

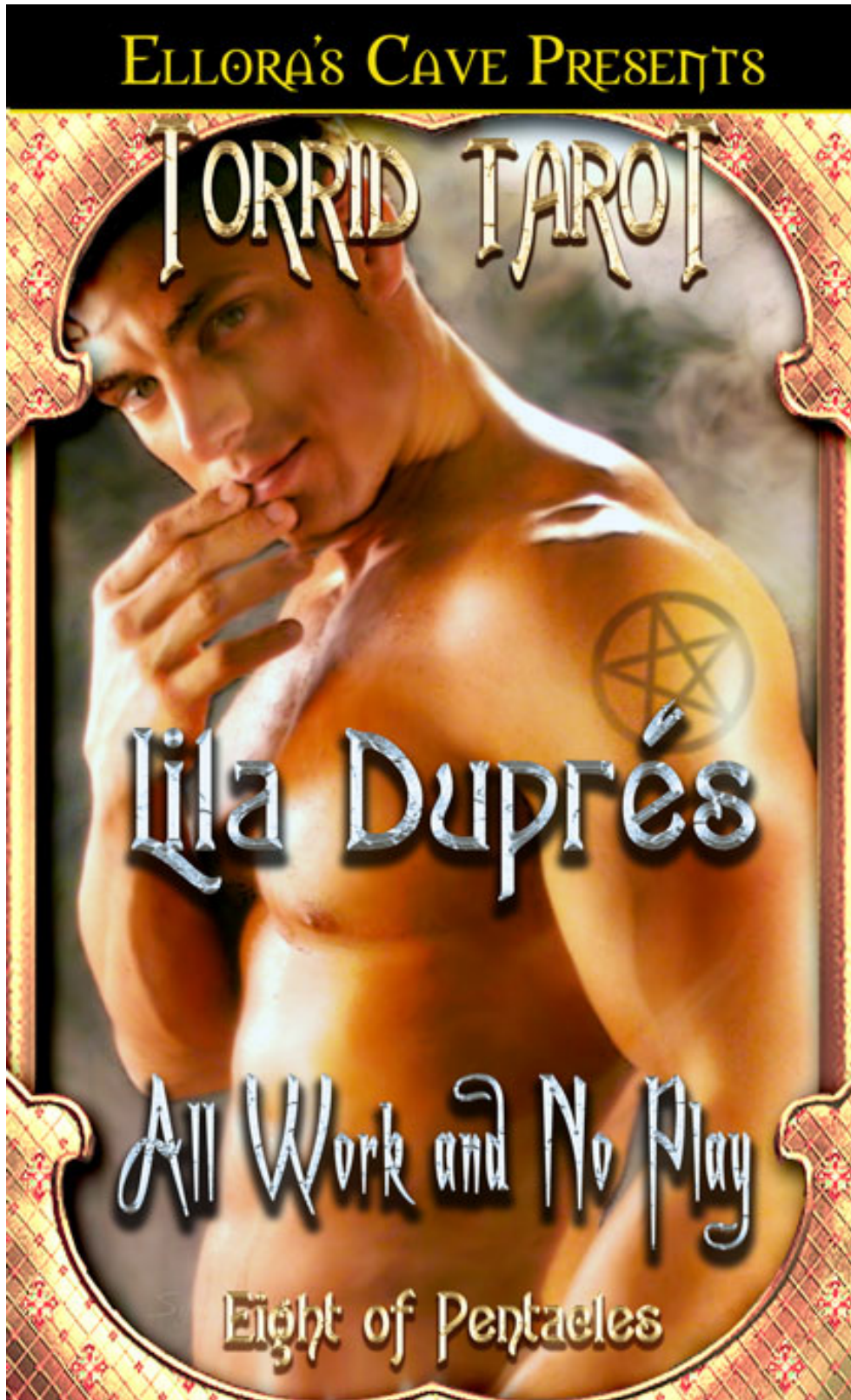
ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

Lila Duprés

All Work and No Play

Eight of Pentacles



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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All Work and No Play

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ALL WORK AND NO PLAY

Lila Duprés

Dedication

To Maureen, for telling me I could do it and holding my hand while I did.

To Ruth, who encouraged me all along the way and kept me on track.

And to Dirk, my first reader, the love of my life and my inspiration in all things romantic.

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Eight of Pentacles

Julie Preston is a hard worker, with much to strive for. If there's a job to be done, she's there. She feels she must tame her baser instincts to achieve something greater, forego her immediate pleasures for the sake of her long-term goals. She always focuses on the task at hand and the prize at the end of the long race. "Immediate gratification" isn't even in her vocabulary.

Julie needs to remember not to drive herself too hard. All work and no play makes her one-dimensional and boring...not to mention lonely.

The Eight of Pentacles shows a man huddled over a workbench, carefully crafting a beautiful pentacle. Seven completed pentacles, all perfect in form, range around and behind the man. There's an open window beyond with a beautiful view of sailboats on a lake and a gorgeous blue sky, but the man has his back to it. All his attention is focused on his workbench.

Upright, this card indicates someone who's a hard worker, who keeps his nose to the grindstone, ignoring all distractions and focusing only on the completion of his project. He is driven, painstaking, methodical. The outside world hardly exists for him.

Reversed, this card describes someone who's tired of working so hard, someone who needs a break. It can also describe someone who does shoddy work, who doesn't concentrate enough to turn out a quality product, who allows his personal life to interfere with his work.

Either way, this card predicts the need to soften the sharp corners and tight angles of life, to be a hard worker but also to have fun.

Chapter One

"I knew I never should have let you talk me into this," Julie Preston said to her friend Tanya Romanov for the third time that evening.

"What?" Tanya shouted. "I can't hear you." She gestured at her ears and grinned. "Too noisy."

The sound system in the dark, smoky O'Connor's Bar and Grille singles bar was cranked up loud enough to rattle the sleazy pictures on the walls, and the spinning mirrored ball cast frenetic light patterns around the room that gave Julie a headache.

Julie shook her head. She ought to be home, doing her taxes. Or pressing her gray pinstripe suit for tomorrow's board meeting. Or checking her younger sister Emily's algebra homework. She should be doing *something* useful. Not just sitting around in a singles bar, stirring the melting ice in her first and only drink and waiting for a male to take notice of her. Waiting meant wasted time. And Tanya hadn't even let Julie bring along her BlackBerry.

"It'll do you good," Tanya had said earlier that day. "You never go out and do anything fun. You're always working. You're an Eight of Pentacles, all right."

"Eight of Pentacles?" Tanya was always comparing Julie with one Tarot card or another. And always a boring one, never one of the fun or intriguing cards, like the High Priestess. Julie loved that card...showing a gorgeous dark-eyed woman with long, wavy dark hair, all knowing and wise and, based on her sheer costume, not afraid to go after whatever she wanted. "What does that mean?"

"The Eight of Pentacles is the card of hard work," Tanya said. "It's someone who works so hard, they don't know how to relax. They can't remember how to have fun. In other words—you."

Julie snorted. "In case you've forgotten, I have a sister to support. I *have* to work. I know how to have fun, I just don't have the time."

"I know, honey," Tanya said and patted Julie's arm sympathetically.

Five years ago, Julie's life had changed. She was home from her junior year of college for the long Christmas break and, as usual, was sleeping late when the doorbell rang. Julie pulled the pillow over her head and tried to drown it out but it rang again and then a third time in quick succession. Apparently, no one else was going to answer it.

"Great," she muttered as she climbed out of bed, grabbed a robe and staggered downstairs to the door. "Leave the sleeping college girl to answer it."

She jerked open the front door. A sick feeling of foreboding swept through her as she saw two uniformed male police officers standing on her doorstep. Her brain stopped working. All she could do was think inanely, *I haven't done anything wrong, have I?*

"Miss Preston?" one of the officers said, snapping her back to reality.

"Yes? Is there something wrong, Officer?" she asked, her heart now thumping violently in her throat. She put her hand to her chest to try to still it.

"Ma'am, are you related to Mary and Richard Preston?"

"Yes. They're my parents," she said, black terror filling her, and she clenched the door frame to hold herself up. "What's happened to them?"

"May we come in?" the officer asked, his grim expression softening.

Silently, she gestured them into the living room. She stumbled after them on shaky legs and perched on the edge of an upholstered chair while the two men sat on the sofa. "What's wrong? Where are my parents?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you that your parents were involved in an accident about an hour ago, out on Hill Haven Drive," the officer said. "Apparently, an oncoming car

took one of the hairpin turns too fast and skidded into the lane of oncoming traffic. He crashed into them head-on.”

Julie gasped. “Oh my God! Are they all right? What hospital are they in? Can you drive me there? I don’t have a car.”

The officer reached out and grasped her hand in both of his. This, more than anything he’d said, stabbed Julie with a keen sense of loss. In that moment she knew it was bad – horribly bad.

“I’m sorry, Miss Preston. Your parents were killed instantly. We’d be happy to help you with any arrangements you need to make or call someone for you, perhaps a relative or your clergyman...”

Julie didn’t hear the rest of what he said. She had swirled down into a dark pit of despair, grief and self-pity deep inside herself. Somehow, she managed to see the officers out, though she never remembered how. The next few minutes were a blur for the rest of her life. Eventually, she snapped into awareness when she heard a sound.

“Jules?” came Emily’s sleepy voice from upstairs. Emily was nine years old and adored her much older sister. “There’s a police car outside our house. What are they doing here? Where’s Mom and Dad?”

“I’m coming,” Julie said as she slowly climbed the stairs. How was she going to tell Emily her mommy and daddy were never coming home, when she herself just wanted to curl up in a little ball and die?

Julie sat on the bed next to Emily and delivered the bad news haltingly. Emily didn’t want to believe it but at last she was forced to accept the truth she saw in Julie’s face. Then they sat together and sobbed, arms around each other, rocking back and forth until their grief drained them dry and left them exhausted.

In the nightmarish days and weeks that followed, arranging and attending the funeral and settling the estate, the two sisters clung to each other for support and protection. Julie learned her parents had named her in their will as Emily’s guardian if something happened to them. Fortunately, the house was paid for, so they didn’t have

to make a move—at least, not immediately. But Julie had to face the fact that she couldn't continue her college studies while caring for Emily. There were no close relatives to step up to the plate and Julie had no intention of letting Social Services take Emily and place her in a foster home.

So Julie did the only thing she could think of. She quit school. She took the responsibility her parents entrusted her with seriously, feeling it was the only thing she could do now to honor their memories. Her social life became a thing of the past. She'd taken the best job she could find, the one with the most potential, and climbed her way up the corporate ladder into a salaried executive position, also working a weekend waitressing job at the start to support Emily. Luckily, Emily's best friend Susie had an understanding mom who was willing to care for Emily on weekend evenings while Julie worked. It hadn't been easy, but Julie had done the best she could for Emily and herself.

"You've done a great job of raising Emily on your own," Tanya said, breaking Julie's reverie. "No one could be a better mother to her than you've been. But that doesn't mean you can never take a break. Kick back and have some fun. You know what they say about all work and no play?"

"Besides making me the Eight of Pentacles? It makes Jane a dull girl. I know. But who cares?" Julie said and shrugged, maintaining a stony expression she'd perfected over the last few stressful years. "I'm comfortable with my life just the way it is."

But now, after five years of struggle, deprivation and want, some innately female part of her rebelled, something deep inside wondered if she were still attractive to a man. Had she really turned into the dull "Jane" who was all work and no play?

So she'd given in and let Tanya talk her into going out this night.

Unfortunately, the evening had turned into a colossal waste of time as far as Julie was concerned. The music was too loud, the smoke hurt her eyes and throat and the only man who'd approached them had sported a greasy comb-over and smelled like mothballs.

