



To Trust A Wicked Man

By

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Dedication

For Tom, an extraordinary man in my life. With love.

Chapter One

Piper Callaghan adjusted her glasses against the bridge of her nose and began to read the letter. Crap! She was getting evicted.

She'd been living in this apartment for years and never thought of moving somewhere else. How in the world was she going to juggle apartment hunting and writing within a space of two weeks? She'd taken a vacation from work to write, not to pack her things and move.

Move. She hated the word right now. She was already doing a different kind of moving—moving on from a recent breakup.

She looked at her dog, Brandi. "I wish you hadn't eaten Mrs. Barth's pudding, buddy."

Brandi's left ear stood straight up.

"The neighbors ganged up on us and signed a petition. They want us out because they said you're a thief, you always pee in the elevator, and you jump on people. But it says here that I can keep this apartment if I get rid of you. Getting rid of you means sending you back to the pound. Do you know what the pound does to misbehaved dogs like you? They send you to doggy heaven." The bullmastiff's ears flopped as if he understood her.

"I'm kidding, okay. Sorry." Poor thing. He couldn't help being what he was—a living garbage disposal.

She'd met Brandi at the Humane Society where she worked as a volunteer. He was skin and bones with a broken hip when he came. No

families went near his cage. When Brandi's name came up on the list of unfortunate dogs, she decided to keep him until she found a home for him. That was six months ago.

She wanted him to have a home. Now, looking at the signatures on the letter she was holding, they both needed to find a home pronto. It seemed she would have to spend her writing and editing time looking for a new apartment. Maybe her story wasn't meant to be published. Her dream of becoming a writer, maybe was just that—a dream.

Loud thumping against the wall and the lusty sound of a woman screaming *Oh, yeah's* took her mind off the heavy weight in her chest.

"Ugh! Why did you have to move in next door?" She balled the letter she was holding and threw it on the wall. The paper landed on the floor with a muffled thud. Why bother, she thought. It doesn't matter anymore. The landlord wanted them gone after a week.

She'd give anything to have her simple, quiet, mundane life back—write in the morning, eat, and work at night. She'd even settle for a few days of solitude just so she could finish her manuscript. The online publication's deadline for submission hovered like a grim reaper standing behind her with his stainless steel scythe poised above his head, ready to come down and split her head in half.

Another loud moan from her horny neighbors interrupted her thoughts again. "Just release your damn orgasm and be done with it!" she yelled.

The couple's loud, active sex routine bugged her. It was a direct hit on her one-month sexual deprivation. Debi, her friend and Cooper's sister, pointed out that her sexual deprivation would end only if she stopped being pigheaded and take Cooper back. She knew Cooper well enough to do that. Although, she couldn't deny that she missed him around. More than she thought she would.

It had been two weeks since she had seen him last, but his scent still lingered in her sheets, pillows, and bathroom where he had left his shaving kit. She'd tried to patch the hollowed spot Cooper had vacated when he left for the San Juan Islands by dating a customer who'd been asking her out for a long time, but she gained nothing from it. Instead she

was groped and kissed sloppily, leaving bad taste in her mouth that made her gag. After that she discarded the idea of dating altogether. It was a pointless and childish way to forget someone anyway. Especially someone who had taught her things she never ever thought possible, things she only imagined existed in romance novels, things that made her whole body tingle and burn. Cooper was the only man who made her want to look pretty, the only man who had given her reason to buy a new push up Wonderbra.

Piper stared out her window. The Space Needle's point blinked in the distance. It served like a beacon in the dark. Downtown buildings, the noise, and the view of the Puget Sound would be hard to give up. But what choice did she have?

"I'll miss this view." She sighed heavily, feeling an invincible weight pushing her down.

Piper swept her long red hair back from her temples, bunched it up in the back and held it with a white pearl-encrusted, claw-type clip. Luxuriant locks cascaded down the back of her head and neck.

It would be a miracle to find another place close to everything like this. The Melting Pot was on Mercer Street two blocks away from Second Avenue. She always walked to work—no gas to buy and no worries about the traffic.

Dang! How was she going to find another place? Her savings were depleted after she lent Alicia money to take her little girl to the hospital to be treated for bronchial pneumonia, and she'd spent big bucks on a new computer. If she had known she was a step closer to being homeless, she would have held off on upgrading from Windows XP to a customized Vista Professional laptop and laser jet printer.

Times like this, she wondered whether she should have let Brandi join other dogs in doggy heaven.

Soft instrumental jazz floated in the air. Good, the hornies were done romping—at least for now. Good God! It took them two hours. She wondered if the man were as virile as Cooper. Did he bring his wife to ecstasy using his mouth? Does he have long expert fingers that knew how to touch, where to touch? Did he ask his wife to look at him while her

body rocked from an intense orgasm?

Warm blitz of desire swirled in the pit of her stomach. Delightful memories of how good it was to be licked, how delicious a warm wet tongue felt when it traveled all over her skin, came rushing back. She throbbed. She'd been this way since Cooper showed her the secrets of pleasure, how to move and ride the flow of passion. She pressed her legs together and knew without touching that her sex was already slick.

The time when Cooper took her to his friend's party formed in her mind. While his friends mingled in the living room, he hid her in the cloakroom behind the stairway minutes after they had arrived. He needed to touch, feel, and taste her, he said. And he did. There, in the dark room, she found her back pressed against the wall with her breasts exposed, heavy, and glistening from his wet kisses. One leg wrapped around his waist. His strong hand gripped her thigh for support. After he pleased her through her soaked panties, he moved the thin material to the side and penetrated her first with one finger then two then three until she felt stretched and open. His thumb teased her clitoris while his mouth devoured her breasts. He didn't stop until her whole body quivered from her explosive orgasm. Before her tremors subsided, he entered her in one swift motion burying his cock to the hilt, touching her womb, eliciting another orgasm she thought would turn her body into bits.

He liked touching her, he said. Like a magnet he was drawn to her, to connect, to match, to mate. When her heart resumed its pace, he kissed her tenderly and whispered wicked things he'd do to her. They went back to the party with her head filled with his promises. Cooper kept his word.

The memory made her heart beat quicker. The room temperature turned hotter. Her hands she realized had drifted down her crotch. With her fingers on her belly, she flexed them. Then slowly they snaked inside her lace panties to rest on top of her mound. She combed the springy curls with her fingers.

She could pacify her need. Cooper had shown her how a woman could bring herself to ecstasy. Using a full-length mirror placed at the bottom of the bed, Cooper asked her to watch their nude reflection, him sitting behind her while she was leaning against his pounding chest. He

slowly spread her legs and asked her to watch as his hand crept down from the top of her mons down to her wet labia. She remembered closing her eyes, but Cooper insisted that she open them. After running his fingers up and down her wet seams, he dipped his fingers in her opening where she was dewy. When he retreated, he spread the shiny juice all over her. She'd never seen such erotic image before. Cooper rotated her clit. She remembered hooking her arms around his neck for support. He laughed at that. But he wasn't finished. He cupped her heavy breasts and already puckered nipples. He pulled one nipple the same time he pinched her clit. The sensation was unbearable. She pleaded with him to stop teasing, but he only smiled. With his arm muscle flexing, he fingered her. In. Out. His fingers shone. When she felt the beginning of her orgasm, Cooper turned her around, lifted her hips and entered her. Wave after wave of pleasure rendered her powerless. Hard and fast, he thrusts his hips until she reached her peak. Cooper followed seconds later, and together they collapsed on the bed—laughing.

She could repeat the simple act without Cooper and without a mirror.

“Yes, just this time,” she whispered.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the chair. Her hand moved down an inch doubling her heart rate. One free hand cupped her breast imagining a strong hand kneading her soft flesh. Spreading her legs wide, she touched herself. She rotated her nub the way Cooper had done it. Pleasure like fire licked her skin. Piper moaned. Her hips moved, seeking what Cooper had given her, what only Cooper could give.

Running the tip of her tongue on her lips, she closed her eyes and whispered his name. “Cooper...”

That's it, love, I'll take you higher. We'll soar together. You're so beautiful and hot. I've never had a woman like you...you're so different.

Different. Piper's eyes popped open. His words brought her back to her senses. Realizing what she had done, shame replaced lust. She flattened her fingers on the table but, remembering where they'd been seconds ago, she made a fist instead.

What was she doing succumbing to the lowest form of pleasure

man ever discovered? And worse! She imagined Cooper doing it. She shouldn't be thinking about him.

She took deep breaths, gathering her willpower to divert her mind away from other business by opening her laptop. Moments later, the call of need went away. She was deep in her chapter when a singsongy voice startled her.

"Writing again, Piper?"

"Chriminy!" turning around, she glared at her friend.

"Sorry, I knocked, but you didn't answer." Debi flashed a smile that rivaled the brightness of her yellow, pointy, short hair. Garbed in a most eye-catching outfit of a red knee-length leather coat, silk scarf wrapped around her neck, red loop earrings the size of doughnuts, and high red stiletto boots, Debi was the very definition of a cosmopolitan woman.

Piper loved her, but at times, she wished Debi would go away. Debi could gab all night, which meant she'd have to look at her eyes—Cooper's eyes.

Cooper and Debi possessed same deep sea blue eyes with dark thick lashes. Looking at Debi, she could see Cooper's staring down at her while pledging his love and affection, turning cloudy blue when passion took over his body, when—

"Stop staring, Piper. I am not my brother."

"What makes you think I'm thinking about him?"

"You aren't?" Debi waggled her brows, teasing her.

Piper felt her cheeks grow warm.

"You can't lie. You blushed too easily."

"Fine. How could I not? You look like your older brother."

"What? Did I forget to shave my beard this morning?"

She smiled at Debi's staged horrified look. "What are you doing here?"

"Just visiting. Got an email from Cooper. He's wondering what you've been doing lately."

The thought about what she was about to do before Debi walked in brought another rush of warm blood to her face. Good God! Debi could have caught her pleasuring herself if she hadn't stopped. "Did you," she

cleared her throat, "tell him that I'm busy working?" Busy thinking about him pleasuring her, was more like it.

"Yeah. I told him about the ugly scabs you've picked up at the bar. He wasn't happy about it."

She snorted. "Hard to believe. Your brother can easily find someone to amuse himself rather than dwell on a recent breakup. Not that there is anything to dwell on about it."

"There must be. You're dwelling on it right now."

"I am not!" She replied defensively. "It's over between me and your brother, Debi. I told you, if I didn't find him suitable, I'd walk away. I did. So stop playing matchmaker. You suck at it."

"I'm not a matchmaker."

"Come on, you tried to match us. That's why you forced me to go on a seaplane ride with you."

"Who wouldn't want to have a tough sister-in-law like you? I can't imagine any of his girlfriends pouring a pitcher of beer on a heckler's head. Besides, Cooper needs someone who can rein him in. He's too wild."

"Now you're talking."

Debi shrugged her shoulders in indifference. "Piper, I do think Cooper fell hard for you."

The idea of Cooper in love with her was hard to fathom. Cooper often comes to the Melting Pot to watch Debi's band play or drink with his friends and girlfriends. She'd never seen him smoke, but he was never without a woman wrapped around him like a blanket, snuggling as if they were joined at the hip.

"Debi, you told me that Cooper confessed he loves women so much he'll never tire of them."

"I know. But that was before he met you."

"You're incorrigible."

"He's changed, you know. You changed him. Honestly, Piper, I believe he loves you."

"I think love means something entirely different to Cooper. To him, love means a romp in bed. Debi, I am but a passing fancy to your

brother." She held a hand up facing Debi to stop whatever it was she was going to say. "Cooper is not a one-woman man, you know that. And you know where I stand on promiscuous men. Believe me, he's probably happy that I broke up with him. I saved him from wasting his time thinking about how to break up with me without hurting my feelings. "

"You're wrong, you know." Debi pouted as if she were a little girl denied from getting what she wanted.

"Believe me, this is the right thing for us. Don't worry; I won't break our friendship because I broke up with Cooper."

"You shouldn't throw away a chance for a good and remarkable relationship, Piper. Not to mention awesome sex just because you think your relationship will end up like your parents'."

Piper snorted. "You got it backwards. I am *throwing away* my relationship with Cooper because I know it's not going to be a remarkable one."

Her parents once pledged love for each other, but they didn't have a remarkable relationship. Because her father realized he wanted a smorgasbord and not the same dish over and over. Yes, women to him were like different dishes he had to taste. Same dinner every night made him lose his appetite.

What a freaking cheater.

Piper doubted that Cooper, a sought-after, handsome pilot used to getting what he wanted, be it a woman, wine or anything, would be any different. He wouldn't stop his wicked ways simply because he had found a red-haired, freckled woman, with vision as bad as Dr. Magoo's, a bookworm, waitress, and a struggling wannabe writer. She was just a new toy for Cooper. No doubt he'd discard her as soon as he spotted a shinier one. A fling. She was all that to him.

"I'm telling you the truth—you're the one for him. He told me so." Debi insisted.

"You shouldn't believe him. We only dated for two short months."

"And that says a lot."

"I've already spent two months with him—enough for me to know that he's not the one for me."

"The whole time you were with him, were you thinking about Cooper as himself and not someone else? Like your father, maybe?"

How could she think about him and not think about her father. They both have the same reputation—womanizer. Everyone knew Cooper as a wicked pilot and notorious for getting any woman in bed, with or without his invitation. If someone told her that he was Eros, the primordial god of sex, lust and intercourse, she'd believe it. There was something about him that draws women the way a flame would a moth.

Her father was the same.

"I think it's best if we just forget about each other." Which he was probably doing right now, forgetting her by snuggling with a different woman.

"He took off to the San Juan's because you pissed him off. He said everything was going along so well, and then you broke up with him. He couldn't understand your decision."

"Debi, I told him that I found him unsuitable." The only time they were suited was when they were in bed.

It wasn't easy telling him about her decision. The smart part of her brain told her to try and forget about her fear, enjoy his company, sex, and attention. The mushy, chicken shitty part of her brain told her that two months was long enough and must stop if she wanted a life different from her mother's. The chicken shit part won.

"Piper, I've never known Cooper to be angry because of a woman." Debi's dark brows formed a deep V.

"Your brother will be fine as soon as he learns to accept the concept of being dumped."

"I don't know. Kip told me he's been barking orders at everyone at the harbor and been drinking nonstop."

"Cooper's just ticked off. It's probably a man thing. He'll recover."

"I don't know. Usually, he would just laugh about a breakup, hang out with his friends and cool off. Not this time, though. He's as grumpy as a bear with a sliver stuck in its paw."

"Ego. That's all there is to it. Soon he'll find another one to toy with. He's the kind who couldn't stay with one woman...maybe for all his life."

"Sheez! Nobody knows that. Give him a chance. You're overly cautious. You think way too far ahead, Piper. If we all thought like you do, the wedding chapels in Reno would be out of business. Don't judge Cooper prematurely. Piper, you won't know if the water is too deep unless you jump in."

"And if the water *is* too deep, what then? Drown? Good golly! Debi, I know I will drown if I stay with Cooper. I have to extract myself from him to prevent that from happening."

Her mother wallowed in misery then eventually drowned. Debi wouldn't understand. She hadn't seen her mother confine herself in the room to avoid everyone and refuse to come out. Unlike her parents, Debi's were most likely a match made in heaven.

"Your brother and I weren't a perfect match."

"You learned that in two months? Give him more time, and you'll see that he's not as bad as you think. I tell you, Cooper has changed since he met you. I've never seen him so—as you romance novelists would say—besotted."

"Debi, I don't need more time with him. And I am not a novelist...yet."

"Come on, Piper, you know he's in love with you. And you are equally in love with him."

And that was the bad part. It was hard not to fall for him. Cooper knew how to make his woman feel wonderful, special, and beautiful. He was caring, attentive and generous. He found her jokes funny, adored her wild red hair—at least, he said so—and ate junk the way she did. Those were a few of the characteristics she was looking for in a man. He would have been perfect if it weren't for his notoriety in women. Wicked and notorious.

"You know, Cooper is—"

"Please! Enough about your brother. I don't want to hear anymore about him. Now, if he's sick, let me know so I can pray for his quick recovery. Other than that, I don't want to know."

"But I thought—"

"Shush! One more word about your brother and I'll forget you're

my friend, will not ask you to be my bridesmaid if I ever get married at all, and I will tell Zee it was Stone who put a ring in your...wherever he put it down there."

"Fine! I'll change the subject now."

"Good."

Debi chewed her bottom lip. "If ever you think of getting pierced, you can choose between an inner labia, triangle or vertical clitoris piercing. Mine is the outer labia piercing. But either style helps stimulate you and your partner."

"Good God! Too much info, Debi. Don't need it."

"You want to change the subject. God! You're hard to talk to these days."

Piper rolled her eyes heavenward before crossing them.

"Stop it! You look freaky. You know your eyes will get stuck." Debi cringed.

"Says who?"

"Cooper."

"It's time you stop believing everything your brother tells you."

Debi waved her hand in the air, dismissing her as if she were a gnat. "Do you have more of those cake Oreos?"

Good, no more talk about Cooper. "Check the cupboard on the left side. How did the band do tonight?"

"Real good. The club was packed. Marcus wasn't happy though. Alicia isn't back yet, and the new temp, Spanky, was slow and spent more time flirting with the customers than delivering drinks."

"Thanks for talking to Marcus."

