



ACTION &
Satisfaction

Lainey Bancroft

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ROMANCE

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CHAPTER ONE

The message on her inner-office email was typed in bold. The receptionist, her close friend, Bonnie, had even used red font to further drive home her point.

DON'T LOOK NOW!

Of course, the first thing Eva did was spring from behind her desk and stare toward the entranceway of the real estate development office. She'd never learn. Curiosity would definitely kill this cat someday. Possibly today.

She'd never actually been poked with a cattle prod but figured the effect of seeing over six feet of gorgeous, muscular man on a mission, striding toward her office, had to be close to the same sensation. Her stomach plummeted worse than the time she'd bungee jumped. Every inch of her skin prickled with awareness. It even felt as though her hair stood on end like she'd been statically charged.

And none of that stopped her from gazing at the hard line of his mouth and remembering exactly what he'd done with said mouth the last time they'd been together.

She pressed a hand to the fire that burst at her breastbone, as though that would somehow deter the heat she felt rapidly creeping upward, from reaching her cheeks. For a second, she had the completely irrational urge to crawl beneath her desk and hide, but it was too late.

Seth Edwards emitted a low whistle and slowed his pace. The line of his mouth quirked to the left, giving her a peek at the slightly crooked eyetooth that gave his smile a wolfish quality Eva thought perfectly suited him.

“Hot damn, Evie. You’re lookin’ good. I knew there was a reason to come back to Ontario, aside from the frigid winters.”

“Back?” she parroted numbly. He couldn’t just come back. She’d spun her life out of control by letting it revolve around him for two years. It had taken her almost as long to quit circling and start moving forward again after he left. Give or take a few dizzying side-trips for hot weekends when he’d been in town and she’d succumbed to his charms.

Never again. She said it every time. Difference was, she meant it this time.

“Well, back for as long as it takes me to build a forty-unit condo complex on the Welland River. And for you to decorate it, of course. Which is what brings me by. Except now that I’m looking at you, going for drinks and catching up strikes me as a better idea. Business can wait. Hell, we haven’t broken ground yet. As I recall, you’ve got a weakness for red. A steak, a bottle of cabernet sauvignon, and we’ll see where the evening takes us. What do you say?”

He stepped forward. She recognized the all too familiar flash of desire in his whiskey-colored eyes and knew he’d already mapped out exactly where the evening would take them. Heat churned low in her belly, and she automatically stepped back. Bracing her suddenly unsteady stance by leaning on the doorway of her office, she averted her eyes from his hot stare and cleared her throat. “I’m busy.”

“Oh?”

The hint of husky laughter that accompanied the single word made her want to slap him.

“I talked to Howard earlier this afternoon. He said things are pretty quiet around here right now.”

“Hmm. He also said he’d never work with you again because you’re a rule-breaker and renegade. Guess you can’t believe everything he says.”

Her intended slight didn’t appear to offend him in the least. Instead, he shot her another wolfish grin. “Howard’s a good businessman. He’s willing to bend a few rules if it gets results. And you know I always get results. So about tonight. Would you prefer Italian?”

“Howard reported to you on my work life, not my social life. I told you, I’m busy.” She felt an inordinate amount of pleasure when his smug smile slipped on his tanned face.

He recovered quickly, and she was treated to another flash of dental-poster white teeth. “Ah. Hot date, or just a cozy evening with a main squeeze?”

She pushed back the tiny thrill she got that he cared enough to ask. Ignoring the question, she tossed her hair in a way she hoped conveyed breezy confidence and struggled to keep her tone professionally modulated. “Nice seeing you, Seth. Call Bonnie when you get far enough along in your project to discuss design. I’ll look forward to working with you again.”

He braced a hand on the doorframe where she leaned, inches away from the pulse pounding wildly in her temple. The rough skin of his palm proved he was an architect devoted to every aspect of a project and prepared to dig in and get dirty when the need arose. The remembered rush of those calloused palms grazing her hips and thighs, breast and belly, tumbled through her. Breathing deeply through her nose, the heady scent of fresh timber, sunshine, and pure male filled her head, making her dizzy. She must have blinked a second too long. When she opened her eyes, his feral grin had spread to full-blown proportions.

“Do you really look forward to working with me again, Evie?”

She ducked from beneath his arm and retreated to the relative safety behind her desk. “Not really. They pay me to say that. Fortunately, I’m paid well enough to accept the less desirable tasks gracefully.”

He barked husky laughter. “I’m tempted to ask what I’m less desirable than, but I’m afraid you’d answer me. Am I really so difficult? I gave you free rein on the Jameson place, and you made it a masterpiece.” His voice dropped until she could feel the rumble of it vibrating in her chest. “You remember the Jameson project, don’t you, Evie?”

How could she forget? Four thousand square feet of unmitigated elegance. Eighteen rooms. And they’d christened every one.

Her phone rang, and she lunged for it. Answering seemed more appropriate than begging him to quit filling her head with images that liquefied her spine.

“Eva Delucca. Your dreams to my design.” She nodded toward Seth, but he ignored the hint and remained standing in her doorway, staring with unabashed curiosity.

“I guess my warning worked. You’re conscious,” Bonnie intoned dryly. “Does he still look as good to you as he did to me?”

She threw a note of flirtatious delight into her voice. “You know it. I’m glad you called. I was thinking about you.”

“Were you thinking you’d like to shoot me for letting that Greek God bod march past my desk?”

Eva leaned the cheek of her butt against her desk, turning her back on Seth. She emitted a throaty laugh that nearly choked her. “Precisely. Are we still on for tonight?”

Bonnie snorted. “Ah, sure. I’ve got a bottle of tequila. *Mi casa, es sous casa* and all that. How does Taco Bell drive-thru grab ya? Are you buying?”

“Of course I am.” She glanced at Seth. He’d thrust his hands into the pockets of his faded Levis. An unfamiliar consternation creased his tanned face, leaving his usual dimples as flat creases bracketing his mouth. She decided to pour it on a little thicker “Sounds divine. I can’t wait. Bye for now.”

She disconnected and glanced up as though surprised to still find him in her office.

“The hot date, I take it.”

Feigning a glance at her watch, she smiled tightly. “Bonnie finishes work soon. If you want to schedule that appointment, you should do it now.”

He tilted his head forward once. “I’ll get right on that. I can see you’re very busy.”

Seth didn’t bother to stop at reception. He’d moved around, but it appeared Eva had moved right on. He may have put physical distance between them, but that was all. She’d never been far from his mind. When Howard had approached him with a new project, he’d been eager to leap at the opportunity, regardless of what the job entailed. Seeing Eva had factored prominently in his enthusiasm.

Her chilly reception surprised him. The hot ache it had created around his sternum surprised him even more. Not that he’d expected a long-lost lover returned greeting or anything. The circumstances surrounding his departure—and subsequent departures—had been too strained for that.

Unfamiliar regret surged through him. When he'd been offered a chance at a historical restoration project he knew would keep him out of the country for the better part of two years, he'd tried to discuss it with her. Discussion had never particularly been his or Evie's strong suit; the timing had never felt quite right. Even when they'd taken off for a long weekend before his departure, he'd been unable to find an appropriate way to broach the topic.

They'd always shared a spark that could combust in seconds, but their final getaway had been—something more. Those three days were forever seared into his mind. The quintessential California dream. Long, hot days and longer, hotter nights. The intensity of it had impacted them both. Even now, seeing *Napa* on a wine label could tug at something deep inside him. He'd thought everything had simply been amplified because of the separation to come, but his twenty-twenty hindsight was telling him he should have examined things a little closer.

There were things he'd attempted to express physically that would have been better expressed verbally. He thought she'd understood. Eva wasn't a fan of unnecessary words any more than he was. It was one of the many, many things that made them such a perfect fit.

Except, despite their spark, he realized he'd been subconsciously waiting for it to fizzle the entire time they'd been together. When he'd flown home for his mother's fourth wedding, Eva had been pissed, but he'd managed to cajole her into forgiving him and attending the ceremony. It hadn't taken much to reignite her. Nor had it on the two other occasions he'd been home. Fun, flattery, a bottle of merlot, and everything had burned brightly again. Today, however, the flame appeared to be as thoroughly doused as a campfire beneath pounds of sand and a hundred stomping Boy Scout feet.

She'd held her lush curves in a stiff, hands-off posture. Her full lips hadn't shown a hint of a smile, and most disarming of all was the flatness in her big dark eyes. Eva had the most expressive eyes he'd ever seen. She could speak volumes without saying a word. With a mere sweep of her lashes, she could cast him a glance filled with promise of pleasures to come.

He couldn't even count the number of times *the look* had given him an inappropriate response for time and place. They'd shared numerous moments during their first project working together working project together. He had fond memories of every square inch of the five-million-

dollar palace he'd built on the Niagara Parkway for a Calgary oilman. As he did of the stretch limo when he'd been Howard's best man. On one wild occasion, he and Eva had even made the friendly skies a whole lot friendlier.

The mile high club. The worst sort of cliché. It was also cataclysmically orgasmic. His pulse spiked thinking about it. It dipped again immediately when he pictured the cool disinterest in her expression today. He would have been happier if she'd screamed and cursed at him.

He clicked the remote for the Navigator he'd leased yesterday. The headlights blinked, making the gleaming black vehicle appear to wink at him knowingly.

Seth was no fool. The short-term lease was a good indication of how he lived his life in general, which was an excellent indication of how he'd managed to turn the hottest woman he'd ever met stone cold. Except in the past, she'd never objected to his footloose proclivity to pursue whatever project piqued his interest. What had changed?

The term *biological clock* sprang to mind. It made him snicker, because he knew she'd slap him if she ever heard him use the phrase in reference to her. Evie didn't have a biological clock. She was forever young. They were kindred spirits as far as being dedicated to freedom and self-indulgences.

He settled in the driver's seat. The sun had heated the dove grey leather to a degree that scorched right through his clothes. It wrapped the desk-wearied muscles of his back like a warm hug, but it was far from what he actually wanted to be wrapped in.

Eva!

A gut punch of desire stabbed through him. He wanted to reacquaint himself with the taste, touch, and smell of every inch of her pale olive skin. To feel the silky brush of her long black curls against his chest as she rose above him.

His fist tightened on the steering wheel until his knuckles whitened. Damn. He'd be around for at least a year, probably more. There was no way he'd watch her sashay around without knowing that, at the end of the day, those endless legs of hers would carry her in his direction. He'd find a way to melt her ice-queen act.

Unless someone else already had. The throaty burst of laughter she'd delivered to whoever had been on the phone rang in his ears. She'd shared that same secretive, naughty laugh with him. Once upon a time, he'd

believed he was solely responsible for that particular laugh. Something foreign writhed through his chest, settling low in his belly.

St. Catharines didn't have that many fine dining establishments where you'd take a lady like Eva. He debated the wisdom of barhopping every one until he *accidentally* bumped into her but discarded the notion. If this were a new relationship for her, making her uncomfortable on a dinner date certainly wouldn't cast him in a favorable light.

Relationship?

The weight in his belly shifted, plunging lower. He wanted to laugh at his sudden and aberrant urge to slug a man he'd never even met.

Parking in the too-narrow drive of the upscale town home he'd also leased for a year, Seth sighed over the characterless collection of pale beige and paler beige boxes that surrounded him. This was precisely what had driven him to become an architect. There was no excuse for the blandness. Buildings were meant to inspire, to embrace and invite, like the arms of a beautiful lover.

Evie.

He sighed again as he unlocked the door and surveyed his standard, Sears-brand central furniture, planted without design on builder-beige broadloom. Maybe he'd invite Eva over to see what she could do with the place. It would be a good icebreaker. Unleashing her passion for decorating might let loose a few of the other passions he knew simmered inside her.

CHAPTER TWO

“Sounds divine,” Bonnie mocked, collapsing with a giggle in the padded lounge beside Eva. “I can’t freaking believe you delivered that line with a straight face. Do you think he bought it?”

“Can’t say for sure.” Eva distractedly drew a pattern in the condensation on her margarita glass with her freshly manicured nail. Indulging in the manicure and pedicure was supposed to have made her feel better, but her siren red finger and toenails appeared to be mocking her as badly as Bonnie.

Considering her Friday night consisted of greasy take-out on her friend’s parents’ patio, while she was clad in seriously unglamorous denim shorts and a tank top, maybe “boredom blues” or “pensive pink” would have been a more suitable color choice.

“You know Seth. He’s got that whole stirred but never shaken thing going on. If the thought of my being out with another man bothered him at all, it wasn’t apparent to the naked eye.”

Bonnie kicked the bottom of her lounge around to face the last rays of fading sun and Eva. “Maybe what you should be asking yourself is why you wanted it to bother him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Six months ago when he blew into town for Howard’s wedding, blew you away with his charm and then blew you off—again—you swore you were over him.”

“I am.”

Bonnie made a dubious noise as she slurped the last slushy bits of her drink. “A deliberate attempt to elicit jealousy doesn’t exactly scream, ‘I’m so over you.’”

Eva gathered the empty glasses, swung to her feet, and paced restlessly toward the well-appointed outdoor cook center. Dumping in ingredients, she

flicked the switch and called over the whirl of the blender, “I was *not* trying to make him jealous.”

“Right.” Bonnie accepted the frosty glass Eva passed. “And I suppose we’re not heading into Margarita mindlessness to drive out thoughts of him, either.”

“Of course not.” The downside of having a friend as intuitive as Bonnie was having the things you weren’t saying heard as loud and clear as the things you were. Her mind had been filled with thoughts of Seth since the second she’d spotted him in the hall. There was truth to that whole out of sight, out of mind statement. She honestly thought she’d shaken the strange hold he had on her, but a single heated glance from his unique amber eyes, and she fell right back in his clutches. Rendered immobile with memories of all the wonderful things he’d offered her, and regrets for all the things she knew he’d never offer—things she’d never even thought she wanted before he’d entered her life. Go figure.

She set aside her glass, her hands suddenly cold despite the lingering humidity that characterized a typical July evening in Niagara. “Seth Edwards quit factoring in my life and my thoughts the third time he played the whole love ‘em and leave ‘em no contact information game.” Maybe if she said it enough times, she’d actually believe it.

“Sure. Right up until he walked back into your life this afternoon.” Bonnie chuckled. “He’ll bring you to your knees in no time. I give it a week before you’re panting for him.”