“Time to go.” Julie held up her arm and tapped her watch so Tanya couldn’t mistake her meaning. “I have to get up early tomorrow to get to that board meeting—”

Julie’s jaw dropped and she faltered to a stop in mid-sentence. The most gorgeous man she’d ever seen was heading across the tiny dance floor, straight for their table. He was over six feet tall, with curly dark hair, broad shoulders and a muscular frame, and blue eyes that pierced her soul.

Halfway to her table, two women intercepted him, homing in on him like a barracuda scenting blood in the water. One was a blonde with a buzz cut and a mini-skirt the size of a napkin, the other a redhead with a frizzy perm and wearing enough stretched-tight spandex to gird the globe. They each put a hand on his arm, grinning like crocodiles and pressing up against him seductively. Julie could almost see their claws sinking into him.

Rats. Julie felt a stab of jealousy. It figured—she was finally about to meet the only good-looking man in the place and those two floozies were going to bag him instead. But that was what she’d expected of this evening. Total failure. So why was her stomach roiling with disappointment? Maybe she’d hoped and expected him to be too smart to fall for such obvious tactics?

But wait. He was peeling their hands off his arm gently but firmly, an annoyed look on his face. They persisted, he shook his head, glancing in Julie’s direction. After a minute or two of back and forth, at last they shrugged, pouted and slunk off. He resumed his path for Julie’s table again, the smile returning to his face as he caught her eye once more.

Tanya glanced over her shoulder in the direction Julie was staring, then turned back and kicked Julie’s shin under the table. “Close your mouth,” she hissed, tapping her chin with the back of her fingers for emphasis. “You look ridiculous.”

Julie snapped her mouth shut and swallowed, suddenly disgusted with herself. She was practically drooling, for heaven’s sake. Had it really been so long since she’d been paid any attention? She smoothed her long brunette hair with a trembling hand and

took a deep breath to steady her nerves. He was just a man. Admittedly, a good-looking one but just a man. A man she'd like to eat for breakfast...

"Hello, ladies," the man said, smiling down on them. His voice was deep, resonant and luscious. "My name is Stephen. And you are—"

"Marie," Tanya said, delivering another kick under the table. "I'm Marie and my friend is Anne."

Julie and Tanya had agreed to use only their middle names if they met anyone promising. "There'll be no complications that way," Tanya had assured her. "You can have a one-night stand if you want and the next day it'll be as if it never happened. No way for the guy to track you down and cause an embarrassing incident."

"Hi, Marie," Stephen said, shaking Tanya's hand. Then he took Julie's hand in both of his. "Pleased to meet you, Anne."

Julie tried to stifle a gasp. Stephen's hands were warm, comforting and yet somehow erotic. His touch shot a lightning bolt of desire straight to her groin. She jerked her hand from his grasp and shook her head, puzzled. Was she really so desperate after a few years of celibacy? Or was there something between them, some instant connection?

"Won't you have a seat?" Tanya said. Julie tucked her legs under her chair to avoid the third kick she knew was coming.

"Yes, please do join us," Julie added belatedly. She needed to get her mind back on track and remember her manners. Especially if she didn't want to lose the opportunity to spend some time with the best-looking guy in the place.

"Thanks, I'd like that," Stephen said and dropped easily into a chair between the two of them. Julie shivered as she caught a whiff of his spicy aftershave. He smelled like heaven.

"Why don't you two get to know each other?" Tanya said with a wave of her banged arm. "I have to visit the little girls' room and powder my nose." She rose and

left the table, winking at Julie when Stephen wasn't looking. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Julie groaned. What *wouldn't* Tanya do? She turned to Stephen. "So, Stephen...um...are you from around here?"

"Yup, I am." He grinned at her and her heart pounded. "You?"

"Yes. No. Well, I'm from around here but not *right* here. I live...over there..." She pointed west and floundered to a stop as warmth crept up her cheeks. Lord, she was babbling like a fool. "Would you...um...like a drink?"

He shook his head. "I've had one and I'm not ready for another. What I'd really like now is a dance with you. Shall we?" He gestured to the crowded dance floor.

Julie looked at the bar patrons moving to the music. The band was playing a fast-paced Eighties disco number and the couples were so far apart, it was hard to tell who was dancing with whom. "Sure," she said. "Let's dance." It seemed harmless enough—probably safer than more alcohol. She was already making an idiot of herself.

She let Stephen take her hand, steeling herself to avoid reacting visibly to his touch and he led her out onto the dance floor.

No sooner had they reached a small open spot than the band began to play a slow, sensual love song. Stephen opened his arms confidently and waited for her to step into them, a sexy smile on his handsome face.

Julie was stuck. She couldn't very well back out of their dance now, after she'd accepted his invitation. That would be rude. She stepped closer and he pulled her near and began moving rhythmically in time to the music. She mirrored his moves automatically. He was a fabulous dancer, no question about that.

Her resolve to maintain distance between them, physically and psychologically, weakened and she allowed her head to rest on his shoulder. He smelled wonderful. His warm, hard body, pressed suggestively up against hers, felt better than anything she'd ever experienced, his strong arms holding her just tightly enough. He knew how to

move, how to hold her, how much pressure to exert to lead her where he wanted her to go. They swayed to the music together, in sync, one. The rest of the world faded away.

Damn. Julie knew she was lost.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Julie and Stephen stepped into a hotel room, hand in hand. Julie's head spun with how fast it had all happened and she could hardly believe she was here. It wasn't like her at all. But this was what Tanya had dragged her out for, wasn't it? Julie smiled to herself as she realized maybe now she'd made the switch from boring to exciting. Conservative to uninhibited. Eight of Pentacles to High Priestess. Julie couldn't have imagined in her most erotic dreams a better outcome of this whole crazy idea of Tanya's. At least so far, so good.

Julie dropped her purse on a table and her coat over a chair and looked around the room. Clearly, the hotel got much of its business from the singles bar. Even ignoring the desk clerk's knowing expression and wink, the room decor said it all. The drapes were red velvet, the bedspread red brocade with gold threads shot through it, and the walls covered in red and gold flocked wallpaper. It was schlocky, like something she expected to see in a honeymoon motel in the Poconos. No doubt there was also a heart-shaped tub in the bathroom. Ooh...maybe she could find some bubble bath? Surely a place like this would have it?

"Anne?"

Julie jumped at the sound of Stephen's voice, feeling guilty for her wandering thoughts. "Sorry. Did you say something?"

"Is something wrong? Are you all right?" He frowned, looking concerned.

Julie felt the heat rise up her neck and into her cheeks. Here she was, standing in the middle of the room and zoning out. Or was she desperately focusing on the furnishings because she was nervous about what was about to take place? After all, though she

wasn't a virgin, her experience was limited and several years in the past. "I'm fine," she said. "Nothing's wrong."

He smiled charmingly, a boyish dimple in his right cheek sending an arrow straight to her heart. "Although I hope you haven't changed your mind, if you're having second thoughts, it's not too late to say so. I can take 'no' for an answer. I want that to be perfectly clear—we can stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable."

"No, I'm not uncomfortable. Thank you, though. It's just that I've..." *never done anything like this before.* But she couldn't say that. Stephen wouldn't have come to a singles club to find a girl who didn't know the ropes, would he? He probably did this every weekend—that thought sent a vicious stab of jealousy through her gut—and he expected she did also.

"I'm fine," she repeated. "I was just woolgathering. Don't worry, I haven't changed my mind."

"Good." He stepped close to her and trailed the back of his hand lingeringly over her cheek. "Because you're an amazingly beautiful woman and I don't know how much longer I can keep my distance when I really want to—"

"Shh." Julie put her index finger on his lips. His soft, warm, sexy lips. "Don't say a word. You don't have to say anything you don't mean. I don't expect any promises from you, any commitments. Let's just be quiet and enjoy each other. After all, that's why we're here. Right?"

Stephen raised his eyebrows, opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it and nodded.

Julie stepped over to the window and drew the drapes securely shut. Then she turned on the radio, tuning it to a soft jazz station and lowering the volume to create a pleasing whisper of background sound.

She returned to Stephen and spread her hands out on his chest, savoring the feel of his strong pectoral muscles flexing under her fingers. She smiled a bit tremulously but she knew this was right. It *felt* right. She opened one of the buttons on his shirt,

allowing her fingers to gently brush the skin she exposed. Then she opened the next one and the next. Stephen shivered as she ran her fingers through the curly dark hair on his chest, allowing her nails to graze his nipples lightly, then pushing the shirt back and off his shoulders. His broad, masculine shoulders.

Stephen's blue eyes bored into her as he reached in turn for *her* shirt, slowly unbuttoning her buttons, kissing each inch of flesh he thus exposed. Now it was Julie's chance to shiver. She arched her back like a cat, reveling in the feel of his fingers on her skin. She scarcely noticed when her blouse fell to the floor behind her.

He dropped his attention lower, sucking and nibbling on one nipple through the wispy pink bra she wore while gently kneading the other breast. A shuddering stab of desire shot through her and she felt the crotch of her panties grow damp. God, it felt so good to have a man touch her. Why had she denied herself this feeling, this need for so long?

Moaning, she reached behind her and unhooked her bra, letting it fall to allow him greater access to her breasts. His eyes darkened to the color of a stormy sea as he cupped her breasts in his hands, rubbing her pink nipples gently with his thumbs until she thought she could bear no more. She backed away from him but only as far as the bed. She shed her last vestige of modesty as she quickly divested herself of her skirt and panties. Then she grabbed him by his belt and pulled him to her, urging him wordlessly to follow her example.

Stephen's eyes traveled hungrily up and down her body, drinking in her firm breasts, her tiny waist, the thatch of chestnut curls at the apex of her legs. He pulled a foil condom packet out of his jeans pocket with a hand that trembled slightly, then shucked the rest of his clothes with as much abandon as she had.

Julie stared at him appreciatively. He looked even better without his clothes than with them—all hard muscles and smooth planes and curling dark hair. She could hardly keep her heated gaze from his cock, standing impressively erect. Clearly, he was

aroused by her and ready for action and the thought that she had such power over him turned her on even more.

He closed his eyes and groaned as she grasped him firmly with one hand while stroking his heavy balls with the other.

Grinning mischievously up at him, she lowered her head to his groin. Slowly, teasingly, she pulled his cock into her mouth, swirling around the tip with her tongue. She felt a shudder ripple through him as she wove her fingers through his curly pubic hair while sliding her lips up and down his long, hard length. When he gave a strangled cry and grasped her shoulders, she knew he was ready. She held out her hand for the condom packet. He tore it open with his teeth, then gave it to her, watching her intently. She knelt in front of him, pulled the condom out of the packet and slowly, oh so slowly, unrolled it down over his erect penis.

Julie stood and dropped down onto the bed, opening her arms for Stephen to join her. He lowered himself over her and she thought she'd die from the piercingly sweet feeling of his skin pressed against hers. She ran her fingers up and down his back, feeling his strong muscles and tendons flex in response. He slid back and forth over her, allowing his wiry chest hair to torture her exquisitely sensitive nipples while he stroked her side and down over her satiny hip with one hand. Her breath caught in her throat as he dipped his hand lower and caressed her thick curls. Then he rubbed her clitoris gently and slowly, dragging a gasp from her. She arched up off the bed and pressed herself against him, beyond nervousness, beyond embarrassment, wanting nothing but his touch.

"Now," she whispered hoarsely, breaking her own rule of silence. "Take me now."

"Your wish is my command," he murmured, his eyes dark with passion. He pressed his cock against her moist, throbbing cunt, teasing her, gently spreading her swollen lips and entering her an enticing inch, then withdrawing.

