and under-tested software they keep buying." She stabbed at a key and glared at what the screen flickered to show her.

His eyebrows flew up in a humorous gesture. "No wonder you hate them. Been giving you a bad time lately?"

She was glad he'd kept it light. If he'd shown sympathy, she might have broken down in tears. "Just finished installing a new software release. Three months of debugging, working sixteen-hour days, seven days a week. Then three weeks of debugging the users, which was even harder, with me on call 24/7."

He winced. "And you finished that when?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I told them they'd just have to fend for themselves for a few days, called Aunt Zany and told her I was coming out here to hide. I knew the place wasn't open but I figured I was so tired I could sleep right through the workmen hammering or whatever they still need to do."

"Ouch." He shook his head. "Not quite the rest you bargained for, is it."

She shrugged. "Naïve of me, wasn't it? But we get what we get."

"And as I remember, you got the Five of Wands."

A struggle for power against circumstances and within myself. She tilted her chin to look up sideways at him. "Are you trying to depress me?"

He met her gaze and the amusement faded from his expression. For a long, shivery minute neither of them moved nor spoke. Then a crooked smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. "No. That's the...last thing on my mind."

Concentrate, she reminded herself. What was important right now was not getting laid but saving the retreat, coming through for her aunt. The consequences if she failed – A shudder ran through her. What would losing the old lodge do to her aunt's health when – never, ever if – she finally woke up?

With an effort she turned back to the computer. She opened a couple of likely looking files only to discover partial lists, nothing that gave the overall picture.

"The Whole Enchilada?" Alec asked.

It took her a moment to realize he read the name of one of the files. A spreadsheet? She clicked on the icon and after a few moments up popped a list, with the first column listing jobs to be completed and others labeled "company", "confirm", "start date", "needs prereq", "is a prereq", "supplies arrived", and many, many more. She studied the headings then, with a growing sense of dread, examined the columns. The only one that looked full to overflowing was the list of jobs. Not all of these had corresponding company names after them. A comforting number had both start dates and completion dates, but when she looked closer she saw that most of these, even the dates that had already passed, were not checked off. And as for the list of supplies that still needed to be ordered and the personnel not yet hired...

Her stomach dived toward her toes, throwing in a triple-twist half gainer on the way. *Oh god*. She had no experience in this sort of thing. How did one play ringmaster to a bunch of contractors and suppliers? And if she didn't do this right, if she didn't get the damned place open on time, they couldn't bring in the customers to pay off the hefty debt created by this remodeling project. She had no clue where to begin.

"Hmmm." Alec looked at her with his mobile eyebrows arching upward once more. "What do you think?"

"I think," she said slowly, "I've just bitten off a huge mouthful and it's more than I can chew."

Chapter Two

You're here for a purpose, mister, Alec reminded himself. And that purpose wasn't to fuck the delectable Ms. Daniella Colbert. He had a job to do. A simple straightforward job at that. Or at least he'd thought it would be. But then he'd met Danni and suddenly nothing seemed either simple or straightforward any more.

Damn, I'm sick of job-hopping! He'd thought he'd found himself a home at last, a place where he could make himself a niche with a company that he didn't despise. He'd sworn to himself—and to his exasperated family—that this time he wouldn't climb on his moral high horse and stomp out, shaking the dust of the latest law firm from his patent leather shoes.

At least this time serving the corporate interest looked like it just might fit right in with doing what was best for the small businessman. Or in this case, the sexy businesswoman. She wasn't small, just a perfect armful. Her breasts—

Concentrate, mister.

What had he been thinking about? *Oh right.* With the owner of the property apparently in a coma and her next of kin stressed out and not having a clue how to run a retreat, it might be in everyone's best interests for them to sell.

He studied Danni covertly but his thoughts strayed once more from her ability to bring this remodeling nightmare to fruition and settled instead on her sweetly swelling breasts. He liked her strong chin, high cheekbones and the light red hair curling about her face and shoulders. A desire surged through him to kiss each and every one of the freckles scattered across her pale skin. And as for her body... Well, he wouldn't mind exploring those rounded curves in minute and intimate detail.

And then there were her vivid green eyes. Even holding so much strain they were lovely. She'd been working too damned hard lately and looked as if she were stressed beyond endurance.

He didn't want to see her that way. He wanted to see her — He tried to break off that thought but already the image fixed in his mind of her naked and sprawled on the sage green throw rug, knees up and spread to offer him her pussy.

That would be one way to help her unwind. His groin ached with sudden, urgent need, his balls tightened and his cock signaled its readiness to oblige. How he wanted to bury it deep in her core. Hell, he wouldn't mind burying it in her lovely mouth or between her breasts. Those rounded mounds provided an intriguing shape to her sweater. Not huge. Just perfect handfuls. Through the light knit fabric he could see her nipples standing erect. They weren't that way a few minutes ago, were they? He was sure he'd have noticed — and remembered. Did she grow wet looking at him in the same way his cock strained just being near her? He'd bet he had drops of cum seeping out of his cock already.

"Where do we begin?" she mused.

It took him a moment to realize she stared at the computer screen, not at his penis, and the extent of his disappointment surprised him.

"Never done this sort of thing before?" And did he mean running a retreat or fucking a total stranger?

"No. I've picked up in the middle of projects before but those were computer programs, not..." She waved her hand, indicating the stacks of papers, the office and presumably the unfinished remodeling beyond. A frown creased her brow.

He waited, watching the determination fill her eyes.

"This isn't enough to let me know where matters really stand," she said at last, "so I need to find someone who can tell me." She picked up a pen and tapped it absently on the desk.

"It's almost eight on a Friday evening," Alec pointed out. "You probably won't get any answers from any of the companies."

"Which leaves the staff." She gave a short nod and went to work with the keyboard and mouse.

After studying the icons, she opened one labeled "Fellow Travelers". Not a list of communists, as he'd half wondered, but a list of staffers for the retreat along with their positions, addresses and, most usefully, their telephone numbers.

"Housekeeper?" Alec suggested.

Danni nodded. "That would be..." Her voice trailed off as she ran her finger down the column of names. "Laura Gustafson. God I hope she's efficient." She picked up the phone, checked the number and punched it in.

She waited, the pen stilled, and Alec watched her. Capable, he decided. Well she'd have to be, holding down a position like hers. Logical and orderly. A problem solver. So would she be like that in bed? No nonsense, straight to the point? Or would her creative side burst free with innovative sex play? He wanted to find out. Damn it, he had to find out or he'd come right in his jeans just from looking at her.

A woman's voice on the other end answered, though he couldn't hear her words. Danni explained the situation in a few short sentences and he could hear the exclamation of dismay from the housekeeper.

"If we're to have this place ready to open by Wednesday for her—" Danni began only to break off as the other voice cut across. Danni sat in silence, her expression relaxing as she listened.

Alec contented himself with studying the way the tiny lines at the corners of her eyes smoothed out. And the fine sheen of moisture that glimmered in her eyes. She really cared about getting this place running. Or was it just her aunt she cared about? *Damn. It matters to me*, he realized.

More than my job?

Don't go there. Not yet. Once she gets a load of the mess she's facing, she'll probably welcome my suggestions with open arms.

And might she welcome me that way too?

Her hand trembled as she thanked the woman and hung up. "There just happens to be a meeting tomorrow morning at nine-thirty for staff and workers. I'll find out then where we stand."

"What will you do if you can't get the place open in time?" he asked, curious. Hell no. He was more than that. He really wanted to know how she felt.

Her chin rose. "We *will* get it open. Failure is not an option."

"It usually is," he pointed out. "It's what happens when you don't succeed."

She shook her head. "I've got to. For my aunt's sake."

"You're sure? I mean about how much she actually wants the place as opposed to how much she feels obliged to make a go of it for her friend's memory?"

She opened her mouth then closed it again. She drew a long, trembling breath and straightened her shoulders. "This place means the world to my aunt. And not just because of what Georgie means—meant—to her. She never missed a summer coming here and she brought me with her when I was growing up. She helped Georgie with the plans to convert it to a retreat. I think it was as much Aunt Zany's dream as it was Georgie's." Tears, never far from her eyes during the last hour, hovered on the fringe of her lashes again. "I'm not going to let her wake up to learn I ruined it for her."

"No," he said slowly. "I can see where you can't."

"I'll do whatever it takes."

"Tomorrow at nine-thirty isn't long from now," he told her. She'd find out then just how much trouble she faced, would learn that she couldn't do all that needed to be done. He experienced a twinge of guilt and tried to push it aside. She'd realize soon enough he'd be doing her a favor in the long run.

"I just wish the meeting were right now." She clenched her fists. "I'm no good at waiting. I want to solve everything at once!"

"What you need to do right now is relax," he told her.

"Fat chance! How can I when I don't know where we stand? God I wish the waiting were over and we could get right to work."

He could get her to unwind. With a whole evening—and night—ahead of them... He might start by rubbing her neck and shoulders. Then when the tension began to seep from her body he could slide his hands down to her waist, around her hips. If he got it just right, would she beg him to touch her breasts, maybe draw her nipples into his mouth and tease them with his tongue and teeth? And what he'd like to do to her pussy—

Another pussy, this one of the tailed and clawed variety, gave a pointed meow from where it still lounged on the desk.

Alec gave a short laugh, glad to be distracted from his erotic thoughts. His cock had grown damned uncomfortable. "Looks like the resident furry wants his dinner."

"Oh." She looked at the cat. "The kitchenette, I think."

She stood but Alec didn't move away. She was so close, if he just leaned a fraction his chest would brush against those enticing swells. The erect tips of her nipples pushed against her sweater, clear for him to see, as if they begged for his touch. Her lips parted and her tongue darted out, circling them. Not a conscious come-on, he realized. Her expression was bemused, not knowing or sultry. That was a huge turn-on for him.

He stepped back. If he didn't, he was going to drag her into his arms and kiss her senseless. And that would only be the beginning. He wanted her naked. Hell, he just wanted her. *I've never wanted a woman this badly.*

Beyond the small office lay a combination sitting room and kitchenette. Another door led to a bedroom and bath.

"Aunt Zany's apartment," Danni said. "Georgie's before that." She looked around. "I'm glad she's redecorated, though I see some of Georgie's things are still here."

Purrcival padded into the kitchenette and sat on the edge of the newspaper that lay on the floor, holding three bowls. Danni poured more dried kibbles into one, checked the water in a second then picked up the third, which held traces of wet food. She set it in the sink then opened a lower cabinet that contained more bowls and neat stacks of small cans containing various flavors. While the cat wound around her legs purring, she popped the lid on one and served up the beastie's dinner.

"Pity the restaurant in this place isn't open," Alec said. "I'm starving."

"It probably isn't stocked with food yet, either," Danni agreed. She checked her aunt's little refrigerator. "Not much, but we might be able to make a meal." She sounded dubious. "I'm a lousy cook."

"Then let me look."

"What, you're a chef?"

"One of my brothers is." He grinned at her, enjoying her wide-eyed expression. It amazed him how so much efficiency could fall apart when taken out of her familiar sphere. Would sex be familiar and taken in stride or would she be delightfully unsure of herself? He was burning to know. Literally. His cock felt like it was on fire and there was only one sweet, moist well that could put it out.

Damn, he had to get his mind off sex. *Food. Think about food, not about tasting her pussy. And not about drinking in her sweet honey. Think about fixing her a dinner to help her relax.*

And a good dinner needed something to accompany it. "Does this place have a wine cellar?" he asked.

"I honestly can't remember. But we can find out."

They went first to their cars and brought in his duffel bag and guitar case and her rolling suitcase. She glanced at the instrument but didn't say anything, for which he was glad. Or maybe she didn't like guitar music? That possibility disturbed him.

"Rooms later," he decided. "I'm hungry and you still need to relax."

They set their burdens in the lobby, then Danni led the way to the kitchen, a large old-fashioned affair with counters and tables and hanging pots and a very modern—and expensive-looking—row of ovens and refrigerators. To one side he spotted a door which he opened to be greeted by a wave of cold emitting from the dark recesses.

"Cellars," he announced, pleased. He flicked on a light and started down. He'd descended just a couple of steps when he realized Danni wasn't following. "Want to wait?"

"N-no. I need to see what's down here."

"Besides the rats and spiders?" Her horrified expression made him laugh. "Just kidding. There'll have been workmen down here." Possibly. Would a serenity retreat stock wine? *I sure as hell hope so.* He took her hand. "Come on, I'll beat off anything that tries to attack you."

Something flickered in her expression and her fingers tightened on his. A jolt of desire shot through his groin, his already engorged cock, all the way to the soles of his feet. He kept hold of her, not wanting to let go. She gripped the railing with her other hand and he led her down the remaining steps to the slab floor.

The chamber in which they stood was surprisingly small, perhaps twenty by twenty feet. It had obviously been used as a storage area, for it boasted a collection of old pieces of furniture, trunks and a strong smell of mildew.

Danni shivered. "Like an attic in reverse."

His fingers squeezed hers. "Doesn't look like anyone ever stocked much wine down here, but I see a few bottles."

"We'll need to get more." She looked around. "There's room for lots of racks. We'll get this junk hauled out and carted away, then have a talk with someone who knows—and sells—wine."

He drew her with him to where the meager selection remained. Without letting go of her, he pulled out the first one in a row. "Riesling?"

"Sounds good."

He turned and there she was, only inches from him, shivering. "You're cold."