“Not a chance.”

“Look at you. You’re so antsy for him already, you can’t even sit still, and all he did was invite you to dinner. What are you going to be like when he waves a plane ticket under your nose and visions of sun, surf, and sensational sex start swimming through your hormones? Bam, that’s what. Down for the count.”

“It’s not going to happen. I’m sick of feeling like nothing more than a Barbie doll he can pull out to play with when he’s in town. I don’t care how good he is in bed; I’m done hitting the sheets with him.” Or the back seat. Or kitchen counter. Or—heaven help her—lavatory at thirty thousand feet.

“If you can’t be honest with me, I wish you’d at least be honest with yourself.”

Eva sat forward, propping her dark glasses on her head. “How am I being dishonest?”

“Because, my dear girl, you and I both know he wouldn’t have made the earth move for you unless he also moved you. And he’s got the ability to do that in or out of a bed.”

Annoyed by Bonnie’s persistence and her own transparency, she dropped her sunglasses back over her eyes, although the light had faded enough that they were no longer required. “You’re wrong,” she stated flatly.

“Oh, yeah? Wanna make a bet?”

“A bet? Are you serious?”

“Sure. We’ll make the stakes good and high, too, so you give this the consideration it deserves. How does cruise fare to the Mexican Riviera sound?”

Eva nervously gulped the last of her drink, her pulse spiking almost as badly as it did when she was with Seth. Damn Seth. And damn Bonnie, too. “I don’t know. What’s the bet?”

“I challenge you to rekindle things with Seth for a while.”

“What sort of dirty deal is that? Have you been listening to me at all, Bonnie? I...”

“Just hush for a second and hear me out. I have a great plan, and it’s for your own good.”

Bonnie sauntered to the blender and mixed a good strong concoction. The icy alcohol hit the burn in Eva’s tummy and sizzled for a few seconds before settling. “Fine. Talk. But remember, I haven’t agreed to your stupid bet yet, and if it requires I become a recharging depot for Eveready Edwards, I’m not going to.”

“Eveready?” She mimed an exaggerated shiver. “And you’re complaining?”

“Oh, stop. Just tell me this brilliant plan of yours.”

“I’d like to see you give Mr. Edwards a taste of his own medicine.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“See him a few times. Seduce him. Hell, you can even service him if it suits you, and then walk away, just like he does.”

“Okay, so what’s the bet, and how is that for my own good?”

“I bet you can’t walk away. You have feelings for him you haven’t even bothered to explore, Eva. If you care about him as much as I think you do,

you better get in there and go after what you want.” Bonnie shrugged and offered her a gentle smile. “If I’m wrong, you not only get a cruise, you get the opportunity to do the leaving for a change. Maybe if you walked away with the upper hand, you really could get him out of your system once and for all, instead of waiting for the next time he has time for you.”

The idea wasn’t without merit, except for all the nasty maybes. As in, maybe Bonnie’s first suggestion was closest to the truth. Maybe she’d never be able to walk away. And maybe she’d never, ever get sexy Seth out of her system. Even thinking about him caused a tightening deep inside her that she wanted to blame on nerves, but knew had much more to do with needs.

“I don’t know.”

“Think about it. It’s the ultimate gamble. Either way you win. You get the man of your dreams, or you get the vacation of my dreams and your pride intact. If you’re as over him as you claim, it’s a no-brainer.”

She averted her eyes, the spring inside her coiling tighter at her friend’s word choice. “Why’d you call him the man of my dreams?”

“You’re young. You’re gorgeous. You have a glamorous job you love and a pretty terrific income. You could virtually cherry pick your way through the male population, Eva, but in the ten years I’ve known you, the only guy you’ve ever had more than a handful of dates with is the one who keeps leaving you. You either love the dude, or you have some whacked commitment issues. Time you figured it out.”

“Maybe later. I don’t feel like sitting around here being bait for mosquitoes. Let’s get changed and go clubbing.”

Bonnie snorted. “What, you’re going to go snag some random pick-up just to prove me wrong?”

She slanted a cheeky grin. “Only if he’s really cute. C’mon. I could use a distraction. Some pounding music, maybe a bit of dancing. What do you say?”

“What about our bet?”

She tilted her head, considering the question. A few evenings of succumbing to Seth’s charm wouldn’t be a hardship. Nor would a few nights of steamy sex. Or not. It might be fun to play him for a while. To promise the action and deny him the satisfaction. Her lips curled in a smile as she mentally repeated the phrase.

“You have the wickedest Evil-Eva expression on your face.” Bonnie giggled. “Does this mean we’re on?”

“We’re on. Eveready Edwards is about to have a fling I’m certain he’s not ready for. And when it all goes up in smoke and I cruise off into the sunset on your dollars, he won’t know what hit him.”

“Hmm. If you really do manage to drop the torch you’ve been carrying for him, can I be your cruise companion?”

Eva laughed. “Since you’ll be the one going in debt to purchase the fares, that sounds fair to me.”

* * * *

Friday and Saturday, Seth managed to curb his urge to drop in on Eva, but it wasn’t easy. He was at the holding stage with the condominium project while he awaited approval of the plans he’d submitted. Two long, lonely days of pacing his soulless home knowing the woman who could soothe his soul—and the rest of him—like no other was an arms reach away was almost more than he could take.

Sunday, he woke from a restless sleep and decided it was more than he *should* take. Brunch struck him as a nice innocuous way for old friends to catch up. There was a great restaurant that overlooked lock three of the Welland canal. They’d spent several lazy Sunday’s there, enjoying the buffet and the occasional passing of a cargo ship.

Eva had a weakness for French toast. He’d always been partial to the way she looked with a shine of maple syrup glistening on her full lips.

He went for a five-mile jog, hoping to diffuse some of the anticipation surging through him. The run and the fifty sit-ups and push-ups he did after only served to make him feel more adrenalin rushed.

He showered and shaved, dressed casually, and hopped in the Navigator. As he wound his way through the familiar streets of his hometown toward Eva’s apartment, he finally had to admit his sense of expectancy was sharpened with a jolt of uncharacteristic nerves.

I’m busy.

She’d never been too busy for him in the past. What if he arrived to rouse her from a lover’s arms, looking sleep-tumbled, her lips swollen from another man’s kisses? The thought tightened the muscles of his gut more than his sit-ups had. He quashed the notion. Not Eva. Unless they were

vacationing somewhere, she'd never even been particularly keen on spending an entire night in his arms. He'd seen her many, many times before she'd allowed it.

He thought unexpectedly of New Years. At the last minute, he'd managed to procure a luxurious suite overlooking Niagara Falls and had flown home on a whim, just to see her—although he hadn't actually told her that. She'd been her usual. Reticent at first and pretending to pout because he'd shown up unannounced, but she'd grudgingly agreed to attend the open-air concert with him. The night had been magical; crisp, cold air and the sparkle of glittering snowflakes on the light displays that decorated the Niagara Parkway.

They'd snuck away before midnight and welcomed the New Year in the privacy of their room. The pyrotechnic display hadn't been the only fireworks going off that night. And the sun wasn't the only thing heating him as he remembered the pleasures of three straight days of Eva, a hot tub and a king-sized bed. They hadn't even left the room for dinner on the final night, content to curl together in the tangled sheets, deplete the mini-bar, and nibble sandwiches from room service.

If he closed his eyes—not the smartest thing to do while driving, but he did it for a second, nonetheless—he could still feel the warmth of her good-bye kiss. Her generous mouth offering him every dark pleasure, her curvy body joined to his as though they were tooled to fit together.

And as per his usual, he'd said he'd be in touch and hadn't. He said it only because it sounded better than “see ya,” anyway. She knew that. He'd never seen the point in torturing himself by listening to the chime of her flirty laughter over a stupid phone. She knew he wanted her, and she knew the second he could make it possible, he'd be hers. That was enough. Or it always had been in the past.

He wondered again what had brought about the radical change in her demeanor. She'd shown no sign of flirting or pouting. To be honest, he hadn't detected so much as a hint of interest from her. Damn. That whole honesty thing sucked sometimes.

Ah well, he loved a good challenge. He'd just have to work harder to remind her of her interest. Or maybe he'd work at being more interesting. Either way, he was willing to try. What he wasn't willing to do was spend

another night thinking of her and another morning with the sluice of icy water coursing over him to diminish the heat thoughts of her caused.

CHAPTER THREE

Monday morning, Eva hadn't been in her office long enough to pour her first coffee when Howard entered. His absent-minded professor persona was more pronounced than usual as he fondled the swatches of material on her desk with one hand and accosted his wheat-colored hair with the other.

She smiled fondly, wondering for the thousandth time how he'd ever managed to develop a successful business. He didn't appear to have a driven, or even an organized bone in his body. She could only conclude that people were eager to assist him because he was so charmingly addled and boyishly handsome.

She'd also frequently wondered about his long-term friendship with Seth. Definitely a case of opposites attracting. Where Howard's business acumen was distorted by his pleasant woolly sheep personality; Seth was a wolf through and through. It seemed to work for them. They'd completed numerous multimillion dollar projects together.

He continued to caress the sample, as though it were the ears of a favored pet. "What the heck is this stuff? Feels nice."

"Silk damask."

"Neat color. What do you call it?"

"Is there something I can do for you, Howard, or are you shopping for new draperies?"

She'd used a teasing tone, but he dropped the material as though she'd scolded him. "Right. Um, I wondered when you'd moved."

"I told you in February I'd bought a condominium in Old Port. You've had all my new contact information for months."

"Right. Of course I do. I wondered why Seth doesn't."

"Is this the adult equivalent of note passing in school, Howard? Ask a friend to ask a friend for a friend's phone number?"

“No. I guess I was just surprised when he dropped by the house yesterday, asking how to get in touch with you. Damned if I could remember your new number. It’s unlisted. Did you know that?”

She chuckled. “At my request. Seth had my old number for years and never felt the urge to call before. I saw no reason for him to have the new number.”

“Right. Of course.” He turned as though to leave and then spun back around, scratching a distracted hand in his overgrown thatch of hair. “But I thought—well, that is, I assumed you two were...”

“We were,” she snapped. “We no longer are.”

“Ah, I see.”

It was apparent by his confused expression that he didn’t see at all. Eva took pity on him. “There’s nothing to be concerned about, Howard. I’ll conduct myself in a professional manner and don’t anticipate a problem working with Seth.”

“Right. Of course. I wasn’t questioning your professionalism. I just—well, I thought...”

Eva leaned across her desk, raising a questioning brow in the hopes it would prompt him to say whatever he had to say and be done with it. She didn’t want to discuss Seth with him—or with anyone. She’d had a rough weekend of soaring between anticipation and torment over the bet she’d agreed to. Not that she minded losing a bet, but the fear of losing her heart to Seth Edwards again was enough to make her break into hives.

“I know Seth agreed to come back here because...”

Howard allowed his sentence to trail off unfinished again as Bonnie entered the office. At least she guessed it was Bonnie, judging by the funky sandals and scads of gaudy rings on her fingers, which were about all that was visible behind the enormous expressions bouquet she carried.

One glance confirmed it was an offering from Seth. It screamed of his signature excess. Mountains of exotic calla lilies were interspersed with bundles of truffles and miniature bottles of port, tied to bamboo sticks with gaily colored ribbon.

Port. She closed her eyes; the warm, sharp taste of lapping the sweet wine from the sculpted muscles of Seth’s chest and abdomen conjured well enough to make her salivate. They’d emptied the entire bottle that night. How much alcohol she’d actually consumed was irrelevant. The feel of it

trickling across her burning skin, followed by his tongue, had intoxicated her.

“Seth.” Howard chuckled and shuffled out, mumbling affirmative-sounding noises as though his single word had somehow expressed everything he’d meant to say.

She shook her head as Bonnie set the ostentation arrangement down, obliterating the entire surface of her desk.

“Let the games begin.” Bonnie’s cheeks were pink, and her green eyes danced. “If this is his first pitch, I’d say you’re in trouble.”

“Not by a long shot.” She swallowed back the waver in her voice. “If this is from Seth, he should know this sort of flamboyance makes me uncomfortable.” She reached for the card with a steady hand but felt a tremor ripple through her when she saw he’d chosen a simple shot of the Niagara Gorge where they’d shared a gourmet picnic their first date.

The inside of the card was blank, aside from a note scrawled in a hand as bold and larger than life as him.

I would have warmed your house more personally if I’d known where to find it. Seeing you again made me realize how much more of you I’d like to see. Ti amo Mexican. Tapas bar at Amigos. See you at seven.

The S he’d signed the note with shot off the page like a lightning bolt or a backwards Zorro mark.

His insolent assumption that she’d show should have annoyed her. For some twisted reason, it thrilled her. As did the fact that Seth—who claimed not to have a sentimental gene—with his extravagant gift and simple card had raised sentiments that threatened to drown her.

He’d sent her an arrangement of calla lilies after the first time they’d made love, in the identical rich, black cherry shade he claimed made him think of the color of her lips. He’d remembered her favorite decadent chocolates and even her preference for Graham’s port. Not to mention the gorge and the many memorable evenings they’d spent on the patio bar at Amigos, indulging in banter, bar food, and what basically amounted to foreplay.

“What’s it say?” Bonnie demanded impatiently. “Did he profess his undying love? Beg for your forgiveness?”

“Hardly.” She reread the last line, and then read the abridged version aloud. “Amigos. See you at seven.”

“Ah. The whole dominant male, caveman thing. I hear it’s a turn-on for some woman. So?”

“Hmm.” She feigned distraction while she pretended to search for something on her desk, inhaling the heady aroma of lilies and fine chocolate in the process.

“So, did it turn you on? Are you going?”

She shrugged, unwrapped a truffle and popped it in her mouth. The sweet melting sensation flooded her taste buds and seeped down her throat. She sighed with pleasure. “I haven’t decided yet,” she finally admitted. The urge to picture him sitting there with his cocky assumption that she’d run to him just because he’d snapped his fingers paled in comparison to her urge to be there with him. And that couldn’t be a good sign.

“Sure you have.” Bonnie chortled. “But you can pretend right up until quarter to seven if it makes you feel better.”

“Get out of my office. But get this monstrosity off my desk first, so I can actually accomplish something today besides eating my own weight in truffles.”