She opened her legs wider to allow him easier access and thrust her hips up at him. He dropped the teasing and slid his full length smoothly and deeply into her. Julie

clasped her legs around Stephen's back and moved in sinful, delicious rhythm with him, clutching his shoulders while he kissed her eyelids, her cheeks, her lips, her throat. Shivers ran through her, stars burst behind her eyes and the world disappeared until Stephen was all there was. His feel, his scent, his touch, his taste. The tension built unbearably and she pushed herself at him, crying out his name as wave after wave of shuddering ecstasy passed over her. Never in her life had she felt anything so piercingly sweet.

Stephen thrust into her once, twice more, then growled and gasped out as his own climax overtook him, passion rippling over his face. Panting, he dropped to the bed next to her and scooped her into his arms, pulling her close. "Beautiful," he murmured, nuzzling her hair. "Beautiful."

As Julie dozed off in the blissful aftermath of making love, snuggled in Stephen's arms, she thought she'd never felt so complete, so happy, so...right.

Chapter Two

Julie awoke an hour later. For a minute, she didn't know where she was. She looked around the room, confused, then gasped as she remembered what had happened. Stephen was sleeping peacefully next to her, lying on his stomach, one muscled arm thrown up over his head. The jazz station still floated through the room and Julie knew this was as close to heaven on earth as she'd likely get. Leaning on one elbow, she stroked Stephen's cheek gently with the back of her knuckles, just to feel his skin against hers.

Stephen murmured, "Sweetheart," and pulled her close without waking.

Nestling close to him, she breathed a sigh of delight. Where had this perfect man been all her life? Oh, there'd be no tolerating Tanya now, she'd be so smug when Julie told her what had happened and would say "I told you so" until she drove Julie insane. Well, when Julie told her *some* of what happened. She had no intention of telling Tanya everything.

So she'd go back to sleep and then in a few hours, she'd have breakfast with Stephen. There was a café around the corner that served the best omelets, hash browns and fresh orange juice in the city. After breakfast, they'd go for a walk, hand in hand, on the green and get to know each other better. There was a perfect bench under a huge maple tree with a lovely view of the old Congregational church. Maybe they'd choose a spot for dinner later on. And then...

And then...

And then he'd return to the O'Connor's Bar & Grille tomorrow night, looking for a new woman to please him. That is, unless she followed through on her rosy dreams and ended up scaring him so badly with her thirst for him and desire for a relationship that he packed up and left town altogether.

Julie groaned. God, was she crazy? A man didn't go to a singles bar to meet a woman for a long-term, committed relationship. There were much better places to meet a woman if he wanted to share his life with someone—work, church, the library, his parents' house. He went to that bar looking for a one-night stand, pure and simple. Wasn't that why *she* had gone, after all? Was it fair to hold him to a higher standard than she'd held herself to?

And even if he did happen to be interested in a relationship, was she? Stephen was a gorgeous man and an amazing lover, no question about that. She shivered, remembering the beauty and eroticism of their time together. But what did she really know about him other than that? She didn't even know his last name, let alone if he had a decent job, a family, some standing in the community. Was he a Democrat or Republican? What were his moral values? Did he like animals? What about children? He could be an axe murderer, for heaven's sake. Though as she remembered his dimple, she doubted it...

Julie shook her head. Then there was Emily to consider. She felt ashamed of herself as she realized she hadn't thought of Emily at all in the past few hours. Julie couldn't possibly introduce a strange man into Emily's life, expose her to harm from a potentially dangerous loony. Her first obligation was to Emily. She couldn't think of herself.

No, she wasn't ready for a relationship—at least, not with a man she'd met at a singles bar and hopped into bed with that same night. That didn't say much for his character. She refused to consider what it said for hers. If she were to pursue a relationship at all, it needed to be with a reliable man, one who was willing to take on a ready-made family, someone she could trust and respect. And if he happened to be a fantastic lover — well, that would be icing on the cake.

And speaking of Emily, she'd better get home to her. Julie couldn't even indulge in one last fantasy and spend the rest of the night with Stephen. Poor Emily would think something horrible had happened to Julie if she got up in the morning and Julie wasn't

there. She liked to pretend she was all grown up now that she was a freshman in high school but under that tough exterior was the little girl whose parents had died suddenly and left her while she was just a child. Julie knew Emily still feared abandonment in her secret heart of hearts.

In the aftermath of their parents' deaths, Emily had begun having nightmares. Julie would wake up suddenly to the sound of Emily's piercing shrieks reverberating through the house. Julie would run to her, try to comfort her but Emily couldn't be comforted. It was as if she were still asleep, still clutched fast in the claws of the cruel dream. Eventually, she'd fall back to sleep without ever having truly wakened and Julie would crawl back into her own bed, exhausted and helpless and heartsick.

Emily's grades and behavior at school suffered. She couldn't focus on her schoolwork and was prone to bursting into tears at no apparent provocation. At last, the school counselor suggested Julie get Emily into counseling. Over time, the counseling helped. Emily was able to deal with the loss of her parents and her natural bouncy nature reasserted itself. She never regained one hundred percent of her optimistic personality but she was able to function again, to do her schoolwork, play with her friends and sleep peacefully through the night.

Julie wasn't willing to risk that kind of emotional upset again by not being home when Emily expected her to be. As lovely as it would be to spend the rest of the night with Stephen, she didn't dare take a chance.

Regretfully, Julie moved out of Stephen's embrace, trying not to wake him. No reason he shouldn't get a full night's sleep, even though she couldn't stay.

Julie watched him as she quickly dressed, drinking in the sight. She knew she'd never see him again but she didn't regret their time together for one minute. It was a sweet, poignant experience she knew she'd remember and cherish for the rest of her life. She couldn't resist going back to the bed and dropping one last kiss on his shoulder. He murmured something and rolled over, still asleep.

She sternly forced back tears as she slipped out the door and closed it softly behind her. She'd had her High Priestess moment but now it was back to boring old Eight of Pentacles. "Goodbye, Stephen," she whispered. "May you find happiness with the right woman someday."

* * * * *

Stephen stretched and rolled over, reaching out instinctively for Anne. His arm met only empty space. Disappointed, he opened his eyes to the sight of a room as empty as the bed.

"Anne?" he called. "Are you in the bathroom?"

There was no answer.

The rosy light of dawn filtered into the room from a small space between the two drawn curtains. Looking around the room again, he noticed his clothes, which he dimly recalled had been dropped on the floor in the throes of passion, neatly draped over a chair. Her clothes, shoes and purse were gone.

Stephen groaned. Great. She'd flown the coop. Not that he hadn't expected it but it still hurt. Especially after how good they'd been together last night. He'd dared to hope she might stick around long enough for him to talk her into a date, where they could make a start on getting to know each other emotionally as well as they now knew each other physically.

Yesterday had been an unusually unsettling day. When he'd gotten up in the morning, he'd had a sense something momentous was about to happen—but he couldn't be sure if it was going to be something good or bad. He'd driven carefully to work, more alert than usual for anything suspicious. He stuck to the speed limit, came to a complete stop at every stop sign and drove defensively, watching for drivers talking on cell phones and not watching the road. He'd paid even more attention to his clients than usual, weighing his words, calculating his gestures, deciphering their expressions and body language but nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

He'd eventually shrugged off the feeling, convincing himself he'd simply imagined it. He was walking down the block from his office to the parking lot at the end of a very long, tiring day, thinking of ordering a pizza when he got home as he was too tired to cook, when a vagrant breeze brought an irresistibly sultry scent to his nose. Immediately remembering his premonition, he stopped and turned to find the source, somehow knowing this was what he'd been waiting for all day.

There. Just stepping out of a taxi was the most stunning woman he'd ever seen—long wavy chestnut hair and dark eyes, fair skin and a curvy figure in an adorable bundle just the right size to scoop into his arms. And when she smiled at her friend behind her in the taxi—all Stephen noticed was the friend was female, thank goodness—he thought his heart would melt right down into his shoes.

He did an about-face and followed her as she and her friend entered a door in mid-block. He had to find out more about her. He wasn't the type to ask a woman out before he knew her name but in this woman's case, he'd make an exception. But one glance at the neon sign over the door and his heart really sank...this time, like a granite boulder flung into a pond. The sign flashed, "O'Connor's Bar & Grille". It was a well-known singles bar where people went looking for a little company for the evening, maybe a one-night stand if they were lucky. They didn't go there looking for a relationship—at least, not one to last more than twelve hours. Ah, well.

Stephen paused. Should he go in anyway? He'd never been in a singles bar before and wasn't sure he wanted to visit one now. He didn't like the idea of being ogled like meat on display in a butcher's window. And the chance of a woman who frequented this place being someone he'd consider dating, let alone getting serious with, was slim. Still...he hadn't gotten where he was today by being bashful. By being afraid to stick his neck out and try. So...before he could change his mind and talk himself out of it, he yanked open the door and stepped into the noisy, smoky, crowded room.

He noticed Anne immediately. It was like he had radar set on her frequency. When she laughed, sipped her drink or tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, it went straight

to his heart. Well, his heart and his cock. He might not be the singles bar type but hell, he was still a man.

Stephen stepped up to the bar and ordered a beer. Then he leaned his back against the bar and watched Anne while he sipped. He didn't want to approach her, not yet. First, he'd see how she behaved, who she talked to, if she stuck with her friend. If she was meeting someone here, or even if some other man in the bar took her fancy, he might not *want* to approach her.

Of course, he hadn't taken into account that women might be approaching *him*. And approach him they did, like a hungry cheetah catching the scent of a plump little rabbit. They were certainly persistent, he had to give that to them. And while some were attractive in a hard, well-used sort of way, they weren't his type. Not even close. He politely shooed away those who would take the hint and firmly discouraged those for whom subtlety passed over their heads.

All this time, he kept an eye on her. She made no move other than to chat with her friend, sip at her one and only drink and once, to fend off a mangy-looking guy with a bad comb-over. So at last, he decided to talk to her. It wasn't a commitment, after all – if he didn't like what he saw, the deepest he'd be in was one wasted evening. Right?

And then everything went so perfectly. The moment he saw her up close, he was hooked. When she opened her beautiful mouth to speak, he was enchanted. When he held her sexy body in his arms to dance, his system jolted into high gear.

Making love to her was the most exquisitely sensual experience he'd ever had. As he'd dropped off to sleep with her in his arms, all he could think was, *I want this every night for the rest of my life.*

But now she was gone. And, stupid fool that he was, he should have known it. Hadn't he told himself she only wanted a one-night stand when he saw her walk into the singles bar? So why was he surprised that she ditched him? The problem was, his heart was already engaged by the time his brain had told him it was no use.

Stephen scowled and rolled out of bed. He might as well get dressed and go home and try to forget what had happened here. He'd taken a chance and it hadn't worked out as he'd hoped. Still, there was no question it was a night he'd remember for the rest of his life.

Chapter Three

After her one incredible night with Stephen, Julie went back to her life as usual. Only it wasn't the same mundane life she'd been used to. Before, her life had been straightforward. Boring, maybe a little lonely, but no surprises. No unexpected and unwanted emotions to deal with. Very neat, all packaged up in a plain white wrapper.

Monday morning, up at six. Lay out Emily's schoolbooks and clarinet, wake her up, make breakfast for them both and get Emily off to the bus stop by seven-thirty. Hightail it to the gym for a quick workout before work, then shower, dress and head to the office by nine. On the way home, pick up the dry cleaning, return library books or videos, grab some groceries. Change out of her office attire, make dinner, help Emily with her homework. Then watch TV for an hour and fall, exhausted, into bed to grab a few hours of shuteye. Repeat every weekday, with subtle variations on the weekend days such as PTA meetings or clothes shopping for a growing teenager. Definitely Eight of Pentacles material.