"You're welcome. It's awesome to have power over him. All I did was threaten him that I would perform somewhere else if he didn't give you a vacation. I thought I heard him growl before he said yes."

"I think Marcus has the hots for you."

"Marcus? I don't think so. Rain is a hot band, too hot for Marcus to lose."

Piper didn't pursue the topic although deep in her gut she knew Marcus was falling for her. She caught him staring at Debi many times.

And his mood often changed from jolly to grumpy when Zee was around.

"Well, thanks for threatening him. I really need my vacation."

"Something else you have to do other than writing?" Debi asked while chewing the Oreo cookie.

Piper stood up and picked up the balled-up paper off the floor. She threw it underhanded, hitting Debi on the chest. "Read it."

Debi sat beside Brandi on the floor and smoothed out the paper.

"It says here that Brandi caused enough trouble to warrant a kicking in the booty." Debi buried her hand in Brandi's scruff. Brandi's brown eyes drooped in doggie ecstasy, and he laid his massive paw on Debi's lap.

"Yes. I'll ask the vet to give him bariatric surgery after he cuts his gonads off. Tomorrow."

"You think he needs a stomach surgery because he steals food and jumps on people?"

"It's his stomach's fault that we need a new place. ASAP."

"I think what he needs is a big hug." Debi hugged the dog. "Good, Brandi. I knew you were good for something."

Piper sighed. "Don't patronize him. We need a new place."

"Don't look so gloomy. It's about time you move out of this place. You've been living in this apartment so long you're becoming like your neighbors—grumpy. It's unhealthy. And worse, you're surrounded by oldies. You befriend one, and then the next day the poor thing's gone. They're dropping like flies around you, Piper. They're a constant reminder of death. So morbid." Debi shuddered. "And have you noticed? The whole building smells like BenGay." Debi said in between chewing an Oreo.

"I happen to like BenGay."

"You're weird. A place where the sun can shine on you would do you good."

"Uh-huh. Move where? To the Philippines or any tropical island where the sun can beat down on me and have my face turn into a one whole freckle."

"I like your freckles. My brother likes them, too."

Piper silently agreed. How many times had Cooper mentioned his fascination with her freckles. He even went on a freckle hunt many nights and didn't stop until he'd found every one of them, including the one located on her inner thigh. Her blood sizzled.

"You look flushed. You're not getting sick, are you?" Debi asked, frowning.

Piper shook her head to get rid of the thought about how Cooper spent most of his attention when he was freckle hunting. She forced herself to pay attention to Debi.

"I just need sleep. The maniacs rocked the wall all night."

"Another reason why you should move."

"That's the problem. I don't have time to look, Debi. Blue Haze's deadline is in two weeks. I still have editing and proofreading to do." Piper grimaced. She sounded so pathetic and hopeless. Piper sat back down on her chair. Her eyes scanned her sparsely furnished one-bedroom apartment. It was a good thing she wasn't a pack rat like her mother. When she moved, she wouldn't have to worry about renting a U-Haul.

"My neighbor moved out. You can move in her unit."

It was so easy for Debi, who owned shares in Microsoft, to suggest a condominium. Even if she found a way to rent one, what would she do with her thrift store-quality furniture? Would she upgrade those, too?

"I can't afford a condo right now. I haven't gotten my break yet."

"All right, let's see...Aha!" Debi snapped her fingers and did a jig in the middle of the room. "I know a place where you can stay while working on your manuscript. Look for another apartment once the monkey, also known to you writers as a deadline, is off your back. I've got it, perfect!"

There was a certain look on Debi's face, but Piper couldn't tell what brought it on. Knowing Debi, a quiet place meant an underground studio equipped with a complete sound system turned up so loud it could shake anyone's earwax loose. But Piper was not in a position to be choosy.

"Okay, I'll stay in this place provided it's not spider and roach infested. Where is this place you're talking about?"

Chapter Two

Piper tapped her steering wheel as if sending a message using Morse code. Her eyes on the humongous house where she'd spent wondrous days and nights before.

The house had been unoccupied since Debi had left for college and their parents decided to travel abroad. Cooper mentioned that the only reason his parents kept the house was because it held memories and sentimental value. Now, its use was reduced to being a sanctuary or a place to rendezvous.

Fate has a nasty way of playing with humans. Here was a house without its residents, and here she was without a home.

Lucky for her, Debi thought of offering this house. At least for a few days, she and Brandi had a place to stay. No one would interrupt her here. However, she wasn't sure if her own memories would stay quiet while she was here. After all, this was where she had lost her virginity. She remembered the look of surprise on Cooper's face when he learned that at twenty-six her hymen was still intact. After uttering a short wow, he broke her barrier and showed her the unbound rules of making love, of pleasures on and off the bed, unleashing the sex goddess inside her. They spent hours in this house making love in every place they could possibly be.

Piper swallowed. Boy, this would be one heck of a stay.

Warm doggy breath fanned the back of her neck. She reached back

to rub behind Brandi's ears. "Hey, you're up. The vet said you were a good boy."

Brandi tried to turn around, but his big mastiff body made it impossible to even stand up. Poor thing.

"Here's the deal; when I start raking in big bucks, I'll buy you a big minivan. But you have to promise to behave."

Brandi woofed then licked his chops.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Piper got out of her car. Her eyes scanned the street of Woodway-Wachusett. Mansions stood on both sides. The whole neighborhood oozed with money. A portico from one of the houses probably cost more than her whole apartment building in UW District. If it starts snowing tonight, with the porch and walkway lights turned on, the tract will have a fantasy look.

Piper breathed in the cold winter air spiced with wood smoke coming from the chimneys. Winter was her favorite season. It was a perfect season to cuddle, to stay indoors, and to sip cocoa in front of a roaring fireplace while reading or writing. Winter, she thought, was the most romantic season of all.

Another light breeze blew. Cedar branches swayed gently from the biting wind. She rubbed her arms briskly. The cold winter air seeped through her knitted sweater, pricking her skin as if she had just landed on a sticker bush.

A fleck of snow landed on her cheek. It quickly melted. "It's snowing, Brandi." She watched the snow land and stick on the ground. "Good thing we made it here now; otherwise, we'd be stuck somewhere."

The wind picked up, and she shivered from the cold. Coffee. Yes, she needed one. Her stomach rumbled. And real food, too, she thought. She checked her watch. It was too late for lunch and early for dinner. She'd had a cup of coffee and doughnuts for breakfast this morning while waiting for Brandi to come out of the surgery room. That was hours ago. No wonder her stomach was complaining.

"Okay, partner, ready to come out?" Brandi woofed and pawed the window. "You can pee, poop, investigate, but don't dig up the lawn. And

don't do anything stupid. The residents here will not bother signing a petition to get rid of us; they will call the cops."

As soon as she opened the door, Brandi pushed it and jumped out. Surprised, Piper tried to get out of his way, but her foot slipped. Her butt landed on the wet driveway, hard.

"I said nothing stupid." She yelled at Brandi who had already raised his hind leg to pee on the rhododendron bush. Grunting, Piper pushed herself up.

A mixture of snow and water clung to her butt. Cold wet feeling quickly soaked her panties. Her skin puckered like a plucked chicken. Crud! If there were a more uncomfortable feeling than wet, cold pants clinging to your butt on a snowy day, she wouldn't want to know. God, she needed to go inside the house. She carefully walked behind her faded blue Honda with a missing bumper and popped the trunk.

Pulling her heavy new-to-her suitcase, she dragged it all the way to the massive double doors.

A warm house greeted her. Burning logs cracked and hissed from the fireplace. According to Debi, their old nanny, Elena, comes by once a week to check on the house. Today must have been one of those days.

Brandi's nails made clicking sounds on the shiny marbled floor as he walked past her. "No garbage digging and keep your paws off the fridge, okay? Come on, let's get settled."

Brandi barked once then took off. "Enjoy the house. We'll be lucky if we find an apartment bigger than a box."

Grunting, she hefted her suitcase and started walking toward the winding staircase. The runner muffled the thudding sound of the suitcase on each step. She was thankful for that. She wouldn't want the Jenkins to come home and find their hardwood stairs all scratched.

The fireplace in the guest room where she'd stayed before was also roaring. She pushed the suitcase in the corner of the room, dumped the hobo bag on the bed, and stretched her aching back.

The hour-and-forty-five-minute drive from Seattle to Edmonds gave her a back pain. For a normal car, it would take only forty minutes to reach Woodway. But her car wasn't normal. When she hit thirty-five miles

per hour, it heaved, clunked, and emitted black smoke the Emission Control Department would call a health hazard.

She was about to stretch her back on the bed when the sound of trickling water reached her ears. She went to the bathroom to check. Her glasses fogged instantly when she walked in the bathroom. Without removing them, she wiped the lenses with her fingers. To her delight, she found a tub already filled with steamy hot water.

Piper searched for her prepaid cell phone. She found it at the bottom of the bag among the candy wrapper, Oreo crumbs, receipts, little salt packets she saved from McDonald's, and used, mint-flavored toothpicks. Debi's voicemail picked up.

"Hey, Debi. This is Piper of Calgon. Elena readied my bath. Thanks. I need it to thaw my cold butt. Give me a call. Love you, girl." She hung up and tossed the cell phone on the counter. A bath is not a bath without scented bubble soap. "Let's see what we can find." She searched the cabinets. She practically licked her lips when she found a bottle of Lavender Milk Bath. Smiling, she poured the contents into the tub and watched the tiny bubbles multiply. She removed her glasses when they fogged up again and laid them on the edge of the tub.

All the steamy, stomach-quivering lines in her stories always came to her when she relaxed in the tub. The water, like a man's hand slowly gliding against her skin, caressing every inch of her body, always helped stir her wild and saucy imagination. Right now, she needed a bite in her story.

She undressed quickly. The water was too hot when she dipped her toe in, but it would do. After stretching her body at the bottom of the tub, she closed her eyes and slipped into another realm.

Chapter Three

Captain Cooper Jenkins couldn't believe his eyes. The woman—with a pair of long legs, slender limbs, smooth looking shoulders peppered with freckles, and hair the color of sunset that had haunted him for weeks—was in his bathtub. And she seemed to be enjoying his hot water; she was smiling!

He was so excited to see his parents enjoying winter in Paris through the webcam that he didn't hear her come in. But why was she in his tub? Not that he was complaining.

Her nudity, with the tips of her glistening breasts barely submerged in sudsy water, fiery reddish hair plastered on her neck and chest, one leg bent showing its silky skin, and wet dark curls between her thighs, was a sight to see.

He'd been to different pleasure bars and clubs around the world. But nothing in comparison to the seductive, unhurried movements Piper's fingers were making. She made lazy circles on her belly, up to her chest and down where he couldn't see.

Cooper held his breath when Piper's chest lifted a fraction as her hand disappeared under the foamy water. He wondered if she was thinking about him, about the last time they had shared a bath.

The image of them sharing a bath made his dick spring. Sweet pain gripped his groin. Cooper took a step back. Despite the tantalizing view, he should leave.

Too late.

"Elena? Thank you so much for the bath," Piper said aloud.

Elena? Cooper didn't answer. He couldn't. He was not supposed to be there. Cooper exhaled slowly when Piper, instead of opening her eyes, hummed.

Here was the chance to wait for her downstairs and pretend he'd never witnessed her bathe.

But Piper raised one leg, her hands slowly gliding down to reach her toes and massage them. The thought of leaving disappeared. When her breasts rose above the water, he wanted to dive in.

His manhood pulsed. He looked down at himself then grimaced. The towel wrapped around his hips resembled a tent. Watching her was almost like watching a pornographic movie.

Water lapped on her milky white skin, and he wished he were the one lapping. The sweet feeling of arousal made him wrap his hand around his shaft.

"Damn it!"

Piper stopped moving as if someone had pressed the pause button on her. And then it happened so fast. Water splashed all over as she tried to sit up. She slipped under water, but quickly came up. Using both hands, she wiped the soap off her face with little success.

"Let me help you," he grabbed her arm, but Piper shook him off then released a blind punch.

"Let go of me, asshole!" she screamed. Cooper dodged the second punch, which barely grazed his left ear.

"Jesus! You hit like a man."

"Don't touch me!" —*cough, cough*— "Leave! I have a Rottweiler in the house. He'll bite your ass." She spat the soap that dripped down her mouth. "Brandi, help!"

"A Rottweiler? I thought he was a mastiff?"

He ducked when Piper swung her hand blindly. Her foot slipped, her hand shot up and grabbed his swollen dick.

"Arrghhh, let go, for Pete's sake!"

"Eeww!" she let go of him, shaking her hands in the air. Bubbles

floated in the room.

Cooper grabbed her by the waist and pulled her against him, making sure her hands couldn't damage him further. He couldn't chance becoming a eunuch. The continuity of the Jenkins' lineage rested heavily on his shoulders.

Piper fought him like a wildcat. "Stop, it's just me damn it! You're going to hurt yourself."

Piper opened one eye. "Cooper? What're you doing here? Oww! Soap! Soap in my eyes!"

"Sit down and I'll pour water on you." He didn't have to say it twice. Piper plunked back down in the tub splashing more water on the floor. Quickly, he rewrapped his towel around his waist then formed his hands like a cup and used them to wash Piper's face.

"Ohh! It stings."

"Blink. Okay here we go. Tip your head up."

She blinked like an owl. "Thanks."

"Can you see now?"

"I could if I had my glasses on."

"Where are they?"

"I put them here, on the edge. Dang! They must have slipped under."

Cooper knelt beside the tub and dunked his hand under. He smiled when Piper hugged her knees. He swiped the bottom of tub and accidentally touched her toes. He wiggled her pinkie.

"Cooper, stop!"

He found the glasses in the corner of the tub close to the drain. "Here they are." He rinsed the glasses and put them on Piper. Her green eyes, the color of apples, blinked. They looked bigger and rounder with her glasses on.

"Thank you. Please hand me my towel."

He pulled the towel from the rack, bent down, and helped her up.

"Turn around, please."

With deliberate slowness, Cooper turned around. He'd seen every part of her already, but this wasn't the time to point it out.

"I've never seen you ticked off like this. How did you learn to hit like a boy?"

"My best friend in third grade showed me. He said the bullies would stop calling me four-eyed buck if I could punch real good."

"Four-eyed buck?"

"Yeah, I had bucked teeth and wore round glasses."

His heart broke. "They're lucky I wasn't there when that happened."

"Cooper, you were thirteen when I was eight. You were probably busy dating junior high girls. And I doubt you would have noticed me. I was a scrawny little thing with long bony legs and arms that seemed to touch the ground when I walked."

He laughed and turned to help when he heard the water slosh.

"And I used to have a—Omigod!" Piper's eyes widened.

Without looking down, Cooper knew what had caught Piper's attention. Despite the manhandling he had suffered, he remained hard and pulsing.

Pink hue slowly crept from her chest all the way up her cheeks. Cooper looked over her from the top of her tangled hair down to her pink shoulders and arms. Cooked lobster only prettier, he thought. And right now, he wanted to eat the lobster.

"I'm sorry, couldn't help it."

"Uncontrollable, eh? No wonder you have the reputation," she said.

He grinned at her and tried to flatten his nodding manhood against his lower belly by tightening the towel around his waist. "I didn't mean to watch, I mean, ruin your bath. You were obviously enjoying it."

"You mean your bath. Seeing that you're only wearing a towel, you must have prepared this bath for you."

"Well, yes, I readied this bath. I was getting ready when I got a call from mom; they were online. So I went to the study to chat with my parents. When I came back here, I found you in there."

"No wonder the water's too hot. So, Elena didn't prepare this bath for me."

"No, sweet. Elena's not here. She still comes to clean, check the mail and get out of her daughter's house. Preparing a bath for you would have been close to impossible. Her seventy-five-year-old knees couldn't handle the steps anymore. Bad rheumatism."

Piper groaned. "I'm sorry. The water's still warm; you could still use it... if you like lavender scent. I know you liked to take baths."

"I like the powerful jets. You should try it sometime. I was hoping the hot water would help clear the cobwebs from my head." Not add more. Seeing Piper naked only made his mind go haywire.

"How come you're using this room? Isn't yours two doors down?"

"I like this room. It held memories I couldn't forget."

"I wonder what those are," she mumbled, lifting one foot to step out of the tub. And then she slipped.

His hands shot out, automatically grabbing her small waist. She was warm, soft, and bare. "Would you like me to show you what memories I'm talking about?"

For bare seconds they stared at each other. Her already flushed skin turned a darker shade of pink.

"No, thanks," Piper answered breathily.

He should release her; instead, he did the opposite and tightened his hold. To keep her from slipping, he assured himself. "Are you sure?" he whispered in her ear.

"I'm sure." Her response was as thin as a whisper.

"You don't sound like it." His mouth lightly touched her ear. The effect was arousing.

She gasped when his hand cupped one rounded buttock and lifted her a little.

"No, Cooper," she said without conviction.

"Yes, Piper."

He couldn't help it; his tongue darted out to trace the contour of her neck. She smelled so nice. Like a field of blooming flowers. He nipped the tender skin with his teeth. She sighed and moved her neck to the side—a silent invitation that he immediately accepted. He licked, kissed, and sucked her skin. He lifted her towel to caress her, to feel the dimple on the

small of her back.

"You're so smooth, so beautiful."

"Different you mean. Cooper, let me go."