By day’s end, Eva concluded menopause had to be a real bitch. The rushes of heat she’d experienced every time she thought of meeting Seth left her weak and dizzy at times, exhilarated at others. He could single-mindedly lavish her with attention like no other man. Envisioning his wicked, whiskey eyes roaming over her like a caress, beaming sheer male approval, and unbridled desire, wove her into knots. When she combined that with his irreverent, wildly sexy compliments and his proclivity to deliver seemingly innocent touches that seared, she became woven into a full-fledged basket case.

Bonnie was right. That she’d go had never been in question. How she’d play it was a different story. Choreography had been mapped. They’d done this dance three times. The first time, she hadn’t been able to contain her enthusiasm about seeing him. He’d been more enthusiastic. His second visit, she’d sulked and cold-shouldered. He’d cajoled and poured on the heat. When he’d flown in unexpectedly at New Years, she’d been furious and had no intention of giving in to him. He’d been so contrite and persuasive, and he’d gone to such lengths to guarantee them a fabulously romantic tryst, he’d broken her defenses in no time.

The star-struck musings she'd indulged in when he'd swung her into his arms and carried her into that suite overlooking Niagara Falls—that suite complete with fresh flowers, champagne, and hot tub for two—made her shudder at her own stupidity.

Play-it-again Seth definitely should have been old by now. She wondered why it wasn't. Well, maybe not old, but stale. It was time for a new routine.

She considered and discarded options while she redid her make-up that evening, finally settling on one that made her smile in a narrow-eyed way she thought justified Bonnie's "Evil-Eva" jibe.

Ignoring the bright floral sundress and sandals she'd intended to wear, she strode to the closet in her spare room. The halter sheath she'd impulsively bought on clearance and never worn would be perfect. She fingered the gossamer, cherry red material, smiling again as she thought of how often Seth had declared the color red had been invented for her.

She shivered as the flimsy cloth slithered over her. She closed the mirrored door of the closet to check her reflection. The cut of the dress worked with her halter bra. It would work better without. After shedding the bra, Eva impulsively kicked off her thong, too. Knowing Seth, he'd be able to tell with a single glance that only a few gauzy ounces of red stood between him and her nudity. The pounding that had beat intermittently at her sternum all day rolled and dropped, leaving a weighted heat between her legs.

Her fingers were clumsy on the tiny buckles of the straps of gold leather that curled around her ankles. It took her three tries to fasten her shoes, which left her more lightheaded and breathless than ever. She glanced at the clock. By the time she drove to Amigos, she'd be fifteen minutes late. Perfect in her estimation. Long enough to make him wonder, but not so long it would look like it was by design.

She pulled her Miata into the crowded parking lot at exactly seven sixteen. She was ridiculously overdressed for the casual atmosphere of the Mexican eatery—but that was the whole point.

Studiously ignoring the heads she turned as she sailed through the restaurant, she zoned in on Seth. Her idiotic heart turned a series of cartwheels that would have made an Olympic gymnast weep in envy when

she saw his mouth drop open and hang slack for a second before he sprang to his feet to greet her.

She held herself stiffly while he brushed her cheek with a kiss, lingering near the furious pulse at her neck to whisper, "I guess I don't have to tell you, you're more than worth the wait."

She didn't bother to glance at the diamond-encrusted face of her watch but stared pointedly at the chair. "Oh. Have you been waiting long?"

He ignored her question and scrambled to pull her chair out. "Can I get you something from the bar? A margarita?"

"Hmm." Tapping a bright red fingernail to her matching lips, she pretended to think about it. "Truthfully, Seth, I'm not at all in the mood for Mexican."

He settled into the chair across from hers and shot her a flash of his crooked tooth, as though aware she was playing him. "Fine by me. Name your pleasure."

"That bottle of red and steak you mentioned the other day sounds about right."

"Sure. Would you prefer Antonio's or the Lakeside?"

"Neither, actually."

His grin spread, sinking a deep dimple on his left cheek and spreading a fan of fine creases around his eyes. "I probably shouldn't admit this, but its fun when you punish me, Eva. Almost makes staying away long enough to miss you worthwhile. Should I keep tossing out suggestions so you can shoot me down and play your game a while longer?"

"No game, Seth. I've just had my fill of those places lately. I'm not in the mood for pretentious formality."

"Care to tell me what you are in the mood for?"

She leaned suggestively toward him, her lips tugging into a smile when his eyes predictably dove down the gaping neckline of her dress and darkened with desire. "Red wine. You. We can skip the steak. I'm not all that hungry—for food," she added, almost as an afterthought.

He shifted his gaze to her face. "I'm sure when I have blood flowing toward the area of my brain again I'll be able to come up with a reasonable response to that. For now, all I can say is, game or not, you sure know how to play me. That was the last thing I expected you to say."

“It’s never wise to expect people to behave in a predictable manner, Seth. You taught me that.” His smile faded, and she averted her eyes, wondering if she’d said too much.

Quickly digging in her gold clutch, she extracted a fresh business card and tossed it toward him. “Pick up a nice bottle of red on your way,” she ordered, smoothing her dress as she stood.

“Italian?”

“Actually, I’d prefer an Australia. Or maybe something local.”

As she walked away, she heard him mumble, “Of course you would.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Eva's condominium was in a nice location, set high on a hill overlooking Lakeside Park, but Seth felt a stab of disappointment that she'd settled on the sort of cookie-cutter building that wounded his architect's soul. An assembly of three buildings, three stories high in the identical sand beige of the place he'd leased.

He'd envisioned her someplace more modern and dramatic, or better yet, old and steeped in character. He didn't know all the dirty details, but Howard—who'd known her since they were in grade school together—had apprised him that Eva's childhood had been even more unsettled than his own. He was surprised it had taken her as long as it had to settle into the homeowner routine.

As he parked the navigator and tucked the bottle of Merlot Reserve, from Joseph's Estate Wines beneath his arm, he realized he didn't care where her home was; the fact that she'd welcomed him to it was reason enough to celebrate. Thawing her had certainly taken less effort than he'd anticipated after her chilly reception Friday. He'd expected to be in for weeks—if not months—of teasing, torture and possibly tantrums.

She had the corner unit on the third floor. When she welcomed him in with a sweep of her arm, he was relieved to see that, despite the lackluster exterior, she'd turned her interior into a bold statement that was pure Eva. The spacious area was warm and inviting, decorated in dark, gleaming wood and the rich jewel tones that set off her exotic coloring to perfection.

"Very nice," he said, strolling to French doors that opened onto a balcony wrapped around the corner of the building. He wondered if there was another set of doors that led from her bedroom; then he wondered if he'd have the opportunity to find out tonight, or if he were asking too much.

She took the bottle of wine from him without a word. He watched the sun begin its slow descent over Lake Ontario and called, “You’ve got a great view.”

“It’s pretty at this time of day,” she agreed, coming to stand beside him. She passed a glass of wine and shot him a sidelong glance. “The sun can be relentless first thing in the morning, though. If you wondered.”

He swallowed heavily at the implication of the statement. Turning, he bumped the bowled rim of his glass to hers. “I was going to say, here’s to your new place, but I’d much sooner toast you. I’ve never seen you look more beautiful, Eva.”

The flash of ire in her eyes confused him as much as her brittle laughter. “No need to sugarcoat it, Seth. We both know what this is about.”

“Oh? Maybe I could use a clarification.”

Her eyes met his; the normal bittersweet chocolate shade of them deepened to snapping black. “It’s simple. You want to have sex with me. Don’t waste your pretty words and faux affection. They’re not necessary. You’re hard. I’m wet. You want to fuck me. I want you to.”

She turned away with a careless shrug but not before he’d seen her throat tighten and heard the waver in her voice when she’d said *fuck*. An acid fire burst in his gut, burning out the hot ache of desire that had risen there the second she’d walked into the restaurant.

“Evie.” He set aside his wine and reached for her, but she spun away, settling her glass beside his and peeling her revealing red sheath in one swift, fluid motion. He’d been right. The only thing underneath was Eva and more beautiful Eva.

Dumbstruck, he let his gaze roam over her. In the rapidly fading light, her olive skin glowed gold. Her pebbled nipples were the identical inviting ruby shade as her lush mouth. His breath caught, and he tore his gaze away from her gorgeous body, forcing himself to meet her eyes. They flashed the same dark combination they had at the restaurant. Dare you? Damn you? He couldn’t decide.

She crooked a finger at him and then walked toward the hallway, her hips swaying seductively, her legs endless in three-inch gold heels.

It occurred to him that he should be more turned-on than he’d ever been in his life, but he wasn’t particularly. Feeling confused—and insulted, although he wasn’t clear why—he followed her into her bedroom. He

blinked, adjusting his eyes to the darker atmosphere. There was enough light for him to see the white flash of her teeth. Her shadowy form bent over the nightstand, then straightened and came toward where he'd paused, a single step into the room.

"Come on, Seth. Don't tell me you're getting shy in your old age." Tucking a hand in the front of his pants, she yanked him toward her. He bent his head to kiss her, but she wrenched her head away. "Undress." Her command was breathless and too harsh for his taste.

He reached forward, sifting his fingers through the thick silk of her hair and turning her face to his. Again, she evaded his kiss. "Evie, I..."

"Shh." She worked her hand between the buttons of his shirt, scraping her nails across the leaping muscles of his abdomen when she encountered bare flesh. He tried to speak again, but she silenced him with a hot, open-mouthed kiss. Her tongue insistently wound around his, but when he cupped her face in his hands, she shifted away, once more intent on removing his clothes.

He felt like she'd instigated a dance he didn't know the steps for. When he tried to speak, she kissed him. The minute he kissed back, she pulled away.

She succeeded in opening his shirt, and her fisted hand traveled up his chest. He jerked in response when she flicked her thumbnail over his nipple, but when her other hand tugged open his button and began to slide his fly, he gripped both her wrists.

"Eva, stop."

Her smile mocked him. "Don't tell me Mr. Eveready Edwards isn't ready."

Eveready? What next? Some juvenile, insulting name for his penis? He wondered how insane he'd look if he actually voiced the question running through his head. *Who are you, and what the hell have you done with my sweet, sexy, Evie?*

Before he could ask, she freed her hands, splaying them across his chest. He glanced down when he felt the scrape of a sharp-cornered object. The sight of the condom package in her hand caused his already faltering hard-on to wither more. He decided the odd flash in her eyes was definitely damn you.

He gripped the condom between his fingertips, like the damning object he thought it was. He tried to smile, but the stiff twist of his lips felt anything but natural. “Only thing that ever came between you and me was the sweat we worked up, Evie.” He flicked the package aside.

She bent to retrieve it and pressed it into his hand. “That was then.”

“Care to tell me what’s changed in the last six months that makes this an issue now?”

She lifted a single shoulder. “I don’t know, which is the whole point. I don’t know what—or rather whom—you’ve done in the last six months. Or the six before that, for that matter. Have you been celibate?”

He couldn’t have been more surprised—or insulted—if she’d slapped him. As he thought about how to answer her, he decided he would have preferred the slap. There’d been women. None who mattered. None he’d seen often enough to reach a stage where he’d forgo protection.

“Condoms are for other people, Eva. Not us.”

For a second, he saw a flash of vulnerability soften her sharp expression, but she chased it with another bitter smile. “You didn’t answer the question. Have you been celibate?”

“N—o, but...”

“Exactly. No buts. We’ll go with that old public service announcement. No glove, no love. If I’m one of many, I’d sooner be treated like the masses.”

“Masses? What the hell is this, Eva?”

She walked away from him, sprawling on the bed in an evocative pose that would have boiled his blood at one time but only served to turn it to ice water today.

“This is what we want. Sex, Seth. Plain and simple sex. Hard. Hot. Fast. Dirty and with no consequences.” She stretched a gold-sandaled foot toward him, trailing a hand suggestively up her inner thigh. “I want you inside me. I know that’s where you want to be. You really going to let a little latex come between us?”

He wondered why he had the sudden urge to wrap her in a thick bathrobe. Or maybe spank her—and not in a good way. His fingers felt thick and uncooperative as he buttoned his shirt. “I don’t know what’s come between us, but I suspect it’s a helluva’ lot more than a bit of latex. Call me if you want to talk about it.”

The gentle click of the door closing forced a modulated primal scream from her throat. The least he could have done was slam it in a fit of rage. *Bastard!* Apparently she didn't even stir his emotions well enough to piss him off. She kicked off her ridiculous hooker's shoes and flung them across the room. They hit the wall with a satisfying clunk, but it wasn't enough to soothe her.

Springing from the bed, she pulled an oversized t-shirt over her head and went to retrieve her drink. The rich red wine hit her belly like a flame. She gasped and held a hand to her heaving diaphragm, forcing herself to slow her rapid breathing.

"I will not cry over Seth Edwards. Never again."

Judging by the warm moisture that flooded her cheeks, she didn't listen to herself any better than Seth listened to her.

CHAPTER FIVE

As she slithered into an emerald dress that showed as much thigh as it covered, Eva tried to tell herself dressing more provocatively than she ordinarily would for the office had nothing to do with seducing Seth and everything to do with showing him what he'd missed out on by not letting her seduce him.

As much as she wanted to write off the disastrous outcome of the evening and never think about it—or Seth—again, pangs of temper had battled with bouts of tears off and on all night. How dare he refuse her when she'd flung exactly what he'd always wanted at him: a convenient and disposable lay?

Maybe there was something to Bonnie's bet after all. It appeared Mr. Edwards didn't much care for the taste of his own medicine. Except she couldn't decide if she'd won or lost the damn bet. It had been he that walked away. Again. But her actions had forced him to it. She and Bonnie could call it a draw, each pay for their own fare, sail off, and find a Latin lover who knew how to treat a lady.

It was a plan filled with bravado, but even as she mentally composed the best way to present it to Bonnie, she knew she'd never make it fly. If the turmoil in her gut was any indication, things were far from finished with Seth. He'd probably be at her office before she was, waving a *forgive-me* bouquet, tempting her with chocolates, or proposing some outlandishly romantic getaway.

Would she have the intestinal fortitude to dodge his faux cupid arrows? She thought about her game plan as she drove to work, and wondered if things really had fizzled between them. It made her sad that he'd become so predictable.