Without thinking he wrapped his arm with the bottle around her shoulders and drew her close. She stiffened and he swore mentally at himself. But before he could release her and apologize, her face tilted up toward his with a look of such longing in her lovely green eyes that he couldn't stop himself. He lowered his mouth to hers. Her lips were soft and yielding and a low moan escaped her. *Damn, I'm insane with this woman.*

He pressed harder and her mouth opened beneath his pressure, which was all the invitation he waited for. He ran the tip of his tongue along her lips then inside, slowly, testing the way, his raging desire for her battling against his resolve not to rush things, to be able to stop if she pulled back. Her tongue met his and his balls tightened and his erection strained against his jeans, demanding a softer, more welcoming sheath.

Abruptly she pulled back. His groan of frustration died in his throat as she cupped his stubbly chin between her hands then ran them over his shoulders.

"Alec?" She spoke his name in a bemused whisper, half a question, half an invitation.

Her expression of awe proved too much for him. He shoved the wine back on the rack, located the bottom of her sweater and eased it up, running his fingers along her smooth skin. With a sigh she pressed her breasts against his abdomen. He could feel the hard buds of her nipples, see the longing in her eyes. Feel the insistence of his cock. He reached behind her, found the hook for her bra and released it. Then he pushed her away enough to get his hands between them and grasp her breasts, squeezing their fullness, his thumbs rubbing the pebbled tips. His cock felt like it might explode.

"Danni—" he began.

"Fuck me," she breathed. "Oh god, Alec, please fuck me."

His blood pounded. He pulled her sweater over her head, taking the loose bra with it. Her breasts were beautiful, small, neat with little rosebud tips that begged him to cover them with his mouth. He brushed his fingertips across the rigid peaks and his cock screamed to bed itself in the moist warmth of her pussy.

A horrible thought struck him. He'd been so focused on his damned job problems lately, he hadn't had a girlfriend. *Do I still have that condom in my wallet?*

"Suck me, Alec. Taste my breasts." Her fingers tightened in his hair, drawing his head toward those luscious targets.

Conscious thought faded in a fog of lustful hunger. He licked the tip of her nipple then sucked it into his mouth like he'd been longing to do. With his tongue he rolled it against the back of his front teeth. She moaned and clutched his head, raking her fingers through his hair.

He fumbled for his wallet, pulled it out and...*yes. There it is.* The package felt a bit worn, but who cared as long as the rubber inside was still good. He had nowhere to set it and he wanted his hands free to explore her body. With reluctance, he released the breast he held.

"Hands full?" she asked, her gaze resting on the foil wrapper he clutched.

"I'd rather they were full of your breasts," he admitted. "Or your beautiful rear as I hold you against me. In fact the sooner we get you naked so I can hold every part of you, the better."

She stared at him, her expression once again bemused. He grinned and reached for the button and zipper that fastened her jeans. As soon as he'd loosened them, he dragged them down, taking her silky panties with them. He tossed the garments to join her sweater then pulled off his fisherman knit and added it to the pile.

"Oh," she breathed. She ran her hand through the hair that curled over his chest, then down his abdomen to his stomach, at last grasping the waistband of his jeans.

Her fingers sliding along his flesh caused his cock to engorge to the point of pain. Her hands trembled, he realized, but she freed his jeans and pulled down both them

and his boxers, allowing his shaft to spring forth, heavy yet rising like a flagpole. He kicked off his shoes and stepped out of the last of his clothes. At once she wrapped her arms about his waist and raised her face to his. His erection pressed against her rounded stomach as his mouth devoured hers.

Damn, I must be dripping by now. He ripped open the packet and freed the condom. With an effort, he broke contact with her long enough to pull the thing on. It was never easy, the damned things tended to be too small for him, but he managed. The sensation was almost more than he could bear in his extremely aroused state. But it wasn't the one he wanted. He longed to feel Danni enveloping his cock. Nothing but Danni. Well, he'd take whatever he could get.

He pushed her flat against the wall. With his hands encircling her plump rear, he lifted her. She wrapped her arms about his neck, kissing his forehead, her lips feathery soft. With care, he positioned her so the head of his penis rested in her cleft then lowered her until he slid deep inside her tunnel.

A groan escaped him. *Damn, that feels good.* She felt good, not only her pussy but the way her body pressed against his, the way her breasts thrust against his chest, the way her legs wrapped about his hips, capturing him, holding them together. He shifted her weight so he could pull back, all the way out until the head of his hard-on slid once more through her cleft, coming to rest on her clitoris.

She tilted back her head, crying out, then her mouth came down hard on his and he lost control. He plunged into her depths once more, then again and again, harder and faster. She moaned against his mouth, writhing her hips so her mons pressed against his pubic hair, grinding her clit each time he hammered into her. The sensations were incredible, spiraling tight inside him, sending shooting flames through his groin, down to the soles of his feet. He pressed his face against the curve of her neck where it joined her shoulder and sucked her sweet-smelling flesh. Then a gasping shout escaped her as the first contraction of her orgasm swept through her. Her cry faded into soft moans and the sounds and sensations of her ecstasy catapulted him over the brink right after

her. For what seemed like an exquisite eternity, the muscles of her vagina continued their rhythmic squeeze and release, squeeze and release, milking him of his seed as wave after wave spurted from him. When at last he was drained he clung to her, nuzzling his face against her throat, kissing her there while his fingers caressed her rear. Her cheek pressed against the side of his head, buried in his hair, while she murmured his name over and over.

"Damn that was incredible," he breathed between nibbles. "You're incredible." He tightened his hold on her even more, surprised by how much he wanted to keep her right where she was, let his cock remain buried in her, as if he sought to join them into one flesh. He hadn't felt like this, so complete, so fulfilled, in as long as he could remember. *Or have I ever?*

She shivered again and he eased her back to the floor then snatched up his discarded sweater. "Here, before you freeze."

He tugged it over her head. It caused him a pang to watch her sweet face vanish, then her breasts, her stomach, her mons. It fell to the tops of her thighs, covering her most delectable parts. Of course just her legs were enough to send his libido into overdrive. With an effort he dragged his gaze from them, pulled on his jeans and scooped up the rest of their clothes.

"Up the stairs to the warmth," he told her. "Fast. I'll bring the wine."

He grabbed the bottle and followed her, getting a great view of her curvaceous legs and tantalizing glimpses of her beautiful ass. He could never figure out what some guys saw in those scrawny model-types. He liked a woman with flesh on her, soft and yielding to his mouth and his cock.

Once again in the vast kitchen, he turned out the cellar lights and closed the door. Danni, flushed, waited for him by the exit. She didn't meet his gaze but turned away, back to the lobby door. He switched off the kitchen light too and followed her back to her aunt's apartment.

He tossed their clothes onto a chair and went into the kitchenette. Opening cupboards at random, he at last found one that held, along with a couple of mugs and tumblers, a set of four wineglasses. He brought out two, set them on the small table and rummaged in drawers for a corkscrew.

"Aren't you cold?" Danni sounded uncertain.

He looked over his shoulder and grinned. "Not a bit. Hey, don't you get dressed," he ordered as she pulled her jeans from the pile. "I want you just the way you are."

"But don't you want your sweater?"

"I want it exactly where it is. It's never looked better." He pulled the cork, wiped the mouth of the bottle and tipped wine into the two glasses. He carried one to her.

She stood staring at him, a bit uncertain, the bemusement still softening her green eyes, her light red hair tousled from their encounter in the cellar. She looked absolutely adorable.

"Drink," he said. "Sit at the table and finish that off."

She eyed him, her expression a bit uncertain, but after a moment she settled on one of the straight-backed chairs.

He checked the contents of the cupboards, looked in the tiny refrigerator then studied the meager contents of the pantry shelf once more. At last he emerged with a couple of small potatoes. After putting about three inches of water into a saucepan, he set it on the tiny stove to boil. He then washed the potatoes, chopped them into fine pieces then slid them from the cutting board into the pan.

Behind him, Danni clapped. "What do you do for an encore?"

"Just wait and see."

"I'm dying to find out. Literally. I'm starving."

"Have more wine." He rummaged in the fridge again and came out with a chunk of cheddar and the last few slices of bacon. He put the former on the chopping block and set the latter in a frying pan to sizzle.

He heard the sound of her picking up the bottle from the table, the clink as the rim touched her glass. Good. She needed to relax. Not to get drunk, just mellow. His cock stirred in his jeans. *Mellow and sated with food and ready for round two.*

Except he didn't have another condom.

Hell. Well they'd just have to work around that. He couldn't possibly wait to enjoy her body again until he'd located one.

In the end he served them two omelets made with mushrooms, eggs, onion, potato and bacon. He set the plates on the table, snagged a spare chair with his bare foot and pulled it into place.

She considered his offering with wide eyes. "It smells fantastic."

"My brother's a good cook. He taught me a few things worth knowing." Such as the fact that women would melt for a man who knew his way around a kitchen. Apparently Jimmy had known what he was talking about. "It doesn't taste bad either," he assured her, gesturing toward her meal with his fork.

She took a bite and her eyes closed. "My god, you can cook, you can—" She broke off.

"I can fuck?" he supplied, hopeful.

A delightful blush flooded her cheeks. "Yes, you can."

"Then finish that meal and I'll prove it to you again." He didn't know if he could wait that long. Already his shaft hardened once more just at the prospect of fucking this incredible woman again. And again. Then maybe, after they'd slept for a little while, he'd fuck her a couple more times. He wanted to try every position he could think of, every technique he'd ever heard sniggered about in locker rooms at the gym or over the water coolers at his various places of employment. This was a woman made for fucking. And he wanted to be the one who did it.

Chapter Three

Danni stole peeks at the man across the table from her as he demolished his omelet. She had thought all she wanted was a good dinner and a warm bed. Well, she was getting the good dinner. And after that? She needed sleep—real sleep, not just the light, restless doze she normally got. But she needed to feel him pounding into her even more.

That fact amazed her. She was no virgin, not by a long shot. But with the guys she'd dated, sex tended to be unimaginative, over all too soon and not repeated until the following week. The idea of fucking a guy twice in one night left her breathless. Could Alec? Her gaze wandered over him. *Oh yeah, if any guy can it will be this one.* He was powerful, his broad shoulders and laughing eyes speaking of stamina, of thrusting power. Of raw sexuality. It made her pussy weep with longing.

He caught her peeping at him and a little-boy grin, as sexy as all hell, tugged at his mouth. "Keep eating."

"I am," she protested.

His smile softened to an expression of concern. "You're worried about your aunt."

She stared at her forkful of omelet. "I hate the fact there's nothing I can do to help her right now. I don't know anything about medicine. So I'm not letting myself think about her and concentrating instead on things I *ought* to be able to manage." Well, that and getting laid again. *Can I manage that?*

"What are the doctors saying?"

She shook her head. "They don't know why she's still unconscious. In a coma." There. She'd said the dreaded word. A shaky sigh escaped her. "I didn't even know about her accident until my plane had landed and I turned my phone back on. That's when I found the message from the hospital." She took another bite of the delicious

concoction, forcing herself to think about the taste and texture rather than the uncomfortable lump of worry that had returned to her stomach.

“And just when you were really in need of a rest.”

Danni stabbed her fork at the omelet, hacking off another bite. “Don’t remind me. I wonder just what I’ve stumbled into here.”

He propped one elbow on the table and rested his chin in his palm. “Nothing you can do to help your aunt, nothing you can do tonight to get this retreat in order. Which means you can concentrate on relaxing. And since your aunt isn’t able to pamper you, looks like I get to deputize for her.” The corners of his eyes crinkled and his mouth twitched into a smile that could have been designed to melt hearts and heat libidos. “I can think of a lot worse fates.” His smile broadened suddenly. “Full?”

She pushed aside the plate she hadn’t even realized she’d emptied. “That was fantastic.”

“Yeah?” He leaned across and picked up the dishes. “Just wait until you see what I’ve got planned next.”

“I’m all—” She considered his phrasing. “Eyes,” she finished.

“And breasts and legs and all the other essentials,” he agreed as he headed for the sink with the detritus of their meal.

“I—” She broke off, caught off balance by his comment. Was he really thinking about sex again? The memory of what had taken place in the wine cellar left her unnerved. She’d never begged a man to fuck her before. She’d never given herself over to such unbridled passion. Oh, damn, that sounded so trite, but it was true nonetheless. In his presence it became difficult to focus on the worries and problems that had been heaped upon her, on the fact she hadn’t a clue how to keep everything on course.

He returned to the table. “Damn, I thought I had you relaxed a bit. Here.” He positioned himself behind her and his strong hands kneaded the knots in her shoulders then worked her neck as his thumbs dug into the soft flesh beneath the base of her skull.

"Ohhh," she breathed. "Do you have another brother who's a massage therapist?"

His deep warm chuckle rolled over her. "No. A sister. And according to her, if I can just find the right spot..." His voice trailed off as his hands worked their way down her back to the place that seemed always to hurt these days.

Sudden tears flooded her eyes. She caught her breath on a sob then her shoulders began to shake and she couldn't hold back. She shuddered with her effort to stop, mortified by her loss of control, by how her eyes would be reddened, her face blotchy – in short, how she had just destroyed his attraction to her. She pulled free from his touch, keeping her back to him.

"Found it." He sounded satisfied.

"What?" she managed. *Damn, doesn't Aunt Zany have a box of tissues anywhere around?* She'd have to resort to a paper towel in another minute.

"Your release point. No, honey. Don't try to stop. Let it out." He wrapped his arms about her waist, drawing her backward against his lean, muscular body.

She could feel his erection pressing into her rear. *He still has a hard-on? Even with my crying? I thought most guys found tears a real turn-off.* She sniffed. "I-I'm sorry."