But now she found herself daydreaming about the feel of Stephen's hands on her breasts while dictating a memo. Imagining the heat of his lips on hers during a board meeting. And oh what she imagined when she slipped between the sheets at night! Her body ached for him, and more than that, her heart cried out for him as well.

She tried to shake off his influence, remove him from her thoughts but to no avail. So she decided to just live with it. After all, what did she really know about the man? Surely, after a while, she'd forget the feel of his arms around her...the scent of his aftershave...the adorable dimple in his right cheek...

Damn. Julie thumped down the lid on the pot of simmering soup. Why couldn't she get the man out of her mind?

* * * * *

Emily dragged her feet when the bell rang at the end of the school day but there was no way to avoid reaching Miss Eberhart's classroom eventually, no matter how slowly she walked. She stuck her head in the door and said, "You wanted to see me, Miss Eberhart?"

"Yes, Emily, I did. Come in." Miss Eberhart gestured to a chair next to her desk. Emily dropped into it and slouched down in the seat, trying to make herself as small as possible. As if that would help.

"I'm sure you know why I asked you to come see me after school today," Miss Eberhart began.

Emily nodded glumly. "Because I'm not doing so good in English Lit."

"Not doing so *well*," Miss Eberhart chided gently. "You're an excellent student in general. I've spoken with your other teachers and they agree. So I think we can rule out the theory that the material is over your head, or that you're not trying hard enough."

Emily didn't respond. She figured the less she said, the sooner it would all be over and she could go home.

"So what do you think the problem might be?" Miss Eberhart continued.

Emily shrugged. "Beats me. I just don't get these books we have to read. They don't make any sense."

"The classics can be a little tough." Miss Eberhart smiled sympathetically. "Are you having any difficulties at home?"

"No." Emily shook her head. "Julie is awesome. She takes wonderful care of me. Of course, I wish she'd realize I'm practically an adult now. She could have a social life and it wouldn't hurt me a bit. I can take care of myself. She doesn't need to stick to me like glue."

She felt heat rise in her cheeks. *God, I'm babbling like a baby.* "But no, I'm not having any trouble at home. Nothing that would affect my English grade anyway."

“All right.” Miss Eberhart pushed her chair back and stood. “I’ll talk with your sister at the parent-teacher conferences. Maybe between the two of us, we can come up with a way to help you improve your grade.”

“Okay.” Emily stood and grabbed her backpack. “Can I go? I’m gonna miss my bus if I don’t hurry.”

Miss Eberhart nodded then turned her attention to erasing the blackboards.

Emily ran through the halls and was able to catch the bus just before it turned left and pulled out of the parking lot. Huffing and puffing, she flung herself down into an empty seat and dropped her backpack to the floor at her feet.

As the bus lumbered along its route, lurching to an occasional jerky stop to disgorge a student or two, Emily thought about her home life with Julie. Julie had been great since their parents died. She’d really stepped up to the plate, taking on extra jobs, helping Emily with homework, keeping the house clean and the grass trimmed. She listened to Emily’s problems and tried to fill the roles of Mom and Dad. The only trouble was, Julie never seemed to have any fun for herself. Not that she complained about it. Julie *never* complained. But even Emily could see Julie was lonely. And that made Emily feel guilty. She knew Julie wouldn’t have quit college if Mom and Dad hadn’t been killed. And no doubt, Julie would be dating some cool guy right now, maybe even married to him. Instead, she was tied down to Emily—at least, for a few more years until Emily was old enough to move out on her own.

Sometimes, Emily dreamed about Julie finding a guy to love. A nice guy...cute, of course...as smart as Julie, with a great sense of humor. Someone who would take care of Julie for a change. And it wouldn’t hurt if he’d take care of Emily too. Then they could be a real family again, like they used to be, before Mom and Dad had that accident. Emily did her best to shove good-looking men into Julie’s path but Emily had to face it—as a matchmaker, she stank. None of her efforts seemed to pay off.

This problem with her English grade wasn’t going to help either. As soon as Julie heard about Emily’s difficulties, she’d no doubt spend even more time with Emily,

helping her with her homework and trying to tutor her. That would leave even less time for Julie to date a great-looking hunk. Assuming such a hunk appeared out of the blue, since Emily couldn't seem to find him and Julie wasn't even looking.

But wait...what about Mr. Peterson, Emily's science teacher? He was kinda cute, in an older guy sort of way, and he was definitely single. He was boring but then, so was Julie...at least, right now. Tonight were the parent-teacher conferences. Maybe Emily could drop a few hints and get Julie interested? It couldn't hurt. Suddenly, Emily grinned. Her day looked rosy again.

* * * * *

Emily flung open the front door, ran down the hall and burst into the kitchen. "Hey, Jules. What's for supper?" She dropped her backpack onto the floor and slouched down into a chair, drumming her fingers on the table.

"Cheese soup, salad and French bread," Julie said. "How about picking up that backpack?" She gestured with her head toward the hooks on the wall next to the back door. "You'll trip over it there. Or, knowing my luck, it'll be me."

"Okay. Mmm," Emily said, sniffing appreciatively as she hung up her pack then sat down again. "Sounds good. Is it almost ready?"

Julie smiled. "Why? Are you hungry?"

"Well, yeah, I'm always hungry after school," Emily said and rolled her eyes. "Those cafeteria lunches are the pits. I don't know what the bologna's made out of but it's not, like, meat. But tonight you have to go to the parent-teacher conferences and you'll only have time to eat with me if we eat right now. Didja forget?"

Julie clapped her hand to her forehead. "Oh shoot. I did forget. Well, would you please set the table while I finish up here? Then we'll be eating in no time flat."

"So," Julie said a few minutes later as they began their meal. "What can I expect to hear tonight from your teachers?"

Emily stirred her soup and stared into the bowl as if expecting “Reply hazy, try again” to float to the top in alphabet-soup letters. “I’m doing fine in almost all my classes.”

Julie raised her eyebrows. “Almost all?”

“Well...” She sighed. “My English Lit grade isn’t quite as good as the others. I’m sorry, Jules, I just have trouble with it. They always want me to write papers about the theme of the books we read and I just can’t do it. How am I supposed to know what the writers were thinking of when they wrote those books hundreds of years ago? Even if I knew what they were trying to say, times have changed. Their ideas don’t have anything in common with my life.” She shrugged.

Julie patted Emily’s hand. “Okay. Don’t worry about it. I’ll talk with your English teacher and we’ll see what she thinks. Miss Eberhart, right?” Emily nodded glumly. “I’m sure she’ll have a suggestion or two.”

“Yeah, I bet she will. Like studying a million hours a night, or giving me even more boring books to read,” Emily said. “I can’t wait.” She made a hideous face.

Julie laughed. “So your other classes are going fine?”

“Yeah. In fact...” Emily narrowed her eyes and stared at Julie thoughtfully, then cocked her head. “Make sure you spend plenty of time with my science teacher.”

“Your science teacher? Why? Are you having trouble with science too?”

“No, silly. Because Mr. Peterson is single and he’s hot. Even if he is kinda old.” Emily giggled. “He’d make a perfect date for you. And it’s about time you started dating. Your life is absolutely bo-ring.” She stuck out her tongue.

Julie felt her cheeks grow warm. First Tanya, now Emily. “For heaven’s sake, Emily, you don’t need to fix me up. If I want to go out on a date, I’m perfectly capable of finding someone suitable.” *And dull and totally unworthy of wasting her time on when the man she wanted was Stephen.*

Emily shook her head, a patronizing look on her face. "That's just like you, Jules. 'I'll find someone suitable.' Sounds like you'll look for someone based on his resume and his three-piece suit. That's not the way to find a guy you can really link mind and soul with."

"And what would you know about it?" Julie chided gently. "Is there something you want to tell me? Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Emily blushed despite her disclaimer. "I just want you to loosen up. Have some fun. You've been so...so serious since Mom and Dad died." She held up her hand at Julie's protest. "I know, you've worked hard to take care of me and I appreciate it more than you could ever know. But now it's your turn. Now it's time for you to find happiness. I want that for you, Jules. I feel bad that all your free time is spent on me. You deserve something for yourself."

Julie blinked rapidly to stave off a sudden wave of tears. "Thanks, honey," she said and stroked Emily's cheek. "Don't you worry about me. I'm entirely content and someday I'll find that perfect man. It just takes time. Some things just can't be forced."

"Okay." Emily smiled. "But check out Mr. Peterson anyway, will you? Just in case he's Mr. Right. You don't want to miss him."

"Sure," Julie agreed. "Whatever you say. I'll check him out. For you."

Come to think of it, maybe the parent-teacher conference, Emily's English difficulties and her cute science teacher would occupy Julie's thoughts fully for once. And if she were lucky, they would also wear her out so for a change, her sleep would be sweet and dreamless. She couldn't ask for more than that for tonight, anyway.

* * * * *

An hour later, Julie parked her black Altima in the large parking lot behind the high school. The lot was nearly full. Parents poured in and out of the building in a steady stream. She entered the school, walked up to the registration desk, waited in line and when she got to the front, gave Emily's name.

“Here’s your teacher list, Mrs. Preston,” a woman said as she handed Julie a list of Emily’s teachers and subjects. Julie didn’t bother to correct the “Mrs.”. She was tired of explaining she was Emily’s sister and her legal guardian. It was easier to just play along. “All the teachers are in the gymnasium.” The woman pointed to the end of the hall, where a large set of double doors stood open.

Julie stepped into the gym, glanced over the list, then looked around the crowded room. Most of the teachers, each seated at an individual table with his or her name on a sign hanging overhead, were knee deep in parents. With a sigh, she stepped to the end of the line at the science teacher’s table, Mr. Peterson. He was, indeed, attractive and attentive as promised and about as “old” as Julie. But there was no spark there. Nothing that reached out and grabbed her like Stephen had.

Julie sighed and forced herself to pay attention to Mr. Peterson’s dull, drawn-out explanation of Emily’s excellent lab work. She was supposed to get Stephen *out* of her mind at this conference. *Focus, Julie*. She filed the information on Mr. Peterson away in her mind for future reference. Maybe someday she’d be lonely enough—or desperate enough—to give it a try. After he was no longer Emily’s teacher, of course. She had her standards.

An hour later, Julie was waiting in line at Miss Eberhart’s table, the final one of Emily’s instructors Julie had to speak with. Thus far, Emily’s teachers had nothing but praise for her academic record and her personality. Thank goodness. Julie didn’t need any additional stress in her life. She tried to gear herself up mentally for hearing a less than stellar report from Miss Eberhart.

“Hi, I’m Julie Preston, Emily’s sister,” she said and held out her hand.

“Pleased to meet you.” Miss Eberhart shook her hand firmly. “I’ve heard a lot about you from Emily. You’re doing a fabulous job of raising her. She’s a lovely girl.”

“Thank you.” Julie sat in the orange molded plastic chair next to the table. “I’m doing my best. So how is Emily doing in English? She told me she’s having a little bit of difficulty. Is she getting Bs instead of her usual As?”

Miss Eberhart shuffled through a pile of folders until she found Emily's. "Let's take a look at her recent tests, shall we?" She handed several papers to Julie.

Julie paged through them. C+. D. C-. She shook her head in dismay. Emily hadn't said she was doing *this* poorly. "I don't understand. Emily's a good student. She didn't tell me she was having so much difficulty. Are you sure these are her tests?"

"Positive. Emily's a good student, true, but she's struggling with English Lit. It's just not her strong suit." She smiled. "Not everyone is cut out for critical analysis of classic literature. I've spoken with her more than once and she doesn't seem to know what the problem is."