She spent her day on the edge of her seat, jerking her gaze toward the door every time there was even a hint of motion in the outer office. He never showed. Nor did he the next three days.

“A big fat Karma slap to you, baby,” she mumbled at her reflection Friday morning as she stabbed at her already long dark lashes with a thick black mascara wand. “That’s what you get for primping, posturing, and ever thinking a guy like Seth could be predictable.”

Feeling tired from her week in nervous knots, she decided to forgo fancy clothes and heels. She had no clients to see and nothing but a bunch of phone calls to make. Her stallion had obviously concluded he wasn’t getting what he wanted, the way he wanted it, and headed off for friendlier pastures to graze in. No point in blatant sexuality to rouse a guy if he had no intention of coming around to see it.

A wave of sadness coursed through her that he’d walked away so easily and made no attempt to get in touch. When he’d been miles away, she managed to drive him from her mind and function like a normal human being without obsessing over where he was and whom he might be with, but somehow knowing he was within a few square miles of her made it impossible to get him out of her mind.

“And the very fact that you’re thinking that means you’re buying two cruise fares, you lying bitch,” she snarled, snagging a pair of denim capris off a hanger and stepping into them.

Bonnie won. Eva had feelings for Seth. But at least now she knew. She also knew he’d never be in a position to return her feelings the way she’d once hoped he would.

She sighed as she buttoned her sleeveless red blouse and gazed around her sunlit apartment. Maybe she had the ability to turn eight hundred square feet of pedestrian concrete and drywall into a warm, inviting haven, but she’d never be able to do the same with six feet of stone-cold man. Particularly a man who conquered life with his big head but only deemed it necessary to conquer the ladies with the little head.

She gave herself the same lame-o, *I will not cry over Seth Edwards* speech again as she drove to work. Her emotions teetered between a desperate need to tear a strip off him for being so callous, and a forlorn urge to curl up with her mental photo album and reminisce over all the sweet, wonderful and incredibly sexy times they’d shared and bawl her eyes out.

Maybe the latter was all she really needed. To realize it was dead, bury it, mourn it, and get the hell on with her life.

Except the way her body jolted to attention when she pulled into the office parking lot and saw Seth's gleaming Navigator told her, whatever the hell the word for what was going on between them was, it certainly wasn't *dead*.

He'd tugged open her car door before she had the presence of mind to contain the idiotic smile that spread across her face at the sight of him. Ignoring the hand he proffered, she swung to her feet and brushed past him with a brusque, "Good morning."

She fought to keep her tense shoulders from climbing toward her ears as she heard the crunch of his slow footsteps in the gravel behind her. She tensed, anticipating his attempt to stop her as she reached for the door, but he didn't. Instead, a low, exhausted sigh carried his words to her.

"I should have called."

Pins and needles ran up her spine as she felt his eyes boring into her. *Turn around, you coward*. Pasting on a smile accompanied by a raised brow, she faced him. "You don't have my number. It's unlisted, and if Howard..."

"He didn't," he admitted, looking as dejected as she'd ever seen him. "I wouldn't press him to give me access to something you obviously didn't want me to have. I'm not talking about this week, Eva. I mean I should have called. Weeks ago. Months ago. I should have done a better job of keeping in touch."

A moronic amount of gratefulness threatened to send her spinning into his arms. Sucking in a deep breath, she tempered the impulse, sure he'd said that only so she'd go back to being as ridiculously happy to see him, and accommodating as she'd always been in the past. "Why? Do you think we should add phone sex to our repertoire?"

"No." The sigh carried from his toes. She couldn't keep her eyes from tracking his big hand as he distractedly ran it through his dark hair. Her scalp prickled as she thought of the many times he'd sifted those hands in her hair, molding the shape of her skull, as though she were something too precious to release. Oh, he had all the right *motions*; it was just too bad none of them were ever accompanied by any semblance of *emotion*.

"I just...I missed you."

That tender morsel was more difficult to ignore, but she swallowed the sentiment rising in her throat. “Sex, Seth. You missed the sex. Calling me was pointless because it wasn’t going to get you what you were after.” She tilted her head, sending him a slow-eyed, flirty smile she didn’t feel. “Calling now, on the other hand, might just get you what you’re after. If you find the balls to call it what it is.”

He folded his arms across his broad chest. Sunlight glistened on the dark hair that dusted his limbs, turning it a bronzed shade that accentuated the way he’d tensed his generous biceps. “You know the other night when I said I liked it when you punish me?”

She nodded, too unnerved by his glare to speak.

“I lied.” He spun on the heel of his worn work boot, slammed into the Navigator, and tore out of the parking lot, leaving a cloud of dust and spray of gravel in his wake.

Bonnie sprang from her yellow beetle convertible, a comical mixture of concern and elation creasing her impish features. “Whoa! Looks like he couldn’t get away from you fast enough. Did I just win myself a cruise?”

Eva unlocked the door and sailed into the office, calling over her shoulder, “Don’t break out the suitcases and sunscreen just yet. Games not over until both players have engaged, and it seems Mr. Edwards is currently having a difficult time accepting the rules I’ve laid out.”

“Yeah, he strikes me as the type of guy who follows his own set of laws. Just what sort of policy did you put in place?” Bonnie followed her into the break room. She leaned on the counter with a grin and wiggled her fingers. “No ring, no fling?”

She laughed as she flipped the switch on the coffee machine. “Not exactly. I’ll tell you all about it after you purchase the first round of drinks on that cruise you’re buying us.”

Bonnie set out mugs and fidgeted with the little device she used to froth milk to mix faux lattes. “You know, maybe the bet wasn’t one of my brighter ideas. We can call it off, Eva. No harm, no foul.”

She observed her friend’s frown of consternation and impatiently snatched the whirring mini-mixer to whip the milk herself. “Now why would we want to do that?”

Bonnie shrugged. “This seems to be causing you undue stress. I just wondered if you might be better to approach Seth like an adult and put your cards on the table.”

She sneered. “Right, like showing your hand is ever the way to gain the upper hand.”

“See. This is exactly what I mean. When you’re not staring off into space, you’re jumping every time the phone rings or the door opens. You’ve been a strung-out mega-bitch all week. Is a cruise worth this? Is *he* worth this?”

“Quit trying to renege, and dust off your credit card, you cheapskate.” She didn’t know how the words had emerged so airily. Deep inside, she still battled the urge to fall into Seth arms, allow him to coddle her, make her feel like a woman, and make her feel loved with his sensational lovemaking, despite the fact that she knew he’d never actually love her. “He’s going to chase me a few more times. I’m going to walk away. And you’re right. It’ll all be worth it to know he’ll never waltz back here again, thinking he can inflate me with his compliments like he’d inflate a damn blow-up doll.”

CHAPTER SIX

Eva planned to spend her weekend dressed to the nines and sauntering in and out of the city's most popular entertainment spots. She felt certain Seth would be out on the prowl, looking for a suitable replacement for her. Some soft, sweet, probably disgustingly young and sexy woman who'd assuage his ego by letting him call all the shots.

Just like you used to do, the little voice in her head whispered. "Ah shuddup," she mumbled as she stepped into her littlest little black dress. She completed her ensemble with killer heels, a thick gold chain that disappeared into the generous amount of cleavage her dress revealed, and a liberal spritz of Seth's favorite, spicy perfume.

As she descended to the underground parking beneath her condo, she assessed her reflection in the mirrored walls of the elevator and felt a stab of something she'd never felt before. It was almost as though she were viewing a stranger. A chilly-faced woman who looked like she was on the prowl on the exterior but really only wanted to growl on the interior.

She should have agreed when Bonnie offered to call off the bet. Seth was the player, not her. Besides, in her heart she didn't want to put one over on him, she just wanted to *be* over him. How had something she'd once viewed as a comfortable relationship decimated to little more than a juvenile prank?

She decided sitting in her condo, brooding about it, wasn't likely to generate any answers, and she might as well carry on with her plans to meet up with friends. All single friends. As she distractedly nursed an apple martini, Eva surveyed the stylish group of woman she was supposedly partying with and wondered if any of them felt as though they'd stuck a neon price tag on their asses, too, by gravitating to a reputed meat-market with all their finest assets on display.

Trying to get in the spirit of things, she accepted an invitation to dance, twitching with discomfort every time *top car salesman of the month*, Joe, touched her. Bob, of the *hey, baby, I've got a boat, whaddaya say we...*, wasn't much better. She declined the third dance invitation, eyeing the eerily glowing circle of pale flesh on his ring finger pointedly. He took her intended slight with a grin and good-natured shrug.

Shortly after that, Tracy suggested the patio bar at the Lakeside might have a better clientele. But by stop number two; Eva had already had enough. She couldn't remember when she'd decided the frenetic, desperate behavior in nightclubs made her want to hurl. At one point, she'd enjoyed the singles scene. The thrill of the chase. But she was in no mood to hit or be hit on. Besides, the way her nerves were leaping, she didn't feel at all convinced she could bluff her way through the situation if she should happen to encounter Seth with some sexy new squeeze.

She begged off with a headache and was ensconced on her sofa, face scrubbed of make-up and clad in an old baseball jersey, before eleven. Shit, she was practically a housewife, except she didn't have a house, and she was nobody's wife.

"Party on," she mumbled as she popped the tab on a can of organic, green tea soda.

She fell asleep on her lumpy sofa and woke up crankier than she'd gone to bed. When Tracy called to see where they were meeting that evening, she declined. She'd accepted the fact that she wasn't on the market but in mourning, and carrying out a charade of living the singles' highlife wouldn't expedite the process. Too bad she didn't have a clue what might.

* * * *

After her restless weekend, returning to work Monday morning was a nice respite, but it didn't last long. Seth sauntered through the door to her office as if he owned the place seconds after she'd settled behind her desk.

She glanced up and wondered forlornly why, in addition to being sensational in the sack and effortlessly oozing more charm than any ten men should have, he also had to be the best-looking guy she'd ever laid eyes on. His white polo shirt fit as though one more ounce of muscle would test the seams, and his well-worn jeans hugged him like his solid lower body had been painted stonewash blue. His dark hair was the perfect length to be

tousled with lover's fingers, and the granite set of his clean-shaven jaw made her want to explore it with her tongue.

If all that wasn't enough, the way his whiskey-toned eyes glowed like she was the only woman in the world every time he smiled at her definitely would have done her in. She forced her gaze away from him, thinking *never again*, but not really convinced.

He set a jumbo iced-cappuccino in front of her and then pulled the hand he'd been hiding from behind his back. He swung the bag enticingly. "Truce, okay, Eva?"

A flutter rippled through her as she immediately recognized the lace-patterned bag of a country bakery they'd discovered in their travels. Knowing he held the most mouthwatering chocolate almond croissant was nothing compared to the realization that he must have been up at the crack of dawn to make the drive out there in time to bring her a breakfast treat.

"Trying to sweeten me up?"

"Damn right I am. Is it working?"

God, yes! She shrugged nonchalantly. "You have a good memory, I'll give you that."

"For some things." He offered a pointed look and she fiddled with the straw of her cappuccino and averted her eyes as she took a sip. He shook his head, as though disappointed she hadn't picked up the conversational ball, then spoke as though it didn't matter. "I'm glad I remembered where to find Lacy's Bakery, anyway. These were just coming out of the oven when I got there. I've already eaten three. Mmm, pure heaven. There's three more in there for you," he added, almost as an afterthought.

His enthusiasm and mock shiver of ecstasy made her laugh. "I can't eat three of those sugar and cholesterol-laden monstrosities."

"Sure you can. I've seen you do it. And an enjoyable sight it was, too." The hard line of his lips quirked to the left, and his eyes narrowed. "I'd buy a ticket to watch you eat one of these, Eva. The way you lick your lips and suck all that chocolate icing from your fingertips does things to me."

The intimate smile and warm light in his eyes transported her back to the weekend they'd stayed in a century bed and breakfast and discovered the bakery. They'd been indulging in wild—and wildly inappropriate—bouts of sex for nearly three months while they worked together finishing the

Jameson project, but that had been the first whole night she'd spent with him.

The flutter inside her heated and sped up when she remember the thrill of waking to Seth trailing soft kisses across her shoulders and down her spine. He'd risen early, snuck out to get breakfast, and they'd lazed in bed, indulging in rich dark coffee, nibbles of the croissants, and nibbles of each other.

Their eyes locked, and she could tell his thoughts had strayed down the same path. His fist tightened on the pastry bag until his knuckles whitened, and he swept his tongue slowly across his lips. Suddenly, she could taste the sweetness of almonds, chocolate, and Seth, and she felt herself mirror his tongue swipe. She cut it short, catching her lip with her teeth. Much more of this, and she'd be melting at his feet the same way the pastry was about to melt in her mouth. And she was sure that had been his intention.

She cleared her throat and shook off the sentimental and sexual stupor he'd thrown her into. "Let's split the difference. One and half croissants each."

"This is good. We're sharing again." He grinned, his sexy, hooded eye expression evaporating like mist. Tossing the bag on her desk, he said, "I'd love to, but I've got to run. Have a nice day, Eva."

The abrupt way he spun and left her office made her want to heave his peace offering at the back of his head.

* * * *

Seth felt pleased with the way the morning had gone. Sure, it would have been better if she'd flung herself into his arms in gratitude. He'd hoped the schmaltzy intent behind his pastry delivery would force Eva to release him from whatever penalty box she appeared to have stuffed him into. That they could kiss and make up. A lot to stake on a croissant, he supposed, but at least he'd seen a genuine ray of hope. For a second, her practiced mask had dropped, and the familiar, soft warm light of adoration had shone in her eyes.

He tried to recall just how many times he'd taken that look for granted. How many times he'd glanced away from that gentle sheen of admiration

that lit her from within and sent his blood pumping to places far more meaningful than the one he generally shared with her.

Shaking off the uncharacteristic wistfulness, he focused on plans for the remainder of the week; confident that now he had a foot on the rung, scaling the wall she had erected between them wouldn't be a problem.

On Tuesday he brought her a basket of cherries, still warm from the sun. She'd been on the phone, and he hadn't waited for her to end the call, content with the quick, sweet smile of gratitude that parted her lips. On Wednesday he snuck in the office early, leaving a teddy bear clutching a spray of wildflowers he'd stopped and picked by the roadside along the Niagara Gorge. On Thursday he had to be out of town, but he prearranged for the Japanese Gardens to deliver Eva's lunch. An assortment of sushi, which she loved, artfully arranged to look like a summer bouquet.