He ignored her words. From behind, his fingers found the deep cleft in between her legs. He needed to feel her heat, touch her womb once again. "Piper, I've missed you so much." He dipped his fingers. Just as he thought, she was already slick. Good God!

He was stone hard. The strong need to feel her warm vagina while he slid inside was insurmountable. He wedged his thigh between her legs.

"Cooper, oh, God. What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Showing you what memories I'm talking about."

"Cooper, you've got to stop. We're no longer together and—"

"We are right now." His hand coasted from her wet back down to her soft round butt. A low guttural sound came from her lips. He kissed her shoulder, neck, and the tops of her breast. "Piper...Piper...you're so hot, so magnificent."

"I'm not."

He grounded his penis against her hip bone. "You are...in so many ways." His body screamed to mate with her.

"Cooper, the water is getting cold. If you want to—"

He lowered his head to suck her nipple. "Hmm..."

"—take a bath." Piper gripped his head and gasped.

"With me?"

"I already had mine. Oh, that's uhm...good."

"And it'll get better. You're so wet, Piper. I like it; I want your scent all over my body." Her long hair dripped on his arms and chest, intensifying his blazing lust. She whimpered when he moved his thigh back and forth. Her hips made short erotic thrusts, rubbing her wet cleft on him. Right then, he wanted to do his own riding. His blood rose to a boiling point.

"Ah, that's it, love. Move your hips while I suckle you like this." His mouth covered her pink areola and sucked the hard pebble with greed. He nearly ejaculated from the intense pleasure, but he managed to keep his control. The other nipple received the same attention. He made

sure of it. "So good..." He swirled his tongue on her glistening skin before opening his mouth wide to accommodate as much soft skin as he could take in.

Piper arched her body, thrusting her nipple deep into his mouth. "Piper, Piper. We've been separated for two weeks. That's all I can take. I missed you."

Piper's breathing was labored. Her teeth raked his shoulder, tantalizing his skin. "Cooper, no. Yes! Hmm...more."

His mouth left her breast to kiss her. Piper immediately wrapped her arms around his neck. "More?" he whispered in her mouth.

"Yes," she answered breathily.

He lowered his hand down the back of her thigh then lifted her leg. "Put your foot on the edge of the tub, love."

Piper complied. "Tell me, Piper, did you miss this?" He cupped her sex.

"Yes, yes, Cooper. I missed this." Her voice was frantic.

Good, he thought. Now he knew that he wasn't the only one who'd suffered from their separation. Cooper slid his fingers along her seams and opened her folds. His long middle finger found her opening. She was soaking wet. Unable to control himself anymore, he pushed his finger deep inside the same time his thumb pressed against her clitoris. Her hips jerked forward, meeting his finger's thrusts. She contracted around his finger. God! She was near her peak. He withdrew his finger only to go back in again.

If she would only open her mind, they could do this anytime. Why did she end a perfect relationship when she was obviously enjoying his touch?

"Would you like me to stop now, Piper?" He asked spreading her juice around and around her sensitive bud.

"What?" she asked half dazed.

"Tell me to stop, and I will." He looked at her passion-coated green eyes and waited. He'd probably suffer from a severe headache if she said no, but he would stop.

Piper couldn't believe he'd throw the ball in her court. Stopping

herself from drooling when she saw him clad in a skimpy towel was hard enough. Now she would have to decide whether she wanted him to stop or not. How could she tell him to stop when all she wanted was to be in his arms? This was what she'd been imagining for weeks—to be touched by him.

She looked up at him and caught her breath. His hooded eyes shone from banked fire. He wanted her as much as she wanted him. However, succumbing to her desire would only make things more difficult. They must stop. But his expert hands, rubbing against her flesh, caused the need that had been plaguing her to triple. Her breasts felt tingly and heavy, her insides hot. He made her weep. There was no denying that. But her good sense hadn't left her yet.

He gave her full control of the game; she'd use it. Planting her hands on each of his strong shoulders, she smiled at him.

"We should stop."

Disappointment etched on his handsome face. "Yeah, we should." His fingers slowly retreated from her sweet spot.

She had to bite her lip to stop from groaning. The need to take back what she'd said was on the tip of her tongue. But she must control her body's carnal desire. She had broken up with him for a good reason. And she must hang on to it. She tried to calm her body. Stopping now would make their lives less complicated.

"We've had two months of a good ride, Cooper, and we—"

His mouth came down on hers with an impact so strong she moaned like her neighbor—lustily. He kissed her with hunger as if he hadn't touched a woman in ages.

All rational thoughts disappeared in a heartbeat. Lost in her need for fulfillment, she did what she'd been dreaming for a month—wrapped both legs around Cooper's lean waist. Cool air whispered on her back. She was naked. How she lost her towel, she had no idea.

His arousal pressed intimately against her throbbing flesh. She hooked her arms around his neck and gave in to his kiss. It was wicked. They both kissed with the same intensity and hunger. Hurried and at the same time gentle but undoubtedly wicked.

"You looked like a naked angel in the tub," he said in between sucking her lips. "I couldn't take my eyes off you."

"You shouldn't have watched." *Oh, God. Please don't stop. Don't ask me to stop.*

Cooper lowered his head to nuzzle her breasts while kneading her bottom. "Damn, I love touching you." His tongue teased and lapped around her hard nipples before taking each into his mouth. Her eyes closed from pure bliss.

She felt herself spin. Cooper turned toward the bedroom. She clung to him and wrapped her legs around his lean hips. He was hard all over. The tip of his shaft was against her wet cleft. The damn towel prevented him from sliding inside, making the anticipation more unbearable. She'd never despised a towel in her life until that very moment.

"You surprised me, you know." He sucked on her skin loudly.

"I didn't mean to. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I like your surprise. God knows I've been dreaming about this every night."

Piper held her breath when her back touched the bed. His heavily aroused body followed.

"Take your towel off."

"Impatient, are we? What happened to the 'we're not together anymore' spiel?"

"We're still not an item, but I'll go crazy if you don't do something." She nipped his shoulder with her teeth.

"Witch, I am doing something." He nibbled tenderly at her breasts.

"Not enough!"

"Why don't you tell me what you want so I can give it to you?"

"Please stop teasing me. You know what I want."

He reached down and entered her with his finger. "Hmm. Like this?"

"Yes," she moaned lustily from the sheer ecstasy of having his fingers back inside her.

"Was this the reason why you started dating again?" He kissed her hard. His tongue almost punishing, thrusting inside her mouth again and

again, making her soar higher.

The slow circular motion his finger was doing on her clit was maddening. She arched her hips, begging silently for more.

"Answer me, Piper. Did you go out dating again because of this?"

It was hard to think when his fingers and mouth roamed all over her. "To...I, I don't know." she managed to say.

"Think." He pumped his fingers with speed.

"Ohh...Cooper...yes..."

"Like it, huh."

"Yes," she whimpered.

"How about this?" He cupped her breast kneading it gently before trapping one pink nipple between his lips. He matched his fingers' movement with each hungry suck.

Pride was no room for what she was feeling right now. She rocked her hips, chasing the orgasm she could almost reach. Cooper's erection was pressed hard on her hipbone. She wanted him inside her, inside her mouth....

"Cooper, please..."

"I know. I'll give you what you want. You'll reach heaven. I know the way. Here."

Piper cried when three fingers forced to fit inside her while his thumb teased her nubbin. He rotated his thumb right on the sweet spot. "Cooper!"

"Yes, scream my name." He kissed her again. His tongue traced the seams of her mouth. "God! You're so ready." With his eyes locked with hers, he pinched her engorged bud, pulled it gently out of its nest, making her thrust her hips. His jaw flexing, his fingers found their way back inside her aching passage.

He captured her moans with his ravishing mouth. Piper moved her hips. She made love with his fingers, chasing the rising pleasure. In and out, his long fingers worked her, buried between her open wet lips.

"Cooper, oh, my God!"

"Let it go, love. Just let it happen. Yes, that's it. Look at me." Eyes unfocused, she looked at him. Even with a hazy vision, she could tell he

was fighting for his control. His face was hard. "Come on, I want to feel you climax."

And she did. She felt her body shatter into little pieces. Cooper held her tight while her body trembled.

"Good girl," he whispered.

She felt languid and pleased. She wanted to laugh, scream...she wanted him. Cooper positioned himself between her legs. She realized his towel was already gone. She looked at his eyes smoldering with need and waited.

He lowered his mouth to capture her slightly parted lips. His tongue swept her mouth, matching the slow, teasing touch of the head of his penis along her juicy cleft. She moaned and touched her tongue with his. Slowly, he lifted his head a fraction to stare in her eyes.

Using his forearms, he propped his weight. "Look at me, Piper." When her eyes met his, he slowly entered her then pushed hard and deep. "Good God!" She was so tight and slick. He remained still for a heartbeat before withdrawing until just the tip of him was inside her then slowly sank back in again.

Piper squirmed underneath him. "Again, please. Don't stop... don't let go."

"I won't stop, and I won't let go, love." With speed, he repeatedly slid in and out of her, savoring the delicious feeling of her velvet walls clamped around him.

Piper's breathing quickened, her eyes half closed. She wrapped her arms around his neck and met his thrusts. He lifted her bottom and deepened his thrusts until she screamed his name a second time.

The moment he felt her orgasm, he released his. He knew Piper wasn't on the pill, but he ignored the idea of protecting her. It was a selfish act, but too late to take it back. One thing for sure, though, he would be the happiest man on earth if his selfishness produced a beautiful baby girl with pouty lips and green eyes like her mother. At the same time, a boy wouldn't make him less happy.

When his breathing went back to normal, he kissed her again. "I can't stop looking at you. It's like driving by a bad car wreck; you just

keep on looking even if the scene is gory."

Piper frowned then placed her hands in between them and pushed his shoulder. "I am as beautiful as a gory scene, is that what you're telling me?"

"No, not like that. You know what I mean."

"No. I don't."

"No? Piper, sorry. I didn't mean to say it that way."

"What did you mean then?"

"That I couldn't stop looking at you."

"Because I looked gory. Like the dungeon in the Wax Museum. People were drawn to the butchered, gory effigies, although they were hideous to look at. I knew you'd realize that I'm not as glamorous as you—"

"Shit!" He rolled off and lay beside her. "Don't start comparing yourself with other women again, Piper."

"Comparing me with other women is better than being compared to a car wreck."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"It's all right." Piper said, followed by a deep sigh.

"Don't get me wrong, Piper; I am overly happy to see you, but why are you here?"

"To stay here for a few weeks. Debi said this house is quiet, and I'd be able to write here without interruptions."

That was it? She came here to write? Not because she missed him? Now, looking at her, he realized she looked great. No signs of her having moped and brooded over their recent breakup. And that seriously pissed him off.

"Debi didn't tell you I was back and staying here?"

"She was trying to tell me something about you, but—"

"You didn't listen. You do have the tendency not to listen to people. You only listen to your characters talking in your head."

"Hmm...I'm not only a gory-looking woman but a loony one as well whose head is always stuck in the clouds."

"Christ! Will you stop misinterpreting my words? You're not a

loony or gory. But you are pigheaded."

"You and your sister both called me a pigheaded."

"Because you refuse to see what you and I are made of."

"Uh, tell me again; what are we made of."

"Perfect couple."

She levered herself on both elbows and turned to look at him. "That's what you think right now because you're not bored with me yet. I broke up with you to spare you from boredom and the trouble of finding an excuse to leave when you find another woman to pacify—"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I am just a passing fancy, Cooper. To tell you the truth I don't even know what you saw in me. We went out for two months; we had fun. But I had to end it before you started feeling trapped or bored. No, just listen. I am not the kind of woman you're accustomed to dating. You've slept with half the girls in town. Most of them are pretty, rich, and...thin but rounded in the right places. You see, when I broke up with you, I gave you an out. You won't have to feel guilty if you feel like ogling other women."

Cooper sat up. "You broke up with me because of my reputation with women."

"That's right. Cooper, I've seen women throw themselves at you. And you're only human; it would only be a matter of time before you gave in to their temptation."

"My God! Am I that bad? You think I'd have sex with other women while going out with you. You don't think of me as human, Piper. To you, I'm a pig."

"You don't understand, I—"

"On the contrary, I do understand. You think I would treat you the way your father treated your mother—cheated and flaunted his mistresses in front of her. That's what you think of me."

Piper sprung off the bed and pulled the covers to wrap around her. She looked surprised and embarrassed. "How did you know about my parents?"

"I heard about them before we started dating but never paid any

attention to it. Gossip, I have no time for it. But while I was in Deer Cove, I got a chance to think about it. I asked Debi if your parents played a part in your decision to break up with me. She said maybe."

She sighed so long and heavy that Cooper wanted to wrap his arms around her.

"It's not your fault that your father's an ass and your mother was..."

"Weak and crazy."

"She was a woman deeply in love. There was nothing wrong with that, except she didn't fight for her love, Piper."

"She did—the wrong way. She loved my father too much to divorce him. She would rather play the martyr part than lose him."

"Ah, since you predicted that you'd suffer from the same fate if you're with me, you decided to break up with me. A man known to debauch every woman in and outside the town. You said you broke up with me to give me an out. I think you did it for yourself. You're scared to trust me. You, my dear Piper, assumed that I am like your father and judged our relationship, me, prematurely."

"Premature decisions sometimes could save both parties heartaches and troubles."

"So you admit it; you think I'll break your heart to pieces because I cannot be trusted around women. You don't trust me."

Her silence pissed him off so badly he wanted to leave and fly anywhere. But that was what he had done last time when she told him it was over. He went to the cabin in Deer Cove that he and his friends had bought. The cabin was their sanctuary, a place to hide from clingy women, to chill. For two weeks, he stayed there to drink and sulk. It was Debi's call that finally gave him the strength to get up. The news about Piper dating made him want to shake the earth's core. He waited until he was sober enough to fly home. While flying one thousand feet up in the air, he thought of different ways to convince Piper to give him another chance. Buying her flowers came to mind and even spending time walking her dog. But he didn't expect to hear that she didn't trust him. How was he going to fix that? No amount of roses or daisies could make a person trust

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another. Ignoring his nakedness, he picked up his towel and strode toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Piper asked.

“To get a damn Tylenol.”

Chapter Four

Hands braced against the sink, he squeezed his mind shut. The truth about why Piper ended their relationship hurt him. She'd shared her body, her damn virginity, with him but not her goddamn trust.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror and winced. His beard was long—he lifted his arms to sniff his armpits—and he stunk. No wonder Kip called him a whiny little stinky girl. He touched his hair. It felt knotted and sticky.

When he arrived this morning, he decided to soak himself in the tub and scrub himself raw. But his beautiful Piper beat him to it.

His. He wished.

Piper. Jesus! How he loved the stubborn redhead. He knew she was *the one* the moment he laid eyes on her. With her he felt comfortable, relaxed, and at home. She was a morning sun shining through his window, bringing a new day, a new life. Piper could lighten up a room with her smile alone. And with her bright red hair, she was brighter than the moon, more beautiful than a sunset. With Piper he felt whole, normal, and not just some pilot, wanted because of his glamorous profession. With her, he was simply Cooper.

Many women walked in and out of his condo, but none of them made it past his second-date rule. Until Piper came along. He cleaned up for her. Stopped hosting parties and even hired another seaplane pilot to charter tourists around so he could spend more time with her. Piper was

worth all the trouble. He knew that. But she saw things differently. To her, he was the devil incarnate that must be avoided under any circumstances. Someone not to be trusted.

He couldn't blame her for that. He'd created his own image.

He knew she was attracted to him and maybe even loved him. The fear of trusting someone, of trusting him, was what was holding her back, what made her cut their budding relationship before it was in full bloom.

But he wasn't one to give up easily on someone he loved. He'd do anything to get her back. If trust she wants, then trust she'll get.

Trust. Yes, it would be his ticket to get Piper back.

Before leaving the bathroom, he quickly ran the idea in his still throbbing head one more time.

Piper was in the process of putting her sweater on, but it seemed a button had gotten stuck in her red hair, exposing her braless breasts. He admired the creamy flesh with pink areolas. They're perfect. Enough to fill his hands and...

"You acquired a new habit since the last time I saw you," Piper said, squinting.

"I didn't mean to stand here and watch you put that sweater on, if that's what you're referring to. If you'd had your bra on, I wouldn't have seen your breasts."

"If you were a true gentleman, you would turn around instead of staring." She put her glasses on. "I think you should take a shower...a long one. You kind of smell."

A swim in Puget Sound water was what he needed. He ran his fingers on his sticky hair. "I know. I was told numerous times."

"You've been drinking."

"Wine kept me warm all night."

"And you lost your shaver?"

"No energy to do it. How about you? You look great. Been sleeping well all night?"

"Well, yeah. Peacefully."

"And you didn't miss us?"

Piper shook her head no.

So all those days and nights he spent on the couch moping, she was sleeping peacefully? "I was wrong then. I thought you wept and soaked my fingers because you missed me, my touch."

She flushed. "Must we talk about it?"

"I'm just stating a fact." Two weeks ago, they never wasted any time talking like this. All they had to do was look in each other's eyes, and they'd be naked in no time.

"Well, we can forget that fact now. I'm leaving."

Oh, shit. Not good. "Why?"

Piper's brows slammed together while her lips moved from side to side. A habit she does when thinking. "Can't write here. I came here to have peace and quiet, to be alone, and to write. Besides, I don't think it's a good idea for us to stay in the same house."