Julie was used to handling problems at work quickly and efficiently. She saw no reason to assume she couldn't do the same with Emily's schoolwork. She wasn't an Eight of Pentacles for nothing. "Okay, then how do we fix this? Do I need to help her more with her homework at night? Does she need to stay after school and work with you? Read more books? Write more papers? Is there some kind of English Lit software we can buy?"

Miss Eberhart held up a hand to stop the flow of words streaming from Julie's mouth. "I'm happy to hear you want to help. I've given this a lot of thought and I feel what Emily needs and what would suit her best is a tutor. Someone to work with her one on one. Someone who could devote time to her on a regular basis, answer every one of her questions and look over her shoulder as she works. As you can imagine, that's not something I can manage—I have five English Lit classes with an average of thirty students each." She pulled a business card out of Emily's folder that read Great Grades Tutoring. "Here's the card of a local tutoring service I recommend highly. They're very good. We've had excellent results from them. The specific tutor I'd like to see Emily work with is Douglas Dean. He's great with kids this age and they seem to trust him and open up to him." She wrote "Douglas Dean" on the back of the card.

Julie opened her mouth then closed it again as she reached for the card. Miss Eberhart was certainly on the ball—she had to give her credit for that. Another Eight of

Pentacles? “Thanks very much. I’ll give them a call and see if I can hire,” she glanced at the back of the card, “Douglas Dean for Emily. So do you think that will take care of it?”

“If Emily cooperates, that should do the trick. I think she’ll actually enjoy it. She’s a good student and I know her low grades are as frustrating to her as they are to us.” She held out her hand to Julie. “It’s been nice to meet you, Miss Preston. See you at the next conference. I think we’ll see a big improvement by then. In the meantime, don’t hesitate to call me if you have any questions or concerns.”

Julie drove home slowly, pondering her parenting of Emily. Had she spent enough time with her? Should she have overseen Emily’s homework more closely? Was it somehow her fault Emily was doing poorly in English?

It was bedtime before she thought of Stephen again as she slid into her smooth, cool sheets. *Ah well*, she thought. *I had a little break from him, anyway.*

* * * * *

The next morning, during a coffee break, Julie called Great Grades Tutoring. They sounded competent and the prices were reasonable, so she arranged to have Douglas Dean tutor Emily in English Lit. Luckily, he’d just finished up with another client, so he could begin with Emily that same night. *The sooner, the better*, Julie thought. *One less thing to worry about.* Although the worry was the only thing distracting her from constant thoughts of Stephen...

When she got home from work, Julie heard music – and she used the term loosely – vibrating from every corner of the house. The walls thumped, the chandeliers shivered. Yup, Emily was home.

Julie jogged up the steps to Emily’s room, covering her ears. How was it teenagers didn’t go deaf from the volume of their music, video games and televisions? “Emily!” she shouted, pounding on the door. She knew there was no point in knocking politely, she had to go straight for the level of a jet taking off to be heard.

Luckily for Julie's eardrums, it worked. The music stopped and the door opened. The sudden silence made Julie dizzy and she grabbed for the door frame. Emily grinned. Her curly dark brown hair was mussed, though Julie couldn't tell if it were on purpose or by accident. Emily liked to call her hairstyle "a controlled mess". She wore a pink cami with "I'm worth it" printed on it in glitter and a baggy pair of flared jeans. "Hi, Jules, what's up?"

"Honey, I need to talk to you about the parent-teacher conferences last night. Why don't you come downstairs and we'll talk while I start supper?" Julie gestured at the stairs.

"Uh-oh," Emily said, rolling her eyes. "You talked to Miss Eberhart, didn't you?"

Julie nodded. "Come on."

A few minutes later, Julie had a frozen tuna noodle casserole in the oven and was chopping veggies for a salad. "So," she concluded, "your new tutor, Douglas Dean, will be here tonight. In fact, right after supper. Miss Eberhart says he's the best, so if you just give it some effort and cooperation, your English grade will come right back up to where it belongs." She smiled encouragingly.

Emily groaned. "Do I have to? Can't I just study a little harder? I might even be willing to read another book. Ugghh."

"Honey, you already study hard enough. I know you do...I see you working at it every night. I think you just need a little help to get you over the hump with English. So bear with it, okay? You want good grades so you can get into a good college." Julie set two plates on the table, followed by two glasses and silverware. "Just give it a try, for me. If it's really awful, we'll talk about it again. Okay?"

"Oh...okay." Emily nodded glumly. "My social life sucks, anyway."

"Come on," Julie said. "It's only going to be a couple of nights a week. It can't be so bad, right?"

Emily shrugged and nibbled on a carrot stick she'd stolen from the cutting board where Julie was chopping. "So what did you think of Mr. Peterson? You didn't say anything about him." She winked. "Isn't he cute?"

Julie cleared her throat. "Well, he is attractive, I'll grant you that. But I don't think he's my type. All he talked about was your lab reports. Not exactly a scintillating conversationalist."

"What was he supposed to do? Bend you over the table and kiss you passionately?"

"Emily!" Julie dropped the knife and turned to her sister.

Emily broke down in a fit of giggles. "I'm sorry, Jules, but honestly, you're so *serious*. You have to get a life. Or you'll wind up a crazy old lady who lives with thirteen cats."

"Well, at least cats return the affection you give them and they're loyal," Julie muttered as visions of Stephen going back to that red and gold flocked room with one of those sleazy women from the singles bar danced through her mind. "Being a cat lady might not be so bad at that." Or the Eight of Pentacles.

Chapter Four

Julie had just finished washing the dishes and putting away the leftovers when the doorbell rang promptly at eight that evening. “Emily!” Julie called up the stairs, trying to pitch her voice louder than the reverberating bass. “Your tutor is here. Grab your textbook and come on downstairs.”

There was a thump and a muffled shout from upstairs, then the music dropped a decibel or two. Julie assumed that meant Emily had heard her, so she headed for the front hall to let in their guest.

Julie opened the door. “Hello, I’m—” she began. Then she looked up and her jaw dropped. She staggered back a step and put her hand to her throat. Her heart pounded loudly enough to compete with Emily’s music and a shiver ran through her. Was she hallucinating, or was it real?

Standing on her doorstep, as gorgeous as the night she met him and he changed her world, was Stephen.

“Anne?” he asked, incredulity clear in his voice and his wide open eyes. So he was surprised to see her too. He smiled and grabbed her hand. “Anne. My God, I had no idea it was you I was coming to meet.”

She backed up another step and out of his oh so enticing reach. “How did you...where did you come...” She swallowed and tried again. “I’m sorry,” she said stiffly. “I was expecting someone else.”

“Douglas Dean from Great Grades Tutoring, right?” He bowed. “That’s me. At your service.” He pulled a business card from his shirt pocket and handed it to her.

“But...but...you’re Stephen.” Julie felt her heart drop to her shoes. What in the name of heaven was going on?

“Douglas *Stephen* Dean,” he said, smiling ruefully. “I’m sorry I wasn’t honest with you when we first met. But I didn’t know what I was getting into, so I used my middle name.” He grinned wider and the dimple in his cheek popped into view. “I’m so happy to see you again, Anne. I hoped we’d run into each other but I didn’t expect it to be so soon.”

“Um...” Julie looked down at her toes. Was he expecting her to fall into his arms for a second one-night stand? What would that make it—a two-night stand? What were the rules in this treacherous and unexplored sexual territory? “My name’s not Anne. Well, it *is* Anne but that’s my middle name.” She smiled tightly. “I guess we had the same idea, Stephen—er, Douglas.”

“Doug. Call me Doug.” He paused and nodded, then after a moment, nodded again. Finally, he said, “And you are?”

Julie felt her cheeks flame. “Oh. Sorry. It’s Julie. Julie Preston.” She extended her hand.

Doug took her hand in both of his. “Pleased to meet you—again—Julie Preston.” He stroked her palm. “Julie is a lovely name.”

She pulled away from his warm, all too welcome touch. “Listen, I don’t think this is going to work. You being my sister’s tutor, I mean. I can’t have you here in the house every week, so close by...”

“Hi!” Emily interrupted in a bubbly tone as she bounced down the stairs. *Great, Julie thought. How did teenagers manage to have such appalling timing?*

“I’m Emily. You must be my new tutor, Mr. Dean.” Emily stepped in front of Julie and stuck out her hand. “I’m ready to get started.”

“No, honey,” Julie began as Doug shook Emily’s hand. “I don’t think we’re going to...”

“Come on in,” Emily said, flashing a quick glance in Julie’s direction and then studiously looking away. “You’re cute. Maybe this tutoring thing won’t be so bad after all. This way. My stuff is in here.”

She pulled Doug toward the dining room. As he passed Julie, enveloping her in the sexy scent of his aftershave, he smiled mischievously and winked. Then he shrugged as if to say, *What can I do?*

Julie groaned. Helping Emily with her schoolwork, worrying about her grades, even the tutoring was supposed to take her mind *off* Stephen. Doug. Whatever. For some reason, her life was suddenly spinning out of control and she didn't like it. Not one little bit. The High Priestess part of her wanted to drag Doug up to her bedroom and rip his clothes off—to hell with the tutoring. But the sensible Eight of Pentacles part of her wanted to ignore him until she got him out of her system and he went out of her life forever. Right now, the second voice was louder...but just a smidge. How long would that last if he kept coming over here, night after night, week after week, to tutor Emily?

Yet, she had no reason to fire him. Well, no reason she could admit to publicly, anyway. As much as she wanted to put him out of her mind, she didn't want him to lose his job because of her. Because of her raging hormones. Because of supposedly unprofessional behavior with a client...even though she wasn't his client when they'd slept together.

Neither did she wish to let Emily in on this aspect of her personal life, despite Emily's not so subtle matchmaking attempts. Surely, she could keep her distance from Doug...keep her hands off him...and once Emily's English grade rose, they'd part ways. Julie had been in solid control of her life up 'til she met Doug and she saw no reason that control couldn't continue.

As long as she kept her hands to herself and her eyes shut.

* * * * *

Emily picked up on the electricity in the air as soon as she came downstairs to find Douglas Dean standing in the open door. What was already going on between these two? She'd never seen Julie so flustered—she was blushing like a teenager and her

hands were shaking. At once, it hit Emily. This Doug guy could be the answer to her prayers. She had asked and the universe had provided the perfect solution.

He was cute, even for an older guy. Point number one in his favor. *Way* cuter than Mr. Peterson, Emily thought with a mental apology to her science teacher. Even boring Julie would have to admit that. Julie might be a workaholic but she wasn't blind.

Point number two. No wedding ring on his hand and no indentation or untanned line from wearing one either. Emily made sure of that when she purposely grabbed his left hand to pull him into the dining room. Now, some cheating guys took their rings off or just didn't wear one at all but she didn't get those kinds of vibes from Doug. She'd bet a month's allowance he was single.

Point number three. The mountain was coming to Mahatma. Or to whatever. Julie wouldn't lift a finger to go out on a date, much less *find* one, and Emily's efforts had all bombed out. But this Doug guy was coming straight to her and would be right under her nose. Twice a week. Julie would be thrown into his company regularly and sooner or later, her resistance would weaken—if Emily could keep her English grade low for long enough.

And that brought Emily to point number four. English Lit. If Doug and Julie didn't click, at least Emily would learn what she needed to know to bring up her grade. And that might get Julie to back off a little and convince her to get a life, for heaven's sake.

Yup. It was all good.

* * * * *

For two whole weeks, Julie managed to keep her hands, her eyes and her thoughts firmly to herself whenever Doug was at her home. Especially since Emily kept trying to throw them together. The little minx. It took a tremendous effort to ignore him when he was right there in front of her. Effort composed in part of stern mental discipline and in larger part of constant physical exercise while he was nearby. She'd never jogged so

many miles in her life. At least she'd be fit and in great shape by the time the tutoring was over.