Friday, he arrived with a jumbo latte and tickets to a concert at Art Park's outdoor stadium. She accepted the coffee with a nod of thanks but tossed aside the envelope that held the tickets, as though disinterested.

He smiled as he thought about how rapidly her contained demeanor would alter when she saw the tickets. Eva loved concerts almost as much as she loved the outdoors. He thought he'd been pretty clever managing to combine two of their shared passions in one simple offering.

Rapping his knuckles on her desk, he said, "I'll see you later."

"Mhmm. Thanks for the coffee," she mumbled, barely glancing up from the massive book of wallpaper samples she perused.

He spent the day dickering over the price of concrete forms for the condo project and grinning like a fool with anticipation. The hype of expectancy flooded out of him like life-blood through a severed artery when he sailed by the development office at five and Howard informed him Bonnie and Eva had left early to catch a concert at Art Park.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The night air was sultry, and Eva put the top down on her red Miata, killing time while she waited for the flood of traffic to leave the park.

“Now are you going to tell me why you took me to what was supposed to have been a romantic evening at an outdoor concert with Seth?” Bonnie demanded, settling in the passenger seat.

She shrugged, not feeling good about what a few hours ago had seemed like a terrifically devious way to bitch-slap Seth. “Maybe I’m just not into the dominant male, caveman routine any longer. He had no business assuming I’d be free for him on a Friday night.”

“But you were free,” Bonnie pointed out pragmatically.

Eva started the car, edging into the stream of cars. “Not for him.”

She felt Bonnie’s eyes on her but pretended to be distracted by driving and didn’t glance her way.

“You’re afraid to spend time with him, aren’t you?”

Bingo! Damn, Bonnie was good sometimes. “Why would I possibly be afraid of Seth?”

“Maybe because, if he got you into his bed, you might never want to leave it.”

“I invited him into my bed. He was just uncomfortable with the terms.”

“Right. You never did say what those terms were.”

No way in hell would she confess she’d behaved like a whore and then thrown a hissy fit over a condom with a man she’d never used protection with. In the beginning, she’d been so naive. Convinced that she and Seth were actually building a relationship that went beyond mere physical intimacy. Maybe they hadn’t advanced to the next level, but at least they’d been exclusive. Protection hadn’t been an issue.

What an idiot she’d been to ever believe exclusivity would continue while he was miles away for months at a time.

She still wanted to cry every time she thought of the indignant expression on his face when she'd referred to herself as one of the masses. She wanted to cry more at his admission that there'd been other women. Had she expected him to deny it? Seth was a virile man. She hadn't had many lovers, but she'd had enough to know his skilled and thorough foreplay—not to mention his stamina—would be considered legendary.

She shook off the nauseating thought of his tempting another woman with the incredible gentleness of his hands, the hardness of his muscular body, and the pleasures of his skilled tongue. "I didn't realize disclosing my method was a condition of the bet."

"I suppose it isn't. You've got him chasing, just like you said he would, and you're not responding. Does this mean I lost the bet?"

She was tempted to say, yes, but knew it would be cheating. She'd put her own slant on the bet, and until she'd proven herself right, the game wasn't over. "When Seth quits playing games and admits what's between him and me is just exactly what it has always been, then you lose the bet."

"God! You're talking in riddles, Eva. I can't believe I risked a month's salary on something we can't even agree on the terms of. He's sending you gifts daily and falling all over you. Maybe you should admit I won the bet. Obviously the man is wild about you."

"Bullshit. He's trying to buy me. Just like you'd purchase a hooker." She was surprised the blunt admission had flown from her mouth.

Apparently Bonnie felt the same. She sputtered and stuttered a few times before she managed to shriek, "What!"

"It's true." Sadness settled over her like a heavy fog. Her eyes burned, and it felt like she'd swallowed a substance that was expanding rapidly enough to fill her entire chest cavity. "The only thing Seth's wild about is getting what he wants, and all he wants from me is sex. When I finally make him admit that, then I win the bet."

"Wow. Bet neither of us is cruising any time soon."

* * * *

Seth arrived at the development office just as Eva unlocked the door Monday. She cast him a glance over her shoulder and a perfunctory good morning. He sauntered in behind her, breathing in a soft cloud of spicy perfume he was pretty sure he'd given her. He couldn't decide if he wanted to grab her and kiss her senseless or throttle her, so he opted to do neither.

“Did you have a nice weekend?” Her back was turned as she shoveled coffee into a filter, but he clearly detected the smile in her voice.

“Not particularly. You?”

She poured in water and hit the switch, turning to offer him a smile that could have melted butter. “Bonnie and I had an absolutely fantastic night at Art Park. What a lovely gesture that was, getting those tickets, Seth.”

“Hmm. Not quite the gesture I’d intended, but I’m glad you enjoyed yourself.” He couldn’t help smiling at her blasé act. It served him right for being cocky enough to presume a few gifts would buy him out of whatever trouble he’d unwittingly fallen into. Obviously Eva felt she had some score to settle, and until she’d flayed him what she considered an appropriate number of times, he wouldn’t be off the hook.

He’d enjoyed the repartee they’d developed in the past. That whole thrill-of-the-chase routine, but oddly enough, the fun had suddenly gone out of it. He had no desire to pursue her and persuade her. He just wanted her to tell him what the hell he’d done, so he could make penance and hold her in his arms. Tell her how he’d missed her and how very much he looked forward to spending time with her again.

The thought of actually saying those things to her made his heart rev until he was sure she’d hear it, growling as distinctively as a Harley. He gave his head a shake in an attempt to dislodge the bizarre contemplations.

“Headache?” She eyed him strangely, and he forced a smile to his face.

“Nope. Just haven’t slept well the last few nights.” Expecting her to ask why was too much to hope for, and he wasn’t about to tell her voluntarily. “Are you free later?”

She shrugged as she set cups on the counter and added milk to one and a heaping spoonful of sugar to the other. He felt like an idiot for wanting to hug her just because she remembered he liked his coffee black and sweet. His own mother drank herbal tea and couldn’t even be bothered bringing coffee into the house on the rare occasion he visited.

She poured and passed him a steaming mug, her face strangely neutral. “It depends. What did you have in mind?”

“Dinner at Marie’s. Maybe a walk on the pier.”

Her bland expression instantly morphed to the narrow-eyed, bitter smile she’d eviscerated him with the night in her apartment.

“A seafood dinner and strolling hand and hand on the boardwalk. How charmingly romantic and clichéd. I suppose there’s a bottle of champagne in there somewhere, too. Perhaps a single, long-stemmed red rose.” Her laughter was as astringent as vinegar. “Did you spend the weekend reading the Dale Carnegie guide to getting laid, Seth?”

That was it. He’d had it. Setting aside his mug so quickly hot coffee sloshed over his hand, he stepped toward her. “What the hell do you want from me, Evie?”

“The same thing you’ve always wanted from me.” Placing her mug beside his, she moved close enough that her breasts brushed his ribs. Her hands curved around his neck, and the familiar, tickling pleasure of her slender fingers brushing the hair at his nape forced a shiver from him.

She lifted her face so her warm, milky coffee breath caressed his throat, making him swallow heavily. For a second, he felt the pressure of her lips rest on the pulse in his neck, and then she leaned far enough that her breath rushed past his ear, and whispered, “I want you to fuck me, Seth.”

She stepped away, spreading her hands in a supplicant gesture. “Simple, really. All it would take is a ten-dollar trip to the drugstore. I don’t know why you’re over complicating things with faux romance, corny gifts, and meaningless gestures.”

Her barbed words pinged off nerves he hadn’t even known he had. “Meaningless?”

She shrugged, picking up her coffee and sipping as though they were discussing the weather.

“Maybe you just don’t get my meaning, Eva.”

“Could be,” she said agreeably. Topping up her coffee, she headed for her office, calling back over her shoulder, “Or it could be that I get it too well, and the honesty is just too much for you.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Seth sipped his drink. The ice had melted and the sour taste of diluted single malt made him shudder. The alcohol wasn't doing a damn thing about the rage coursing through him anyway.

I want you to fuck me!

Jesus. He was no prude, but hearing her state it in such blunt terms made him want to wash her mouth out with soap. It had always been about more than that with Eva. Not simply anatomy pumping against anatomy but about intimacy, laughter, and playfulness. About enjoyment that reached beyond the puzzle pieces fitting together so perfectly.

He'd always believed that the foreplay of the time they spent together—the courtship, so to speak—was every bit as pleasurable as the climax. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe Eva just wanted her tidy little designer life and the luxury of an orgasm without the complications of a relationship.

Fuck me.

He reached for the box of Trojans. The cardboard crumpled as his fingers curled into a fist. Damn her. If that's what she wanted, that's what she'd get.

* * * *

Eva woke to a persistent pounding. She glanced at the clock. One-twenty. She'd been in bed less than an hour, and the fuzziness of sleep deprivation left her weighted and woozy.

There was no question it would be Seth. He was the only one she knew ballsy enough to bang on a door at this time on a Monday night. She wondered how he'd gotten in the secure entrance of the building, but she wondered what he wanted.

As she stumbled out of bed and down the hall, she struggled to mentally run through their exchange at the office earlier that day and smiled. She'd been an uber-bitch. He hadn't said much, but judging by the tight line of his mouth and the flash of fire in his whiskey eyes, he'd wanted to shake her.

He'd probably turned up to do just that. Well, he could save it. She wasn't about to embark on a pointless argument with him at this time of night. The knocking took on a louder, more impatient tone. He was definitely riled. She wondered if it was wrong to feel a certain amount of satisfaction that his temper was still stirred hours later.

"Open up, Evie. I know you're standing right there. I can smell your perfume." His voice was hushed but harsh and deep.

"I don't want to talk to you, Seth."

"Good. I don't want to talk to you, either."

She heard a rustle and then the smack of plastic against the door. Cautiously putting her eye to the peephole, she saw a flash of red as he shook the string of condoms that dangled from his fist.

Heat slammed through her chest and swooped low in her belly. "Jesus, Seth. You're a real Casanova, ya know that?"

"Lemme in."

She dropped the chain. Her hand wasn't even off the knob of the deadbolt before he flung the door open, grabbed her, and crushed his lips to hers in a bruising kiss. He kicked the door shut and carried her across the room in a rib-crushing hold, his mouth brutalizing hers all the while.

When he shifted the rough scrape of his stubbled face to her neck, she gasped. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" She pushed against him. He leaned an inch, enough so she could see the hard line of his mouth and the heat in his eyes, but kept her pressed tightly to his solid chest.

"Giving you what you asked for."

He lifted a hand, fanning the hair back from her face. He traced the shell of her ear, first with his lips, and then with his tongue. His breath was moist, whiskey sweet, and hot enough to make her shiver. She wanted to push him away. To humiliate and deny him, as he'd done to her the other night, but she couldn't make herself do it. The second he'd touched her, the subtle ache she'd felt in the region of her heart all week had dropped, becoming an aching void there was only one way to assuage.

She whispered his name as his mouth continued its hot assault on her ear. His only response was a low, animalistic groan she felt as much as heard. He smoothed his other hand up her ribcage, cupping her breast. When she moaned, he brought his lips to hers again. The brutal desperation of his kiss had become raw hunger. The same hunger she felt for him. The same hunger that had driven her to distraction the entire time she'd known him.

"Seth—wait."

"I did. I'm not waiting anymore." He slid both hands down her body. When she tried to ease away, his grip at her hips fell just short of painful, and the harsh rasp of his voice scraped against the pulse pounding in her ears. "Unless you'd like to get the shoes. You know how I love you in those CFM stilettos, babe."

The shoes. She'd left them on the first time they'd ravaged each other at the Jameson house. The place had been nothing but a shell at the time. Outer walls but just a vast cavern of two-by-fours, jutting like teeth to outline where rooms would be. She'd gone to take preliminary measurements. It was only the second or third time she'd seen Seth. He'd caught her eye the very first time, but somehow seeing him in what appeared to be his natural habitat amplified the attraction. When he'd bent to assist her, sawdust, sunshine, and raw sex appeal had assaulted her senses, and she'd kissed him.

To say he'd responded enthusiastically would be the understatement of all time. They'd stumbled around in the dust and timber, pawing each other like animals.

After peeling her dress and ripping her panties in what he claimed was the den, he'd led her, wearing nothing but the shoes, to the master bedroom. He'd driven her wild that afternoon and many afternoons, evenings, and mornings after that. He'd often claimed seeing her walk through his building in nothing but heels had turned him on like nothing else. She'd left her shoes on a few times just to tease him, since, and they'd laughed about it.

The memory of it made her want to cry tonight. She'd brought them to where they were as much as he had, indulging him with playful props instead of trying to engage other senses. But somehow, when she was in his arms, nothing mattered beyond the physical.

She squirmed against him—her body urging her to get closer at the same time as her mind urged her to draw away. He thrust his pelvis forward, his erection prodding her belly through the thin satin of her short nightie.

She moaned his name again, and he spread his fingers across her rear, urging her nearer. The hard length of him burned through the material that separated them and sent her blood rushing.

“Is this what you want, Evie?” He lowered his face to hers again; the hot, persistent message in the open-mouthed kisses he rained all over her cheeks drawing what little oxygen remained in her lungs.

Yes. No. No—Oh, God, yes. Her lips parted in a sigh he swallowed as his mouth crushed hers.

His hands crept downward, slipping beneath satin to caress her naked ass. She gasped as his fingers probed, gently, and then with the same prodding insistence of his tongue as it accosted hers. He backed her toward the dining table, edging the nightgown farther up her body with each step. He pulled his mouth from hers long enough to jerk the white material over her head and fling it aside.

Curving his lips in a wolfish grin, he locked one arm around her waist and splayed his other hand across her lower abdomen, feathering his fingers through her pubic hair and then sliding lower. She shivered as the solid pressure of his middle finger parted her swollen folds, slid across her, retreated, and then tickled over her again.

“You’re so wet, baby. You’re wet. I’m hard. This is what you want. Right?”