He kissed the side of her head. "Don't be. You needed this. You've been through hell lately. There's nothing worse than trying to keep all that emotion and stress bottled up inside you. It only makes you sick. So let it all out, honey. I'm here for you." He moved his hands to her shoulders and turned her around.

She buried her face against his neck and fought for control. "I-I'm getting you wet. And I'll look horrible."

"No, honey. You'll look as beautiful as ever."

She choked, which effectively stopped the flood of her tears. "You don't have to be so damned patronizing." A grin threatened to break through, but she fought it back. "Everyone looks a mess after crying."

He caught her chin and brought her face up to his. "I thought you were more spiritually attuned than that. Beauty," he said in lofty tones, "comes from within." His teasing manner faded and a slight frown crept between his brows. "You glow with it. It's in your eyes, in your skin and in the sweetest face I've ever seen. You—" he broke off to kiss her, "are—" he kissed her again, "beautiful."

She stared at him, blinking the moisture from her eyes. He kissed it away, first from one, then the other.

"Let's check those cards and see if you get a more favorable reading, shall we?"

She was standing there, her face tracked with tears and her nose undoubtedly an ugly shade of red, and he called her beautiful and actually meant it and wanted to read the tarot cards with her? A giggle started deep within her and bubbled forth. "You— You're crazy."

He beamed at her. "And you're smart, too. You've figured me out and you've only known me for a few hours. Now where's your pack?"

She fetched it from her purse and they sat at the table again. It felt odd being bare-assed without so much as her panties. It was arousing though. And everything about this man was arousing too. Hell, she just might be able to look forward to another fucking before much longer after all. Then if he really did have the incredible stamina she suspected, another one after that.

"Go ahead and shuffle," he said.

She did, seven times, then spread the cards face down across the table with her right hand. She positioned her left about two inches from them and moved it slowly along the line, hesitating, continuing, hesitating again. *This one? No, that one back there.* She picked it up and turned it over.

The Five of Wands.

"Again?" she cried, not knowing whether to be annoyed or afraid. "That's three times in one day."

"Have you drawn any other cards?" he asked, frowning.

She shook her head. "Just three selections. All the same card." She gathered the deck together and shoved them back in their box. "I think I need a different pack."

The tears started once more to her eyes. *Damn, why can't I stop acting like a watering pot?* He'd been so understanding about her crying fit already, she didn't want to push her luck.

He rose and came around the table to bend over and rest his forehead on the top of her head. "Come on, honey. I've been through hell too, so I can be your tour guide. You know, show you all the hot spots, that sort of thing. I recommend we start with the flaming pits."

* * * * *

Alec took Danni's hand. She hesitated a moment, then rose and allowed him to lead her from the apartment to the two-story lobby with its huge hearth. An uncomfortable chill hung in the air, but he'd get that taken care of quickly enough. Plenty of logs lay neatly stacked at the ready and beside them stood a bucket filled with kindling. He'd been a Boy Scout. He could light a fire with a single match even though a whole copper box of long ones stood on the mantle ledge.

"Sit here," he ordered, pushing her gently onto a loveseat drawn close to the stone fireplace. She went without protest, that bemused expression once more on her face. Good. He preferred that to the worry and strain that kept creeping back.

He laid the fire with care. More care than usual in fact. *Damn, I'm trying to impress her!* That realization amused him. He was acting like a ridiculous schoolboy with his first crush. Still, it was going to be one hell of a fire if he could manage it. He arranged a couple of larger logs along the back, deep in the cavernous hearth. Apparently, he noted with wry amusement, he was going on the principle that bigger was better. *More impressive*, that mocking voice laughed in his mind. Satisfied at last, he flourished the match before her, struck it on one of the stones and set the kindling ablaze. *Perfect.*

"That's the fiery pit?" she asked.

He turned and the joke that sprang to his lips died. She had drawn her long legs up to her chin beneath the sweater and hugged them to her. The bottom of his Aran knit didn't quite reach her ankles, exposing her pussy. At least it would if there were more light in the room. The area was just a dark shadow. So why did he find that so erotic? *Hell, I find everything about her erotic in the extreme.* He'd been in a constant—and uncomfortable—state of arousal since he first saw her sitting in her car clutching that damned tarot card.

He'd also been in an uncomfortable state of conflict between job and— And what? Conscience? That was a luxury in which his law professors had told him he couldn't afford to indulge. But it dawned on him he wanted what was best for Danni, and that could be the opposite of what served his employers' best interests. *Somehow*, he swore to himself, *I'll figure out how to do what's best for everyone.* At the moment, though, the answers eluded him.

Danni shifted her position and the sweater rose higher. *Damn, why couldn't I have had just a few more condoms?* His balls were as rock-hard as his cock. He couldn't get enough of this woman.

"There's nothing like a roaring fire, is there?" A dreamy note sounded in her voice.

"Oh, there's something better."

She looked up, her eyebrows lifting in curiosity.

"Making love in front of it." He took the three steps that separated them and held out his hands.

She hesitated, but he couldn't tell if the soft color that suffused her cheeks came from the flickering of the flames or an internal source. She lowered her feet to the thick throw rug and clasped his fingers. He drew her to stand before him then into the circle of his arms.

"I ought to be preparing for the meeting tomorrow," she murmured against his collar bone.

"You'll need that meeting first to let you know what is happening. Tonight," he paused to kiss the sensitive spot just below her ear, "is for relaxing. Everything will make more sense in the morning."

"Mmm." She ground her mons against his aching cock, drawing a groan from him. "You have a very solid argument."

"Cast-iron," he assured her. At least it felt like it to him.

"It's always good to have hard evidence," she agreed.

He grinned, making it difficult to kiss down her throat. So did the crew neckline of his sweater, though on her it was big and hung a little open. It was still in the way though. He drew it back with one finger and peered down the opening. *Damn, nothing but shadows again.* He wanted to see her breasts with their wonderful puckered nipples and erect tips, make sure they were as sexy as he'd thought in the cellar.

"Warm enough?" he asked.

"Getting there fast." She slid one hand into his waistband.

"Then clothes aren't necessary, are they?"

"Don't seem to need them at all," she agreed.

Her fingers trailed up through the hair that covered his stomach then over his chest. He caught his breath as they brushed across his nipples then closed over them in a brief gentle pinch. Abruptly she gasped – and well she should. He'd just run his hand under the sweater and was caressing her soft rounded ass.

"I want you naked, woman." He tugged at the sleeves, pulling her arms over her head as he dragged the knitted sweater up...to reveal the curling hair that covered her mons.

He paused, captivated by the sight of the dark red curls. He'd been in such a frantic hurry to fuck her earlier, he hadn't taken the time to appreciate her fully. His loss then. He'd make up for it now. If the demands of his straining cock let him.

"What's the holdup, mister?" she demanded. "I can't see."

"The fact that I can see," he said with perfect honesty. "And the view is spectacular."

She took matters into her own hands – literally – and freed herself from the sweater.

"Hey, I wanted to do that slowly," he protested.

"Later, mister. I want you naked, too."

That did it. He'd known his share of women in his time, but never one as direct as Danni. And it drove him wild. He fumbled with his button and zipper, then his hands weren't alone pulling off the denim. He kicked them aside but before he could gather her back into his embrace, she sank to her knees before him, staring at his cock.

He knew it was large – and though he tried not to ever let himself feel smug over the fact, he'd been in enough locker rooms to know he was more than well-endowed in that particular area. "Hung like a horse" was the expression one of his envious friends had used. The women he'd known had expressed appreciation. But this was the first time he'd really cared what his lover thought of his equipment.

With a hand that seemed to tremble – or was that just an illusion caused by the flickering of the fire, the room's sole illumination? – she touched it, sending a shudder of pleasure through him.

Abruptly she began to giggle, an uncontrollable, almost hysterical, sound.

"That is not," he informed her, keeping his answering chuckle in check only with difficulty, "what a guy wants to hear when his lady is about to go down on him." If any other woman had laughed at a moment like this, his poor erection might have shriveled away to limp nothingness. But now it only grew harder if that were possible.

"I – I'm sorry," she managed, still giggling. "It's just that this place," she gestured around to indicate the retreat in general, "might not be the only instance where I'm biting off more than I can chew. But it's a really tempting mouthful."

He gave up the struggle and his deep chuckle shook him. "Hey, no biting anything off or I'll have something to say about it."

"No, I wouldn't want to ruin anything this perfect. But I might nibble a bit."

"That," he assured her, "sounds like a damn good idea. But only if I get to do a bit of nibbling of my own."

"Ohhh." She looked up at him, her liquid green eyes sparkling and flickering with the flames. Then abruptly she looked back at his straining shaft, lowered her head and ran her tongue along the length. "Really tempting mouthful," she repeated.

"Careful, woman, or I'll come before we even get started."

"Then I'd only have to make you come again. And again."

"You have an exaggerated idea about my stamina."

She ran her tongue over her lips then kissed the bulbous head of his cock, taking away the drop of pre-cum that had glistened there. "No, I think it's pretty close to the truth. Let's test it."

Before he could say anything, she began her threatened nibbling along the sensitive underside of his erection. She caught his balls in her hand and massaged them gently while her teeth and tongue continued their assault on his engorged penis. Sensation surged within him, burning through his loins, swelling his gonads to the point of explosion.

"Danni..." he began.

At once her mouth closed over his erection. Her teeth bit gently into his cock while her tongue tortured the ridge around the head. A coiling tension tightened within him and his hips thrust forward with convulsive force. He pumped into her twice more then with a cry he was shooting his seed into her sweet receptive mouth.

Seconds passed—or were they minutes? He drew a shuddering breath and realized he shook all over. *Damn, that was explosive.* He had just experienced two of the best orgasms he'd ever known, and both in the same night. And from the way she was now rubbing her hands together with his penis sandwiched between them, it would be a pretty good bet he would shortly experience a third, maybe even a fourth.

But not until he'd brought her to an equally earth-shattering climax. He drew her up to stand before him, his arms locked about her waist. Possessively, he realized. He wasn't going to let go of her, risk her slipping away. His mouth covered hers, gently at first, then with sufficient force to part her lips so he could slip his tongue inside. At last he pulled back. "So that's what I taste like."

"Mmmm. You're pretty good."

A simple comment. So why did he feel it encompassed more than just his cum? *Because she makes me feel every inch a man.* She made him feel whole, invincible, like he could accomplish anything. Feelings like that could be addictive, better than any chemically induced high imaginable. And would it be such a terrible thing to become addicted to Ms. Daniella Colbert?

He eased one hand between them to cover her breast. It fitted perfectly, not too small, not too large. Just right. And the darker rosebud tip pressed into his palm, hard and erect, ready for his mouth. He lifted it and ducked his head to run his tongue around the areola, then inward to find that luscious point. A soft moan escaped her as he caught it between his teeth, tugging gently while his tongue assaulted that marvelous pebble. He released it seconds later when his cock registered its return to readiness.

With an effort, he held her slightly from him. "On your knees, woman." *My woman. My sweet lady.*

Obligingly she knelt before him and her tongue darted out to circle the head of his fully engorged penis.

"Not so fast," he said. Though there was only one thing he wanted more than to have her warm moist mouth, with the help of her tongue and teeth, bring him to orgasm again. And that was to explore her pussy and clit with his own until she moaned and writhed and came to a screaming climax on his lips.

He lay down on his back on the soft rug. The damned thing might have been designed for incredible fucks before the hearth. Well, incredible because of Danni. And he wanted to get started.

“Straddle me,” he directed, pushing her shoulder gently so she faced his feet.

She did as he asked and he caught her waist, easing her back until her knees pressed against his shoulders and her hands rested on either side of his hips. He ran his fingers up the insides of her thighs then separated her pussy lips. Wet already. He grinned and drew her down so he could trace her creamy cleft with his tongue.

She didn’t waste any time either. He felt her teeth close over his crown, her lips massaged his shaft and his balls tightened with a growing urgency. With an effort he concentrated on giving her the maximum pleasure, using fingers, tongue, teeth and lips to nibble and pummel and plunder. Her sudden quivers or low moans both reassured him and spurred him on to greater efforts and creativity. He captured her clit with his lips and assaulted it with his tongue. She gasped and he released it only to replace it with his fingers as he thrust his tongue into her depths. She rocked back, grinding her pussy into his face, but his surge of delight turned into a groan of his own as she managed to draw his balls into her mouth and massaged them with tongue and cheek muscles until he writhed with the ecstasy.

Damn, I want to see her face, her eyes as she comes. But he wouldn’t stop what he was doing—nor did he want her to stop her sweet torture—for anything. Next time he’d have her face before him. Then thinking became impossible as his hips bucked upward to meet her renewed onslaught on his erection. The bulbous head beat against the back of her throat, again and again.

He withdrew his tongue from her tunnel and replaced it with his fingers, plunging them in, hooking them as he drew them out then thrusting them even deeper. He felt her whole body quivering in response, and the knowledge that he brought her close to orgasm flooded through him, driving him closer to his own. *God, I can’t hold out much*

longer. This was torture, ecstasy. This was one hell of a ride. Heat surged through his loins, unbearable, demanding release.

A moan tore from her, a drawn-out sound of pure erotic rapture. That did it. With a cry centered on her sweet pussy, his semen shot forth into her receptive mouth. Her back arched, her hips thrust against his hand and her own contractions gripped his fingers, milking them in the same way her mouth muscles finessed the last of his seed from him. Long exquisite seconds passed while her body continued to tremble and clutch at him in the throes of her release. *I've never felt anything so fucking fantastic!*

At last a whimpering sigh escaped her and she collapsed across him.