Of course, she couldn't keep her thoughts from him twenty-four/seven. After he left, she allowed herself a little time to fantasize while his image still burned in her brain and his aftershave lingered in her house. But as long as he wasn't within tempting reach, she figured she was safe.

She was safe...until Emily cornered her one evening as she returned home from her usual jog.

"Julie, can Doug stay for dinner tonight?" Her eyes sparkled and it looked like she was trying hard to suppress a grin as she hopped from one foot to another.

"Dinner?" Julie squeaked out. She couldn't jog in place during dinner, could she? "Um...I'm sure he has other plans, honey."

Doug stuck his head out of the dining room door and into the hall, clearly eavesdropping and not ashamed of it in the least. "To be completely truthful with you and Emily, I have no other plans." He grinned disarmingly before he ducked back into the dining room.

Sure. Honest as a Boy Scout. The worm. He and Emily had probably cooked this up together.

"Well, uh...I don't know," Julie said. "I have to shower. It'll be quite a while before I can start supper and I was just going to reheat leftovers from last night. Not very appealing."

"Doug and I will make dinner, Jules," Emily said. This time, the grin escaped her. "By the time you're ready to eat, the food will be done. I've got it all planned out. What do you say? Please? Puh-leeze?" She held up her cupped hands and panted like a puppy.

There was no graceful way out of it and no doubt that was what Emily was counting on. "Oh all right," Julie said with somewhat less than her usual good grace.

“Fine. Go ahead and start dinner.” But she shot Emily a parting look that said, *You’ll pay for this later.*

Emily stuck out her tongue. “Go get cleaned up. We’ll be ready in half an hour.”

Julie tried to relax in the shower. She’d need all her strength to get through dinner, so she might as well start out loosened up. But as the warm water streamed over her, she couldn’t help but close her eyes and imagine it was Doug’s soapy hands trailing down over her back and buttocks, up her sides, down over her breasts and stomach and then up between her legs...

She turned the cold water tap higher and gasped as the frigid stream hit her. Why couldn’t she get the man out of her thoughts?

Eventually, she managed to cool off, a little, in body and mind. She toweled dry and dressed in a pair of beige linen slacks and a short-sleeved cinnamon-brown cotton sweater, then braided her long, wet hair rather than dry it. The last thing she wanted was to go back into the bathroom and face that shower again while digging through the linen closet for the blow dryer.

Downstairs, Julie peeked into the kitchen. Delicious odors swirled but the table was empty and so was the room. That was odd. Hadn’t Emily said supper would be ready when she came down? She stepped into the dining room and paused in the doorway, her mouth dropping open.

The table was covered with a linen tablecloth. Emily must have dug it out of the cedar chest in the guest bedroom. It was one of Mom’s favorites. Candles flickered and the good china and silver gleamed. In the center of the table was a large wooden bowl of tossed salad and a basket filled with crusty rolls. The star of the meal was a fragrant, bubbling casserole dish of luscious-looking lasagna. Doug held out her chair for her. Emily was watching her, waiting for her reaction.

“Oh my,” Julie managed. “This all looks...wonderful.” She took her seat and watched as Doug strode to the head of the table and seated himself. “You’ve both worked very hard.”

"I enjoy cooking when I have time," Doug said as he filled a plate and passed it to her. "But I confess, I brought the lasagna with me. I wouldn't have had time to make it from scratch and have it ready by now." He filled a plate for Emily, then one for himself.

Aha! So he was in on this. It's a plot, Julie thought glumly.

Emily bounced in her seat. "Did we surprise you?"

"You sure did, honey." Julie patted Emily's hand then risked a glance at Doug, who was grinning broadly. "You were pretty sneaky, planning this behind my back."

At first, Julie felt constrained, being in Doug's company and forcing herself to keep a tight rein on her emotions about him. But she relaxed gradually and found she enjoyed the meal after all. The food was excellent and the company superb. Doug kept Emily laughing and participating in the conversation, which ranged from English Lit homework to teen fashions to television shows to the environment. Julie was surprised to learn how intelligent and well-versed Emily really was and she was also impressed with Doug's ease with topics of interest to teenagers. A point in his favor.

And the lasagna was fabulous. A man who not only could cook but who *liked* to cook? How often did that happen in one gorgeous package? He was definitely a keeper.

Only...he wasn't a keeper, he was a player, she reminded herself. A bachelor with nothing more than one-night stands on his mind. Drat. He looked so natural at the head of her table...so tempting...so right...

Julie got up from the table abruptly and tossed down her napkin. "Thanks for a lovely meal. You two can clean up. I have to go for a jog."

Chapter Five

The next morning, after a restless night full of sensual yet unfulfilling dreams, Julie slept through her alarm. Rushing through her morning ritual left no time for cooking breakfast, so she stopped at her favorite coffee shop, Bingo's Beans, for a quick mocha latte and an onion bagel with cream cheese. She sat at a small table in the corner and pulled the morning newspaper from her briefcase. At least she'd have ten minutes to eat, read and compose herself before she had to head for the office.

A shadow fell over the table and immediately a hot shiver ran through her. She knew it was Doug before she looked up. Was it the aftershave that gave him away, or was she becoming exquisitely attuned to his presence?

"Is this seat taken?"

"No, it's not. Would you like to join me?" She waved politely to the empty chair. Her innate good manners wouldn't allow her to shoo him away.

Doug grinned and dropped easily into the seat, putting his coffee cup on the table. "I didn't expect to see you this morning. Do you come here often?"

Julie nodded. "But not usually at this time of day. I like to stop here for a pick-me-up during my lunch break or after work. Bingo's makes the best coffee." She studiously avoided looking into Doug's eyes – his achingly blue, piercing-right-to-her-soul eyes.

"It's my favorite coffee joint too." Doug pointed to his cup. "Have you tried their 'Bingo's Breakfast Robusto'? It really gets me going."

"That's a little too much caffeine first thing in the morning for me," Julie said. "I wouldn't be able to sit still after drinking that. When I come here for breakfast, I usually drink tea."

"But you're not drinking tea now," Doug pointed out.

"No." She shook her head. "I didn't sleep very well last night."

"Why not?"

Julie felt a flush climb up her cheeks. She hoped Doug didn't notice. "Bad dreams," she mumbled. *Very bad...or at least naughty.*

Doug smiled sympathetically. "I'm sorry to hear that. I hope it wasn't the lasagna?"

Julie giggled. "No, of course not. The lasagna was delicious. I just have...things I'm concerned about," she finished lamely. "Like Emily and her English Lit grades."

"Don't worry about Emily," Doug said. "Emily is a smart girl and she'll pick up on it in no time. I can see a great improvement already, after just working with her for a few weeks."

Hearing him say that made her sigh with relief. She didn't question his assessment, on the contrary, she felt secure in the knowledge he was right. "I'm glad. She's a good student and I know she tries hard. I want to see her succeed and build a happy life for herself."

Doug put his hand over hers. "And what do you want for you?"

Julie tried to cover the flare of excitement she felt at his touch. She couldn't tell him what she really wanted for herself. Him at her side, helping to raise Emily, maybe with a child or two of their own, spending the rest of their lives together. It was pointless. It wasn't what he wanted. "I just want to finish raising Emily and then I'll think about myself. There'll be plenty of time for me later." She shrugged. "In the meantime, I'm content."

"Content sounds like you're settling. It sounds so...boring."

Great, now he thought she was a bore. Had Tanya been poisoning him with the Eight of Pentacles story? "Yes, I know, all work and no play makes Julie a dull girl," she snapped and pulled her hand away from his. "You and my friend Tanya, you think you know what's best for me. Well, have you ever considered that maybe you don't? Maybe, as odd as it may seem, I'm happy with my life as it is."

Doug had the good grace to blush. "I'm sorry, I apologize. You're absolutely right. I'm in no position to judge you or your choices. Clearly, you're doing a fabulous job with Emily and that's your first priority. As it should be."

"I'm sorry too," Julie said, contrition flooding her. Just because she felt defensive about her life, or lack of it, was no reason to take it out on him. It wasn't his responsibility to make her happy, after all. And it wasn't his fault she wanted more from him than he was willing to give. "I'm under a little stress these days, that's all. Let's just call it square, shall we?"

Doug grinned. "Fine with me." He glanced at his watch. "It's later than I thought. I'd better get going to work. I'll see you tomorrow night. Do you like steak? I thought I'd bring a few to broil for dinner and some baking potatoes. You can make the salad."

Julie couldn't help but laugh. "You're certainly forward. But yes, I love steak and I make a mean Caesar salad. I'll see you then."

Despite herself, she went to work that morning with a smile on her face.

* * * * *

So dinner with Doug became a ritual after his twice weekly tutoring sessions with Emily, despite Julie's initial efforts to discourage them. Julie knew Emily had a hand in it. She seemed to sense a spark between the two of them and pushed them together at every opportunity, disappearing conveniently to "do my homework or whatever" when it was time to cook, to put away the leftovers, to wash the dishes. And when Doug went home, it was always "Doug this" and "Doug that" for the rest of the evening. Emily practically had his name tattooed on her forehead.

And Tanya was no help either. When Julie called and complained to her about how she couldn't get Doug out of her mind, Tanya said, "Why try? You're so lucky. He's gorgeous, hon. Definitely the King of Swords type. Take what he's offering and enjoy it. Wasn't that why I took you to that singles bar in the first place?"

Honestly. Tanya could be so obtuse sometimes. As soon as Julie had seen Doug, she knew she didn't *want* just a one-night stand. She wanted him forever. And that's where the problem lay.

Working with Doug on homely tasks in the kitchen in companionable silence felt so right. It was as if he'd always been there, in her home, in her life, in her heart. She had to keep reminding herself, viciously at times, that Doug didn't *want* a home and hearth, a wife, a station wagon and a picket fence. And no matter how fond he might be of Emily, he certainly didn't want an instant family with her as his nearly grown stepdaughter. He was the type who hung out in singles bars, for heaven's sake and went to a hotel with whichever woman he fancied that evening. Definitely not the type to settle down.

And really, Julie wasn't sure she was ready to settle down either. At least, not with the first guy to come along and stroke her...um...her ego. She felt a blush creep up her cheeks. Ridiculous. What was happening to her? No doubt her rose-colored memory of their few hours together in bed was tinged by the length of time before that she'd been celibate. And by the distant memories of college liaisons that were...well...forgettable.

The first time she'd had sex had been with a guy she dated a few times her freshman year. She hadn't particularly liked him any better than any other guy she'd dated. But she was feeling the heady allure of being on her own for the first time in her life and she wanted to cement her entry into adulthood with losing her virginity.

Julie wasn't sure what she expected from it, but she was certain she didn't expect what she got. A brief stab of sharp pain. Then ten minutes of pumping and grunting on his part that did nothing for her, after which he shouted and collapsed on her while she asked herself, if that was all there was to it, what was all the fuss about? Where were the stars, the fireworks, the passion?

She dropped him a short time later. She figured the problem was, he just wasn't the right guy for her. When she found the perfect man, experienced but not too experienced, tender and gentle and caring, no doubt sex would become the lovely,

otherworldly thing she'd heard described. She'd dated a few other guys over the next couple of years and while some were better than her first experience, none of them rocked her world.

Then Julie decided it was because she wasn't in love with any of them. Maybe that emotion was the missing link in sexual satisfaction. She wouldn't know if that were true unless and until she fell in love. In college, she'd never really been in love. So she just gave up – temporarily – on sex. Someday it would become a priority, would rise to the top of the list again and then she'd figure it out.