"Why not?"

"Come on, Cooper. Don't make this harder—"

"Me? It's you who's making this harder. You're in love with me but—"

"Me, in love with you? No, I was *beginning* to fall in love with you. There's a big difference."

"Yes, deny it all you freaking want. But I know you are in love with me. You're just too chicken shit to admit it because you don't trust me, denying both of us a chance of happiness." And great sex, he wanted to add, but it would only cement Piper's idea of him as a womanizer. He wanted more than sex with her. He wanted her.

"Stay."

"I can't, Cooper."

"Please."

"Why?"

"I came back because I couldn't bear to be away from you another day. You have no idea how happy I am to find you here. I thought God was really quick in answering prayers. Please. Stay. I'm not asking you to stay with sex in mind."

"Oh?"

"Well, the truth is—"

To Trust A Wicked Man by Tierney O'Malley

"Cooper, Debi told me I could stay here. I need a quiet place to write. Since you're here, I don't think I'll have my quiet time. So I must go and find another place."

"Stay, I won't bother you. Trust me. Oh, wait, you can't."

"Cooper, please."

Piper started dragging her suitcase. He could see the outline of her breasts through her sweater, her cute butt molded on her cargo pants. Swiftly, his dick rose and started pulsing. Damn, damn it all. She's right. He should take a shower—a cold one. He stepped aside to make room for her.

If he let her leave this house, he'd lose her forever. He must convince her to stay. He was branded as a wicked pilot; he'd use it to his advantage. If only he could make the stubborn redhead listen.

"I am not what you think I am; I can prove it."

She stopped dragging the ugliest suitcase he'd ever seen. "How?"

Thank God. "I want to propose a deal."

Chapter Five

"That's the most absurd deal I have ever heard." Piper propped her elbow on the armchair she was sitting in and rested her chin on her hand. Her hair looked like a nest clawed by fighting birds, giving her the look of a woman after a rough tumble in bed. She looked lovely.

He twirled the small wheel that came off her suitcase when she'd insisted on dragging it downstairs. His mind was working like his seaplane engines, whirring loudly in his head. If what she wanted was proof of his fidelity and honesty, this deal should do it. All he needed was to convince her to accept it.

"I think it's great. Two weeks with me, Piper. That's all I ask. In two weeks, I will prove to you that I can stay celibate, that I can be in the same room with a woman—you—without the presence of a single touch. You know me well enough to know how hard that would be. Not being able to touch you while living together would be hell, but I'll do it—for you."

"I don't see how this deal could build trust."

"You think I'm a womanizer, a man who couldn't live without a woman. That's why you don't want to trust me, right? Well, stay with me in this house, and I'll show you that sex is not the only constant thing in my head. That I can carry on a conversation, dine together without expecting any physical contact after, and that I am content just to be with you. If I fail, I won't bother you again...forever."

"What if you succeed?"

"You'll marry me."

Her laughter echoed in the Tudor ceiling. "Are you kidding me?"

"No, think of this, Piper. I desire you more than anything in this world. So the chance of me winning this deal would be close to nothing."

"But you still want to try?"

"Yes. I want your trust. And I want you. Do you have any idea what our two weeks' separation has done to me? And when I heard that you started dating, I wanted to kill those men with my bare hands."

Piper's eyes lit up. "Okay, for two weeks you will avoid touching me. What if I accidentally touched you? What would happen?"

"If you touch my skin, it'll give me freedom to return your touch. I could pleasure you, give you orgasm after orgasm. But without the presence of the actual...union."

"Ah, so you'll do foreplay, but not actual sexual intercourse."

"Yes." He gripped the wheel tighter. The pointy metal pricked his skin. Good, the pain could keep his mind off her soft, lovely mouth pronouncing the word intercourse.

"What if you did the actual sex—?"

"Then the deal is over." He answered quickly. This deal won't go anywhere if he let this conversation go on another minute.

"That's it?"

He nodded. He could see she was considering his proposal. *Come on, Piper, just agree with me.*

"Wait a minute. For two weeks, you could hide in this house and easily win. How about me, how can I stop you from winning?"

"The deal is about me not touching you. So try everything to make me do it. If I lose control, that means I cannot be trusted. I'll leave. You win."

"So I have to seduce you to touch me, and I win?"

"Yes, if I touch you first then the deal is over."

"Chriminy! This deal is absurd. It doesn't matter how you look at it; your deal is simply idiotic."

"That's the deal. Take it or leave it." *You'd better take it.*

"Oh, good. I'll just leave then." Piper stood up, smiling up at him.

"Go ahead. But I won't be responsible for my next actions."

To his surprise the darn woman laughed. Didn't she know that he was serious?

"What, you're going to tie me up until I agreed to your deal?"

He stood closer to her. Blue eyes met green eyes. He searched her face, memorizing every contour, admiring the freckles and the smooth skin.

"Piper, I will do more than tie you up."

Something about the way he said the words went through her like a strong wine. It made her dizzy and fuzzy inside. His dark blue eyes glittered like an emerald touched by the sun. And the way he stood, with his hands across his chest, legs apart, and jaw muscles' twitching, warned her that she must think twice.

Crud! Please someone tell me he's not serious.

Fine. She'd accept the deal like a big girl not a ninny. She needed a place anyway. And judging by how much Cooper wanted to make love with her, he would probably last a few days but not two weeks. And if he managed to control his lust, she could always run out the door.

It was too bad that they had to resort to this childish game. If only he were the right one, her type. The silent reminder made her think. What was her type? Old, bald, with false teeth, or someone who wouldn't attract any attention even when he showed himself naked on television?

She stared at him, hoping to see signs that would convince her he was different, a totally different species that would never want a smorgasbord like her father.

Who wants to eat the same dish every night when he can have a smorgasbord anytime he wants it.

Her father had said those words while looking at her mother sitting by the fireplace, her eyes puffy from crying. Listening to her father's drunken tirade, she learned that men always look for variety in life no matter where they are, what they do or their status. Men are simply men. They were all born to change course. Till death do us part meant nothing to a man like her father. And most likely, nothing to Cooper.

Cooper's hooded eyes looking at her reminded her of a predator

watching his prey. She decided he wasn't a different kind.

"Come on, we're both adults here."

Yes, both adults who could do what they wanted. Like lick him the way she would a melting sugar on a hot bun before devouring it.

And he looked like a hot bun. Cooper had shaved and showered, changed into blue jeans and a polo shirt that showed his sinewy shape. The result was no better than seeing him wrapped in a towel. The man was a walking god on earth. Living in close quarters with the man who had given her her first orgasm would be worse than listening to her neighbors day and night.

Dear me, I'd probably take off my clothes before him.

All right. A big girl could handle this childish play. "Two weeks of living together without any form of touching my clothes or skin. If you do, accidental or not, our deal will end."

"Yes."

"Two weeks of walking around naked, seducing you, and that's it."

Cooper coughed on his hand. "That's all I want."

"You're insane, you know that?"

"Whatever it takes to get you back."

"Okay, this deal might sound absurd, but I'll take it. I'll agree with this because I badly need this place; I'm running out of time." Of course she was kidding about walking around naked. Seduction, flirtation wasn't on her list of things to do. But she'd play his game. Until it was time to head out the door, if needed.

"We have a deal?"

"Okay, deal."

Cooper's shoulders sagged a bit. "Thank you. Now, how should we seal our deal?" he waggled his eyebrows, flashing a wolfish grin.

She laughed and shook her head at him. Another thing she liked about Cooper was his ability to make her laugh. "Coffee. A good cup of coffee is what we need."

"Darn. That's a dull way to celebrate."

"Coffee or nothing."

"Then coffee it is."

She laughed at the way he comically sprinted toward the kitchen.

"What the hell!"

Piper walked faster to see what had happened. She peaked around him. As soon as she saw the refrigerator wide open, milk jug peppered with holes lying on the floor, she knew who'd done it.

"Oh, no! I forgot about him."

"Forgot who? What happened to the honey-baked ham, potato salad, Tillamook cheese, and pecan pie?"

Piper spotted the orange juice container tipped sideways with punctured holes on the sides. Juice dripped from the top compartment down to the vegetable crisper.

Cooper pulled the crisper out and stared at the Romaine lettuce.

Soft panting came from underneath the table.

"Brandi, come out, you pig!"

Brandi slowly came out with his eyes on Piper.

"I thought you were just bluffing when you said he was here."

Cooper turned to look at the dog. "You did this? You opened this frig? But you don't have hands."

Piper went down on her knees and started picking up the mess.

"He's a dog and a half and could open anything including a can of tuna fish."

"Good dog!"

"Don't patronize him. His ego is as big as his...never mind. Did he leave anything?"

Cooper raised the wilted lettuce. "You like lettuce dipped in orange juice?"

"What are we going to have for dinner? I'm famished."

Cooper checked the contents of the refrigerator. "He ate everything that I bought this morning. Nothing's in the freezer except for the frozen box of Otis Spunkmeyer cookie dough ice cream."

Piper threw the garbage underneath the sink. "Are you going to kick us out now?"

"What? Why would I do that? This is not Brandi's fault. He's a big dog."

"Just asking."

"We can go to Petosa's." He turned his attention back to Brandi.
"You like lettuce, too, Brandi?"

Brandi barked. Cooper tossed the lettuce. Brandi caught it mid-air and gobbled it within seconds.

"Geez, no wonder you're huge." He deposited the crisper in the sink.

"I'm sorry about this. I thought a visit with the vet would cure his piggish nature."

"What has the vet done so far?" Cooper rinsed the crisper and put it back in the refrigerator.

"Neutered him."

Cooper coughed. "Ouch! Obviously, that didn't work."

"I know. I should have thought about a muzzle. It would have been cheaper. I'll buy the groceries." She winced at the mention of the word buy.

"Okay. It's snowing hard, but Petosa's is close enough. Hope my truck makes it; otherwise, we'll have *dry* cereal tonight. But for now, we'll have our toast. Unless Brandi ate the coffee beans also. Did you buddy?"

Brandi responded by licking his chops.

The distraction was more than welcome for Cooper. He'd killed a few minutes with Piper without thinking about her body or of making love with her or of her idea about walking naked to seduce him. He started making coffee, aware that Piper was watching his every move. He even caught her staring at his fingers. He smiled at the thought of where they'd been.

"So, how long did you plan on staying here? I noticed you couldn't even lift your suitcase."

"I have two weeks left to meet the publisher's deadline. So I guess two weeks."

"I offered you a perfect deal then." She shrugged her shoulders then looked at her dog sleeping on the floor. "You always had a soft spot for wayward creatures. Always taking them in when nobody else would."

"Someone has to do it. I wish I could help more."

"How's Fred? Did you bring him with you and stuff him somewhere?"

"Rico, the maintenance guy who works on my apartment building, took him. He said he's got a pond where Fred the Frog could stay."

"And Angel?"

"Mike at the Aquarium Inc. added him to his tank."

"You still have Gene?"

"No, Miss Honey's class took him, and the kids take turns taking him home every week. I went to visit him last week. I've never seen a more pampered rodent in my life."

"So you have only Brandi to keep you company." He leaned down to scratch the dog's neck.

"Only," she scoffed, "he's enough to keep the rest of my neighbors company. I don't need another one, at least not right now."

She couldn't have said it plainer. She didn't want his company. Two subtle dings told him coffee was ready. Ignoring the annoying feelings her words inflicted on him, he inclined his head toward the shiny machine sitting on the counter.

"Ready for your cup?"

"Sure. Starbucks Barista. Does it make the same coffee you buy at the coffee shop?"

"Even better. I don't have to tell the barista how many shots of chocolate or coffee I want; I can add more ingredients myself." He poured coffee into two white mugs and offered her the one with cream and sugar mixed in it.

He smiled when Piper pointed at the table. "Ah, avoiding me already."

"Of course." She took a careful sip. White foam painted her upper lip. She licked it with two quick swipes of her tongue. It was a simple gesture and yet delivered a hot blend of pleasure all over his body. He finally realized the full impact of his deal. He'd be miserable for two weeks.

He raised his mug to propose a toast. "Here's to us."

Piper followed suit. "To our silly deal. I know I'll easily win."

"Didn't know you were capable of being arrogant."

"I'm just saying what's obvious—that I'll come out as the winner. You said it yourself; you desire me too much. You won't last, Cooper. I'm too irresistible for you."

"True. But you might not have heard this—I was born a winner."

"Hah! Now who's arrogant?" She took another sip of her steamy coffee. She smiled and looked at him through her foggy glasses. "This is good."

He laughed. "Thanks. Things happened so quickly I didn't even get a chance to ask how you're doing."

"Better than ever."

"Glad you came."

"Thank your sister."

"Thank you, Debi, wherever you are right now." Piper laughed as he raised his cup toward the ceiling. He loved hearing the sound of her laughter, pure, real, and melodious. Piper's. He had fallen in love with her wit, soft heart, and willingness to give herself wholeheartedly.

"You could thank my neighbors, too."

"Oh? How's that?"

"They were another reason I agreed to stay here. I couldn't concentrate at home because of their constant, uhm, romping."

"You couldn't concentrate because of that?"

"Sheez! You sound like your sister."

"I wish I could sing like her. She's amazing."

"I know. That's why I had to dump beer on that moron's head when he yelled at Debi." She raised her cup to take another sip, which instantly steamed her lenses. With a sigh, she removed them and carefully laid them on the table.

"Too bad I wasn't there to witness it."

"I think you were there. But as I recall, your view was blocked by an unusually large pair of breasts."

"You we're watching me?"

"I watch everybody when I work."

She looked even lovelier when blushing. He was about to point it

out, but it would only make her more embarrassed. He changed topic. "When can I purchase your book?"

Piper's shoulders sagged. "Let me see. If I finish my manuscript, polish it, and submit it on time, the answer to your question would be—I don't know."

"Do you need help in editing? I can help. I think I got all A's in my English class."

"You know editing would require reading my story."

"So?"

"Men, as I understand, treat romance novels like a jock itch and avoid them the way they do shopping. And you, Captain, would probably fly above the Bermuda Triangle and disappear forever before you read a romance novel."

He nearly spewed his coffee at her joke. He crossed his arms against his chest out of habit and rubbed his thumb on his chin. "Maybe you're right. But I'll do it. We'll be cooped up here for two weeks; I might as well help. You'll know if I don't like the story."

"How?"

"I'll give Brandi my pilot's license to snack on."

Piper's shoulders shook from laughing. "You're terrible. She's not that bad."

Cooper returned a smile that just about knocked the wind from his chest. If she continued to give him those smiles, he'd most likely lose the deal. "I'm serious."

Piper sat on the kitchen table with half of her butt hanging off. "Okay, I'm writing a contemporary romance novel. It falls under the sensual category with a heat level of three. Do you still want to edit it?" she asked, raising her brows in a challenging way.

Reading a romantic story with bed scenes would not be a good idea. If it contains what he thought it contained then it would only fuel his burning need. On the other hand, he'd like to know Piper's knowledge in creating bed scenes. Did she write what she'd learned from him, or did she create uninhibited characters like herself?

"Maybe you shouldn't," she said, shaking her head.

"Why?"

"You'll just bug me. The way you're doing now."

"How in the world did I bug you? I was just smiling."

"Exactly. You're thinking of something."

"Would you like to know what I'm thinking?" He placed his mug on the table.

"Will I like it?"

"Without a doubt."

"Tell me."

Her reddish brows rose when he stood in front of her. He placed his hands on each side of her to see her eye to eye. "I was wondering whether your heroine is as talented as you are, sexy, beautiful, wild and passionate. If she enjoys getting f—" a soft hand clamped his mouth. He watched her eyes widen when his tongue licked her palm.

"I write sensual stories not erotica. And did you just lick my hand?"

"Yes," he answered with her hand still covering his mouth. He licked her again.

"Wouldn't that be considered touching?"

He nodded. He covered her hand with his and pressed it against his mouth. The scent, texture, and heat were enough to wake all parts of him into a full alert. And there was more. A strange feeling invaded his heart—possessiveness.

His mouth found her wrist, planted kisses all over and nipped the sensitive skin with his teeth.

"Cooper, we have a deal."

"Yes." He scooted her butt to secure her position on the table, spread her legs and stood inside. "And the deal is if you touch me first, it would give me freedom to touch you also—without breaking the deal. Now, I want to continue what you've started."

Before she could protest, he kissed her square in the mouth. Her hands against his shoulders stopped pushing when he suckled on her lower lip.

"Cooper, you tricked me," she whispered.

"I forgot to mention I'll do everything I can to make you touch me. And when I succeed, like right now, I'll take advantage...like this," he snaked his hand inside her top to caress the undersides of her breasts. He longed to suckle her again, bury his face in her deep cleavage.

"I take it, it would be up to me to stop this."

Cooper placed his hand between her breastbone and gently pushed her backwards on the table. She complied.

His jeans felt so tight, uncomfortable. "Yes, just say the word." He looked her in the eye while deftly unbuttoning her pants. He quickly found her pulsing cleft.

A helpless groan escaped her mouth. "How can I say no while you're doing this?" A soft hiss came from her lips when he cupped her mound. "And I don't know why I'm letting you do this?"

"Because your body wants it." His fingers tangled with her curls. "And this is what I want also. Should I continue?"