"Come here," he managed, though he felt too spent to move.

She rolled off him, turned, and he gathered her close in his arms, her head resting on his chest, her fingers tangling in the hair that trailed up from the bush where his cock rested. From where his cock, he realized with a sense of surprise mingled with smugness, already stirred once more. He wrapped his other arm around her, rolling to his side until her cheek rested just above his elbow and he could find her mouth with his.

"You're right," he murmured when he could speak again. He nuzzled the soft curling hair just above her ear. "I like the way your mouth tastes of both of us. In fact I like everything about *us*."

Chapter Four

Danni awoke to the sound of a guitar playing an evocative melody, filled with chords and runs and more complexity than she had thought possible in such an instrument. Unless there were more than one. Alec must have put on a CD of some classical guitar group.

She moved her head and found it now rested on a throw pillow from the sofa. She still lay on the thick rug but he'd draped a knitted afghan over her. The fire had not yet burned down or had been restoked, she could just hear its crackling through the strains of music. She could smell it too, a wonderful scent that filled her with contentment.

And speaking of being filled with contentment, where was Alec? She lifted up on one elbow, disturbing the cat that had slept curled up against her.

He sat on the edge of the stone hearth, naked still, a twelve-string guitar in his lap, his head bent, his eyes closed, his fingers moving rapidly through chords and pluckings. All that incredible music coming from that one guitar? From that one man?

The intensity of emotion that washed over her frightened her. She couldn't possibly feel like this, not with a man she'd met only the evening before. *Keep it light*, she ordered herself. *Proceed with caution and keep open the lines of retreat. Don't set yourself up for pain.*

He looked up, straight at her. His face was silhouetted against the flames behind him so she couldn't see his expression. His fingers slowed and he stopped playing.

"Don't," she breathed. *Hell, I must sound besotted. Well, I am, but he doesn't have to know that.* With an effort she tried for a more casual tone. "You're pretty good with your fingers."

His grin was visible, mostly as a streak of white teeth against the darker blur that was his face. "There are a lot of other things I can do with my fingers as well."

“Yeah. I think I...met a few of them last night.” She sat up, hugging the afghan to her.

He set down the guitar and joined her, easing the knitted blanket down far enough to kiss the tops of her breasts, then the tips that pebbled beneath his touch.

Oh, damn. Her cleft tightened with its longing to feel him sliding within and her clit tingled, signaling its willingness to go along with anything he might have in mind. *Not now*, she ordered herself. She had a retreat to launch and having her mind—and her hands and her face—in his pants would play havoc on her concentration.

And it was saving Aunt Zany’s retreat that mattered now, not Danni getting herself laid. And laid. And laid some more.

“What do you do with that kind of talent?” she asked, making the valiant attempt not to clutch his head to her breast and beg him to suck harder, longer, faster.

He kissed her shoulder. “Which one?”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “I’ve gathered what you do with that one.” Her fingers traced down his stomach to the erection that jutted out long and hard. She trailed them along the shaft, which quivered in response. “I meant your music.”

“I compose for my own pleasure.” His voice sounded tight.

That might have been due to her ministrations. *Or it might not.*

“No one else’s?” she demanded, appalled to think such exquisite music could go unheard.

He shrugged and a boyishly embarrassed grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. “My sister—the massage therapist—uses some of my recordings during her sessions. Sometimes her clients buy one of my CDs to take home and use for relaxation.” He rose as if anxious to change the subject then held out his hands to her. “Want to catch the sunrise over the lake?”

Is music a taboo subject with him? She hoped not. She wanted to hear him play again. She could lose herself in those incredible runs and intricate pluckings. As she could lose herself in his eyes and arms.

Once they had showered, retrieved the rest of their clothes from Aunt Zany's little apartment and dressed again, they let themselves outside into the pale light of the pre-dawn.

Danni shivered. "It's cold."

His deep chuckle sounded. "This is the Pacific Northwest remember, not the tropics."

Hand in hand, they picked their way carefully down the lawn to where the water lapped gently on the rocky shore. To her left she could make out the hulking shape of the boathouse.

"We'll have to see what's in there," she murmured, mostly to herself.

"There ought to be kayaks and those little foot paddle boats for a place like this," Alec said.

"And life vests," she agreed.

And what else would they need? She'd check to see what was there as soon as it was fully light. Or perhaps Aunt Zany had left an inventory on the computer. She'd check that first. She shivered again and Alec positioned himself behind her, drawing her tight against the long lean length of him.

He rested his cheek against hers. "Relax," he murmured. "That's what you came here for, remember?"

"Yeah, but look what I walked into instead," she sighed.

"Mmmm. Me."

A laugh bubbled up within her, setting her shoulders shaking as it escaped.

"Still think this is all more than you can chew?" he asked.

“Well I’ll find out about the retreat once the meeting gets going. And as for you...” She turned in his arms, wrapping her own around his neck. “You’re the most tempting mouthful I’ve ever encountered. Of course I might have to try a couple more times before I can be sure.”

He kissed her hard and she felt the quickening of his cock, its rock-solid length swelling even more as it pressed against her lower stomach.

“But right now,” he said when he pulled his head back at last, “turn around and enjoy. The show is just starting.” He repositioned her so she leaned back against him as the clouds turned pink and golden orange against the lightening blue of the sky.

An odd sensation crept over her that puzzled her, evading identification. Then it hit her. Contentment. *God, when did I last feel that?* She couldn’t remember. But here, nestled in Alec’s warm embrace, privy to one of nature’s great beauties, was all she could possibly want.

It scared the hell out of her.

She freed herself. “I wonder if the display is that spectacular every morning.” She had to stop thinking about sex and Alec and more sex. She couldn’t afford to lose herself in him, not when so much depended on her being able to handle the contractors in a focused, businesslike manner.

“It varies depending on the atmospheric conditions. But if you want, we could set up a hammock right here, facing it, so we could watch in comfort every morning.”

Every morning? Maybe for the next several days until they’d seen the retreat safely opened. He couldn’t possibly mean more than that.

She shook her head but risked a look at him. *Big mistake.* That only made her want to sink right back into his embrace. “That sounds like a sunset sort of thing to do.”

He grinned. “Brilliant. We’ll orient the hammock east to west. Then we can crawl into it together to watch the sunset, make love all night—making sure we reverse directions in the process so we’ll be ready to watch the dawn.”

The idea held more than just a little appeal.

* * * * *

Alec frowned as he scrambled eggs and made chocolate chip pancakes—one of his chef-brother's guaranteed lady-seducing recipes—in the kitchenette. Something was bothering Danni. Well hell, she had every excuse to be upset. The coming of morning had probably dumped all her worries on her again. She certainly had more than her fair share, far more than even that capable mouth could chew.

A slow grin spread across his face as he thought about the way she'd chewed his cock. A "tempting mouthful", she'd called it. She'd managed to take most of its length into her mouth at that. In fact she'd handled it very well, very well indeed. It stirred again, rising irrepressibly, demanding her touch once more.

Danni. His grin faded. Ever since he'd seen her sitting in that rental car, clutching that damned Five of Wands, his cock had taken over and done his thinking for him. And it was landing him in one hell of a jam. Unethical conduct was just one of the things of which he could be accused. Screwing up his latest job was another. *Damn*. Who'd have thought he could do that just by screwing... What was she? The most desirable woman he'd ever met? The sweetest, curviest armful he'd ever grabbed onto? His downfall? *My love?*

Hell, he was tired of job hopping. Or in truth, he was tired of the never-ending search for job satisfaction. He'd honestly thought—honestly convinced himself—he could find some aspect of this career that would make him feel fulfilled. But he'd been at it now for over ten years and the only thing he'd gotten was more cynical by the day.

The urge crept over him to reach for his guitar again, to lose himself in his music. Or maybe to go outside and chop some logs for the fireplace. Or even better, to bury himself in the warmth and caring that radiated from Danni. But she had retired to her aunt's office to print out as many lists and spreadsheets as she could find to have ready for reference when the meeting began.

He flipped the last pancake onto the plate and carried it to the table. "Breakfast," he called.

She appeared almost at once, surprising him.

"Thought I'd have to carry you out of there," he told her.

For a moment her eyes lit up, then she looked away. "I've got several spreadsheets in the printing queue. Oh." Her gaze settled on the table. "You're going to kill my diet."

"Good. I hate scrawny women. And you," he added as he came around and dragged her into his arms, "are perfect just the way you are."

She disentangled herself. "Then let's not let breakfast get cold." She pulled out a chair, sat and reached for the coffee he'd poured for her. Purrival jumped into her lap, kneaded for a few seconds, then settled down, politely refraining from raiding her plate.

Alec settled across from her. "We have to go into town, there's a big chain grocery store there that ought to be open by now. We need more food. And as much fun as last night was, I want a few dozen condoms."

Damn! She can blush! Not many women seemed to these days. On her, the heightened color beneath her dusting of freckles was adorable. But she didn't smile and that wasn't right. Danni was made to smile. He'd have to make sure she had a lot to smile about from now on.

But he could guess at least one of her current worries. "Why don't I drop you off at the hospital? I can grab a few things at the store alone while you stay with your aunt, then I'll pick you up. We'll be back here well before the meeting is set to start."

She looked up from her forkful of eggs and mushrooms, opened her mouth, closed it again and nodded. "Thank you."

They ate the rest of their meal in silence. Several times he caught her peeking up at him from beneath her lashes, but she lowered her gaze so quickly he couldn't be sure of

her expression. As soon as they'd piled their plates and silverware into the tiny dishwasher, she collected her purse and they left.

Once outside, she strode right past his car, headed for her rental. A woman accustomed to being in charge, he noted. That boded well for the retreat. He tried not to think what it might bode for himself.

"Danni?" he called.

She glanced back to where he'd stopped beside his sleek sports car. "Oh. That's right, you're dropping me off." She joined him as he unlocked the door with a click on his controller then opened it for her. She started to speak then just shook her head and got in.

He went around to the driver's side and slid in behind the wheel. When he switched on the engine, loud classic rock music blared through the strategically placed speakers. An old Led Zeppelin, one of his favorites, but he just wasn't in the mood.

Apparently Danni wasn't either. She winced. "I don't suppose you have any of your own recordings? I need something relaxing."

"Now that is the nicest compliment I've ever received." He kept his tone light to cover his surge of pleasure at her words. He rummaged in the glove compartment and found the CD he'd just burned a week ago. It still needed analyzing. Maybe her comments would be helpful. He shoved it in and the intricate yet dulcet sounds of his twelve-string filled the car.

Danni sighed and leaned her head back against the rest and closed her eyes. The next time he risked a glance from the winding road, he saw a slight smile hovering on her lips. Well that was comment enough for the moment.

He dropped her in front of the hospital, made sure she got safely inside, then turned in the direction of the grocery store. He'd wanted to walk her all the way to the ICU, but she'd refused.

They'd made a list of items they thought they could turn into meals—he'd had to admit his cooking skills ran to omelets and grilling steaks and Danni had decided she

might be able to toss a salad, provided the ingredients came pre-chopped in bags. He chucked the food into the basket then browsed the aisles for further inspiration. Ice cream? No, too cold. *Pity*. He'd like to spread a scoop all over her luscious body and lick it off. Warm custard would be better. He came to an abrupt halt, intrigued by the idea. The stuff came in boxes, didn't it? Then all they'd have to do would be to add milk and heat? Between them they might be able to manage that.

Provided they didn't get sidetracked while they discussed where they were going to spread it and forgot the custard completely.

He added a couple of boxes and an extra carton of milk to his trove and went through the checkout, then cruised the town, inspecting it. There was a decent-looking restaurant, no neon in sight. He'd take her there for dinner tonight. Then later... His thoughts drifted back to the custard and his grin settled in to stay.

When he entered the ICU, he saw her almost at once through an open door, sitting beside a bed, holding the hand of the occupant. Her mouth was moving as if she talked to her aunt, even though the poor woman showed no sign of being able to take part in a conversation. He started toward Danni.

A no-nonsense nurse bent on the protection of her patients intercepted him at once. "Are you family?" she demanded.

The idea shot through him, with as much force and as shocking as lightning. *Family*. "Not yet," he said, disturbingly aware of how much the possibility intrigued him. "I've just come to pick up my lady." He nodded toward Danni.

Possibly she heard him because she looked up then rose. She said something to her aunt, stooped to kiss the woman's forehead then, with a last squeeze to an apparently unresponsive hand, she left the little cubicle.

It didn't seem possible one face could contain so much strain. He didn't say anything, just opened his arms and folded them about her as she leaned her face against his shoulder. For a long minute she trembled as if fighting back tears, then a shaky sigh escaped her. "Sorry."

"No need to be."

"Thanks." She straightened. "Let's go back there and save her retreat for her."

Alec avoided looking at her as he led her back to his car. Was saving the retreat really the best thing for Suzanne Laurent? And for Danni?

It certainly wasn't for himself.

Or was it?

Chapter Five

How can anyone as dynamic and exuberant as Aunt Zany look so frail? So fragile? Danni huddled in the passenger seat, arms folded across her middle, hugging herself. Aunt Zany was—had always been—a powerhouse on two feet. What Zany wanted, Zany accomplished. And she'd been brought down by a DUI driver, drunk at ten o'clock in the morning. When Aunt Zany woke up—when, when, *when*, never *if*—it would destroy her if her retreat wasn't opening, wasn't generating sufficient income to cover the horrendous remodeling loan.