Her legs grew weak, and a low moan escaped her as he bent his head, drawing the aching peak of her nipple into his mouth. The tugging pressure of his lips on her breast arrowed straight down to the area where his finger continued to tease. Her traitorous body ground against his hand for a second before she shook her head and tried to pull away.

“How could you just show up here like this, you arrogant ass?”

He trailed his tongue upward, circling an erotic pattern in the conclave of her throat. “It’s what you asked for. No faux romance. Right? Just me, on a mission.”

He thrust against her again. She bit back a cry as her legs weakened and the pulsing pressure in her belly lowered and then dropped, leaving a throbbing ache that had her unconsciously pressing herself to him. Contrary to every cell in her body, her mind still wanted to deny him. “Did you honestly think I’d assume the position like some bitch in heat?”

“That was the plan, yes.” His voice was a low, harsh growl against her collarbone.

“You’re crazy.”

The mind-blowing heat of his lips shifted as he trailed his tongue downward, pressing a hard kiss where she felt her heart thudding heavily enough it threatened to break free of her chest. “Not generally, but you’ve made me that way. I want to give you what you want, Evie,” he mumbled as he wound his tongue around and around the hot flesh of her breast, easing closer to the aching peak. “I want to fuck you. Hard. Hot. Fast.”

She threw her head back with an anguished groan as he finally drew her nipple into his mouth, sucking hard enough to send pain stabbing through her and then bathing the ache with hot strokes of his tongue. She threaded her fingers in his hair, molding her hands to the curve of his skull, holding his head to her breast as pleasure swept through her.

His deep voice had fallen to a rasp. “Until you’re crying my name, Evie. Until you don’t even know if you’re begging me for more or begging me to stop.”

He turned her suddenly, bending her over her black oak dining table with a firm hand on her spine. The hard table edge pressed against her diaphragm. The moonlight dancing across the gleaming wood made her see spots. Before she could catch her breath, she heard the purr of his zipper, the whisper of a foil package being torn, and then he was inside her. As hard and hot and fast as he’d promised.

And within minutes, she whimpered his name as an orgasm ripped through her with the force of a tsunami. She scraped her nails helplessly against the smooth table, scrambling for purchase as her vision turned gray around the edges and all the blood in her body rushed to the pulsing between her legs.

He grew still for a second and then slowly withdrew. Everything inside her coiled tight in an effort to hold on to the hard length of him. She whimpered as his erection slipped between her legs, probing but not penetrating.

“Say it, Evie,” he growled. “Say you want more.”

More? She wanted so much more than he’d ever give, but for now, having him fill her, thrill her, and drive out the rest of the world was

enough. She wriggled her hips backward, nearly sobbing when he shifted farther away. “Oh—God. I...”

“Say it.”

“I want you inside me. I want you, Seth.”

“I know.”

He pulled her upright, molding her body tightly to his and burying his face in her neck. She could feel the heavy thud of his heart against her back and hear a low keening in his throat she thought might be her name. She let her head loll back against his chest, and the gentle brush of his lips at her temple made her want to weep.

For endless minutes, he cradled her, his body swaying slightly in a dance-type motion as their breaths heaved in and out in perfect sync with one another. She crossed her arms around where he’d banded his arms beneath her breasts, hugging herself within his hug. Sated but still aching for him, she had a desperate urge to tell him she’d be happy to stay right where she was forever.

Before she could, his grip loosened, and he thrust her forward, driving himself into her with a thrust that bounced her womb. “I know, Evie. I know what you want from me.”

You’re so wrong. You have no idea what I want. The words wouldn’t come. She braced herself against the table, swallowing a sob. The relentless smack of flesh on flesh, and the breath rasping in and out of him in hard, harsh gasps reverberated in her ears. He grunted as he looped an arm around her middle and jerked her roughly against him, grinding until she felt pressure build all over again.

He bent his knees, sinking himself more deeply inside her. Her senses were so heightened, the coarse brush of the denim he hadn’t even bothered to completely remove scrapped against her thighs like shards of glass. She moaned his name again as his fingers stroked over her, cupping, pressing, and sending her closer and closer to the edge.

With a final hard thrust and a guttural cry, he stilled, but he didn’t pull away. His hands continued to roam from her breasts down to tease at the hot slick area where they were joined. He circled his hips slowly, until she could feel the dizzying motion shoot straight to her throat, and then she was tumbling to a place where she felt—nothing at all and everything.

When he released her, she was weak enough to sprawl boneless across the table with a sob. Heat tingled through every nerve in her body. Her vision blurred. It took several deep breaths before she could stop the ringing in her ears.

Seth's respiration was still rapid and harsh. He cursed. She closed her eyes, blinking back tears when she thought of all the gentle touches and tender words that usually accompanied his lovemaking. He loved to tell her how beautiful she was. How hot she made him. How he'd never get enough of her.

She didn't feel hot or beautiful. She felt dirty. Like she'd somehow degraded them both. And she'd definitely had enough.

Sucking in a shuddering breath, she stood. He'd straightened his pants but not buttoned them, and her eyes were drawn immediately to the condom glistening with moisture. It occurred to her that she'd won. He'd given in on something he'd taken a stand on just to get laid.

She felt like anything but a winner.

Swallowing a sob, she waited for him to speak. When he didn't, she lifted her gaze to meet his. His dark hair was rumpled, and there was something far-off and glacial about his expression.

"That was disgusting."

His eyes narrowed, and he gave her a quick flash of his crooked tooth. "That was what you asked for."

"Get out." She rushed him, yanking the condom off so viciously he barked a yelp of pain. She stormed to the bathroom to flush it, calling back, "Get out of my apartment. Get out of my fucking life, Seth."

CHAPTER NINE

Working Tuesday was out of the question. She'd slept and cried. Cried and slept, and even cried in her sleep. When she stumbled into the bathroom late in the afternoon and glanced in the mirror, she discovered she looked precisely how she felt—like a six-foot-three, two hundred and twenty-pound man had flattened her.

After a hot shower, the tears she thought might never stop did, leaving her feeling empty and nauseated. She tried to sooth the nausea and her raw throat with honeyed herbal tea and then faced the blinking light on her answering machine with a tripping heart.

Would he call? She decided it didn't matter. Nothing he could say would bridge the chasm that had ripped open between them. An abyss she was sure even he'd become aware of now.

You have eight new messages. Six were from Bonnie. They started with curiosity, dwindled to concern, and then the last one held a note of dismay. "Eva, hon, you've got to call me. I fielded messages for you today and cancelled your appointments tomorrow, but I'm worried."

The seventh message was from Howard, wondering if she'd seen Seth. Apparently he'd failed to respond to repeated cell calls and pages. The eighth message on her machine almost made her laugh out loud in that semi-hysterical isn't-life-funny, peculiar kind of way.

After checking the time to ensure it was past five and she wouldn't actually have to speak to anyone, she called the development office and said she'd be out for the rest of the week.

Clearing her throat, she picked up the phone and returned the last call. She set a meeting for Thursday lunch, figuring that should be enough time to nurse the bags under her eyes and feel human again. The plans made her feel oddly mollified and curious about the possibilities yet to be explored. Just like that old saying about a window opening whenever a door closed,

the beginning had resurfaced right at the end. Things appeared to have come full circle.

* * * *

Monday morning after a difficult meeting with Howard, Eva took an early lunch and spent the afternoon tying up the loose ends on her current projects. Bonnie had left for the day when Eva returned to the development office. She propped the cruise brochures she'd picked up against her computer monitor and smiled when she thought of the response it was sure to draw from her enthusiastic friend.

When she went into her office, she noticed someone had propped something against her computer monitor, as well. Her heart lurched into her throat and then dropped heavily. She perched on her chair, squeezing her eyes tightly closed. What could he possibly have to say at this point? It had been a week. Seven days of blaming him, blaming herself, and then eventually reaching the conclusion that it didn't really matter whose fault it was; the end result was the same. It was over.

With that firmly planted in her mind, she picked up the paper.

Eva,

I've experienced so many firsts with you, I wouldn't know how to begin to list them all, but I can honestly say last week was the first time I've regretted giving a woman what she asked for. Sorry doesn't cut it. I behaved unconscionably, and I only hope you can find it in your heart to give me the opportunity to make it up to you. To prove I can treat you like the intelligent, desirable woman I think you are.

The paper in her hand trembled enough to make her dizzy. She smoothed it across her desk and noticed the letters in his final sentence had been formed smaller and sharper. A shade darker too, as though the pen had fallen more heavily on the page.

A woman who means more to me than I can express.

Her eyes burned but felt strangely dry and free of tears. She crumpled the paper in her fist. "Not more than you can express, Seth," she whispered tossing the ball of pale blue stationary toward her trash. "Just more than you're willing to express."

* * * *

Seth wanted to stay away from the development office and give Eva time to digest his apology, but he couldn't do it. He knew his written request for forgiveness was not only a day late and a dollar short but also a damn poor substitute for the things he should have said in the past.

At the crack of dawn Tuesday, the Navigator—as though self-navigated—sped toward Lacy's bakery, and his heart sped up with every mile on his way back to town. Eva smiled when she saw the pastry bag, but it was a pale substitute of her normal smile. Distant enough to make a warning note ping somewhere deep inside him.

"Did you get my note?"

She nodded and gestured to the bag in his hand. "We did have some terrific firsts, didn't we?" The vise in his chest loosened at her words but tightened enough to cut off respiration when she spoke again. "But all we seem to be good at is firsts, and we've used them all up."

"Eva, I..."

She raised her hand, cutting him off. "Don't, okay? Don't let me force you into anything else. We had a neat little game, Seth, and I not only changed the rules but also tried to change the whole game. And I'm sick of it. Sick of games. I know you live for the firsts. The mega-romance and grand gestures, and I feel stupid even saying this, but it doesn't do anything for me anymore."

She eyed him in a peculiar way she never had before. He tried to define her expression. Disinterest? Disappointment? He realized it was both, maybe even a hint of pity. "It doesn't or I don't?" he asked dully.

She shrugged. "Does it make a difference?"

"It does to me."

"The flowers, the gifts. They don't make me feel special, Seth. They make me feel...purchased. Rewarded for a service I've provided. I don't know—maybe it's just me. But this isn't working anymore."

How could she stand there so calmly? Couldn't she see she was ripping him to shreds? "I don't know what you want from me, Eva," he confessed desperately.

Again her shoulder lifted in a dispassionate shrug. “Nothing. Well, that’s harsh. Friendship would be nice. The ability to be civil to one another so we can look back on things fondly.”

He noticed her decision had cemented itself so firmly, she already referred to them in past tense. Could have and should have choked him, and he swallowed heavily, realizing his reckless behavior had extinguished the glow he’d always thought they’d share. He’d find some way to relight it. But judging by her uninviting face, it wouldn’t happen today.

He dropped his head forward in a single nod of agreement, although he couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard anyone say anything he’d disagreed with more. He set the pastry bag on her desk. “I’ll be in the office a fair bit over the next couple of weeks while we finalize everything.” He forced a smile, but it felt more like a grimace. “I’ll lay off the flowers and faux romance, but would it be okay if I brought you a decent coffee now and again? You can decorate, Evie, but face it, your coffee-making skills are for shit.”

Her smile looked as insipid as his felt. “Agreed. A decent cuppa is definitely something special around here.”

“Okay. I’ll um, see ya.”

“Bye, Seth.”

She dropped into her chair the second he left, exhausted by her efforts to sound calm, when inside, all she wanted to do was pound her fists on his chest until she somehow exposed the heart she knew had to be beating in there under all that damned rock-hard muscle and stubbornness.

She felt sure he had a heart, but obviously she didn’t have the skill to expose it. Like the old story of the sun and the wind competing, she’d tried both angles—when pouring on heat backfired, the chill hadn’t brought him closer—he remained buttoned up.

Maybe he always would. Maybe Seth Edwards would stay a man who’d forever give the way he wanted—with cash instead of character.

CHAPTER TEN

Over the course of the next few weeks, Seth appearing in her office every morning, toting treats and specialty coffees, had become an occurrence she subconsciously anticipated. He'd been painfully polite on every occasion. In a distant, unnatural way, perhaps like a man might treat a sister-in-law or the wife of a friend that he didn't particularly care for.

She'd done her best to copy his cold courtesy but couldn't stop herself from searching his face daily for signs that it strained him as much as it did her. Sometimes she thought she caught a glimpse of something in his expression that made her sure one of his irreverent comments or sexy suggestions were about to emerge from the carefully contained smile on his lips. So far, nothing had. She couldn't decide if she were relieved or resentful.

He'd failed to appear Monday and Tuesday. When he didn't show until noon on Wednesday, she castigated herself for having wasted the morning watching for him and drowning in disappointment. She also considered the difficult decision she'd made one of her best yet. The pretend distance they were enacting hadn't done a damn thing. She needed some real distance to get over things. The end of the week couldn't come soon enough.

"Plans are finally all approved," he announced without preamble. "They'll break ground midweek."

Her heart lurched as he settled into the chair across from her desk and scrubbed his hands over his face as though he could erase the exhaustion clearly stamped there. She'd been so intent on not letting him catch her looking at him, she hadn't really looked in a while. The weariness creasing his features surprised her. She ached to smooth her thumbs over the tired smudges beneath his eyes. To press her lips to the crevice by his mouth until her kisses relaxed it into the dimple it ordinarily was.

She dropped back into her chair, ignoring the impulses. “You look tired. I take it this project hasn’t gone as smoothly for you as most do.”

He jerked his head up, and the shadow of a dimple flashed. “Project’s fine. No hurdles I haven’t leapt before. It’s the homecoming that’s wearing on me, to tell the truth.”

Her heart plummeted. He’d never liked to stay in one place for long, but he hadn’t even been in St. Catherines a full three months yet. This had to be a new record, even for Seth. And yet another few notches on her *made the right decision* belt.

She thought unexpectedly of the plot of land Howard had recently bid on. The acreage was a few miles from the Jameson house. That area of the Niagara Parkway had long been devoted to homes of distinction and character. It was one of her favorite places to indulge in a Sunday drive. When Howard had proposed to plant town homes there, she’d wanted to slap him for blighting the scenery with his little tacky-tacky boxes, but a small part inside of her had actually leapt in glee at the thought that Seth might become involved in the project. Like maybe involved enough to stick around for another year or two.