He covered her mouth as she struggled to answer. With deliberate slowness, he inserted two fingers into her wet vagina, rotating, flexing them inside. She gasped in his mouth, followed by a sigh of pleasure. It was the only encouragement he needed. His tongue danced with her.

In and out, his fingers went. She was so slick. The erotic movement was too much; he had to squeeze his eyes to keep his control.

He kissed her chin, the column of her neck, and the tops of her creamy white breasts. "Tell me, did you touch yourself like this when you were alone?"

He felt her grip on his hair tighten. "You are one brazen pilot, Cooper."

He laughed and peppered her belly with kisses. She squirmed. He looked up and smiled.

"Lift your sweet butt, love." She shook her head but lifted her hips to his satisfaction. He had her jeans and panties lowered to the floor in no time. "Beautiful." His gaze traveled from her eyes all the way down to the red patch between her thighs. He touched the backs of her knees. "I love looking at you." He lifted her knees up and planted her feet on the table. Yes, he'd dreamed about doing this to her. Using the flats of his hand, he

pinned her down when she tried to get up. "No, let me pleasure you."

She whimpered and tried to close her knees together when he ran his fingers up and down her labia but, to his satisfaction, opened them again right away.

"That's it, love. Show me how you like this. Yes, move your hips." He was close to bursting. If he prolonged this play longer, he'd humiliate himself by pumping his seed inside his pants. Using two fingers he spread her pink, swelled-up labia. Her sex glistened. "I want to taste you, love."

Piper levered herself and saw how exposed she was while he was fully clothed. She watched him slide his hands down to her hips, and then they disappeared to cup her buttocks. Seeing him looking at the very center of her made her heart pump faster.

"You're beautiful, Piper," he murmured. "From top to bottom, you're delicious looking, too, everywhere and here."

When his hand wandered into the pulsing hollow between her thighs, she lowered her head back on the table.

"Jesus, Piper," he hissed on her belly. "You smell so great. I know you taste great, too."

"Cooper, I don't think..." a loud groan escaped her lips. Her legs opened wider on their own when his tongue touched her sensitive core. All thought of stopping him disappeared.

"Sweet, sweet, Piper." His fingers kept her lips wide open while he tongued her. Then the suckling followed. It was unbelievably orgasmic.

Her hips surged forward, but his hold was firm. "Cooper, this is too much."

"Not enough, love, not enough." One hand reached out to massage her breast while he made loud suckling noises.

She put her hands on his head feeling his jaw work as his tongue laved her. He was as unprincipled as the Greek mythology gods she so admired.

Soft ticking sounds of Brandi's nails hitting the marbled floor sounded somewhere in the room. Her hand touched his cheeks. He swirled his tongue on her bud over and over before giving it a hard suck.

"Cooper!" she gripped his hair. He buried his fingers inside her

and worked their magic. Rotating, sliding in and out. He knew where her sensitive spot was and worked on it until she contracted.

He must have known she was close to orgasm, because he continued to suck the one spot she knew would take her to the top. After a few more hard pulls of his mouth on her clitoris, she did reach her peak. Her muscles clenched. The power of her orgasm was too strong for her to speak.

Slow, lazy licks and loud kisses followed her receding tremors. She felt Cooper move and start kissing her belly all the way up to her neck.

"I feel like a drunk. You're an aphrodisiac, Piper," he said, breathing heavily.

Piper tasted her essence when he kissed her. Their faces were so close she could see his dilated pupils and the hard set of his jaws. "You okay?"

"No. I'm about to burst. But I'll survive. I want to gain your trust, Piper. I love you that much."

Lust and love. Two different things but often misunderstood to mean the same. Was it possible that Cooper interpreted his lust as love?

Their bodies were still touching. Hips to hips, chest to chest. His heart was pounding against hers. If she could convince him to make love with her, his agony would end and she'd be free from their silly deal.

As much as she loved his touch, his nearness, she must put an end to it.

Chapter Six

After sliding on the slippery road, Cooper was glad to finally put his gear in park. He smiled at the funny look on Piper's face. Despite the hair-raising experience going downhill, she didn't loosen the tight pinch of her fingers on her nose. "We made it. We need to get out quick or die from suffocation," he said while holding his breath. "I think Brandi ate something bad—he's stinking up the whole truck."

Piper nodded, still pinching her nose. Simultaneously, they unbuckled their seat belts and were out of the truck within seconds.

Brandi let out another loud fart.

"Jesus! Brandi, what did you eat?"

"Rotten—"

A shriek loud enough to shatter their eardrums came from behind them. He didn't have to turn around. He knew whom the shrieking voice belonged to. Piper raised her brows at him then turned her attention to attaching Brandi's leash around his neck.

"Dahling! I didn't know you were back. You didn't call me."

"Rhea, good to see you."

"I could say the same to you, dahling. I've been thirsty since you started dating that red-headed—Oh! You're here. How could I have missed the flaming red hair? I see you still exist."

Cooper winced as he saw Piper wrap the leash around her hand. She most likely wished she were wrapping it around Rhea's neck.

"Aren't you supposed to be cleaning tables at the bar right now?"

"No, I have Cooper's table to clean for two weeks. What about you? Aren't you supposed to be attending a seminar?"

"What seminar?"

"A how-to-pluck-your-eyebrows-the-right-way seminar." Piper answered with a straight face.

Mortified, Rhea's hands flew up to her brows. She searched her red purse, pulled out a compact and checked her face in the tiny mirror. It didn't take her long to get her snappy attitude back. "Excuse me, but there is nothing wrong with my eyebrows. What do you think, Coop?"

Two pairs of angry eyes trained on him; he felt like hopping back inside the truck and taking off. It would be easier to drive on a slick road than to give a woman assessment about her eyebrows.

"Coop?" Rhea asked, tapping her shoes on the pavement.

"I think Piper's right. Your left eyebrow is thinner than—"

"Bullshit! I paid seventy-five dollars for this." She pointed her fingers at the tips of her eyebrows. "And we both know she's lying. My eyebrows are perfect as they can be. I can't believe you're agreeing with this woman who looks like she's never been inside Macy's store. Just look at her; JCPenney from head to foot." She sashayed toward him, tiptoed and kissed him square in the mouth. "Come on, Coop, what happened to your taste, huh?"

"I still have my taste, Rhea. Only this time, it's a good one."

Rhea's laugh was more like a shrill. Cooper couldn't believe he had gone out with her; she sounded like a witch cackling over a boiling cauldron.

"You amuse me, Coop. That's why you'll always be welcome in my bed. Let me know when you tire of Jaclyn Smith here; I'll clear my day just for you. *Ciao*, dahling."

Piper walked toward the post to tie Brandi's leash around it. She couldn't believe she'd stooped so low. Exchanging insults like that, it was embarrassing.

The woman had provoked her. Yeah, she was provoked. That's it. "Duhhling, let's go shuhhping." She mimicked.

Cooper grinned. "Sorry about that, Piper. Rhea is—"

"She's right, you know."

"About what?"

"About me."

"She doesn't know squat about you. Don't let her bother you, Piper."

Too late. Rhea's words had hit the mark. She's not a designer type. And she's not a JCPenney shopper either. She's Value Village woman. Rhea's comments only cemented her thoughts about her and Cooper. They're too different to be together.

She must do everything to shorten their two-week deal.

The snow stopped falling. The tree branches heavy with snow drooped. Lights reflecting on the crystal snow made the whole place look so magical. She wished her life were, too.

"Piper."

"Let's go grocery shopping," she said quickly, not wanting to talk about Rhea and her comments.

* * * * *

With the amount of food Cooper had bought, they could shut themselves in the house for a year, and they wouldn't go hungry. By the end of their two-week deal, she'd be overweight, looking like a doughboy or in her case doughgirl: white, round, but with red hair.

Dinner consisted of French bread, broiled chicken and the most superb bow pasta she had ever tasted. She felt her innie bellybutton was now an outie after the two servings of salad and one and a half chicken breasts she had practically inhaled.

Cooper suggested they move in the media room while eating Häagen-Dazs ice cream filled with whipped cream, strawberries, nuts, and crunched Oreo cookies.

"Have you seen *The Thirty-Year-Old Virgin* movie?" Cooper picked up the remote control and turned on the TV. He flipped through different channels so fast she had to look away to avoid getting a migraine.

"No. Was it good?" She scooped her ice cream and popped it in her mouth.

"I thought the story was little exaggerated."

"But?" She watched Cooper pick the crunchy Oreos with his spoon.

"It was close to the truth. I now understand the man's problem." Cooper plunked the big chunks of cookies in her bowl.

"Yummy. Thanks. So you're saying you understand the man's problem. Why? He was supposed to be a virgin, right? And you're not."

"I'm talking about his problem of wanting to get laid but couldn't and ended up walking around the house with a huge erection."

The scoop of ice cream swooshed down her throat choking her. Cooper's hand poised to smack her on the back. "I'm okay, thanks. So, you're experiencing the virgin's problem."

"Uh-huh. It's damn cruel."

"Because of our deal?" She bit back a laugh when Cooper stabbed his ice cream.

"What else?"

"Wanna take it back?"

"No. A deal is a deal."

"Well, I have a solution for your problem." She leaned closer to him and waggled her brows the way he had his in the kitchen. "Think about it. You won't have to walk around the house with a huge...banana poking you."

If she were lucky, their deal would be over the same day he proposed it. And Miss Perfect Eyebrows could have him.

"Cooper, I could ease your pain right now. I am willing to have your—"

The look he gave made her scoot a foot away from him. His eyes were smoldering, his chest heaving. If she started seeing smoke coming out of his ears, she'd be out of there in seconds. He swirled his ice cream in the bowl with his spoon so fast she suspected he wasn't even aware he was doing it.

"What?"

"—Banana. Cooper, I was only suggesting that a quickie would—"

He shoved a big spoonful of ice cream in her mouth. She couldn't even close her lips.

"Close your mouth and chew."

"Whahahelldiyoudooatfor?" she tried to ask with a mouth full of ice cream. Cold melted ice cream dripped down her chin and neck.

"What did you say? You will stop tempting me? Good. Now, let's watch a movie."

"You are such a dick! I nearly choked on your ice cream."

He smiled wickedly, looking like a wolf that had just cornered a lamb. "When our deal is over, you'll choke on something else—better than ice cream." He stood up and disappeared for a few minutes. When he came back, he handed her a warm wet dishcloth. "You have ice cream all over you. I'd lick you clean, but I wouldn't dare to lose. I can do all the licking when you become my wife."

"You're insane to take this deal seriously."

Wrong word. His gaze turned sharp. "Oh, yes. I take this deal seriously. And you'd better think the same; otherwise, you'll face the consequence."

"And what would that be? The same consequence you told me if I refused to accept your deal?"

"Worse. I'll tie you up in my bed in a spread-eagle position, naked, paint you with dessert and eat off of you until you beg me to stop. Now, rock, paper or scissors. Whoever wins will pick what movie we watch tonight."

She won easily. Cooper squirmed and groaned when she picked *Gone with the Wind* she had found among his mother's collection.

Every time he groaned aloud, she'd poked him with the remote. Finally, he took it away from her and threw it to the recliner where Brandi was sitting. That was the last time they saw the remote in one piece.

When the movie was over, she picked up their bowls and went back to the messy kitchen. Cooper might be a great chef, but he is a messy one.

"Ready for your coffee? You have a choice, hot mocha or iced."

He stood directly behind her. His scent, a mixture of pasta sauce,

ice cream, and man, never failed to remind her that she was a woman.
"Hot coffee sounds good."

"Anything in it aside from cream and sugar. I could spice it up, you know. I have a few tricks up my sleeves."

"Cream and sugar is fine, Cooper. Now, could you please stop crowding me? It's kind of hot here."

He chuckled but did not move. Warm breath tickled her nape. He was closer than she thought. "But you're shivering."

"No, I'm not. I'm almost done here. We can have our coffee in the living room. I want to show you what I have. I mean my story. You said you would check me, my writing." She was babbling. Her mind was getting foggy just being near him. His power over her was frightening.

"Piper?"

"Yeah?"

"It's almost midnight. Too late for editing, don't you think?"

"Yeah, you're right."

"Piper?"

"Yeah?"

"I can smell your heat. You want me right this moment, don't you?"

"Don't be too cocky. Just because women throw themselves at you doesn't mean I would do it, too."

"You didn't answer me. You want me right now, say it."

"Cooper, why are you doing this?"

"Because you're too closed up, like a clam. You hide behind your fear. And the only way to make you come out, to be yourself and have what you really want, is to seduce you. Be brave and trust me. Stop punishing us. Let's face our future together."

Piper stopped washing the plate and plunked it back in the sink. "You think we have a future together? Cooper, maybe nobody ever told you this, but there is a big difference between love and lust."

"Oh, yeah? Please enlighten me. What do you know of love and lust?"

"You're right; it's late. I think we should call it a night."

"No, I will say goodnight when I am ready, Piper. You think whatever I feel for you is pure lust. You're wrong. You bewitched me. You have a strong hold on my heart, Piper, and my body is just reacting to what my heart dictates. And you're the same. Your body betrayed your feelings more than once. You moved with me with all of your heart and soul. I know you know it, too, but you're too stubborn to hear what your heart, mind, and body are telling you."

She stood motionless. The hot water in the sink made her sweat. Popping soap bubbles tickled her hands.

When was he going to open his eyes? Sometimes love wasn't enough to keep two people together. Her father loved her mother once, but did it keep him from staying faithful? No. And Cooper, with his past, he would surely turn around and break a vow or something when a perfect woman, his type, walked by. An image of her mother with sad, red-rimmed eyes, constantly checking the time hoping her husband would come home for dinner, popped in her head. She didn't want to be like her—foolishly trapped in her cobweb of misery.

"Cooper," she turned around, but he was gone. The coffeemaker was cold, the room empty; she felt empty.

* * * * *

The following days turned out to be great. He and Piper created a routine that he looked forward to sharing with her. After they agreed never to mention the incident in the kitchen, they went back to their light camaraderie he looked forward to every day. He cooked, they shared meals, and they watched a movie while having ice cream and cake. Then they'd brainstorm on her story. She cleaned the kitchen while he watched. He could watch her all day and never tire of doing it. Saying goodnight was his least favorite part of the day. Lying in bed alone at night, knowing the woman he wanted most was just two doors away from him, was a punishment from hell.

Tonight, he decided to shorten his miserable time tossing and turning in bed. When he heard Piper's door close, he decided to go out for

a walk. He walked with a brisk pace and covered about three miles. They turned back around only when he noticed Brandi no longer investigating bushes and walking slower. The poor dog was spent. Slowly they walked home.

Brandi quickly jumped on the sofa when they got home.

"You're a good dog, Brandi." He was patting the dog's head when he heard a noise. It was coming from the kitchen.

Without making a sound, he went to the kitchen. A beautiful round bottom pointing his way was the answer. Piper was bent forward searching the drawers.

"What are you looking for?"

Piper jumped and closed the drawer on her finger by accident. "Oww! Jesus! You and your sister. You like sneaking up on people."

"I wasn't sneaking; you were too busy to hear me. So, what are you looking for?"

"A manual."

"For?"

"How to use your damn coffeemaker."

"You should have asked me. I'll make you a pot." He moved to open the freezer and took out a blue pack of cold compress. "Here, for your finger. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Thanks. You don't have to make me coffee."

"I insist, Piper. Keep the compress on your finger. Can you move it? Do you think it's broken?"

She wiggled her finger then winced. "Not broken but throbbing like hell, and I might lose my nail. It looked black." She squinted at her finger.

"Where are your glasses?"

"I couldn't find my last pair."

"What happened to the other pair?"

"Brandi sat on it and broke the frame. Could you start the coffee now?"

"Hot cup of coffee coming right up."

Over a cup of coffee, Piper decided she'd continue editing her story

since she'd lost valuable time already and couldn't afford to lose more. While she gave her full attention to her story, he was too absorbed thinking how he'd love to feel her skin against his again. Piper was one passionate woman, and he was dying inside to feel her passion again.

"You don't think it's good?" she asked frowning.

"What's not good, love?"

"Those pages you're holding. You've been frowning for about ten minutes now. Are the lines that bad?"

"So far, I've never read anything you wrote that was bad."

Piper sighed. "Your help will be useless to me if you don't act like a critic, Cooper."

"I've been severe. I nearly butchered your second chapter."

"You call adding ed's and shifting paragraphs severe?"

"What can I say? I like the way you write. You pour your heart into your story."

"Come on, Cooper, you're thinking of something. Spill it." She threw a small square pillow on his lap.

"Really? I've wanted to do it since—"

"Cooper, please be serious. You know what I am talking about. Spill whatever's floating in your head."

His grin widened.

"Ugh! You're the devil incarnate. Fine, just write your thoughts down, and I'll look at them." She tucked her legs underneath her. Her sweatpants molded to every sweet curve of her legs, hips, and thighs.

"This is supposed to be some kind of critiquing session, not a seduction." She mumbled before peering back down at her paper.

"Don't you need your glasses to read?"

"No, I enjoy squinting so much I don't need them," she answered sarcastically. "Of course, I need them. What do you think?"

He touched his shirt pocket and felt the cold flexon material he'd been carrying since he'd found them in the bathroom. It was better than her purple pajamas that he kept under his pillow. With the glasses, he could carry them everywhere. He didn't know it was her last spare.

Piper covered her face with her hands and rubbed them with the

tips of her fingers. He felt guilty. He'd just have to give up the spare.