She glanced up at Alec then away. He'd been quiet, frowning since he'd escorted her to his car. *Thank heavens I'm not in this alone.* But Aunt Zany had never mentioned hiring a consultant. He must have been a new addition to her one-woman team. A desperate measure because of desperate circumstances? She should have been pumping Alec for whatever knowledge or ideas he had before the meeting rather than encouraging him to pump her.

She turned her considering—and covert—gaze back to him. He looked so damned capable, so reassuringly rugged and strong. Something about his expression—or was it the square cut of his jaw and his aura of raw masculine power?—filled her with confidence in his abilities to preserve and protect all she loved. "You said you were my aunt's advisor."

He shot her a rapid glance then focused once more on the road. "Not your aunt's."

"Ah." *The bank protecting their investment then.* "Are you a specialist in resorts and bed and breakfasts?"

He shot her another frowning glance. "This is a very desirable property, Danni. There are at least three chains that are interested in acquiring it."

Did he sound uneasy? And well he should if he was considering recommending that Aunt Zany sell. "You can tell the bank not to worry. We're going to make this place succeed. I appreciate that they might want an emergency backup plan, but they aren't going to need it. I'll do anything to make this place fly for Aunt Zany."

He slowed as they reached the final turn and started up the winding drive. "Listen, Danni, I'm not —"

"Oh!" she gasped as the parking lot came into view.

More than two dozen cars, trucks and vans filled the area, many with company names and logos displayed on their sides. A man and a woman dressed in rubber boots and knee protectors over their jeans stood in conversation beside an area of weedy overgrowth. Alec pulled the car into a parking space and switched off the engine and at once the sound of distant power tools reached them.

Relief washed through her. "The work crew!" she exclaimed and tried to hug Alec, a feat made difficult by the center console and stick shift. "We'll be ready for those executives on Wednesday, you'll see. So you can tell the bank we're going to make it without being bought out!" She opened the door and sprang to the asphalt, all but running toward the front door.

Apparently someone had a key and had let the rest of the workers inside. She found the boxes that had been neatly stacked the night before now lay scattered about, many open with several men and women sorting through contents or hauling fixtures toward the solarium. Danni paused, not sure whom to approach.

"Is Laura Gustafson here?" she called.

A tall blonde woman looked up. "Daniella Colbert?"

Danni hurried over to where the plump middle-aged Laura rose from before a box of towels—neatly monogrammed with the retreat's logo of bamboo entwined with the initials SR for Serenity Retreat.

"Everyone's already working," Laura assured her. "I hope you don't mind, I let them all in. I didn't think you'd want them just standing around."

"No," Danni agreed, heartfelt. She glanced at her watch. "We still have half an hour before the meeting starts. Can you spare a few minutes from this," she gestured toward the half-unpacked boxes, "to give me a quick tour and tell me what's been going on? I haven't been here for years. Alec –"

She turned to find him but he was just disappearing behind the reception counter, his arms loaded with grocery sacks. She ought to help him but she also ought to see the state of the upper floor before the meeting began. Duty, she ordered herself. She could sneak a few moments of pleasure with Alec once she knew exactly how everything stood.

As they mounted the stairs, the sounds of floor polishers grew louder. Room doors stood open and Danni peeked into the first bedroom she reached. No furniture yet, only walls painted sand and a bare bamboo floor.

"There are two color schemes," Laura told her. "One is sand, sage green and soft gold and the other is cream, blue and golden tan. You've seen the brochures?"

Danni nodded. "I'll be glad when the rooms are finished so we can add pictures."

Laura smiled. "The whole effect is going to be as serene as we can get it. Not at all like now," she added in a much louder voice as the roar of a polisher came closer. "Each bathroom has an environmental unit that includes everything from a soft mist to a torrential downpour."

They were just closing the door of a linen cupboard—still empty—when Alec bounded up the stairs two at a time. "There you are. Danni, I need to talk to you before the meeting starts. Can you—" He broke off and slapped the cell phone that he'd clipped to his belt.

Danni heard a low buzzing that sounded like an electric razor.

He pulled it free, flicked it open and glared at it. "Sorry, I have to take this."

Danni checked her watch. "Join us in the meeting as soon as you're done."

"Danni—" he began, but an impatient voice, loud enough to be heard even from several feet away, emerged from the phone.

Danni brushed against him, kissed him quickly and hurried down the steps. She wanted this meeting over with as soon as possible so she'd know the worst—or the best—that waited to pounce on her.

Several people had already gathered in what had once been a salon and was now, from the furnishings she glimpsed through the doorway, an impromptu conference room.

She hesitated then made up her mind. "I'll catch up with you in a minute," she told Laura and hurried behind the reception desk and through the door into her aunt's apartment. Purrcival blinked sleepy eyes at her from the comfortable depths of an overstuffed chair. She'd left that damned tarot deck somewhere...

There. She grabbed it up, shuffled, fanned the cards in her right hand and drew with the other. For a long moment she clung to her choice, afraid to turn it over. But she had to hurry.

She slapped it down on the table and stared at it in growing dismay.

Damn and damn and damn! The Five of Wands.

Conflict. *Still*. And right now she didn't know if she could take any more.

* * * * *

Alec leaned against the jamb of the open doorway to the room where the contractors had gathered. Danni sat at one end of an arrangement made up of two long folding tables. Five men and two women sat around her. Danni, he noted, looked drained, as if she'd faced too much. He strolled in and casually took a seat at the far end, giving her a reassuring smile when she looked up at him.

A slightly built man, balding, wearing a business suit and heavy glasses, peered at him then flipped through a notebook before him, at last stopping at one of the pages and studying it. "Is anyone else going to come?" he demanded.

Danni hesitated. "I think that's everyone, Mr. Manning."

"Good." He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his middle. "Then let's get started."

Danni checked her list. "Construction first, I suppose. Mr. Vituri?"

A middle-aged man, short and stocky with dark, Mediterranean good looks, awarded her a beaming smile. His blazer seemed out of place over his T-shirt and jeans, not in the least bit fashionable. *Now why?* Alec wondered. He himself dressed that way on occasion. *Does the combination look as ridiculous on me?* Or was it the man's supercilious expression that didn't sit right? Or possibly the overdone charm put on like that damned blazer to cover some hidden agenda? For whatever reason, Alec realized he didn't like the man.

Vituri leaned back in his chair. "We'll be done in time."

"In time for the plumbers to hook up the hot tubs and the fountain?" Danni asked.

"They can get started on that right now," came the response. "They don't need us to be done."

Danni stared at the building contractor then turned her uncertain gaze on Alec.

It wrenched at him to see her so overwhelmed. *More than she can chew, all right. And nothing the least bit tempting in the mouthful this guy represents.* Vituri was playing her. He'd put a stop to that.

He considered him a moment. Some people could be won over, turned into allies. Not this guy. He was a shark sniffing innocent blood with Danni.

"What was the contracted date for completion?" he asked.

Vituri shot him an assessing look fraught with dislike. "We can't be responsible for materials that don't arrive on time."

"So you're already behind." Damn, he wanted a pen to tap meaningfully on the table. That always unnerved people. Danni had one but she had no idea how to

intimidate an opponent. He caught her worried eye. "Toss me that pen and some paper, will you?"

Laura, who sat closest to him, complied before Danni could.

He thanked her, then toyed with the ballpoint for a moment. "In other words, Mr. Victor—" he began. Calling a person by the wrong name always put them at a disadvantage.

"Vituri," the man interrupted.

"Oh?" Alec pretended to make a note of the name. "You are behind in your contract."

The man shrugged but a touch of uneasiness crept into his face. "That's the way it goes sometimes."

Alec merely raised his eyebrows. "How far behind are you?"

"According to the contract, it was supposed to have been completed two weeks ago," Danni put in.

"Two weeks," Alec murmured and made a note. "I see. Two weeks."

"And this place is behind on their payments," Vituri stuck in quickly. "I don't see why we should work if we aren't given the funds on time."

"On time," Alec repeated and fixed him with a stare.

Vituri shrugged again. "We can't buy what we need, I can't pay my workers if we don't get our money."

"I—" Danni began, faltering.

Alec shot her a quelling shake of his head, almost imperceptible. She quieted at once. *How can anyone look so vulnerable, so damned desirable?* He wanted to haul her out of here, tear her clothes off and lick and kiss and suck every part of her until he had her moaning in pleasure.

The panic faded from her eyes and they darkened as she gazed at him. Was she getting as aroused as he was? Any chance they could slip off for a quick fuck before continuing?

With an effort he dragged his mind back to the present. "If the work had been completed, you would have been paid. Danni?" he plowed on before the contractor could interrupt. "Is that a copy of the contract? Is there a penalty clause for failure to complete on time?"

Vituri's dark eyes flashed.

Danni picked up a document and started to scan the first page.

"Send it down here," Alec said. "You go ahead with the meeting."

She did as he requested. With half an ear he listened to the reports from the plumber about the two hot tubs, the lap pool and the soaking pool in the solarium, the electrician on his progress, the housekeeper on the schedule for the decorating of the rooms, the head chef on what was still needed for the kitchen, and finally the landscape gardener. All gave somewhat encouraging summaries of their venues. But none gave absolute guarantees.

"And we can't finish in the solarium until the plumbers and the electricians get everything hooked up so we can disguise their pipes and boxes," the gardener summed up.

Alec glanced across at Danni's troubled expression. She drew a visible deep breath and let it out, her shoulders—and her breasts—rising and falling with the action.

"Our first party of guests will be arriving at ten a.m. on Wednesday. This place will be finished, decorated, landscaped and serving a welcoming tea ceremony at that time. Is that understood? There are no excuses. We *will* be ready." Danni rose. "I think we've covered everything. Mr. Manning? Your bank has nothing to fear."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Vituri asked.

Danni directed a cool stare at the man. "Your contract? Alec?"

He grinned. Danni, pulling herself together and taking charge, was a delight to behold. Well, she was always a delight of course, but at the moment he was proud of her. She must be aching to slip away and hide but she carried this off magnificently.

"There is a penalty clause. If Mr. Vituri would care to stay after the meeting, I'll be glad to discuss his options."

Danni blinked rapidly. "Mr. Vituri?"

The man's jaw tightened. "That wasn't what I was talking about. After each weekly meeting, Ms. Laurent gave us all checks to cover our outstanding expenses."

Danni looked at Mr. Manning, who nodded. "Quite right, Ms. Colbert. She kept meticulous records and receipts. A very efficient lady, your aunt."

"I see. Let me get—" She broke off, her expression freezing. "I'm afraid we're going to break from tradition today. You may leave your itemized bills complete with receipts if you like and they'll be covered as soon as my aunt leaves the hospital."

Vituri's eyes narrowed. "Can't you write the checks?"

Danni met his gaze, her chin lifting in defiance. "No."

"Then how are you going to pay us?" Vituri pressed what he obviously saw as his advantage.

"If you'll give me your bills, I'll see to it they are taken care of."

"I think—" Vituri began.

Alec cut him off. "If you'll hand them to me, please? Thank you," he added as the plumber, the gardener and the electrician handed over envelopes presumably containing the required information. He looked at the chef and the housekeeper Laura, both of whom shook their heads.

Vituri pushed across a thick manila folder. "We'll be working just outside the solarium," he said at last. "We'll collect our check when we break for lunch, or we won't be back. And no one," he added as he stood, "has fixed either the dock or the boathouse yet. I thought you were going to have a general handyman on staff by now."

"My aunt's accident has thrown us — me — off schedule," Danni informed him, "but only by a bit. We should be back on track by this afternoon."

Brave words, Alec reflected. He wanted to look over these bills, see what sort of a financial obligation loomed over Danni.

There was a general exodus from the room until only Danni, Alec, Mr. Manning and the middle-aged woman who was the head chef remained.

"Shall I just leave my requirement list?" the chef asked.

Danni hesitated. "Are you able to purchase the things we still need?"

The woman regarded her with a frank stare. "Will I get reimbursed?"

A forlorn smile tugged at the corner of Danni's mouth. "One way or the other, yes."

The chef nodded. "I'll have to go to Seattle for some of these things. I'll be back tomorrow or I'll call if there are any problems."

Danni nodded, thanked the woman, supplied her with her cell phone number then turned back to Mr. Manning.

The banker regarded her with a frown. "Your name is not on the bank account."

"No," she agreed.

Alec came to sit beside her. She cast him a grateful smile.

"How do you plan to meet these bills?" Manning nodded toward the pile of envelopes Alec set on the table.

"Let's see what we've got," Alec said. He looked at the first — the gardener's — and frowned. "That's a hell of a lot for shredded bark and ground cloth." He set it aside and checked the plumbing account, then the electrical and finally the building contractor's. He winced. "I don't think petty cash is going to cover this."

Danni looked from the staggering amounts to the banker. "Is there any way I can use the funds? These are legitimate expenses for the retreat. Can you cover the checks?"

"With a power of attorney, certainly. Without one..." He spread his hands in a helpless gesture.

"A power of attorney," she repeated. "If she could sign one of those, she could sign the checks. Look, she'll recover soon, I know she will. We just need to keep things together until then."

"I'm sorry."

Danni turned to Alec. "Is there anything..." Her voice trailed off, leaving only the mute appeal of her eyes. Her lips twitched into a mirthless smile. "And to think I was actually feeling pleased about the progress reports." She drew in a shaky breath and let it out on a sigh. "I need to think. And tour the work areas. I'll be back in a bit."

And with that she strode from the room.

Alec watched her go. He wanted to console her. On the other hand, he might be able to accomplish more if he stayed here. He turned back to the banker. "May I see exactly how affairs stand?"

"Do you hold a power of attorney?" Mr. Manning asked. "If not, I'm afraid I can't disclose any confidential information."