What an idiot she was. Seth wouldn’t grow roots until they planted him in a pine box. “Getting itchy feet again already?” She winced at the snide way the comment had come out, but he just offered another worn smile.

“A little maybe. I thought a few days in Halliburton might do me good. Get a cottage, fish, or just lie on a dock and drink beer.”

“But you love to watch them break ground.”

He shrugged and then leaned, propping his elbows on her desk. She felt compelled to raise her eyes to his, but she was sorry she had. The wounded confusion she read there only intensified the ache at her sternum.

“I’d love to reconnect with you more. What do you say, can you spare a coupla’ days?”

She swallowed back the *God, yes!* that had lodged in her throat. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Look, I can’t fake this anymore. Okay?” His voice emerged low and harsh, like a shout he struggled to contain. “I don’t want to be your goddamned friend. I want things to be the way they used to be.”

Me, too, she thought forlornly. But it would never happen. While Seth had ridden off to pursue his heart’s desire, she’d been left alone to get in

touch with her own heart in a way that made forever replaying their history impossible. “We used up all our firsts, remember? It’ll never be the way it used to be.”

“Why?” Leaning farther, he captured the hand she’d waved dismissively at him and brushed his lips across her knuckles. “I can’t fix it if you won’t tell me how I broke it, Evie. Tell me what changed.”

She yanked her hand away so fast, he felt like he’d been doused in cold water. Standing, she paced farther away from him. He spun his chair to see her, and she’d bowed her head and wrapped her arms protectively around her midsection. When she spoke, it was into her chest, and he found himself holding his breath to be able to hear the low mumble.

“After you left at New Years, I had a near miss.”

Miss? He mentally urged her to continue. She didn’t. “What, like a life-altering accident or something?”

“You could say that.” She turned to him, and he forced himself to remain sitting rather than tugging her into his arms like he wanted to. Her smile was small and sad. “I missed a period, Seth. I spent weeks obsessively running to the bathroom to check for spotting. Weeks considering my options.”

“Options?” His voice cracked like a hormonal teenager. The thought of Eva terminating a child—their child—alone tightened a vise around his lungs. “Did you...” He couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence.

“Abort,” she supplied. She shook her head. “I measured my views on the subject, but fortunately it didn’t come to that. I considered lots of things those weeks. Single motherhood. My mom was no paragon of parenting, but I turned out all right, I suppose. I even wondered if I could be selfless enough to carry a child and give it up for some barren couple yearning to be parents.”

She stopped pacing a few feet from his chair, and her bleak gaze met his. “Oddly enough, Seth, the one thing I never considered was you and I raising the child together. It never even crossed my mind.”

“Eva.” He stood and reached toward her, but she raised her hands to ward him off. A single tear teetered on her lashes, and she flicked it away with the careless disregard of someone swatting a fly. It occurred to him he’d never seen her cry. Not at weddings. Not at tear-jerking chick-flick

movies. She'd even remained dry-eyed throughout the days of visitation and the memorial service after her mother's death.

For years he'd considered himself lucky to be aligned with such an emotionally stable, self-contained woman, but the realization of how wrong that particular belief was blasted him with enough velocity to make the blood pound in his temples. Eva's failure to display emotion had nothing to do with her control and everything to do with how much she held back from him.

By involving her only in the aspects of his life he felt comfortable sharing—the romantic evenings and getaways, the shallow playtimes—he'd unwittingly placed her in the role of good-time gal. A role she played to the max, happily providing what he asked. No less and certainly no more. Up until now, he'd thought the system worked for them. What a stupid bastard he was. *I feel purchased*. The words he'd puzzled over for weeks were suddenly crystal clear.

As he watched another tear slowly spill over her thick lashes, he almost wanted to cry himself thinking about everything they'd lost out on because of his callous behavior.

He reached for her, but she stepped away, and he only managed to graze her goose-bumped arm with his palm. "I would have been there for you, Eva."

She delicately swiped an index finger beneath each eye and raised her head to send him a cheerless smile. "We'll never know, will we?"

His gaze drifted from her metallic painted toenails peeking from her sexy sandals, up her shapely calves and thighs, pausing at her midsection, where she still had her arms folded tightly enough to make it appear she was holding something in. Somehow he easily pictured the soft swell of her hips spreading, her full breasts blooming with nourishment for her child. Their child. A searing pain wound its way upward from his testicles, stopping like a fist in his throat. There'd never been a child. How could he suddenly be mourning what had never existed?

"I would have been there for you, Eva. No matter what. Trust me."

"Trust you." Her laughter rang sharp enough to shatter the cracks her admission had caused inside him. "I can always trust you for a good time and great sex, Seth. Unfortunately, an unplanned pregnancy isn't a good time, and it sure isn't sexy." She dropped her arms and started pacing again.

“Trust you. Brave words after the fact. You’re no more family material than I am. Have you forgotten all the snide comments you made when we attended your mother’s fourth marriage? How is dear old Mom, by the way?”

He didn’t particularly want to answer, but her laser like gaze left him no choice. “Gleefully awaiting her fourth divorce decree and celebrating her almost freedom on a Florida golf course with her date du jour.” She didn’t say anything, but she nodded, as though he’d confirmed her point. “Doesn’t have to be that way for us, Eva.”

“No? How about your dad? He’s on his third family. Raising a child young enough to be yours. I remember all those horrible jokes you made about selfish people procreating. How you thought that sterilization should be a mandatory component of a third divorce. For what it’s worth, I mostly agree. Saying you’re a little married or a little bit of a parent is like being a little dead or a little pregnant.” Her stern expression crumpled on the last word. Regardless of the blasé attitude she fought to hold onto, he heard as plainly as if she’d spoken the words, that Eva had wanted her baby. His baby.

He approached her slowly, and she stilled, allowing him to rest his hands on her shoulders. The mild tremor he felt running through her leached its way inside him and left his voice low and unsteady. “It’ll be different for us. I don’t want to be like them.”

“Who do you think you’re fooling, Seth? Not me, I’ll tell you that. You already are *them*. You’re thirty-five years old, and you’ve built dozens of homes for other people, but you’ve never stayed in one place long enough to contemplate a home of your own. Have you ever even owned a car? Or do you just sign on to a vehicle until it has the first engine sputter or rust spot, toss it back, and snag the next shiny new object that won’t give you any trouble?”

She moved to shift away, and he instinctively tightened his grasp. She winced, and he loosened his fingers and wrapped his arms around her. There was none of the usual hand-in-glove sensation. None of the parts melding to parts as though they’d been designed to fit. Holding Eva was the equivalent of trying to hug a sheet of drywall. He dropped his cheek to her crown, breathing in the soft, spicy scent that always clung to her. Instead of

comforting him, it made him frantically afraid to let go. Terrified he'd never get this close again.

"I hear what you're saying, Eva. For the most part, you're even right. But I don't want it to be that way. I can change."

She eased away from him and mimed another dismissive wave. "Leopards and spots, Seth. People don't change but circumstances can, and I've decided it's time to alter mine."

"By ditching me?" He knew he sounded like a jilted loser and didn't even care.

The sad little smile tugged at the corners of her lips again. "I don't think I'll ever be able to completely ditch you. Too much time invested. Too many memories. But it is time to quit dipping the same empty well and coming up dry."

He didn't think she'd appreciate the dirty joke his mind automatically conjured and opted not to share. "You want to see other people. Is that what you're telling me?"

She shrugged. "Other people. Other places. 'Member the Jameson house, Seth?"

A hint of laughter brightened the flatness of her eyes, but he knew it wasn't a good sign. The joke was about to be on him. "I'll never forget the Jameson house."

She nodded as if in agreement. A nostalgic and genuine smile parted her lips, and for a second, his heart soared. But she brushed her hands together, and her features tightened to all business again so quickly he almost thought the look they'd shared had been his imagination or a trick of light.

"Misty called me. Now Mrs. Jameson is someone who knows how to improve her circumstances. Seems she's a bit bored simply being the lady of the manor, so she's purchased several high-end properties in exotic locations."

"Good for her." Seth smiled, remembering the feisty Misty Jameson. She'd been spoiled and demanding as only someone born with a mouthful of silver spoons and then married to another mouthful could be, but he'd respected her perfectionist's eye, and she'd been suitably grateful for the amazing job his team and Eva had done on her dream home on the escarpment.

"Her plan is to renovate and flip them for profit."

“And so the rich get richer,” he mumbled, scrambling to tie in the current subject with whatever was going on between him and Eva. She didn’t leave him to his mental gymnastics long.

“She asked me to redecorate the houses for her. I said yes.”

You’re leaving me? It screamed through his head, but he somehow managed to keep the words from escaping. “You’re, um, leaving Howard?”

“I’m taking an open leave of absence, yes.”

“But—what about our project?”

She shrugged, as though his project was no more worthy of a second thought than she seemed to consider him. “I’ve wanted to branch out for a while now. You know it’s the custom jobs that truly satisfy me.”

Everything inside him sped up, and a strange weightlessness floated through his head, making him feel like it might take flight from his shoulders. Not so long ago, he’d believed he truly satisfied her. “I’ll give you carte blanche on the condo, Eva. I always have. You have impeccable taste.”

She sniffed as though he’d made some inane, elevator-conversation type comment. “Free reign on a middling condo complex. Yahoo. Anyone with a lick of sense who isn’t colorblind could choose paint and carpet for that application. You’ll be able to find a replacement for me in the damn yellow pages.”

His constricted throat made the words feel like shotgun shells being propelled through a straw. “I’ll never find anyone to replace you, Evie.”

The grin on her face made it apparent he was shooting blanks. He’d said the words, but he hadn’t said them right somehow. “You do always have the smoothest lines, Seth. I’ll miss that.”

“Then don’t go.” Certainly not the best line, but it was the best he could come up with in his current state of panic.

She ignored the comment. “Misty and I fly to St. Martin Saturday, but I’m all organized and ready to go. Would you like to buy me a farewell dinner Friday night?”

He nodded. The jumble of words he couldn’t seem to say had backlogged in his throat, making speech impossible.

“Let’s say Amigos for old times’ sake. I’ll meet you there. Is seven okay?”

He shook his head, finally finding his voice. It held a raw, wounded note even he barely recognized. "I'd sooner surprise you. I'll pick you up at six."

"Fine." The single word was delivered airily. She walked around her desk, fiddling with her pen and sifting papers, effectively dismissing him.

He turned, the weight of his feet almost more than his legs could take as he walked away from her.

Friday.

He had exactly two days to accomplish all the growing up he hadn't managed to do in thirty-five years.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Eva was moved to tears by the farewell luncheon Howard and Bonnie organized as a surprise for her. Actually, she'd been on the brink of tears for the better part of the week. She couldn't figure it out. It wasn't her nature to be a crybaby.

Misty had offered her a wonderful opportunity. One that she not only wanted, but needed. Getting away was the *only* way she'd get over Seth. She glanced around the well-known office, taking in the friendly faces, surprised he hadn't made an appearance.

Just thinking about him forced the too familiar swelling pressure in her chest. What the hell had she been thinking, inviting him to take her for a farewell dinner? She had no doubt he'd use every weapon in his well-stocked arsenal; wine, flowers, a gourmet dinner somewhere exclusive. She could handle all that; it was his smile—that intimate glow that lit his eyes as though he were looking into her very soul and treasured the view—she wasn't sure how to deal with.

Maybe she'd just tell him right off the bat they could skip the dinner and simply hit the sheets for a farewell—fling. It was certainly a tactic that had sent him into retreat mode before. Trouble was, it was also exactly what she wanted. To lie in his arms and have him whisper sweet nothings as he thoroughly loved her from head to toe. Maybe then she could erase the fiasco that had been their last sex-capade and remember the good stuff.

Dumb, Eva. That was tantamount to saying one last hit would help a junkie retain fond memories of speed. Seth was her addiction, and the more she had of him, the more she'd want.

She set aside the seafood salad she'd been picking at and sipped her punch. Trailing her finger over the keypad of the telephone, she debated calling him and telling him she had too many last minute details to iron out and would have to skip dinner.

“You’re looking awfully pensive for someone about to embark on her own personal episode of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*,” Bonnie commented, rolling a chair over and sitting beside her. “Having second thoughts?”

She shook her head, smiling wryly. “Having Seth thoughts.”

Bonnie drew her fair brows together in a frown of concern. “I know you conceded you have feelings for him, and even stayed true to your word and bought me a cruise, but, Eva, if you’re embarking on this new venture just to spite him—leaving the country the same way he does—maybe you need to reconsider. Making yourself unhappy in an effort to make him miserable seems counterproductive.”

“I want to go with Misty. It’s a great chance to test my skills. Plus, she’s quite a character. I’m sure I’ll have a blast. Punishing Seth never crossed my mind.”

Bonnie’s expression screamed *liar, liar, pants on fire!* “But running away so you could avoid him did.”

She tilted her head in a so-so gesture of agreement. “True. A bit of distance will be good for both of us. But I’m not avoiding him. I’m having dinner with him tonight, as a matter of fact.”

Bonnie clapped her hands together like a little girl and whooped. “I bet...”

She threw up both hands defensively. “No! Forget about it. I can’t afford another one of your bets, Girlfriend. Stop right there.”

“I bet you a cruise for next year the dude brings a ring.” Bonnie spun her chair in a full three-sixty like a hyper child. “Do you think he’ll hide it in a champagne flute or something deliriously romantic like that? Tell me if he does. Woo hoo! Eva is getting engaged.”

“Would you shut up?” she hissed, practically smacking a hand over Bonnie’s grinning mouth. “Seth is convinced marriage is an institution to make divorce lawyers rich, and nothing more. No way would he buy me a ring. Besides,” she added dejectedly, “*don’t go*” is the best he could come up with when I told him my plans. He didn’t offer any sort of incentive for me to stay.”

Bonnie quit spinning her chair. She pursed her lips, and her eyes shone with a mixture of sympathy and curiosity. “Would you still be going if he had?”

She shrugged. “Moot point. He wants what he’s always wanted, and I want—more. I’m not even sure what, but definitely more than having him swirl into my life like a tornado and then storm back out of it again just as quickly the second a project looks more appealing than me. We’d never make it work.”

“Where there’s a will and all that jazz. Judging by the hang-dog expression on the man’s face these past few weeks, I’m sure he’ll find a way to prove himself now that you’ve really put him to the test.”