"Come here."

"Why?" she looked like a skeptical owl with her round green eyes slowly blinking.

"I have something for you."

"What?"

"You have to come here to find out." It had been days since the last time he'd touched her. He wanted to do it again. To see her perspire from her need, pant from the expected onslaught of ecstasy. Damn! He'd never been bewitched like this before. This time he was hit hard.

"Just forget it." She stared at him with her eyes squinting. "I'm not going to fall for any of more of your tricks."

"I'm not trying to trick you. I have your glasses. Do you want them?"

"Do I? You sneak! I can't see these dang words without them, and you ask me if I want them. Of course I do. Where are they?"

"My breast pocket."

"You can have them then."

"Suit yourself. Just let me know if your headache gets worse. I'll get you a Tylenol." He continued to read and edit the chapter, although his mind was nowhere near it. He smiled when he heard Piper sigh, mumble, and curse.

"This is not fair. You don't need my glasses, Cooper. It's not like you're going to wear them."

"You're right, I don't need them but you do. Have you tried wearing contact lens."

"I have a presbyopia."

"I didn't know that. Isn't presbyopia a condition that occurs mostly to middle-aged people?"

"The doctor said I have a rare condition. I'm fifteen years ahead of everybody."

He thought he knew everything about her; he was wrong.

"I heard you could buy bifocal contact lenses now."

"Sheez, imagine what kind of headache I'll get when I try it."

Piper looked depleted. Her eye condition must have been another reason why she thought she wasn't his type. He thought to humor her.

"I wonder, was I blurry then when you inspected big boy the first time?"

"Big boy?" she asked squinting.

Cooper answered by pointing at his crotch.

"Oh, please don't remind me." She covered her face with her hands.

"Just wondering, that's all."

After a minute of silence, Piper looked at him with furrowed brows.

His own brows rose when her gaze traveled from his neck down to his crotch and stayed there for a few minutes. It was obvious; she was thinking of something.

"When you offered your deal, you said the words skin to skin. Does it mean I can touch your shirt or pants and I won't be breaking our rule?"

"You're right." He didn't like where Piper's questions were going. Her intelligent green eyes were sparkling with mischief.

"Good," she said with a nod before lowering her feet to the floor.

Piper had never played seductress before, never attempted to use her feminine wiles. She supposed there'd be a first time for everything. And this would be her first to play tease. She would get her glasses and tease his pants off of him.

The deal had gone far enough. She couldn't sleep, rest, or think right. Her dreams flooded by his images, naked and clothed, were constant. And she was beginning to look forward to dining with him, watching him help clean the kitchen or eat his dessert while watching a movie.

She'd been thinking about how to use the best tactic to make him give up; now the solution presented itself. She gave him a coy smile and stood in front of him. One finger running across her lower lip, she cocked her head to the side, pretending to think. "I guess I should be thankful that you hid my glasses in your breast pocket; otherwise, I would have a

devil of a time retrieving them."

It would be easy to get her glasses. He still wore his black zip-up sports jacket that he used when he walked Brandi out. All she had to do was unzip the jacket, open it, and reach in the pocket. But first, she would give him hell. She laughed nervously at her own idea.

Cooper frowned. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"You. You look like a boy outsmarted by a little girl."

"How?"

"You think you can trick me; you're wrong. I can get what I want without taking it out of your pocket. By the time I'm finished with you, you'll be handing me my glasses while quaking in your nicely fitted jeans." She nodded, liking that sound of her voice. It came thick with confidence. "Tonight, I will get two things: my glasses and victory. Shall I start, Cooper?"

"I am at your mercy, Piper."

Her heart made a loud thump in her chest. She meant to give him a dose of his own medicine but didn't realize that it would affect her, too. For days, she had longed for his touch, thought about him, woke up wet and with a heartbeat faster than a marathon runner. She should have thought about this before she acted. Her plan was already backfiring.

She walked in between his spread legs. Strong, long legs, narrow hips and a bulge she knew to be his thickening phallus made her throat convulse.

Jiminy Cricket! Courage, Piper, you can do this. She bent low to make eye contact. "Did I thank you for the great steak and potatoes? I loved them." She licked her lips.

Cooper didn't answer her. She knew why; the poor thing couldn't even breathe. Still, he looked dangerous. He was no longer smiling. Instead, he looked like the hunk in *300* movie they watched—ready to attack, to plunder, and to fight. It was too late to back out now; she had her pride.

"You smell like sandalwood. So masculine, so strong and earthly."

She took the zipper with her good fingers and slowly unzipped his jacket. Her hand stopped right in front of his crotch. On purpose, she

grazed her knuckles on his erection. She sucked in her breath when it leaped. Her hands moved inside his jacket. She found his flat nipples through his Nike shirt. She wanted to taste him, suck on the little nipples and...

"Oh my God!"

"What's wrong, Piper? Can't do it?"

No, I want more than just getting my glasses. I'm a slut. She swallowed hard. She'd gone this far; better finish it. "Of course, I can." With her fingers pointing downward, she slowly traversed the path that would lead to his erection. And then she cupped him.

"Piper," his groan was so loud and pure sensual it made her feel reckless.

Through his jeans, she found the tip of his penis and rubbed on it. "Yes, Cooper. Ready to hand me my glasses?"

"No. But be warned; don't start something you cannot finish."

"Oh, I will finish." She boldly rubbed her hand up and down his length imagining her mouth doing the same thing. She'd done it before; she wanted to do it again. Her knees grew weak.

"Getting tired, love?"

"Yes." She lifted her leg to straddle him. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all, love," he answered in a husky voice as if he had just woken up from a dream. She noticed his hands were tightly fisted.

"It's getting hot in here. I think I'm overdressed." Before her good sense won, she lifted her shirt exposing her white laced bra. She silently wished she wore the new Wonderbra she had thought would never be of use. "Hmmm, that's better. So, which pocket? Left or right side?" She asked while slowly rocking her bottom against his thigh.

Cooper didn't reply. Instead, he just stared.

"Cat got your tongue?"

"No."

"All right, playing tough, are we?" She stood up and undid the ties of her sweat pants. Cooper's breathing, she noticed, was deep and hard like a rhino ready to charge. Without shame, she let her pants pool around her ankles. She kicked them to the side before sitting back down to

straddle him again. "Hmm...this is a lot better, comfortable and cooler. Are you comfortable?" She moved her bottom back to press her warm vagina on his bulge. He was huge.

A loud, growling sound escaped his lips. "What the f...Jesus."

"That doesn't sound good. You know how to end this, Cooper. Make love with me."

"Believe me, I will. But not until the end of our two weeks. I will do you day and night without using a condom."

Piper stilled. "You didn't use one when..." *Oh, my God!*

"You're right. I didn't use any protection. You know what that means. You could be pregnant with my baby."

"Oh, no." Pregnant? No, impossible. She'd just had her period. Right, she had. Hadn't she?

"You need to get this inside your stubborn head, Piper, you're mine. Afraid or not, you will marry me." He surged his hips, lifting her.

The delicious feeling of his hardness pressed against her drove all thoughts of the possibility of being pregnant away. She pressed herself harder on Cooper.

Cooper hissed. "Continue with this and both of us will have a tremendous headache."

"I don't care."

"You're also punishing yourself, not just me. Why don't you just touch me? A little bit of my skin, and I can give you what you want. Just let me. Please."

She looked into his smoldering eyes. They were eyes of a wicked man who could give wicked pleasures, eyes that could make any woman weak in the knees. His reputation preceded him, a reputation she'd been aware of and should stay away from.

"No," she said shaking her head.

"This is ridiculous."

Piper watched Cooper close his eyes. His face was hard as if he were fighting his inner self. Reality dawned on her; he wasn't lying when he said he meant to win their deal. He would never break the rule.

But her seduction wasn't over yet. She still had one move to make.

"Cooper,"

"Yes, love."

"I will ease your pain."

His eyes opened. "What are you talking about?"

She answered him by unzipping his pants.

"Piper, good God!"

A white brief bulging with his erection was hidden beneath. She pinched just a bit of the white material and pulled it down. His erection sprang out. She stared at the angry flesh. A small drop emerged from its tip.

"Damn it, Piper, don't—Geez!"

Without second thought, she touched the tip of his penis with her tongue. She licked the silky liquid before wrapping her lips around the tip for a good suck.

"Sweet Jesus."

She swirled her tongue around the ridge of his penis. He tasted so good she wanted more. She suckled his head again then moved her head down to fit his length inside her mouth.

It wasn't enough. She wanted more of Cooper, of him moving deeply inside of her. Cupping his balls, she wrapped her fingers around him. With her mouth closed around the tip, she pumped him.

"Enough!" Cooper gripped her arms and pulled her up. He quickly moved, and she found herself pinned beneath him.

His hands were frantic, seeking. He wrapped one arm around her shoulder and kissed her hard. It was painful and bruising but at the same time arousing. His hand snaked inside her panties and began to stroke her.

Using his middle finger, he delighted in bringing her to orgasm. She clung to him while her body trembled. And then she felt his teeth gently bite her shoulders followed by his body going rigid.

"Don't move. Lay still."

The feel of warm liquid just below her bellybutton made her smile. Finally, he'd found his release. Although she didn't succeed in seducing him to make love with her, the thought of easing his pain made

her...happy.

"God damn it, Piper. Did I hurt you?" he asked.

"No."

"Piper, you will be the death of me." He kissed her temple and shifted his weight. He surprised her by pulling a crisp handkerchief out of his pocket and wiping the semen off her belly. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Fire away."

"You're twenty-six years old and stayed a virgin, which is quite a feat in the twenty-first century. So why did you give yourself to me?"

Because...I fell in love with you. The silent admission rattled her, but she composed herself. God! That was the truth. She wasn't just beginning to fall for him; she was deeply and hopelessly in love with him. The reality took a big hunk off her chest. She was a step closer to becoming like her mother. If they continued carrying on like this, she'd accept his proposal and would eventually find herself in the same situation as her mother once had been.

And that wouldn't happen. It wouldn't help admitting that she was in love with him. Win or lose, she would leave him. "Carrying my virginity all these years was kind of a load, you know. So I decided to give it up. And you were the unfortunate victim."

"You're lying. When I took your virginity, I saw something in your eyes."

"It was lust you saw, Cooper, through the eyes of a woman learning what fucking means."

"You didn't see yourself that night, love. You learned more than—let me borrow your word—fucking that night. You gave yourself to me without second thoughts because you have feelings for me. But you thought of squelching it by ending our relationship."

"And you already know why. Cooper, you might think you love me now, but—"

"I will cheat on you anyway because your dad did even when he was married to your mother. Oh, yeah, I want a smorgasbord, too. Don't look shocked; Debi told me about it. Your father poisoned your mind, Piper."

"Everything he said was true."

"What was?"

"Men were born to stray."

"Including me. The reason why we're in this situation—trying to prove that I am trustworthy. I suppose I deserve to be tested because of my reputation. And we've been in this house together for days now doing just that. Now, where am I on your scale? Am I trustworthy enough?" Cooper ran the tip of his finger on her side tickling her.

"Cooper, am I the first woman to break up with you?"

"Why?"

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe it's your ego that drove you to offer this deal? That you were only challenged by my decision? Maybe I am not what you really want?"

"There is no doubt in my heart that—"

The sound of the doorbell ringing stopped him from replying. Piper got up to pick up her clothes and quickly put them on. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"No," he replied before planting a soft kiss in her mouth followed by a deep one that made her groan. Cooper was tracing her lips with his tongue when the bell rang again.

Chapter Seven

He had come so close to giving up. The deal would have been over if he had waited another second. He thought he had died and gone to heaven when he felt Piper's warm tongue timidly touching his tip. But the image of her standing on the dock with his sister, laughing while waiting for him to ride the seaplane, pulled him back to earth and helped him decide how to best handle her seduction. He didn't want to have just an image of her; he wanted her—forever.

Impatient knocking, no, banging on the door took his mind off the temptation he had so nearly given in to. He checked his watch. It was fifteen past ten. Who the heck was at the door?

Chandra Shervette. The well-molded, statuette model and his ex-girlfriend stood on the front porch. Wearing a hooded fur coat that would definitely give Piper apoplexy, she looked at him with her doe-eyed look. Before he could ask why she was here, he heard Brandi's nails clicking fast on the marbled floor. He went past him and to his surprise planted his massive paws on Chandra's chest. Together the two landed on the front porch with Brandi on top. Chandra screamed, "Get off." Brandi didn't; instead, he started humping.

"Brandi, get off of her." The dog barked, licked the screaming woman then took off. "Here," he offered his hand and pulled Chandra up. "Are you okay?"

"Was that a bear?"

"No, Brandi's a dog."

"Cooper, what's going on?" Piper asked.

"Brandi jumped on Chandra."

"Chandra?"

He stood aside so she could see whom he was talking about. Immediately, Piper's eyes narrowed. Did she hiss?

"Your dog humped me. So disgusting! He needs to be injected with something to...to make him sleep forever."

"You mean euthanasia."

"Yes, that's it."

"I apologize for what he did, but I don't think he should be put to sleep because he thought you're an animal in that coat. What is that you're wearing? A hundred and one Dalmatians fur?"

"Ugh! Who cares?"

"I do."

Cooper stood between the two women—not that he expected them to claw each other's eyes out, but he'd seen Piper's left hook. She might let it fly again.

"Who the heck are you, and what are you doing in my boyfriend's house?"

"Boyfriend?"

"Yes."

If killing weren't illegal, he'd strangle Chandra until her huge eyes popped right out of their sockets. "What are you doing here, Chandra?"

"Oh, Coop, aren't you even going to invite me in?"

"I'm not sure I should."

Chandra collapsed. "What the—" He caught her before she hit the ground. He carried her and placed the limp body on the couch. Even without makeup, Chandra was stunningly beautiful. Only a couple of inches shorter than his six-foot-two height, she could command a room with her presence.

"Is she all right?" Piper whispered.

"I hope so. Do you know Chandra?"

"Yeah, I've seen her picture on the magazine. And when you two

came to the Melting pot."

Ah, the woman with big breasts that blocked my view.

Chandra moaned.

"I think we should call 911. Maybe she got hurt when Brandi jumped on her."

Chandra slowly opened her eyes. "Cooper, I am cold."

Piper took off before he even blinked and came back with a blanket. She covered Chandra with a bedspread he recognized belonged on her bed.

Chandra eyed her as a vulture would a carcass. "Oh, you must be the one the boys at the harbor were talking about. They described you well: bushy, wild red hair, sun-damaged pale skin. They said you're Debi's friend—the waitress."

He didn't miss Piper's stiffening spine. "Chandra, meet Piper. She's a writer and my—"

"Glad to meet you, Chandra. Hope you feel better soon. Well, I'll leave you two now." Piper adjusted the blanket on Chandra's shoulders with a robotic movement.

"Brandi, let's go."

"Wait. Just wait a minute." He looked back down at Chandra. "This is a surprise visit, Chandra, and quite late, too."

"I could have been here earlier. But the cab drivers didn't want to come in this area because of the snow."

"Care to tell us why you're here?"

"Cooper, you aren't happy to see me?"

"You were not expected."

"Oh, did I come at the wrong time?"

"No, Chandra, your timing is perfect." Piper answered.

Chandra glared at Piper. "Will you find something to do while I talk to Cooper?"

"Whatever you want to say you can say in front of her." He was more than annoyed. He was pissed. With Chandra's unexpected visit, he could see his chance of having Piper's trust slipping away.

"Why? Is she some special guest to you, Coop?"

"Yes, she's my fiancée."

"No, I'm not." Piper differed with a huff.

"Of course you're not," Chandra said without looking at Piper.

"Oh, Coop, you're angry with me; you're making me jealous."

"Tell me why you're here, Chandra." This is not good, he thought. Things were getting shittier every minute.

"I've come back to accept your marriage proposal."

The walls started closing in on her. She needed to get out. Piper took a deep breath and called her dog.

"Brandi, let's go, boy." She opened the door and went outside. She didn't stop walking until her lungs were ready to explode. And then she shivered. In her haste to leave the house, she forgot to get her coat.

Maybe it was a good thing. Chandra would have laughed if she'd seen her one and only coat from the flea market many years ago. Cooper's other girlfriends made her look and feel like a rag, but Chandra...this woman was different. Not only could she wear a fur coat that probably would cost Piper her whole month's paycheck to afford, not that she would even think of buying one, she was also the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen. With big brown eyes and long brown lashes, perfect red lips, blonde hair, unblemished facial skin, and an amazing body, she looked like one of those American Dolls. No wonder Cooper had asked her to marry him.

That good for nothing man! A two timer, just like her father. Piper slumped on the bench she had spotted underneath a huge cedar tree and hugged herself. Why did he say all those things to her when he had already proposed to someone else? Was he toying with her feelings? Why?

Why had she let him con her into this deal? She knew why. A part of her wanted to believe that Cooper was different, that he truly loved her, because she wasn't just falling in love with him. She was already deeply and stupidly in love.

Brandi sat in front of her and put a paw on her lap. "Good dog. I'm glad to have you." She rubbed his neck. Brandi let out a tiny whine. His breath warm in contrast to the cold biting wind. She could keep her hand

warm buried in his thick fur, but not the rest of her. Her butt was numb from sitting on the cold bench, and her toes were tingly, but the discomfort wasn't enough to keep her mind off what Chandra had said. Her stomach cramped. She wrapped her arms around her middle to stop the sharp pain that was slowly carving her gut, heart, and soul.