"I'm an attorney, damn it!" With an effort, he brought his temper under control.

"Ms. Laurent's?" The man looked interested. "In that case your name will be on the paperwork." He sounded relieved as he set down his briefcase and opened it.

"Not Ms. Laurent's," Alec admitted.

The banker snapped his case closed again. "Sorry then."

"I—" But Alec got no further.

A small woman of sturdy build and determined expression had entered and looked around. "Who's in charge?"

Alec considered sending her in search of Danni then decided better of it. "May I help you?"

"I heard there's a cash flow problem."

"From whom?" he demanded.

The woman shrugged. "Everyone's talking about it outside. Is it true?"

“There will be a temporary holdup, but not—”

“Oh hell. All right, I’ll have to resign then. I’ve had an offer to work at a medical clinic and that’s a guaranteed paycheck.”

Alec hesitated. “You *were* one of the staff?”

She nodded. “Massage therapist. I’ll send a bill for the consulting I’ve done to get the facility set up.” And with that she raised her hand in a halfhearted wave and left.

Oh great. Now the staff was quitting before they’d even begun. Where would they be able to find someone to replace her at such short notice? A qualified person would have to be there, familiar with the facilities and ready to begin in four days’ time.

Damn and hell. The retreat would face bankruptcy if Ms. Laurent didn’t wake up soon. And when she did, there was a good chance there wouldn’t be any staff and the work wouldn’t be finished and there’d be no opening on Wednesday. Which again meant bankruptcy.

He looked around the room then out the glass wall to the solarium where Danni stood, chin raised, watching the plumbers install one of the hot tubs. Unexpected emotion surged through him, not just for Danni but for the retreat. It was a beautiful place, it held out such promise of being exactly what its name implied—a serene retreat. There weren’t enough of those in the world.

Would the chain of hotels he represented ruin the place? Take away the personality Zany Laurent and her predecessor worked so hard to create? But if Danni couldn’t come up with an immediate solution, there wouldn’t be any choice but to sell when Zany finally emerged from her coma. If the bank hadn’t already foreclosed by then.

He was amazed how much that thought disturbed him. *Oh hell. I’m teetering on the brink of blowing another job.*

And only Danni’s downfall, he realized, would save him.

Chapter Six

Danni stood in the solarium, watching the plumbers and electricians as they made the final adjustments to the hot tubs. There was a chance she could get the retreat open on time. If only she could find some money.

She fought back a sick sensation in her stomach. *What a complete nightmare!* She'd already been so stressed she could barely cope even before she got here. But she had found Alec, her advisor. A rush of gratitude swept over her for whatever kindly powers-that-be that had gifted her with his presence.

She turned to look through the glass wall into the conference room where she could see the back of his head as he talked to the banker. Alec. Lust surged through her, primal and powerful. She wanted to undress him slowly using only her mouth. And once she had him naked, she longed to lick him all over. Just looking at him made the moisture pool between her legs and her clit throb. But it did more than that. *He* did more than that.

He made her feel stronger, as if she might actually be able to pull this off.

Alec, she decided, was good for her.

And she wanted him in her life. That realization startled her and she examined it. Yes, she'd already proved to herself she was a complete and capable person in her own right. She didn't need anyone, not even him, to be whole. But there was a part of her that cried out for him. Craved him. He would make her life so much more joyful. So full of love and laughter and contentment. She'd never experienced anything like it before. Never wanted a man like she wanted Alec.

Mr. Manning rose and the movement caught her attention, dragging her thoughts away from Alec and back to her present struggles. *Damn that Five of Wands.*

She hurried back inside to meet the two men as they crossed the lobby. Alec, she noted, was frowning. So was Manning. *Not a good sign.*

The banker directed an unfriendly glare at her. "It appears to me that matters are far worse than you seem to realize, Ms. Colbert. You should have told me immediately about your aunt's accident, not left it until today for me to find out."

"It only happened yesterday morning," she shot back, "and I didn't know myself until after my plane landed. By the time I got to the hospital and found out how things stood, it was already too late to call you, even if I'd known at the time who you were and what your number was."

"That's what's so troubling," he explained as if he addressed a backward child. "You have no idea how your aunt's affairs stand, and you have no legal right to make any decisions—or to even be on the property, for that matter. I'm going to have to give some serious consideration to the queries I've received from those hotel chains."

"No!" Danni clenched her hands. "You can't do that until we've actually defaulted in our payments—which I know hasn't happened. I'll figure out how to hold things together for a few more days. My aunt isn't that badly injured. She'll come out of the coma soon, maybe even today, then she'll be able to sign the power of attorney even if she won't be up to resuming management herself."

"Give her time," Alec interjected. "Ms. Colbert is a capable businesswoman."

"She's a computer programmer," the banker said in tones that implied her profession precluded any ability beyond that field. "What's she going to do when those workers demand she cover their expenses? Write them some computer code to cover it?"

Danni stared at him. She might be able to do a trade, offer to build them websites, create...*what?* Her tired imagination failed.

Assets. She could cash in her assets. Or borrow against them. *What assets?* She had her car, but it wasn't anything remarkable and almost six years old now. The bank no longer owned it but it wouldn't bring in enough to cover even a quarter of the expenses

she'd been handed that morning. She had a house. It still had a huge mortgage but since it was located in California's Silicon Valley, the value had gone up a fair amount since she'd purchased it. She might be able to refinance, increase the mortgage as high as the bank would allow.

You could lose your house if Aunt Zany doesn't wake up soon.

She turned to Alec, making one last desperate bid. "Can't you two advance me something?"

Mr. Manning brightened. "Are you in a position to offer her a loan?" he asked Alec.

Danni blinked. "But—" Her expression confused, she looked from the bank manager to Alec then back again. "Isn't he one of your advisors?"

Mr. Manning drew back. "Most certainly not. I've never seen this gentleman before."

"Danni—" Alec drew a deep breath. "I was trying to tell you earlier. I don't work for the bank."

"But you said you didn't work for my aunt."

Alec held out his hand toward her. "This sure the hell isn't the way I meant to tell you. I'm a lawyer. My firm was hired by one of the chains interested in buying the retreat."

"Excellent," breathed Mr. Manning. "Why don't we—"

"This place isn't for sale!" Danni yelled the words at the banker. "I'll find the money and we'll get through. And you," she rounded on Alec, "can get out of here. Right now!"

She spun away, blinded by the tears that flooded her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She stumbled over a box but kept going, across the lobby and out the front door. Cool air enveloped her and she broke into a run, crossing the sloping lawn and not stopping until she'd reached the edge of the lake. She wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, partially clearing her vision, and stared at the wavelets that lapped gently at the shore.

What an idiot I was! The thought repeated over and over in her mind. *What a complete gullible fool.* Of course Alec played up to her. He wanted his clients to be the ones to whom they sold the retreat. *And I actually begged him to fuck me!*

Only it was worse than that. What she'd done was fall in love with him.

Impossible. You don't fall in love with a man after knowing him for less than twenty-four hours. Lust maybe, but not love.

But it was love. In her heart, she knew that was true. The bond she felt with him went far beyond the need to get naked and sweaty, beyond the need to have him hammering his cock inside her.

Except a bond goes both ways, doesn't it? He should feel the same about her. And that meant not betraying her trust.

So her romantic yearnings had played her false. It was possible to want something—or someone—so badly she could have convinced herself a bond existed when in truth it didn't.

Conflict. That damned Five of Wands sure got it right.

Except the card issued a challenge to overcome, to triumph.

Well, she'd have to chalk up her entanglement with Alec as personal growth because there wouldn't be any happy ending for her there. Which meant she'd just have to move heaven and earth to make sure she succeeded for Aunt Zany.

Slowly she turned to face the old lodge. She had to think. She had to factor Alec out of the equation. She had to decide what to do, then follow through.

One corner of her mouth tugged into a rueful half-smile. About one thing, at least, she'd been right. With this place she really had bitten off more than she could chew.

But oh god, it was such a tempting mouthful. She loved this place.

Well, the tarot card had warned her. It also gave advice. She had to face her mouthful of problems. That was the message inherent in the card. She had to find

strength and resources within herself to overcome her problems, thereby not only succeeding in her task but growing as an individual.

Yeah. Right.

But for Aunt Zany's sake, she had to try.

Besides, if one failed to learn their lesson, they had to keep repeating it until the message finally got through. She sure as hell didn't want to live through the last few months again. So if that meant growing and moving beyond, she'd better get on with it.

So what inner resources could she draw on? *Damned few.* She was stubborn—did that mean she had to learn to bend a little? She was logical—so perhaps she had to call on her neglected creative side? She was overstressed—so she had better learn how to relax.

Relax. God, she longed for a bit of real peace. Since she'd come here, she'd only found it with Alec.

A sudden, heart-wrenching yearning filled her to feel his lips on hers, on her breasts, on her clit. Heat shot through her, burning along her cleft. Moisture pooled there, ready for his cock. She closed her eyes with her longing. How could she want anyone so much? Her need was painful in its intensity. With an effort she forced it aside—never away completely—and tried to focus on her present problems.

She'd always gone to the boathouse when she was young and wanted to think. Her steps led her there now. It needed repair too, she noted. Part of the roof sagged. Sighing, she let herself into the long low structure.

One wall held a selection of kayaks stacked on supporting rods. Half a dozen two-man foot-powered paddle boats rested on the dock that ran along the other side. A number of life vests and bright orange floats hung above them.

She pushed a button on a control panel beside her, but instead of lights coming on, a garage-style door rumbled upward at the far end facing the lake, letting in light and a cool breeze. She strolled toward it then sank onto the dock. After a moment she took off her shoes and socks and dangled her feet in the chill water.

How many times had she done this as a child when her aunt had brought her to visit her old friend? She closed her eyes, letting memories wash over her. Of Aunt Zany and Georgie. Of exploring the shoreline on the long lazy summer afternoons. Of evenings spent sprawled before that cavernous fireplace. Of last night before those flickering flames, licking and nibbling Alec's cock while he tongue-fucked her.

Alec again.

She gazed across the water to a tumbled pile of boulders and the lone spruce that clung to them. She couldn't let thoughts of—oh all right, longings for—Alec cloud her decisions.

It was fairly straightforward, really. Under no conditions would she allow this place to go into bankruptcy while Aunt Zany lay unconscious. She had a small amount of capital in the house she owned. So first thing Monday morning she would arrange for a new mortgage then go to one of those instant cash places to tide her over until the house loan produced the money. She would prove to that unhelpful Mr. Manning that she could carry on until her aunt woke up.

And if Aunt Zany didn't recover— For a moment she forced herself to consider that possibility. Coma patients could linger that way for a very long time. Months. Years, maybe. Without a power of attorney, Danni wouldn't be able to make any legal decisions, either for her aunt or for the retreat. The bank would foreclose on it and sell it to the highest bidder. And Aunt Zany would wake up to find her beloved retreat gone and any proceeds eaten up by the staggering hospital bills.

And I'd have lost my house as well.

She couldn't let herself think about that. It would be a gamble, but she could never live with herself if she didn't take it. What really mattered, after all?

The answer washed over her. Aunt Zany. Love for her and love for this place.

And love for Alec?

Was Alec betraying her? He *had* tried to tell her something before the meeting, but he'd been interrupted by that phone call. Had he been going to explain to her that he worked for the opposition?

He knew how she felt about keeping this place for her aunt. So either he would have to betray her or his employers. Or was it possible he thought selling this place would be the best thing for her and her aunt? He might not see it as betrayal.

She had to know where he really stood. He meant too much to her to jump to conclusions—again—that might be just as wrong as her earlier ones.

Of course if he were bent on obtaining Serenity Retreat for his clients, he might lie to her.

She'd tell him about her plan to obtain fast cash. If he tried to talk her out of it...well, then she'd know what his intentions really were.

Alec paused in the open doorway of the boathouse and peered inside. The far end gaped open, illuminating the interior. He cast a cursory glance at the variety of watercraft—nothing motorized, he noted with relief—and attendant equipment, then made his way along the dock to the lone figure who sat at the far end.

"Danni?" He spoke softly, not wanting to startle her. *No, damn it, I just don't want to provoke more conflict with her.*

She turned to look over her shoulder then scrambled to her bare feet. Her chin rose in challenge. "I'm going to mortgage my house and go to one of those instant cash places."

God what loyalty she has. "You'll be taking quite a risk. You could lose everything."

"It's Aunt Zany and this place," she waved her arm to indicate more than the sagging boathouse, "that matter."

"Danni..." His voice broke and trailed off. "Love me like that."

He hadn't meant to say the words aloud, they'd just slipped out. But he meant them. Her love for her aunt, for the retreat, shone in her eyes, in her whole face, in her posture. She was a passionate, caring woman. And he needed her to care just as passionately for him.

He wasn't aware of moving, but there he was beside her, holding her in his arms, her mouth under his, his arms wrapped about her. For a moment she struggled, then she freed herself enough to press her hands against his shoulders.

She held him off. "What do you honestly think I should do?" Her voice trembled.

"Love me," came his prompt response. "Now. Always." His fingers fumbled with the button on her jeans.

"About this—this mess, I mean." She slid her hands under the bottom edge of his sweater and tugged at his zipper.

"Whatever you need to do to succeed. Danni—" He broke off, shaking his head, all the while tugging down her jeans and the silky panties beneath. "This is what you want, what you believe you must do. So do it. I'll help in any way I can."

"And your job?"