But sex with Doug was fabulous. And that fact led her to the question uppermost in her mind. Was she in love with him? Julie wasn't sure. She had no previous experience to compare it to. When did lust – and she had plenty of that for Doug, gorgeous hunk that he was – become love? Was love added in, or did it replace lust? Were the two mutually exclusive? When did having sex become making love and what was the difference between making love and being in love?

Julie's parents had been deeply in love, no doubt about that. They did everything together. Julie loved to watch them when they cooked or worked on balancing the checkbook together. They kept glancing up at each other, just a quick look for no other reason than to make a connection. When they walked together, they held hands. They always sat together on the sofa and snuggled while watching television in the evening, leaving the recliners for Julie and Emily. Their lives were intertwined to the point that to remove one would be to kill both. That was the only good thing about the way they'd died – they went together.

That was what Julie wanted. A man to love, to be with, to do all the little things with that made up each day of their lives. She wished desperately Doug could be that man but she feared it wasn't possible. Which brought her circular thought pattern back to how and why they'd met in the first place. A one-night stand after meeting at a singles bar. Having sex...making love. Clearly, the two were *not* the same thing.

Aha! Maybe that was the answer. He *was* the first man she'd had sex with in a long time, after all, and the only truly marvelous lover. But that didn't mean he was the *only* marvelous lover on the planet, did it? There were dozens...hundreds...maybe thousands of men who were just as good in bed as he was. Maybe better. Just because she hadn't experienced them didn't mean they didn't exist. Did she really want to tie herself down to just one man and miss out on all the others? What if Doug were just an incredible lover but not her soul mate for life? Was she willing to give up one for the other?

Even if Doug was not the love of her life, though, the problem remained. How to get him out of her thoughts, out of her body and out of her heart.

Suddenly, a solution popped into her mind. Of course. Why hadn't she thought of it before? No man could be as incredible a lover as her memory of him claimed. She simply had nothing better to compare him with and she'd lost her head during their one night together. So she'd sleep with him again. Just one more time. Kind of a science experiment, she told herself, with a silent apology to Mr. Peterson. Then she'd realize he was an ordinary lover and not worth obsessing over. Not worth turning her life upside down for. Not worth jogging every night for. Now she just had to figure out how to bring it about.

* * * * *

Doug paced in his living room, his hands clenched behind his back. He'd been giving it his best effort to win Julie over these past few weeks. Cooking, washing dishes, telling jokes, making friends with Emily. Ah, little Emily. She liked Doug and he returned the favor—he had to confess he had a great fondness for her. Emily had been in on the plan to gain Julie's love from the start. She claimed Julie was lonely and it was only a matter of time before she caved.

But even with both of them working on it, Doug felt he was making no progress. It was like trying to reduce a granite boulder to a pile of dust with a toothbrush. He took one step toward Julie and she took one step away. By the time she let him hold her

hand without pulling away, they'd be old and gray. If only he could get back the Julie he'd met at O'Connor's Bar and Grille. That Julie had let him put his hands everywhere and his arms and his lips and...

God, he wanted to crush her in his arms, kiss her face and her delectable lips, stroke her back, make passionate love to her right on the kitchen table. It was all he could do to stay polite, keep himself in check, not give in to his raging desires. He didn't want to scare her off. He had to woo her gently and slowly.

But that wasn't working, he reminded himself glumly. He couldn't go much more slowly than he already was without slamming into reverse.

Maybe that was the problem...he was going *too* slowly. Their relationship, such as it was, had started near the end instead of at the beginning. They'd skipped over the usual "getting to know you" steps and had gone straight for intimacy. So reversing the steps now felt wrong. Going back to hand-holding and polite conversation seemed stilted and uncomfortable when they'd already scaled the heights of passion together.

Julie might be bored. No question about it, now that he looked at it the right way. She was used to going to a singles bar to meet men for a quickie. She wouldn't frequent the place if she really wanted to get to know someone. Yet he was courting her like an old-fashioned suitor who asked for permission to walk her home from church, with marriage his ultimate goal. His approach to wooing her was having the exact opposite effect from what he wanted. It was driving her away.

All right then. His *new* approach would be to get her into bed again as quickly as possible, to remind her of how good it was between them and maybe convince her with his hands, his lips and his body that she wanted to hang onto him and forego the other singles. After her body "caved", as Emily said, he could work on her heart. Then he'd have all the time in the world. He needed a break, just one break, in the dam of her resistance.

However, in order to win her body, he had to do more than simply make love to her. It had to be exquisite...unique...something she'd remember and long for again and again. Hmm. Something special. Something incredible. What might that be?

All at once, Doug stopped pacing and started whistling as he picked up the yellow pages directory. He had the *perfect* idea.

Chapter Six

Julie could hardly wait for Emily to run upstairs to do whatever it was she did each evening in her room. She wanted desperately to be alone with Doug, for the first time since he'd started tutoring Emily. She twisted her napkin in her lap, waiting for the interminable meal to end. The food was no doubt superb as usual but she couldn't taste a thing. It was like cardboard in her mouth. She ate mechanically, all the while watching Doug's strong jaw as he chewed, the flex of his arm muscles as he lifted his water goblet, the light in his eyes as he laughed at one of Emily's silly jokes.

At last the meal was over and Emily bounced up the stairs, only stopping long enough to shake her finger at Julie and say, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Julie blushed. She had every intention of doing something she hoped Emily wouldn't do for a long, long time. Say, until she was thirty. That sounded about right.

Now that Emily was gone, Doug seemed more quiet and thoughtful than usual. He washed the dishes, handing them to Julie to dry in silence. As she took a bowl from him, their fingers touched and she felt her heart thump madly, trying to leap out of her chest and into his arms.

"Julie—"

"Doug—"

They both stopped and then burst into laughter. "Ladies first," Doug said with a sweeping bow, dripping water on his shoes.

"Oh no. You go ahead. You're the guest." Now that the moment had come, Julie felt suddenly shy. What if he weren't interested in an "experiment" with her? She couldn't very well tell him she wanted him to make love to her so she could grade him on his performance. How could she phrase it so he'd agree? She didn't want to promise him anything she couldn't deliver but neither did she want to crush his male ego.

“Okay.” Doug reached for the towel and dried his hands, then set it on the counter. “Let’s go sit outside on the porch swing. What I have to say isn’t for Emily’s ears. Just yours. Not that I think she could hear me,” he said with a quick glance up at the thumping ceiling above their heads.

Uh-oh. That didn’t sound good. Was he going to quit tutoring Emily? Julie followed him outside glumly. That would put a monkey wrench in her plans, all right. Although, wouldn’t that give her just what she wanted – him out of her life?

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately,” Doug began as soon as they were seated. He studiously looked at the orange day lilies blooming in front of the house instead of at her. “I can’t seem to forget our night together at O’Connor’s and at the hotel afterward. I suppose it’s not very chivalrous of me to mention it but I’ve never experienced the level of passion with another woman that we two had together.” Suddenly, he turned and grabbed both her hands in his. “I can’t get you out of my mind. Julie, will you let me make love to you again?”

Julie’s mouth dropped open and she knew her cheeks were flaming. Her heart was trying to do a tap dance on her tonsils. “I...I...” She cleared her throat. He was suggesting the very thing she wanted and she hadn’t even had to ask him. A wave of relief surged through her. But...what did it mean, that he wanted to make love to her again? What were his motives? If he was a one-night stand kind of guy, why go for two? Wouldn’t that send the wrong signal to her?

Could it be he was wondering the same thing about her that she wondered about him – if the passion between them was too good to be true? Was she going to be *his* little science experiment? It was all she could do to keep from laughing in delight. Everything was falling perfectly into place for once in her life. She’d make love with him, she’d have a great time but she’d realize he was just like any other man and then it would be over. Out of sight, out of mind. Right? Then she could get back to the business of living her life.

"It couldn't be here," Julie managed to croak. "Not with Emily in the house." She glanced up at him and was flattered to see the eager light in his eyes.

"Of course not," he replied, a light leaping into his eyes as he realized what she'd said. "You could come to my place. How about tomorrow? Say, eight-thirty? Will that work?" He grinned at her, that damned dimple flashing into play. But his hands, which still held hers, trembled just a bit.

Julie nodded, touched by his apparent nervousness. It made her feel oddly protective of him. Whatever she did, however it turned out, she didn't want to hurt him. Confirmed bachelor or not, he was an amazing man and deserved at least that much consideration. "Eight-thirty," she whispered. "I'll see you then."

Then she pulled her hands from his and stood up abruptly. "I'd better get inside and finish the dishes. You go ahead home. I don't need any more help." She couldn't resist giving him a smile and a twinkling wave from the doorway. He was still sitting on the swing with a bemused look on his face when she looked out the kitchen window. Tomorrow night would definitely be fun.

* * * * *

Julie approached Doug's front door with trepidation. Now that the moment of truth was at hand, she wasn't sure she was doing the right thing. What if he *was* as good as she remembered? Then she'd have to live her life with second best if she couldn't interest Doug in a long-term relationship, or live it alone. Was she willing to take that risk?

Heck, she was in that position already, her logical side told her. So tonight would either confirm what she already suspected was true, or it would prove her wrong. Either Doug was as good as she thought, or he wasn't. So, she reasoned, she had a fifty percent chance of walking away with Doug out of her mind if she went in and a zero percent chance if she chickened out.

She took a deep breath, wiped her damp palms on her thighs and rapped on the door. It popped open as if Doug had been waiting anxiously on the other side.

“Julie. Come in. I’m happy to see you. I was afraid you might have changed your mind.” He was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, both snug fitting enough to show off all his muscles and planes. Lord, he looked good enough to eat for dessert. She gulped and stepped over the threshold.

He ushered her into his living room. It was neat and clean, clearly a bachelor’s apartment in terms of mismatched, eclectic furniture and unframed prints tacked up on the walls. Yet, everything worked somehow. Together, they created a style that was uniquely Doug. She could see a tiny kitchen on the other side of a kitchen island with four stools. It too was clean and tidy, everything in its place. He knew how to cook...he know how to clean...he knew how to teach...he knew how to make love like Adonis. God. She had a feeling the odds weren’t going to be on her side tonight.

“Here, this is for you.” Doug picked up a package the size of a shirt box from the coffee table and pressed it into her hands.

“You didn’t have to give me a gift. Though it’s very sweet and thoughtful,” Julie said, feeling a little flustered. She didn’t have anything for him. “What is it?”

“It’s not exactly a gift.” He grinned. “Go into the bathroom and put it on. I want you to wear this tonight.”

Julie frowned. “You don’t like what I have on?” She’d spent half an hour mulling over the choices in her closet before settling on a flirty lavender sundress. She thought she looked enticing and a little daring in it, apparently he didn’t agree.

“Sure I do. You look lovely. But we have a theme tonight and what’s in the box is part of that theme. I have it all planned out. Just humor me, okay?” He smiled a winning smile that sent a zing straight to her heart. “It’ll be fun, I guarantee.”

She sighed. In for a penny, in for a pound, right? “All right, I’ll play along. Where’s your bathroom?”

He pointed it out. “Just give me a holler when you’re ready.”

Clutching the box, she stepped into the bathroom, closed the door firmly and locked it for good measure. The room was spotless, like the rest of his apartment. Either he really *did* know how to clean, or he'd hired someone to do it for him. Based on what she knew of him, she'd bet money on the former. Just her luck.

She set the box down on the counter and opened it. Inside a protective sheath of white tissue paper she saw fuchsia-colored gauze, beads, glitter and velvet. What the... She grabbed a fistful of gauze and shook it out. It was a pair of harem pants, with a bikini bottom made of velvet and the legs of sheerest gauze. A row of beads was sewn around the low-cut waist and another around the ankles. Inside the box was a matching bra outlined in glitter and a set of finger cymbals.