Thinking about what the two must be doing right that moment, her eyes started to water and her nose stung as if a sneeze were coming.

Why did she have to hear her father mock her mother, why did she have to witness her mother waste her life away, and why couldn't she just fall in love with a middle-aged, balding, round-in-the-middle guy? Why does he have to be a wicked pilot?

"You have Brandi's look when he eats something that gives him a stomachache."

She jumped at the sound of his voice. "What are you doing here?"

"You left without your coat. Here, put this on before you freeze to death."

And it's a perfect time to die, too. Piper reached for the coat, but Cooper was quick in wrapping it around her. "Thanks."

"We need to go back in the house."

"Wait. Cooper, I think we've come to the end of our deal. Your girlfriend is back to accept your proposal. It's not right that we should continue—"

"Chandra's not my girlfriend. Not exactly."

"That's not what I heard her say. And what do you mean by not exactly."

"Chandra and I met at a party; we danced, drank, and before I knew it we were dating. I didn't court her, no. We just ended up together. I was physically attracted to her. When she told me she was leaving for Paris, I made a joke about taking me and we would get married in the most romantic spot in the world."

"She didn't think it was a joke. That's why she came back."

"I was surprised she did."

"Surprised? You were ogling her. You couldn't take your eyes off her massive breasts enclosed in her tight leather top. I could even hear

your teeth grinding, see your nostrils flaring; your eyes could have popped out if they weren't deep in their sockets while—what the hell is so funny?"

Cooper continued to grin, which turned into a chuckle then full-blown laughter.

"Whatever. Laugh all you want. I should laugh; you look so idiotic ogling double D breasts that don't jiggle or move or—" she stopped. There was no use talking over his laughter anyway.

"Sorry. It's just, I've never before been described the way you did. I was always with a sexy grin not grinding my teeth or with bedroom eyes and not ready to pop out of the sockets."

"Well, it was true."

"Piper, I was ogling her breasts because they don't look—heck, they weren't the same as they used to be."

"You've seen hers enough to know what to expect." She said it as a statement and not a question. "Men like big breasts like hers."

Cooper lowered his eyes on the snow he was kicking with the tips of his shoes. "Maybe you're right. I've seen different breast shapes and sizes, but only one pair stayed in my head, the only pair that made me go loco every single day of the last few months, especially the last few weeks. Only one pair of breasts with freckles and pink nipples is what I want to see, taste, suck, bury my head between, and feel for the rest of my life." His voice slow, soft, and caressing. He took a few steps forward; his shoes made crunching sounds as he stepped on the powdered snow. "Yours."

He was doing it again, seducing her, fogging her mind with wanton desires. She stared at his lips, feeling his words caress her body. Her breathing became short. An earthly desire quickly warmed her body.

"I'm telling you the truth, Piper. You've got a firm hold on me, on my soul. It's hard to start and end the day without you. I am not a child, Piper. I'm thirty years old. Old enough to know the difference between love and lust. I know what I feel here," he pointed at his chest, "is love."

He stood a few inches away from her; she could almost feel his warmth emanating through his leather jacket. Somewhere she heard a tree branch break, Brandi barking, but she ignored the sounds. She looked up

to meet the most beautiful eyes that haunted her every night.

"If you set aside your love for me, you'll see that we are different in so many ways. Cooper, we aren't matched. You're too handsome and rich while I am—"

"You think we aren't matched because I have money? Shit! There's more and more to why you don't trust me. First, you broke up with me because of your father, and you're afraid I would cheat on you, too, then there's the I-am-not-your-type bit. And now, you're saying I am so freaking rich that's why we don't match? I didn't know you were prejudiced."

"I'm not. Listen for a minute. All of these reasons played a part in why we shouldn't be together. My parents didn't consider these things when they got married. They thought love was enough to keep them together, forgetting to weigh their differences until it was too late. Dad realized they were too different to enjoy life together. Like them, you and I came from totally different worlds. We belong in different social strata. Your friends wear fur; I protect the animals where the fur came from. You grew up in a house; I grew up in different apartments. You like to party; I don't. My point is: we're night and day, square peg and round hole."

"Yes, we are so different that's why we have so many things to share, Piper. I see it that way. If our differences bother you so much, we could meet in between. You know what? I haven't been to any parties since I met you. And I'm fine with just hanging out together without the noise and booze. I only need you to get drunk."

Piper shivered either from the cold wind or the heat of his stare. She pulled the jacket tighter around her.

"We should start walking back."

Piper nodded. Aware of his presence and the subtle rubbing of his jacket on hers, she thought about what he'd be giving up, of what he'd be missing if they stayed together. She didn't want him to give up anything for her. He would only resent her later when reality bit him in the butt. When he realized that she wasn't the fun blonde gal he wanted. Ignoring his last comment, she continued with her reasons why they weren't a good match. "You earn money to sustain your lifestyle; I earn to keep my

apartment, which I lost anyway, and—”

“Whoa! Back track a little. What do you mean you lost your apartment?”

“Brandi and I got kicked out of the apartment. I only have two weeks to find another place. That's another reason I am staying here...aside from my humping neighbors.”

“How did you lose your apartment?”

She nodded her head toward Brandi who was walking ahead of them.

“I see. Well, no problem. I'll buy you a house. Or you can have my house on San Juan Island. We can live here in Woodway, too.”

“Cooper, can't you see? I can't even keep my own apartment. Chandra in there probably has places everywhere. She's the right one. Anyway, what I was trying to tell you is how we don't suit. You are used to frivolous life, with an ever changing—”

“Stop using our differences.”

“I'm just telling you what I think.”

“Maybe you should stop thinking. Maybe you should forget about your parents. Maybe you should stop comparing us to them.” He said each word with a bite. He was angry.

“We only dated for two months, Cooper,” she yelled back.

“Then let's add more. Let's start right now.”

“You don't understand. If I continue seeing you, it would be more difficult to—”

“You don't want to love me,” he stopped walking forcing her to look at him.

“I,” she halted. Love, as far as she knew, was not enough to have a happy life. Her mother had drowned herself with love, and her father thought himself in love with her—just like Cooper. But her father realized his mistake too late. He was already bound and married. “We only dated for two months.” She repeated.

“You are one stubborn woman, Piper.”

“I'm not stubborn. I'm just using what I learned from other people's mistakes to avoid long-lasting...damage.”

To Trust A Wicked Man by Tierney O'Malley

“You could learn from other people's happiness also.” He snapped. “We have four days left of our deal. I hope by then you'll learn that I can be trusted. You wouldn't want to start our marriage without trust, don't you agree?” With those last words he left her standing in the middle of the snow-covered lawn.

Chapter Eight

After three taxicabs, Cooper gave up. Chandra just wouldn't leave. Somehow she would always come down with some affliction and wouldn't come out of her room until the cab was gone. And when she was out of her room she whined the way she was doing right now.

Piper massaged her temples. Chandra's whining and moaning worsened her headache. She hid in the media room, to avoid Chandra. But like a hound, Chandra tracked her down and sat on the chair wearing her gauzy robe, complaining about her expired contract. Well, she should be thankful. At least Chandra wasn't attacking her with barbs.

Pretending to be reading her story, she kept her head down and turned the page. She wished she had her glasses. Cooper had given them back to her the other day, but the dratted things disappeared again.

"Piper, stop squinting. You look terrible. You'll have wrinkles before you turn thirty. Imagine that, wrinkles on top of your freckles and dry skin. Being smart is not enough to attract men, you know. You've got to have a good face, too."

"I can't find my glasses." Freckles, dry skin. Yesterday, her hair was compared to a dirty mop; the other day she had alligator skin left out in the sun for hours. What's next?

"Why don't you get a lasik surgery? But you probably can't afford it, can you?"

"You're right, I can't."

"I don't have a high school diploma, but I make more than my manager. She's like you. Always reading, using fancy words, but super dull."

Piper could feel Chandra's scrutiny even without looking at her.

"If you'd cut your hair shorter, enhance your boobs, or wear more than eyeliner and mascara, you'd be prettier than her. Would you like to borrow my cold cream? It might help get rid of your crow's feet."

"No, thank you." She kept her head down, pretending to read. "Wrinkles are signs of aging, maturity, knowledge, wisdom, and experience. I'd rather have a wrinkly face. You mentioned breast implants; my answer would be no to that. Mrs. Barth, the holy woman, told me that we shouldn't alter what God has loaned us."

"Loaned us?" Chandra asked while inspecting her nails.

"Yes, our body. You never know when he'll take your body back. When he does and finds you changed parts of it, he will punish you."

Chandra's hands flew to her chest, and she had an incredulous look on her face. "You are lying!"

"I wish I were, Chandra, but Mrs. Barth is a holy woman and knows this entire thing. I believe her." Oh, yeah, payback time.

"Who's Mrs. Barth?"

"My neighbor. She died once but came back to life. When she was crossing over, she talked to God and learned about what I just told you. Plastic or silicones are God's pet peeves." She purposely looked at Chandra's D-size breasts for effect. The poor woman was gripping her breasts so hard it hurt to look at them.

"Did she say how God punishes those who change their body parts?"

"Yeah." Piper let out a long sigh for effect and kept a somber face to keep Chandra squirming.

"How?" Chandra's voice turned smaller and squeakier.

"God will turn you into a slug." She had to look down to hide her grin when Chandra screeched and left running. She let out her full blown laughter when Chandra's footsteps receded. "How thick could you get?" She asked herself aloud.

"You are one mean woman."

Piper looked up. Cooper was leaning against the doorjamb, hands in his pockets, looking relaxed, and grinning. He looked like a lollipop in need of a good licking in his blue Nike short sleeve shirt and faded blue jeans that hugged his lean waist. He was simply sexy.

Her eyes followed the length of his thighs and legs and stopped where his toes were peeking under his pants hem. Every inch of her body came to life. She wanted to strip naked and rub herself all over him, muss his still wet hair, kiss her way up or down until...

Cooper's grin widened. Dang! She'd stared too long.

"I wasn't trying to be mean to Chandra. I just want her to leave me alone."

"She's hard to get rid of, isn't she?"

"Be that as it may, you're still enjoying her company."

"I'm just trying to be a good host." Cooper sat on the sofa Chandra had vacated.

Uh-huh. And a good host's job includes helping her with her bath, rubbing her toes and who knows what else when I'm not looking? She wanted to say those things, but she held her tongue. Cooper might think she was jealous.

"Jealous?"

Crap! What was it about him and Debi? They were so perceptive. "Why would I be?"

"Simple. You love me and after tomorrow, you'll marry me."

"Don't be too cocky; deal's not over yet." It would have been over if snow weren't knee deep. Her little car looked like a small hill of snow and would most likely not start with its old engine. Of course she could always walk but, with her worn boots, she wouldn't have any toes left by the time she reached the main road.

"To me it is. I suggest you think about what you're going to wear on your wedding day." Cooper was saying.

"I don't understand why you're adamant about marrying me. Do I have to start my litany about how incompatible we are?"

"Nope, save your litany. You know why I'm adamant about

marrying you."

"Yeah, you love me. I bet you told Ms. Silicone many times that you love her, too."

"Never. Not to anyone."

Piper didn't quite know how to handle his statement. Her heart quivered like a teenage girl facing her high school crush.

"I already called my sister. She'll come over when the roads are passable and clear. She's emailing you Web sites where you two can look for a wedding gown."

"Why?"

Cooper laughed. "Because, like me, Debi wants you to become a part of our family. She's dying to be your sister in-law. She's never had anyone—except me—who stood up for her. She was bullied when she was a little girl and never really had a best friend until you came along. Until you came into my life, I never have fallen in love before. So, Ms. Piper Callaghan, it seems that you captured two hearts at the same time."

Warmth like a sun shining on a cold morning wrapped around her. She could feel his words penetrating the hard wall she had painfully built around her, seeping through the cracks, forcing her to believe in his love and forget about her fear. But this was Cooper, a man who possessed expertise in seduction. Should she let her wall crumble and take a chance with him?

"Cooper, a bird could love a hare, but how and where would they live?"

"The way we've lived the past thirteen days? We will spend our time together—different or not—enjoying our dinner, movies, lazy walks at the beach with Brandi, editing your paper. Our differences made our days interesting not boring or tasking. Piper, I don't care who or what you are; I love you."

"For now."

"Stop being obstinate about this. You better get used to the idea of being with me because we have a lifetime together ahead of us." Cooper stood up and took a step toward her then stopped. His hand lifted a fraction as if he wanted to touch her, but he caught himself and took a

step back. "I'll take Brandi for a walk."

Piper nodded.

Was she wrong to suppress her feelings for him, to prevent a disastrous relationship? No she was not. He'd thank her for it—someday.

She really must do something to end this lunacy. If the weather was preventing her from leaving, then tonight, she must act.

* * * * *

The grandfather clock chimed twelve times. Piper checked herself in the mirror. The flimsy material she was wearing hid nothing. She felt embarrassed just by looking at herself, but she must do this. If she succeeded, she could save both of them from long-lasting misery and guilt.

The floor-to-ceiling window in her bedroom showed the snow was falling again—heavily.

Leaving her room, she found the hallway cold and deserted. Good. Chandra went to bed early pleading a coming headache, which Piper felt sure was an alibi so she wouldn't have to help clean the kitchen. Piper stopped in front of Cooper's room. She pressed an ear against the door. No sound indicated that he was still up. Dang! She'd waited too long to come. Because of her stupid courage that was so slow in coming, she would just have to wait inside until he woke up. That is if she could get in. She turned the doorknob. It was unlocked. She closed the door and stood in the dark. She couldn't see a thing.

Now what? Should she sit on the chair and wait or lay down beside him? Beside him would be right. That way he wouldn't be able to resist touching her.

Piper's heart was pounding so hard she started feeling dizzy. Maybe she shouldn't do this at all. Their deal was stupid. She should just pack her clothes and leave. Forget about her story. She would find another publication. Seducing him wasn't necessary. If she was determined to stay away from him—just leave.

It wasn't easy. Her feet wouldn't move and her heart...

Just one more touch, that was all she needed and she'd be gone. One more.

Cooper had just closed his eyes after a long, thorough thinking about Piper's tenacity in rejecting him when the door opened. An apparition slowly materialized before his eyes. At first, he thought he was dreaming. But the beautiful form standing inside his room was flesh and blood. The very same woman who tormented him night and day was wearing practically nothing.

So this was her plan to seduce him. He waited in anticipation. Piper took one step forward, stopped then took another one until she was standing by his bed. Through his half-closed lids, he could see that she was squinting.

On his way upstairs, he'd spotted her glasses wedged inside the potted plant placed on the left side of the stairs. He picked up the glasses wondering how they'd gotten there. He thought about going back to the media room to give them to Piper but thought better of it. He knew if he turned around he'd do more than give her her glasses. He'd taken the glasses with him with the intention of giving them back to her first thing in the morning. Now, it seemed he wouldn't have to wait till morning.

He flinched when Piper's hair fell and touched his chest and shoulders when she leaned forward. Lavender scent enveloped him as she reached for the blanket covering his chest. She was leaning so close to him he could see the outline of her breasts. He wanted to lift his head and taste the tantalizing bud but didn't dare. He meant to see what she had planned tonight.

Piper lowered the blanket down to his hip. He grinned in the dark and waited for her next move.

Careful not to wake him up, Piper slowly leaned down to better see him. Up close, she could see his profile, eyes closed and mouth slightly open as if he were smiling. He must be dreaming, she thought. Dreaming about what? Who? Not Chandra, she hoped. The woman ran him ragged. Poor baby must be tired from going up and down the stairs to deliver whatever Chandra asked him to bring.

What a man. Despite his irritation, he never said no to Chandra's

requests. He never ignored Chandra and always treated her like a gentleman would a lady. Lightly, she touched his eyebrows, the tip of his nose, and the soft curve of his lips, all the while praying he wouldn't wake up. He was warm and smelled like soap. For days, since she had tried to seduce him, they hadn't touched. She missed him so much.

Her eyes traveled along the length of him, stopped where the beginning of a dark patch showed and up again to stare at his face. Lashes spread like a fan on his cheeks. They would look good on a little girl. Someday, he would have kids, and they would be as handsome as he is. And maybe as beautiful as their mother—whoever she might be. The thought of Cooper being with another woman wrenched her heart. It would hurt when she left this house, but it would be worth bearing.

They might have toasted their deal, but she had no intention of carrying it through. The deal was nothing but silly. He'd understand when she was gone. And he would appreciate her action when he found the right woman to fall truly and madly in love with.

Goodbye, Cooper. She leaned over to give him a butterfly kiss on the cheek, nose, and mouth.

"You kiss like a girl."

"Eekkk." She tried to move away, but Cooper grabbed her arms and pulled her on top of him. "I thought you were asleep."

"I was falling asleep when you walked in." He moved quickly, pinning her underneath him. He nudged her legs apart with his knee and settled himself in between.

"You saw me come in and pretended you were asleep?"

"I thought you were an apparition at first. A beautiful one who came to seduce me to end a deal." He pressed his hand on the back of her knee and gently gave it a massage.

They were nose to nose, hips to hips. It was hard to think while lying underneath him. His arousal pressed against her muddled her brain.

"Yes and no. I thought about seducing you because this deal has gone far enough. And then I changed my mind at the last minute—I was kissing you goodbye."