He felt his own jeans and boxers lower to his knees. "Screw it. You're more important." He cupped the rounded swells of her buttocks and pulled her tight against his fully engorged erection. A low sigh escaped him as he rocked it back and forth against her stomach.

"Speaking of screwing, did you buy those condoms?" Her tongue played with his earlobe.

"Boxes and boxes. And I threw half a dozen packets in my pocket. I know what you're capable of making me feel."

"Even in here?" Now her tongue ran down his throat.

He dragged off his sweater. "Especially in here. Gives me all sorts of ideas."

"Like what?" She pulled off her sweater and lacy bra and stepped out of the jeans that confined her ankles. "You like boats?"

"Yeah. I love the thought of dipping my oar in and out of your lake." Then he had to stop talking because he couldn't wait a moment longer to kiss the pebbled tip of her nipple and draw it into his mouth to lick and nibble it.

She gasped. "With that mast of yours, I thought you'd prefer to sail."

He released the delicate bud long enough to say, "I'll take you between the sheets any time."

Her hand circled his balls then caressed his cock. "It's time you dropped anchor."

"Better test the water." He traced a finger down the center of her body, dipped it in and out of her navel several times, then continued over her mons and to the soft, moist folds of her cleft. "Oh, yeah. Time to take the plunge."

She knelt on the rough wood of the decking. "So you're a swimmer too?"

"Mmmm." He caught his breath as her tongue ran the length of his cock. "Turn around."

She spread her clothes on the rough boards and shifted so her hands and knees were protected as she bent to offer him her rear. "What's your favorite stroke?"

"I like to begin with the back stroke, real slow at first before I work up to racing speed." He positioned himself behind her and ran his hands over her wonderfully curvy rear then over her hips and around her waist.

She had a beautiful back. Everything about her was beautiful, fully padded, incredibly soft and desirable. He licked the base of her spine and felt the tremor that ran through her whole body.

"I've been wanting to kiss every inch of you," he breathed.

"Do you hear me complaining?" A shaky laugh escaped her. "Get on with it, mister."

He caressed her back and shoulders while licking and nibbling his way to the nape of her neck. "I love your freckles."

"And I always thought them a curse."

"Nope. They give me targets to kiss." He suited action to words. "But now," he added, sliding his hands to her stomach, "comes my second favorite way to swim. The breast stroke."

She gasped as his fingers outlined the rounded mounds. She squirmed, bringing his palms into contact with her hardened nipples sooner than he'd intended, but her whimper of pleasure sent a white-hot surge of desire shooting through him, swelling his already engorged cock to bursting point.

Damn, I can't keep this up much longer or I'll explode. And he wanted to bring her as much pleasure as possible before then. He wanted her to come on his fingers, on his mouth and finally on his throbbing penis.

He pinched and tugged at the buds of her nipples while massaging every other part of her breasts he could reach with the heels and sides of his hands. Allowing her to bear some of his weight, he leaned farther forward so he could dip his tongue in her ear. She moaned again, rocking her hips back against him.

"I—" She broke off to gasp once more as he kissed the base of her spine again. "Are you any good at the freestyle?"

"That used to be known as the crawl, remember? And right now I want to crawl all over you."

"The Australian crawl," she managed.

"Damn right. Down Under time." He released one of her breasts, tickled his way along her stomach and found the warm dampness of her cleft.

She whimpered. "Oh yes."

A deep chuckle escaped him. "Let's swim, honey." He plunged three fingers into her depths. "Come on, come for me."

She cried out as his thumb caressed her clit, then suddenly her hips bucked back against him over and over, faster and faster, forcing his fingers deeper. He increased the pressure on her clit and pinched harder at the nipple he still held. She moaned, over and over until her whole body tensed. Her inner muscles spasmed, clutching his fingers, milking him as he wanted them to milk his cock. Her nectar drenched his hand.

"That's right, honey." He wrapped both arms about her waist and pulled her up against himself so he could bury his face in her thick sweet-smelling hair. Violets, he realized. She smelled of violets. *God, I'll always love that scent now.* A rush of emotion washed over him, leaving him weak. But he wasn't nearly done with her yet. He sat back. "Time to let my tongue paddle in the shallow waters of your pussy," he murmured.

She shook her head. "You've forgotten one of the most important of the swimming styles."

He grinned. "The butterfly?"

She sank back onto her hands. "Get swimming, Mister."

"I was always good at the dolphin kick." He pulled one of the foil packets from the pocket of his discarded jeans, ripped it open then set it over the head of his erection. His breath escaped in a long sigh as he eased the rubber down the considerable length. The damned things always proved tricky – frequently uncomfortable – because of his girth.

More than she could chew, but a real tempting mouthful. He grinned at the memory of her words as he positioned his aching penis between her nether cheeks and eased it down until it encountered the moist warmth it sought.

"Make it hard and fast," she begged.

"Anything to oblige my lady." He thrust deep, gripping her hips to hold her in place.

A low groan of pure ecstasy escaped her. She shivered then began working her inner muscles, clenching them around his shaft. He drew back then plunged again. And again. His pelvis worked in the rhythmic flexing of the dolphin kick, his back arching

with the wild sensations that shot through his groin and down his thighs. He wrapped one arm about her stomach to clamp her against him while his other hand sought and found her clit. He wanted to see her face, watch her expression as she came again. He wanted to taste her mouth, taste her pussy, taste every inch of her. The longing filled him, sending shudders through him, then his taut balls released their seed, shooting it up his cock in an ecstatic explosion.

As he clung to her he became aware of her orgasmic contractions squeezing the last drops from him. They kept coming, over and over, accompanied by her trembling whimpers. At last they subsided. Her shoulders relaxed as a long shaky sigh escaped her.

“Come here.” He lay down beside her and pulled her to join him.

“We’ll get splinters if we aren’t careful,” she protested though she snuggled against him willingly enough.

“When I have the energy, I’ll rearrange my sweater under you.”

“Well...” Her smile faded. “I should be doing something constructive.”

He kissed the top of her head. “And I should tell you why I came to find you.”

“You mean you had another reason?”

“That would have been more than enough. But no. I found the name of your aunt’s lawyer.”

“You —” She broke off and sat up abruptly.

He liked the way her breasts bounced when she made sudden movements. With an effort he dragged his gaze back to her face. “It took a while to track him down. He was out playing golf and had left orders he didn’t want to be disturbed. But I convinced his answering service this was an emergency. He’s agreed — grudgingly — to meet us in his office in —” He broke off to check his watch. “Ouch. Just over half an hour. Guess I really didn’t have time to go paddling.”

“Later,” she promised. “Why didn’t you tell me at once?”

"Because whenever I see you, all the blood rushes out of my brain and into my cock. I can't think straight."

"I'll remember that. Might come in useful." She scrambled to her feet and began pulling on her clothes. "How far away is his office?"

"Should take us twenty minutes." He found his jeans and dragged them on then yanked the fisherman knit sweater over his head and tugged it down.

"I won't have time to change," Danni said, eyeing in dismay the light sweater that now showed smears of dirt from the dock.

"Never, ever change. You're perfect just as you are." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close for a deep kiss. He groaned as he released her. "Oh god that feels good. But we'd better get going in case I get us lost."

They crossed the lawn, her hand tight in his, until they reached the entryway to the retreat.

"Hey!" The contractor climbed out of the truck he'd pulled up across the handicapped access ramp. "You got our money?"

"Hell," muttered Alec. He started forward.

Danni held him back. "I haven't had a chance to get it yet," she called back to the contractor. "I'm on my way now."

"Not good enough." Vituri planted his fists on his hips. "When you've got it, give me a call. My team's out of here until you can produce the cash." He turned to where a number of his workers had gathered around. "We're off!" he shouted.

The men must already have packed up. They piled into their vehicles and engines started all over the lot. As Vituri pulled out, leading the herd, he waved an airy hand toward Danni and Alec.

"Bastard," Alec muttered.

"Let's not waste any time on him right now. I need to get my purse and let Laura know where we're going. And just maybe that everything will be all right when we get back."

"I'll get the car started." He turned toward the sporty vehicle and climbed in.

Minutes passed. He switched on the radio and listened while still more minutes passed. He had just gotten out to find her when Danni pushed through the front doors, her purse clutched in her hand, and ran toward him.

"Hey." He steadied them both as she threw herself into his arms. "What's wrong? Another worker quit?"

"It—" She broke off and took an unsteady breath. "It's my aunt. There was a message on my cell phone—I'd left the damned thing in my purse in the office. Her heart—"

"Easy, honey. I'll take you straight there."

She shook her head. "You've got to go to the lawyer. Tell him I'm sorry I couldn't be there."

"Right. Get in." He pulled her around to the passenger side.

"No. I—I'd better drive myself. I don't know how long I'll...want to stay."

He noticed the way she hesitated over the verb. Want? Or need?

"Will you just come back here when you've seen that lawyer?" She sounded like she'd break down in tears at any moment. "Someone needs to oversee things."

And she'd rather concentrate on her aunt, he guessed.

He kissed her, holding her, torn, wanting to be there to comfort her, knowing that seeing the lawyer might, in the long run, be of more use to her. He let her go at last and dropped one final kiss on the top of her waving red hair. "Call me if you need anything, even just to talk. Promise?"

She nodded, apparently unable to speak, and made her way to where the rental car stood waiting. She got behind the wheel, started up and pulled out, heading toward the road.

With a sigh he went around to the driver's side of his car again.

Chapter Seven

Alec cast an appraising look around the lawyer's waiting room. He'd worked in enough different law offices to be able to pick up a sense of what to expect of the inmates from the décor. This one, he guessed, liked money and power. And ostentation.

The door to the inner office opened and a middle-aged man, tall and slender, dressed in khakis, a polo shirt and designer shoes, looked out. "Mr. Wallace? I'm Nathan Grier." The tanned face didn't smile.

Alec crossed the room and took the hand extended to him. "Thank you for meeting me."

"You said it was urgent." Grier's tone implied the matter had better be of a great deal more importance than his interrupted game of golf. He ushered him into the inner sanctum and gestured toward a chair.

Alec seated himself and explained the situation. Grier, who had settled himself behind the oversized mahogany desk, picked up a gold pen and tapped it absently on the polished surface.

"And you say you represent one of the hotel chains," Grier said as Alec finished. "This niece of Ms. Laurent's, this Ms. Colbert. I thought you said she was coming with you."

"She was called to the hospital."

Grier's eyebrows rose. "Is Ms. Laurent not doing well?"

"Let's say she isn't likely to come out of her coma any time soon."

"I see." The rapidity of the pen tapping increased. "Ms. Colbert, I gather, is unaware of what—if any—arrangements her aunt has made?"

Alec nodded. He had a fair idea where this conversation might lead, and that interested him very much. "She—and the retreat—will be in serious trouble if she can't establish some legal right to act on her aunt's behalf."

Grier began to smile. "Like a power of attorney."

"Exactly like one. Her aunt didn't by any chance have one made up in case of emergencies, did she?"

"Hmm." Grier rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "It would hardly be proper for me to discuss such a matter with you. In fact, unless at least one of the people concerned presented herself in my office and made that request, I don't believe I could even tell you if such a paper exists."

"But is that in the...best interests of your client?" Alec's voice purred.

Grier shrugged. "And what is in the best interest of yours? That chain just might," he went on without waiting for an answer, "be very pleased to acquire Serenity Retreat, especially at the price the bank would ask after foreclosing on the mortgage."

Alec kept his expression neutral. "Financially pleased, do you mean?"

"Well..." The man clicked the gold pen open and closed several times. "Neither of the ladies is really in a position to manage a property like that, are they? It would be in their best interests to see it taken off their hands. And I feel certain we would both benefit from such an arrangement."

"I see." Alec leaned forward. "A tidy little profit, perhaps?"

Grier smiled.

Alec studied the lawyer for a long thoughtful moment then nodded his head. "I believe you and I have some talking we can do."

* * * * *

Danni paused after exiting the hospital's glass doors and drew a deep quavering breath of the cool evening air. *God what a hellishly stressful afternoon.* They'd come so

close to losing Aunt Zany. The tears, held back through the long hours of waiting and worrying and praying, filled her eyes and she tried to blink them back.

An unexpected reaction to one of the meds. The doctor who'd told her had been matter-of-fact, almost casual, as if a patient's going into tachycardia and nearly dying from an administered drug was an everyday event. No big deal.

Except to me. And to Aunt Zany.

At least they'd identified the problem at last and stopped the drug. No permanent damage done, the doctor had assured her almost cheerfully. *Except to my nerves.*

And now the offending med had been stopped, they might expect to see some improvement in her aunt's condition. *Improvement.* She'd demanded to know if the coma had been pharmaceutically induced, but the doctor had denied that emphatically.

Well, she could hardly expect him to have done otherwise.

She'd remained until her aunt was out of all danger, then finally dragged herself from the bedside where they'd allowed her to sit once the machines and support personnel had vacated the ICU room. Now she had to return to the retreat and hear what—if anything—Alec had learned.

It was past seven o'clock when she at last drove through the gate of...*home*. She braked to a halt, stunned. Some part of her had always thought of this place as a second home, but now? *This is where I belong, where I want to be. I'm not going to let anyone take this from us.* She wouldn't mortgage her house, she'd sell it. She'd live here with Aunt Zany, helping her manage this beautiful old place. As for her job? She hadn't realized how much she'd come to hate it. Oh, it represented stability and security. But what was life without a little risk? What was life without beauty and a bit of Serenity? Keeping this place in the black would provide a constant challenge. And maybe she could make herself useful in some other way. She'd always had a secret hankering to study t'ai chi or aromatherapy or conduct guided meditations. She could certainly, she reflected ruefully, read tarot cards for anyone who might be interested.