Julie groaned. It looked like it came straight out of *I Dream of Jeannie* but she was no blonde bombshell like Barbara Eden. How did he know if the stuff would even fit her? He hadn't asked her what size she wore. Damn men and their fantasies, anyway. Still, she'd committed herself to this and he'd apparently gone to a lot of trouble, so she might as well play along. Heck, she'd always wanted to know what she'd look like in one of these outfits.

Surprisingly enough, the clothing fit her perfectly, hugging her curves and giving her a little thrill when she saw her now-exotic image in the mirror. Maybe Doug was onto something. Why shouldn't sex be fun?

She pulled her hair back into a "Jeannie" ponytail, then put on the finger cymbals and gave them a test ring. "I'm ready," she called. *For better or worse*, she added to herself.

"Okay," came Doug's muffled voice from somewhere in the house. "Come on out."

Julie stepped out into an empty hallway. "Doug?" she called uncertainly. Now that she was out of the bathroom, she felt a little exposed in her skimpy costume.

"Last room on the right," she heard coming from down the hall. "Knock first."

Knock first? How silly. He knew it was her. Still, she'd agreed to play along and she wasn't going to chicken out now. "Knock, knock," she said as she tapped on the door.

“Greetings, oh fair one. You must say the magic password to enter,” Doug said in a deep voice from the other side of the door.

Password? For heaven’s sake. “Um...okay. Abracadabra.”

“Sorry, wrong password.”

“Bibbiddi bobbiddi boo?”

“Guess again.”

Annoyed, she looked down at her toes and tried to think what he was up to. At the sight of the gauze and beads, something suddenly leapt into her mind. It wasn’t *I Dream of Jeannie*, it was *A Thousand and One Nights*. “Open sesame.”

The door popped open. “Enter, lovely one,” Doug said with a deep bow.

Julie took one step into the room and stumbled to a halt. The room was astonishing. It looked like something out of *Arabian Nights*. Panels of silk in gold-shot pinks and purples were draped over the four posters of a king-sized bed covered in a stunning gold satin quilt. Candles flickered and incense swirled throughout the room. Gilt-framed mirrors hung everywhere and sensual middle-eastern music played sinuously in the background.

But that was nothing compared to Doug himself. He wore low-cut, tight-fitting men’s harem-style white pants and a bolero-length embroidered white vest, open to show off his muscular chest. He looked like something out of a *Sinbad* movie. In a word, scrumptious.

Doug seemed stunned also, staring at her with an open mouth and a hungry look on his face. After a moment, he shook his head and resumed the role he’d obviously carefully planned.

“New lamps for old?” he said as he held out to her a lamp that looked like the one Aladdin used to summon a genie.

Julie reached out and rubbed the lamp sensuously, stroking it as if she were stroking him.

“Your wish is my command, oh queen of the night,” he purred. “Pray, what can I do to please you?”

“Perhaps we can please each other.” She reached out toward him, tapped her finger cymbals together and swayed her hips to the exotic music playing in the background.

Doug set the lamp aside on his bedside table then slipped his hands around her bare waist. She put her hands on his shoulders and together, they danced around the room. Swirling to the music, his skin pressed against hers with little but gauze keeping them apart, a fire began to burn in the core of her being. She shivered and her nipples tingled as he pressed a hot kiss to her neck.

“Cold?”

“Oh no,” she murmured. “Definitely not cold.” She raised her face to his hungrily for more kisses. “In fact, I could stand more heat from you. A lot more. Lord, I want you.”

He looked deep into her eyes for a moment. She swore she saw love there, in the depths...but she was only kidding herself, she knew. Then he pressed his lips over hers and all coherent thought slipped away as she focused on the sensation of his firm mouth, his tongue teasing her, his breath mingling with hers. She groaned...or was it him?

Still swaying, she backed toward the bed and he willingly followed. “You’ll follow my orders, is that right? All of them? To the letter?”

He nodded, his eyes dark with passion.

“Then strip for me,” she said. “I want to see all of you.”

A small smile flitted briefly across his lips. “Your wish is my command, enchanting one.”

He shrugged out of his white vest and tossed it aside. He looked like an ad for a home gym machine—chest muscles taut and shiny, coarse dark hair trailing down his slim and sexy torso and pointing intriguingly to what lay underneath the harem pants.

He turned and she got an enticing sight of his well-defined, muscular back. She barely refrained from leaping up and running her hands over him, just to feel his skin under her palms. There was time enough for that later. If she could wait.

He put his hands to the waistband of his pants and slowly lowered them, giving her a delicious view of his gorgeous buttocks. They were firm and round, his legs muscled and strong. Then, he kicked out of the pants and turned to face her.

Oh my.

His erect, enormous cock was the most impressive part of the evening yet. She wanted nothing more than to hold it, to caress it and to feel it plunge deep inside her, to her core. But first, she owed him a reward for his willingness to follow her directions.

“Stay there,” she murmured as she reached behind her to unfasten the skimpy bra. She slipped it down over her arms and tossed it away, then raised her arms overhead with the grace of a ballerina, giving him an enticing view of her full, firm breasts while she swayed and tapped the cymbals.

He groaned. This time, it was definitely him.

She got off the bed and stood no more than a foot in front of him. Swinging her hips, she unfastened the harem pants and let them drop, then stepped out of them.

His eyes traveled down her body and back up, heat following in the wake of his gaze. “Julie,” he said in a deep, husky voice and reached out for her. “God, you have no idea how much I want you.”

“As much as I want you, I hope,” she said simply, holding out her arms. “So take me.”

Doug lifted her easily and lay her down on the bed. Then he straddled her, holding her legs together with his knees. “I’m going to appreciate you first,” he said. “Fully.”

“Ooh, I like to be appreciated,” she murmured, getting a tantalizingly close view of his cock as he hovered over her.

He leaned over her and kissed her forehead, her cheek and then her neck. His wiry chest hairs rubbed against her nipples, making them crinkle and throb. She arched her back and pressed against him, willingly continuing the sweet torture.

He lowered his lips to her breasts, kissing and caressing them, first one, then the other. He circled his mouth around her areolas and finally gave her nipples the attention they craved, sucking one into his mouth and swirling his tongue around it while he gently kneaded the other.

“Oh my,” she gasped as exquisite shudders rippled through her. “I want...I want...”

He looked up at her with a devilish grin. “What do you want? Your wish is my command, lady of my heart.”

“Everything. You. I want you.”

He trailed his tongue down her stomach, stopping to circle her navel. “I think that can be arranged,” he said in a passion-roughened voice. He threaded his fingers through her chestnut pubic curls and kissed her hip, then rubbed her clit once, twice.

She squirmed. “Don’t stop,” she panted. “Please.” She tried to spread her legs to give him better access but he held her fast for an excruciating minute. She felt a trickle of moisture in her hot, throbbing cunt. She knew she was ready for him, she was on fire, burning with the wanting of him.

He pushed her legs apart with one knee and she gratefully opened herself to him. Then he slid the rest of the way down her torso and pulled her legs over his shoulders. He flicked her clit with his tongue and she thought she’d melt right through the bed and onto the floor.

She gripped the sheets frantically and arched off the bed as he swirled his tongue around her clit. Everything in the world had disappeared. There was only him, his hands, his mouth, his tongue. “Now,” she said hoarsely. “Please, take me now.”

“As you say, mistress,” he whispered. He grabbed a condom from the bedside table and quickly sheathed himself. Then he dropped down above her, his cock poised

teasingly at the entrance to her cunt. After a moment he slid smoothly into her and as he filled her to the center of her being, she knew right then her universe meant nothing without him in it. So much for science experiments. This one had failed, because it would ultimately destroy her heart.

He glided in and out of her and she felt the pressure in her groin intensify. She wrapped her legs around his back, locking them together at the ankles to allow him deeper access and to keep him where she wanted him. She clutched his shoulders and he kissed her, hard, as he plunged in and out. Fireworks went off in her body and in her mind and she could swear sparks flew from the tips of her fingers. She cried out his name as she felt herself burst into a million sparkling pieces. As wave after throbbing wave of pleasure rushed over her, Doug too reached his climax and roared out his satisfaction.

After a minute, panting, he dropped down next to her and pulled her into his arms. "I know you don't want to hear this from me now," he gasped after a minute. "But I'm high enough on you to say it anyway and I may never get another chance. I don't want this to be the last time we make love." He kissed her shoulder. "I don't want to give you up. I want to make love to you every morning, every afternoon and every night. I want to be with you – and Emily – for the rest of my life. I want us to always be together."

Julie's breath caught in her throat and it wasn't from exertion. It was sheer elation. Had she heard him right, or was she imagining what she wanted him to say? Could her still-surging hormones have affected her hearing?

"I know you're not ready to settle down," he continued. "I knew that the minute I saw you go into O'Connor's Bar and Grille. But something about you went straight to my soul and damn it, I knew I couldn't live without you. So I had to give it my best shot, had to try to win you over. Don't be angry with me for trying."

"I'm not angry. But...but..." Julie began. She swallowed and tried again. "I just went to O'Connor's because Tanya dragged me there. She said I was a boring Eight of Pentacles and I needed to loosen up."

“Eight of Pentacles?” He raised one eyebrow.

Julie waved her hand. “That’s Tanya’s Tarot talk. Never mind. What I want to say is that night was my first visit there. Ever.” She frowned. “I’m confused. You were in O’Connor’s too. So I thought...I assumed...I figured you were only interested in a one-night stand. That you didn’t want a relationship, just a different woman every night.”

Doug’s eyes widened as he stared at her for a moment, speechless. Then he leaned back and howled with laughter. “I can’t believe it. All this time I thought you weren’t interested in a committed relationship...and you thought *I* wasn’t interested in one...”

After a moment, Julie joined him in laughter. It figured – they’d been working at cross purposes. How many miles had she jogged in a wasted effort to get him out of her heart, when he was trying his best to get in?

Still smiling, he reached over and opened a drawer in the bedside table, then pulled out a small black velvet box. “I had this on hand, just in case things went my way. As I keep telling Emily...you have to be prepared in life, whether for an English term paper or the woman of your dreams.” He snapped open the box to show a gorgeous emerald-cut white-gold diamond engagement ring nestled in a bed of white satin. “Julie Preston, will you please marry me and end this torture? I can’t live another minute without you.”

“Oh,” Julie whispered as she reached out and touched the diamond with one fingertip. “Oh my.”

Doug frowned, looking a little puzzled. “Does ‘oh my’ mean yes or no? If it means no, I’m going to have to do something about that...” He lowered his brows in mock anger.

“Yes! Of course it means yes!” She threw her arms around him and kissed him soundly. “It means I’m such a fool, thinking a man like you would want a different woman every night. If you want me and only me, I’ll marry you right away. This minute. Whenever you say.”

He pulled the ring out of the box and slipped it onto her finger, then kissed the back of her hand. "You have no idea how happy you've made me. We'll choose a wedding date and get started making plans tomorrow and of course we'll tell Emily together." He paused. "But as for tonight," he winked at her, his eyes twinkling, "I think it's *your* turn to be the genie."

About the Author

Lila Duprés moved several times throughout her childhood. Always being the “new kid” in town meant she spent a lot of time alone, reading. This turned out to be a good thing, as it ignited in her the burning desire to write.

Lila lives in beautiful New Hampshire with her husband Dirk, who is not only a terrific first reader, but also eagerly volunteers for any “special research” that may be necessary for Lila’s books. Lila enjoys hearing from her readers at lila@liladupres.com and invites them to visit her website at www.liladupres.com and her blog at <http://liladupres.blogspot.com/>.

Lila 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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