He sagged on top of her forcing her to breathe hard. "Piper, why do

you push me away? Am I that repulsive?"

"You know why.

"You still don't trust me."

"Cooper, please..."

Cooper eased his weight and rolled off her.

"Before you came in here, I was thinking about how selfish I am."

"What are you talking about?"

"I offered you a deal because I want you for myself, threatened to tie you up if you didn't accept. I was thinking about not just kissing you but devouring you, tearing your clothes with my teeth, pushing you against the wall and making hot, sweaty, mindless love with you if I win. My attention was focused on what I want, my body's needs, and I refused to hear your reasons. I forgot to consider what you're getting out of this deal. A man with a reputation murkier than gutter water. You deserve someone better, someone with whom you could share a walk at the beach or at the park and not feel embarrassed. Someone you could trust and not doubt when he's out of your sight. I love you too much to deny you of finding that someone." He took her hand and kissed her palm.

"I'm not—what are you saying?"

"I've decided to end our deal. You're free to go, of me."

Free. No running away from their deal. She could pack up and leave. Their deal was over but, coming from him, ending their deal felt like taking the very air she breathed. For two weeks she'd thought of nothing but a way to win their deal, but the thought of leaving didn't prepare her for this knee-weakening blow.

"I don't know what to say." Indeed. What could she say? *I feel like dying right now?*

Cooper rolled onto his side, propped the weight of his upper body on his forearm and looked down at her. Locks of dark hair fell over his eyes. She reached to swipe them back but, as soon as she let go, they fell again.

He took her hand when she tried to fix his hair again and kissed her palm. "Have I told you how my parents met?"

"No." She shook her head. That was all she could do. Her throat

felt too swollen to say more.

"At McDonald's. Dad accidentally took mom's order. He was half way through his Big Mac when he realized it had tomatoes and cheese on it. He looked at the receipt and saw the name Lily written on the corner. He looked around and found mom complaining to the cashier, holding a receipt saying his name, Connor. Dad handled the confusion by offering to buy Mom's lunch. She accepted his offer. They chatted until Mom said she needed to go. They went their separate ways after that. Dad swore he fell in love with Mom that same day and kept going back to that same McDonald's, hoping to see her. At the time, Dad and his partner, who is also my godfather, managed the seaplane business. Dad said he was close to losing the partnership because he continued to miss work."

"He was looking for your mom," she whispered.

"Yes. He loitered inside and outside McDonald's. He said, he didn't care and waited for mom to eat there again. He did see her again after a month. Mom told us, Dad looked like he hadn't shaved or showered in a month when he approached her."

Like you, when I saw you two weeks ago.

"That same day," Cooper continued, "Dad proposed and threatened to kidnap her if she didn't agree. She laughed. She said Dad looked so pitiful she had to accept his proposal. Later on she admitted that she had gone looking for him also. Only she gave up after a week, thinking that Dad wasn't interested in her because, at that time, she was just a Washington Mutual Bank teller and Dad was wearing his pilot uniform. Dad talked to Mom's parents, and they got married the next month. And where are they now? In Paris celebrating their wedding anniversary, initial meeting anniversary, first kiss anniversary and God knows what else."

"What a romantic story."

"I know. You see, Piper, like Dad I fell in love with you the moment I saw you standing on the dock with my sister. Saw the future in your eyes, and it gave me an idea of how our children would look—freckled with red hair and stubborn lips. I saw you not just as a beautiful woman but as the woman whom I want to share my future with. I even imagined

you and my sister shopping together for baby clothes. You're perfect for me; even your name is perfect. Piper—like a Piper Cub airplane." He sighed and shook his head. "The only difference between us and my parents is there was no deal involved. Dad didn't trap Mom into marrying him. Although he had a backup plan of taking her to the Alps if she said no to him."

"Did you have a backup plan?"

"I wasn't kidding when I told you I'd tie you to the bed. But that was before I realized the silliness of our deal."

"So we're...done. What were you going to do when I left?"

"I'd just vent my frustrations toward everybody, maybe kill one or two. Or I'd convert into Buddhism."

"You? A monk. Tibet will be free before that happens." She wiped the single tear rolling down the side of her face.

"How about you? Atlantis will be restored first before you learn to trust me?"

His tone was heavy as if he'd been carrying a heavy load. Piper ran the pad of her fingers along his cheekbone down to his strong chin and back. She didn't mean to hurt him like this, only to save them from making a huge mistake. But as she looked in his eyes, something was there she hadn't seen before—utter sadness. What had she done?

A month, she wasted trying to convince herself that falling for this man was the worst mistake she could possibly make. She was wrong. Losing him would be a mistake. A big mistake.

Reality started sinking in. Her mother wasn't crazy for loving her father too much, for trying to stay with him, hoping the marriage would work out. Her mother tried, except her father was an ass and refused to give up his old ways. Whereas Cooper, he tried changing for her sake. She was wrong to compare him with her father. Cooper was different, a man set apart by his own character, nature, feelings, and wickedness. How could she have been so stupid not see him for what he was?

"Cooper, if I were to give you my trust, what would you do with it?"

"Keep it safe; make sure it stays intact. I think I'm a good keeper."

"All right."

Cooper's hand stopped caressing her thigh. "I—what do you mean by that?"

"I'll give you my trust."

"Please tell me you're not shitting me."

"Well, the shitting part killed the moment."

Cooper threw off the covers, sat back on his heels and pulled her up. He gripped her shoulders and looked her in the eye. "Please don't joke about this."

"I'm giving you my trust, Cooper. Don't make me regret it."

"I won't. Piper, Piper. You have no idea how happy I am right now."

"Cooper, were you kidding when you said you wanted to rip my clothes off with your teeth?"

Cooper bared his teeth when he grinned. "I kind of got carried away. I could use my hands."

"Hands are fine." Her pathetic negligee landed on the floor within seconds.

Cooper pulled her close. Piper heard herself purr as he began to nuzzle her neck. His teeth raked the sensitive skin of her breasts until they tingled. She placed her hands on his shoulders, feeling his muscles work as he explored her body. She did her own exploring.

She cupped his balls, squeezed them gently before wrapping her fingers on his phallus. Hard with soft skin, he felt wonderful.

Cooper groaned. He dipped his head to suck her nipple. She arched her back, giving him more of her swollen breasts. He wrapped one arm around her waist while the other wandered down to sift through her springy curls.

"You can't take your words back, Piper. Mrs. Barth said—"

"—I will turn into an escargot."

"Hmm...I was going to say my sex slave."

"I won't take my words back."

"Good. You're so hot, and beautiful, and you're mine."

He dipped his thumb inside then withdrew to spread juice around

her clit. "Cooper, whatever you do, don't stop. Oh, God. Don't."

"You know I wouldn't."

With an arm wrapped around her waist, he lifted her a little then slowly guided her down to impale her in one thick slide. She stopped her descent and held her breath at the feel of him filling her. Her fingers dug into his shoulders.

Cooper held her waist, staring at her with eyes dilated and the irises cloudy blue. "Piper, love...I will lower you some more. Can you take more of me?"

"I don't know. You feel longer and...bigger."

Cooper chuckled. "I'll take that as a compliment. It's the position, love. Just relax. Believe me, you can take more." Cooper lowered her and impaled her real deep. They both hissed from the intense pleasure. "So good, Piper, so good."

Free from doubt, apprehension, and fear of loving Cooper, Piper moved her hips without inhibitions. Cooper leaned back and watched her. The darkness of the room and their position rid her of shyness. She returned his smile and rode him. She cried when Cooper touched her clit.

"Like it, huh?"

"Yes. Please don't stop."

"I won't, baby."

She took the hand that was cupping her breast and kissed his palm. How could she have hurt him so badly? She was so blind—metaphorically—not to see love and honesty in his eyes. Her thoughts started to jumble as she neared her climax. Cooper gripped her hips and helped her move against him. Her thighs burned, but the pleasure was so strong she couldn't stop even if she wanted to. And then she shattered. Her orgasm was so intense her whole body shook.

Cooper felt her contract around him. He grinned and surged his hips upward to give her more of him. She whimpered and bit her neck. The tiny pain undid him. He growled as the absolute pleasure racked his body. Piper was amazing. She took his energy; he felt so tired and weak. Together they fell on the bed, laughing.

Somewhere downstairs the grandfather clock chimed.

"Good morning. That was the best breakfast ever. Will you stay and sleep with me? I'll wake you up for breakfast." His soft little kisses rained all over her face.

"Real breakfast?"

"Yes and no."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her. "Yes. I want to stay here."

"Good. Let's get some sleep."

They spooned together. For the first time in three weeks, Cooper felt rested. This was where she belonged—in his arms. Overwhelming possessiveness brought tears to his eyes. He couldn't believe he was capable of loving someone this much. He hugged Piper tight. Her round bottom pressed against his groin.

"Breakfast already?"

He laughed and kissed her shoulder. "Go to sleep." He wanted her again, but he would wait. Right now he just wanted to cuddle, feel her heartbeat, her even breathing, her warmth. Yes, for now.

Chapter Nine

Piper woke up alone in bed. Cooper was gone. His scent, however, lingered on the pillows and sheets. She stretched languidly, burying her hands under the pillow. She was about to recall what had transpired last night when she felt something. She pulled the soft material from underneath the pillow and was shocked to see the pajamas she thought she'd lost. She laughed. Who would steal a pajama bottom and keep it under the pillow. A man in love. Dear God. He really, truly loved her.

Soft scratching and whining took her out of cloud nine state. She felt languid, but she must get up. Wiping off the floor and scooping up a mastiff's poop wasn't how she wanted to greet her morning. Setting her foot on the floor, she spotted her glasses on the bedside table. A short note was there, too.

"Good morning. I found these yesterday. Yours, Cooper."

Yours. The simple word brought smile to her lips. *Got that right, Cooper. I'm yours and you are mine.*

Wearing her glasses, she went downstairs to thank Cooper. The house was quiet.

Chandra wasn't lounging in her spot on the couch. She glanced at the grandfather clock. It was ten o'clock, too early for the woman to be up. She thought about going to the kitchen, but Brandi's whining told her she must hurry or she'd be cleaning the marbled floor.

As soon as she stepped outside, the cold air filled her lungs. At least the sun was shining through the gray clouds, which was a treat for

the Seattleites. The air was heavy with the scent of snow and decaying leaves. It was heavenly. Her boots scrunched the snow while she followed her dog, with his snout on the ground, most likely looking for the best spot to do his dog thing. They walked along the street of Woodway and took their time.

Brandi finally did his business. Piper called him then headed back toward the house. Her socks were already soggy inside. With her next paycheck, she would buy a pair of sturdy boots. One that would keep her toes dry and warm.

The smell of bacon and eggs wafted in the air. Brandi barked once then took off, leaving footprints on the floor. She wanted breakfast, too, but her feet were numb from the cold. She doubted breakfast would be enjoyable if her toes suffered from frostbite. She decided to change instead.

Piper stopped in the middle of the hallway when she spotted something on the floor. A thong and not a clean one either. She was still looking at the offensive material when she heard Chandra laughing. Cold and hungry, she forced her mind to think of something, anything other than the woman's voice coming from Cooper's bedroom.

But curiosity took hold of her senses. She pushed open the mahogany door that was left ajar. The sheets where she had spent the night were still rumpled. Her attention was caught by the sound of running water and murmurs of whisperings. The sound of flesh hitting flesh followed Chandra's ear-shattering laugh.

Rage rose from somewhere deep inside her. Emotions she never felt before bombarded her. She couldn't breathe. Every sound coming from the bathroom worked like an evil spirit urging her to lash out, scream, break something, and hurt someone.

She wanted to walk in the bathroom and see the truth. Her nose started to sing. Don't cry; don't cry. Don't be weak.

The door swung open and out came Cooper with a towel wrapped around his waist. His cheek was red. Beads of water from his hair dripped on his shoulders and down his chest. Scratches marred his chest and arms.

She stood motionless battling with her emotions, sifting her

thoughts, ignoring the pain, anger and jealousy, and focusing only on what was obvious.

Cooper looked at her without saying anything. But his eyes spoke volumes; she clearly understood.

Chandra, gloriously naked, came out, too. Perfect in every way, Chandra looked like a goddess—one with marks on her shoulders and arms as if someone had gripped them hard.

"Piper, I didn't know you were there. You're late for a *ménage à trois*." Chandra smiled. "Did you enjoy your walk with your beast of a dog?"

"Brandi is a good walking partner."

"And Cooper is the best shower partner. Thanks for the good scrubbing, sweetheart. You know where to find me, Coop. Ta-ta, Piper."

"Wait!"

Chandra turned around. "What?"

"Please pick-up the thong you left in the hallway before Brandi pees on it. He hates dirty things."

Chandra huffed and slammed the door.

She waited a full minute before turning to look at Cooper. Then she smiled.

"You're smiling." Cooper expected everything coming from her, but not this, not a genuine smile.

"Why? Am I supposed to cry?"

"Well, I guess crying or screaming would be more expected in a situation like this."

"But I don't feel like crying or screaming."

"No? How about throwing things at me, gouge my eyes, accuse me of cheating on you. Aren't you even going to call me a pig?"

"Why would I do that?"

That was it. He lunged for her. She yelped and tried to run away. He caught her around the middle and spun her around.

"Cooper, put me down! I'm getting dizzy," she yelled, laughing.

He stopped spinning when he reached the middle of the bedroom. He put her down but didn't loosen his hold on her waist. "You're not mad

at me?"

"No."

"But you saw me and Chandra; we're both—naked."

She combed his hair back with her fingers. "Maybe days ago, I would have reacted differently. Not this time. Yes, I battled with my emotions while standing here listening. But because you already planted trust in my heart, I was able to sift through my feelings, fight the jealousy and see reason. My trust in you helped me see everything I needed to know, Cooper. Your eyes showed me that you didn't do anything to lose my trust in you. And this." She touched his cheek where Chandra had slapped him when he refused her offer. "Chandra did this, didn't she?"

He nodded and turned his head to kiss her palm. "Yes."

Piper sighed. "I gave you my trust last night, and you didn't make me regret it. You kept your part of the bargain. And I love you more for that."

"I love you, too, Piper." Tears blurred his vision. He had been so shocked to see her standing outside the bathroom door, eyes wide and questioning. Fear of losing her and anger toward Chandra rooted him to the floor. He couldn't say anything. Instead, he just looked at her. "I thought I'd lost you for good."

"Nope, you'll have a devil of a time getting rid of me."

"Ditto. You smell nice, like winter. Makes me want to cuddle and stay warm."

Piper parted his towel to cup him. "You do need some cuddling."

"Aren't you Miss Wicked."

"I have a very good teacher."

"Of course you do." He nibbled her ear, all the while delighting at her unhurried touch. "Piper?"

"Hmm..." she licked his flat nipple and was about to go down when he caught her arms.

"Wait," he adjusted his towel and went down on his knees.

Piper's eyes brew big. "What are you doing?"

"Something I've been wanting to do since I met you." Cooper took her hands in his, pressed them in between his warm palms. "Piper

Callaghan, love of my life, future mother of my children, will you marry me?"

Piper's cheeks were wet with tears by the time her knees touched the floor. She never thought it would happen to her, not even in her wildest dream, to receive a proposal from a half-naked man. It was the most romantic thing ever.

In between sobs, she gave him her answer. "Cooper Jenkins, future father of my children, my heart, my soul, my everything, yes, I will marry you."

Cooper undressed her with speed. When nothing but her panties were left, he slowed down. His hands slowly traced every curve, crevice and secret place of her body, heightening the anticipation of their union. Without taking his eyes off her, Cooper lowered her to the carpeted floor. Piper let out a helpless groan when he lowered his head to lick her nipples, his hands cupping, kneading her breasts. When he suckled one aching nipple, her back arched. She buried her hand in his hair.

Piper bit her lip when Cooper spread her legs wider. He rose to grip her hips, anchoring her legs on his thighs. With a wicked grin, he fingered her. Lightly at first until she moaned and squirmed at his touch.

She raised her arms to pull him down, but Cooper only took her hand and one by one suckled the pads of her fingers the same time he inserted two fingers deep inside her vagina. All she could do was moan at the sinful pleasure building higher and higher inside of her. Just when she thought she would climax, Cooper pulled out his fingers.

"Cooper," she whispered.

"I'm here, love. Spread your lips for me." He lowered her hand and placed it on her wet labia. Doing what she was told, she spread herself open using her fingers. "Yes, that's it. Good God! You're so wet, Piper. Yes..."

Cooper's thrust was swift and delicious; it triggered her climax. "Don't stop. More."

Cooper leaned over her, his face inches from her. "You're mine." He thrust harder and faster. Piper felt the muscles in his arms and thighs quiver each time he drove inside her. She felt the beginning of her second

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orgasm. And then with one more powerful stroke, they both found their release.

“Cooper, today our deal officially ended.”

“Yes, love, and today is the beginning of us.”

The End

Author Bio

Tierney O'Malley was born and raised in Manila, Philippines. She graduated from PATTS College of Aeronautics and worked for an airline company. She also worked for a non-governmental organization dedicated to the conservation of natural resources.

Ducts.org and Ebbside Newsletter published her essays under her real name. She met her husband in 1993 and was married in 1994. They now reside in the Pacific Northwest with their two daughters and a golden retriever.