She eased the car forward along the drive and pulled into the parking lot, empty now of all the workers' vehicles. Only the retreat's van remained, along with Alec's car which sat in its usual spot. They had the place to themselves. *Does he have good news or bad for me?* As much as she dreaded what she might hear, she had to find him and ask what the lawyer had told him. But—*oh god, I'm tired. I just want to eat something and sleep for days.*

Yeah. In your dreams maybe.

The sun wouldn't set for another two or three hours. She ought to see how much progress the workers—the *remaining workers*, she corrected herself—had made in her absence.

As she climbed out of the car, an odd, uneven pounding reached her, carried on the faint evening breeze. She looked around, puzzled. None of the contractors remained, of that she was certain. So who was working—and where?

Curious, she followed the sound down the lawn toward the lake. The boathouse? As she neared, the pounding stopped to be replaced by an eerie creaking. An extension ladder leaned against the siding, rising about two feet above the overhanging edge of the pitched roof. She glimpsed the top of a dark familiar head.

She slung the long strap of her purse over her shoulder and around her neck and mounted the rungs until she could see Alec clearly. He still wore the same clothes as before, but now he had an old leather tool belt slung around his hips and a crowbar and sledgehammer lay on the shingles beside the hole he'd made. At the moment, he seemed to be pulling out bent rusty nails.

He looked up from his labors as she sank into a cross-legged sitting position beside him. "How's your aunt?"

"Okay for now." She told him what had happened.

"Hell!" he exclaimed when she finished. "My poor honey, what a day you've had!"

"Make it better for me," she begged. "What did you learn from her lawyer?"

"That he's the worst kind of scumbag."

"Oh." Her hopes, never all that strong, faded. "Then he couldn't help us."

"He thought my firm's clients might be willing to pay him a sizable bonus if he assisted them in buying this place when the bank forecloses. He even offered to share it with me."

Her chest tightened painfully. "I-I see."

"So then we had a little chat." The corners of his mouth seemed to be struggling against their current serious expression. "I offered to file criminal charges against him and in the end he agreed to hand over the power of attorney in your name that your aunt had signed in case of an emergency."

"The—" She broke off. "You mean I have legal authority here? I can pay the bills? We really can get this place ready to open by Wednesday?" Tears once again filled her eyes, blurring her vision.

He shifted closer so he could pull her against his side. "We're saved, honey."

She sniffed and dashed the moisture away with her fingers. "I can't believe it."

"I've got a dozen copies of that damned document safe in the office. I've called Mr. Manning and he's agreed you can start signing checks at any time. And Vituri and his contractors will be back here first thing in the morning."

"They-they better be," she managed. She pulled back a trifle. "What are you doing up here? Why aren't you cracking champagne bottles?"

"Later," he promised. "I didn't want to waste the light."

"So you're knocking the roof apart."

"Fixing it," he corrected. "Seemed to me the best way to apply for a job is to prove I can do it." The grin he directed at her was crooked.

"What..." she began, but something in his expression robbed her of breath and her voice trailed off.

His grin became even more lopsided. "You need a full-time handyman, don't you? Vituri said your aunt had been planning to hire one. And maybe you might like a part-time musician to play evenings?"

"But you're a lawyer."

"Well, I can do that for your aunt, too."

"But your job?"

He shrugged. "Afraid I told my firm they'd have to send someone else to represent their hotel chain client because I quit."

She stared at him, struggling to find the right words. All she came up with was, "Are you sure?"

He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "I had a choice—I could either work for you or against you."

She eased herself onto her knees. "You quit your job?"

"I've quit all my others. But I think I've finally found one that will suit me."

She eyed him skeptically. "Being a handyman?"

"Well, you said I was pretty good with my fingers. I'm not bad with my hands, either."

Her breath caught in her throat and a slow pulsing began in her clit, spreading heat through her pussy and thighs. "Prove it, mister."

"Well, being a handyman requires knowing how to do quite a few different things." He set down the hammer he still held. "Such as how to get rid of things that aren't wanted or are in the way." He tugged at her sweater, freeing it from her jeans and dragging it over her head. "Nice bra. That front hook is real useful. A handyman," he added, "should be able to fasten and unfasten things with ease." He trailed his fingers along the lace that covered her breasts then unhooked the plastic. He bent his head to grasp one side with his teeth and pulled the lace away from her breast. He repeated the action for the other side.

"I see." *Would he...oh god yes, he's going to lick my nipples.* She caught her breath and clutched his shoulders as he drew one into his mouth, teasing the tip with his tongue. "You still haven't finished the clean-up project," she reminded him when she could control her voice again.

"Yes, ma'am. I take it you want that done real fast." He slid her bra straps down her arms.

"Damn right." She wriggled out of them then rested her hands on the roof behind her and arched her hips forward so he could reach the button and zipper on her jeans.

He undid them then stood and lifted her to face him. "Removal work is one of my specialties."

"I—" She broke off as his finger trailed down her lower stomach and tangled in the curling hair that covered her mons. A moment later, as her jeans and panties slid down to her knees, he trailed his finger over her clit. A soft moan escaped her and she stepped out of her clothes, kicking her shoes after them. "You're very efficient."

"Wait'll you see this." He dragged his sweater over his head, exposing those gorgeous abs and pecs with their thick coating of hair that tapered as it trailed below his navel and disappeared into his jeans. Seconds later he had the rest of his clothes off.

"Impressive," she assured him, but wasn't sure if she meant his speed or what he revealed. His erection captured her full attention.

"A handyman should also know how to turn things on." He dropped to his knees and clasped her hips. He licked around her navel then proceeded to tongue-fuck it.

A whimper escaped her. "You're doing more than that, you're making sparks fly."

He tilted his head up to grin at her as he slid his hand between her legs, cupping her pussy. "Hmmm. Moisture. In fact it's dripping."

Sensation shot through her and she closed her eyes for a moment. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Fit in a pipe. The only possible solution."

"What are you waiting for?"

"Have to wrap the end first." He found his jeans and dragged a condom out of the pocket. He rolled it on, spread their clothes then lay on his back on top of them. "Now to insert it."

She straddled him then sank to the roof, her knees on either side of his hips. She caught his rock-hard shaft and positioned so its head barely penetrated her pussy.

"Easy now." He grabbed her hips. "These things have to be fitted with care."

She lowered herself a bare inch, sighing as that huge pipe of his pushed against her inner folds. Part of her wanted to drift off into the ecstatic oblivion he brought her but she kept her eyes open with difficulty, wanting to see his face, his expression, as she gave him as much pleasure as she could. She lifted again, not far, just enough to tease, then slid down a little farther than before. *God that's heaven.*

"Ah! Yeah, honey. Ride me." His grip tightened on her as he tried to drag her down.

Instead she pulled back up then lowered just that little bit more. She repeated that retreat and advance over and over until he moaned and cried out, his eyes tight shut, his face a mask of ecstasy. *Oh yes. That's what I want my man to feel. Then, Oh god, that's what I'm feeling.*

He filled her, so deep, so broad, stretching her, creating sensations she'd never before experienced. Her clit ground into his coarse public hair, shooting thrills throughout her body. Abruptly he released her hips and he dragged her toward his chest. One hand cupped a breast while his mouth found the other. While he pinched and tugged one nipple, he drew the other into his mouth, sucking and licking until she couldn't bear the exquisite torture a moment longer. Tension coiled inside her, unbearable, fantastic, powerful. It exploded, and it took her a moment to realize the scream that rent the air was her own ecstatic release. Her inner muscles clenched over and over as he pumped harder and faster until his seed shot from him in hot streams that seemed never to stop.

At last, gasping, she sank onto his chest. He wrapped his arms about her, holding her tight, his lips brushing her forehead, her temple and, when she raised her head, her eyes.

"You've got the job," she told him.

"What, already?" A half laugh sounded in his voice. "And I never got to demonstrate how well I can hammer."

"Oh, yes you did."

"Damn. Can I still show you how to use a lubricant to get a pipe into a tight place?"

She kissed the base of his throat. "After dinner, maybe? I seem to have worked up a bit of an appetite."

"Good plan. I want to whip us up some custard first anyway."

* * * * *

Alec sat at the table, his long legs stretched out beneath it, watching Danni as she baked the one-and-a-half-inch thick steak in the oven. From the tantalizing aroma that reached him he guessed she knew a thing or two about cooking after all. She poked the cubed potatoes that simmered gently in a pot then set down the fork and picked up the merlot he'd fetched from the cellar.

"We should build a caretaker's cottage a few hundred yards from the retreat," he said. He watched her closely, curious—*hell, I'm nervous*—about her reactions.

She considered as she poured them each a glass of the wine. "My aunt's apartment isn't exactly set up for three, is it?"

He took the Merlot she handed him. "And I don't think Purrcival would like the dogs."

Her eyes widened. "You have dogs? In the plural? All I can say is they'd better be big ones. Really huge."

"They are. Or rather they will be. I don't have them yet. It wouldn't be fair to them, trying to keep them in my condo in Seattle. But here—" He broke off and gestured to indicate the surrounding acres populated only by trees and wildlife.

"A house and dogs?" She shot him a penetrating look. "You're making big plans, mister."

He drew a deep breath. "Yeah. There's something about you that makes me think of life beyond the next month or even the next year or two. Of futures and permanence."

She turned to the oven and peered through the glass, probably to give herself time to take in what he'd said. "I don't think people who come to Serenity Retreat would welcome the sound of dogs barking at them."

She doesn't want me, not for more than just this fling. The thought devastated him. He didn't think he could bear to live the rest of his life without her.

"So we should probably build our house at the farthest edge of the property nearest town. That would put us about half a mile away. The woofs wouldn't bother anyone from there."

His head came up and he saw her smiling at him, soft color tingeing her fair complexion. Emotion welled in his throat and he forced himself to swallow.

"Hold on a sec." She held up her glass. "We need to get a few things straight."

"Such as?" Why was he so nervous? *Because I love her so much.*

She leaned back against the counter and took a sip of her wine. "I'll make you a deal. We'll build that house and you can have the dogs on two conditions."

He eyed her warily. "And they are?"

"First, that one of the dogs is a Newfoundland. That way it can perform daring water rescues on the idiot retreaters who get in trouble on the lake."

He let out the breath he'd held. "Done. Any objections if the other is a Saint Bernard?"

She grinned. "Sounds like a perfect pair."

Like us. "And your other condition?"

"A five-to-one ratio. For every fifty pounds of dog, we get ten pounds of cat."

He did some hasty calculations. "You want five cats?"

"It'll take that many to keep those dogs you want in line."

"And if I agree, I get you?"

She moved around the table until she stood behind him. Carefully, so as not to spill her wine, she wrapped her arms about his neck and nibbled on his earlobe. "Oh yeah. Those cats won't be the only pussy you'll be getting."

He took her glass from her then grabbed her arm and pulled her so she sat in his lap. "Are you sure about all this? About giving up your job, selling your house, moving here? Taking on the retreat? Taking on all those animals? Taking on me?"

She nodded. "It'll always be a challenge, but it's what I want. You're what I want."

Warmth seeped through him and his hand slid up to cup her breast. "There's only one response to that."

She laughed. "After dinner. I really need to eat something."

"And I need to make some custard." He set her on her feet then rose and followed her into the kitchenette.

"Mmmm. I've always loved dessert," she murmured.

"And I've got the perfect dish in mind to serve it on." He stooped to kiss her shoulder then rummaged for an appropriately sized saucepan while she brought out the salad makings.

They had just finished eating everything but their dessert and cleaning up the dishes when Danni's phone rang.

She stared at it for a long moment then picked it up. "Hello?"

Alec busied himself loading the dishwasher, running water and banging pans to give her a measure of privacy. When he finished, he turned to find her sitting once more at the table, a frown creasing her brow.

She held the deck of tarot cards.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"That was the hospital. My aunt has woken up. They don't want me to come to see her until tomorrow though."

"That's terrific." *So why does she look so worried?* "Is there something else wrong?"

"No. I mean—" She broke off and gestured toward the cards. "The last time I drew one was just before the meeting this morning and guess what it was?"

"And you're afraid that in spite of the decisions you've made and the struggle you've gone through, there's still conflict ahead." He made it a statement.

She nodded.

"Only one way to find out."

She gave a shaky sigh, shuffled the cards then spread them across the table. She hesitated over several possible choices then abruptly selected one as if she'd felt its pull. She clutched it without turning it over.

"Aren't you going to look?"

"I'm afraid."

"Let's try this." He gathered up the rest of the cards and riffled through them, only to pause when he found the one he sought. "Hah!" He held out the Five of Wands.

"Oh god," she breathed. "It's finally over."

"Aren't you going to look at the one you drew?"

She shook her head and when she looked up at him, a smile tugged at her lips. "No need. I know exactly what I'm about to get. And it involves lots and lots of custard."

His cock surged to life. "Then get your clothes off and lie down on the table, honey, because it should be warm and ready to spread all over your delectable body."

As his penis throbbed in anticipation and his balls tightened, she did exactly as he asked.

About the Author

Elyssa Lynne firmly believes that life ought to be one long fantasy—and the more fantastic, the better. She loves the quirky, the magical, the romantic—and the tyrannical furry beasts who dominate her home. She is also firmly convinced that her computer runs on chocolate chips instead of silicon chips.

Under her own name she has written numerous books and won several awards, but she has only just discovered the delights of writing for Ellora's Cave. She feels she has embarked on a joyful new adventure, not only in her fiction but also in reality.

Elyssa welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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