“For the last time, Bonnie, I did not do this to test Seth.” He’d already failed the test she’d given. She thought forlornly of the last conversation they’d shared. *I would have been there for you, Eva*. Whatever the hell that meant, she felt pretty sure a ring didn’t enter into the equation. “In many ways, Seth reminds me of my mother,” she confessed softly. “She chased her heart’s desire on a whim. Every man she went mad for, every small-time stage or singing gig. I never went to the same school two years in a row. She got off on the constant chaos, but I found it damn tiresome.”

“Kind of an odd thing to admit, seeing as you’re gearing up to jet-set for the next year or so. And you say you’re not running from him.” She sniffed.

“I’m not. This is *my* whim. I can end it whenever I damn well please. I made that very clear to Misty. Right now this works for me, but I want roots someday. A foundation, Bon. All Seth wants is his freedom. He’d sooner put a ring through his nose than a ring on a woman’s finger.”

“If you’re so sure, then bet me.” She stuck out her hand and wriggled her fingers.

Eva offered her a firm handshake. “Start saving those travel miles. A cruise two years in a row. Wow, guess I really am a jet-setter.”

Bonnie’s grin was sassy. “Unless it’s a honeymoon cruise.” She frowned. “Guess that leaves me looking for a new cruise companion, though, doesn’t it?”

Eva laughed. “Here’s a bet for you. If Seth books a honeymoon with anyone, I’ll marry you, Bonnie.”

“Nah, you don’t have to actually marry me. Just take me on a glamorous honeymoon. A European tour might be nice.”

“Good thing I’m positive you’re going to lose. The cruise cleaned me out. I definitely can’t afford to tour Europe in style.”

“Fine. How about a little side bet, since you’ve already pegged me as the loser. Throw me a bone.”

“What did you have in mind?” Eva narrowed her eyes suspiciously at Bonnie’s naughty chuckle.

“I bet you a new bathing suit and cover-up to take on our cruise that this little farewell dinner of yours with Seth will have very little to do with food and everything to do with the physical.”

“Are you suggesting I’m going to do more than just give him a good-bye peck on the cheek?” She feigned shock, but judging by Bonnie’s laughter, her acting skills were weak.

“He’ll pour on the charm, and you’ll give him a send-off that makes it impossible for him to forget you.”

“I did consider the merits of a serious bye-bye bang,” she confessed with a wry smile. “Not gonna happen. Sorry. Now you owe me a cruise and a swimsuit. And you know I don’t go for the cheap stuff. I think you better consider looking for a side job.”

Bonnie leaned back, crossed her arms, and smiled smugly. “I think I’ll rejoin the gym instead. A few months on the treadmill, and I’ll be good to go for one of those lovely bits of fluff bikinis. A few hundred bucks for a few ounces of material. Oh, Eva, I should feel horrible for wasting your money like that. But I don’t.” She giggled. Springing from her chair, she headed for the buffet table and called back over her shoulder, “Don’t let the man keep you up too late. Misty said the limo would pick you up before eight a.m.”

Right, Eva thought. And if she had her way, she’d be safely tucked into her bed—alone—before eight p.m.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As Seth pulled the Navigator into the last remaining spot in front of Eva's condo, he wondered if he'd ever felt such a strange mixture of exhilaration, trepidation, and nervous tension before in his life. Despite the fact that she'd agreed to let him surprise her, she likely had her own agenda for the evening. He grinned, thinking how far off base she'd be—whatever she was expecting.

It had been an effort for him, but he'd gone against all of his natural tendencies. No flowers, candy, or wine. In addition to being empty-handed, he was dressed for yard work. A black t-shirt that hadn't been truly black in dozens of washes, ancient Levis, and battered Nike sneakers. He'd arranged dinner, but it was nowhere near the reservation he felt sure she'd be expecting.

She buzzed him in without saying a word. He scaled the three flights two steps at a time, and it increased his already rapid heart rate and left him slightly breathless. He paused at her door, sucked in a deep breath, and smoothed a hand over hair he'd meant to get barbered a week ago.

After he knocked, she took her time about answering. Judging by her stunned expression as she ran her eyes over him, the first part of his plan had worked. He'd definitely thrown her off guard.

It was a good thing he'd taken time to catch his breath; she looked absolutely breathtaking. A red dress hugged her curves and accentuated the fact that she had a body built for sin. The dress stopped mid-thigh, leaving inches of glorious olive legs stacked in killer red leather heels exposed for his perusal. And peruse he did. He couldn't help himself. She had the nicest legs he'd ever seen—or felt. Sleek, baby-soft skin covered the curve of muscles well defined enough to hug a man like... He cut the thought short and swallowed heavily.

When he raised his eyes to meet hers, she flashed him an indulgent smile, probably well aware of where his thoughts had strayed. She'd piled her gleaming black curls into an intricate knot. A stray tendril swirled downward, framing her jaw. He reached, tucked it behind her ear, and cupped her sweet face.

The carefully veiled expression she'd punished him with for weeks evaporated. Her eyes softened to dark glossy pools, and her lips parted, as though she wanted to say something but wasn't sure what. For a second, everything he'd planned escaped him, and he just wanted to lose himself in hips and thighs, soft lips and limpid eyes.

He gave his head a shake, trailed his fingers down her cheek, and then dropped his hand to his side. "You're overdressed. I'll wait on the balcony while you change. Have you got a cold beer or a glass of wine?"

"Umm." She spun, as though suddenly disoriented in her own apartment. "I'm sure I still have something left in the fridge."

He followed her into the kitchen, his heart slamming harder as the reality of her departure kicked him when she flung open her virtually empty refrigerator. She reached past the single yogurt and container of cranberry juice to pull out an unopened bottle of chardonnay. "Will this do?"

"Sure." He took the bottle and reached for the opener on the rack hanging under her cabinets. "We've got lots of time. Grab two glasses, and we'll sit on the balcony and share a toast to your new venture."

She hesitated, her hands seeming to take on a life of their own as they fluttered toward one cabinet, stopped, and then veered toward another. He'd teased her about speaking with her hands when she grew distracted. She always said it was the Italian in her, and he always laughed and said he didn't speak Italian. Time he learned.

The strange bumps and jerks that had taken up residence in his chest increased as she visibly shook off her uncertainty and obeyed his request. He filled the glasses, surprised by the steadiness of his hand as he poured.

Still silent, Eva took her wine and headed for the French doors. She had a sun lounge stretched at one end of the balcony, a rattan bistro set at the other. They had an awkward moment as they stepped around each other in the narrow area, each claiming a chair.

The slosh of wine as she set down her glass betrayed her nerves. She shook off the drops that had splattered her hand and curled into her chair

like she couldn't get far enough away from him. Suppressing a smile, he tugged his chair around until it was close enough that their knees brushed when he sat.

"You say I'm overdressed. What exactly do you have in mind for this evening? A nature hike?"

"We'll get to that later." He raised his wine glass. "First, here's to us."

She'd raised her glass as well and held it at the midway point to meeting his, but she stopped dead, like a child playing the freeze game. "Us?" She parroted in a horse voice.

"Absolutely." He closed the distance between their glasses and noticed the high-pitched ping of crystal on crystal made her cringe. "We're on the same mission, Eva. Using our talents to build beauty into the world. That's worth drinking to. Wouldn't you say?"

Whether she thought it was worth drinking to or not, she took a healthy swig of wine. He sipped his and then set it aside. Scooting his chair closer, he settled his hands lightly on her clenched knees.

"All the beautiful things between us are toast worthy as well. I know I don't want to ever forget them. I'd sure like to add to the memories, though." He leaned and brushed his lips softly over hers.

She didn't recoil, but she didn't return the kiss. Nor did she speak. He could feel a mild tremor building in her thighs.

He repressed a shiver as the silky material of her skirt brushed his hand. His fingers itched to travel up her thighs. He resisted the impulse, tightening his grip on the smooth muscles of her legs. Her knees parted; her hips lifted imperceptibly toward him.

He groaned as he felt an answering leap in his groin. *Go easy!* He struggled to remind himself what he'd planned for the evening. He transferred his gaze from her thighs to her face. That didn't help a damn bit. Her full lips were parted—an unquestionable invitation. Her liquid dark eyes were hooded. It was an expression he'd drowned in too many times. Sink or swim boy-o. He and Eva were about to dive into something not merely physically altering, but life altering.

He sat back, his hands still resting lightly on her knees. "Remember that weekend we spent in Napa?"

Eva shifted uncomfortably. Napa? Eveready Edwards wanted to dredge up ancient history? Of course she remembered Napa. The beginning of the

end. Three days of lush scenery, winery tours, candle-lit dinners, and lovemaking that left her befuddled enough to commit the ultimate faux pas.

She could still hear herself, panting in the heat of the worst possible moment for unguarded declarations, "*Seth, oh, Seth...I love you.*"

He'd responded by not calling her for two weeks and then sending her an email announcing he'd transferred out of the country. Her cheeks flamed at the memory. It was her first episode of dyslexia. Somehow she'd managed to turn L.U.S.T. into L.O.V.E.

"Eva? 'Member?"

She breathed deeply, summoning a smile she didn't feel beyond her lips. "Hmm, fabulous merlot."

"Fabulous company. Sometimes all I can think about is how gorgeous you looked in that white sundress. Do you still have it? Would you wear it for me again?"

Her eyes snapped open as his hands traveled with a feathery touch down her calves. He remembered what she'd worn three years ago? "I..." Her breath caught as he raised her foot and unbuckled the thin leather strap of her stiletto.

Not the shoes! He loved for her to wear the shoes, and she loved to wear them. She'd come to think of them as a shield. Armor of sorts. A reminder that, as far as Seth was concerned, she was a game.

The shoe dropped, and he bent his head, pressing a kiss into the arch of her foot.

"Seth." His name escaped, barely more than a hiss of breath. Seth what? Stop? Don't stop? The old Seth robbed her control, but this new gentle, talkative Seth was robbing her sanity.

He removed her other shoe, his skillful fingers kneading her foot until the sensation rushed from her toes to the roots of her hair. She thought of the bet she'd made with Bonnie and choked back strangled laughter. His tongue traced her pinky toe. Warmth flooded her as he sucked it into the hot cavern of his mouth. Game over. All bets off.

"It had a low back."

"Hmm?"

"The dress," he clarified, sweeping his lips across the pulse in her ankle. "Dipped low enough that you couldn't wear a bra. I spent that entire day

thinking about running my tongue up your spine. Don't you remember? It was the first thing I did when we got back to our hotel room."

A weighted heat roiled through her, tugging at her throat, her navel, and heading rapidly downward. She remembered. Every second of it. He'd been hot, hard, demanding. Himself. Nothing like the gentle, worshipful role he was currently playing. "Seth, what is this?"

He released her foot and chuckled. Damn! It was nice to see her as rattled as he felt. He'd made Miss Instant Gratification think for a change. He leaned, cupping her face. Her skin felt hot, satin smooth. He traced her full lips with his thumb and then followed the path with his tongue. She didn't pull away, but he felt a minute distance spring up between them. Eva was out of her comfort zone. And he intended to keep her that way.

"This," he mumbled, probing the sweet familiarity of her mouth. "This is me, making love to you, Evie. Only this time, we're not going to stop there. You're not just going to let me make love to you. You're going to let me love you."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Eva noticed the squeaky gasp of surprise she hadn't managed to contain appeared to force him back to his senses. He leaned back, casually looped one ankle over the opposite thigh, and sipped his wine as though he hadn't said anything out of the ordinary.

She felt like he'd pulled all the air with him. *Making love to you. Loving you.* Apparently, he was as confused about the distinction between the two as she was. Time had proven she'd never have one, but she definitely wanted the other. She swayed dizzily toward him and rested her hand on his inner thigh. She could feel the burning heat of his skin through his worn jeans. Screw the farewell dinner. She just wanted him to screw *her*. She'd been on sexual pins and needles for weeks. Thinking about wanting him. Thinking about how much she wished she didn't want him.

Like a true junkie, she couldn't resist this final opportunity for a fix. Tomorrow, miles would erase all the issues between them. Tonight, motion would accomplish the same thing. She wouldn't sit here and listen to him twist words in an attempt to con her. The only way they ever communicated—if not openly, at least honestly—was in the horizontal position.

Her hand crept upward. He didn't move, but she saw the faded material of his shirt flutter at his diaphragm as he breathed deeply. She shifted farther, and her knuckles brushed the strategically faded area of threadbare denim at his crotch. A noise between a sigh and a groan escaped him. The hard length of him immediately responded to her touch, and she wanted to purr like a satisfied cat. He looked like the proverbial calm, cool, collected playboy, but beneath the chilly exterior, he was every bit as hot as she was. She scrapped her thumbnail down his fly. Her tongue snaked out and circled her lips as she thought about how very much she'd like it to be circling something else.

She loved his vulnerability when she took him in her mouth. Seth was all about control. Power. Even when they made love, he always retained a certain measure of dominance, but oddly enough, when she was on her knees for him—an inferior position to be sure—it stripped him defenseless.

The muscles in his legs tightened like bowstrings. When she glanced up, she saw a muscle leap along his tense jaw. As though he'd read her thoughts, his eyes softened, and the lids grew heavy. She pressed her palm to his groin as her fingers reached for his zipper. With a strangled noise to clear his throat, he lifted her hand and placed it in her own lap.

With a lazy *I know I could have you right here and now* kind of smile, he reclaimed his wine glass and sat back. "Anticipation will make it that much sweeter, Evie."

So much for her attempt to gain the upper hand. She sipped her drink and fought to keep the waver out of her voice. "Hmm. I anticipated a nice dinner. You know, a friendly send-off. What exactly are *you* anticipating?"

He just held his superior smile. "I told you, I intended to surprise you. Come on. We're burning daylight. Drink up."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to get me loaded?"

He chuckled. "Tempting. You are incredibly pliant and passionate when you've had just the right amount of alcohol. But maybe it would be best if we kept clear heads while we discuss us."

"Us? That's the second time you've said that. Beyond what we could be doing right now"—she paused to smooth her hand up her crossed leg suggestively—"there is no us. What happened to the farewell dinner?"

"I'll feed you. Eventually. I just wanted to fill you up with a couple of possibilities first. Go on. Get changed. There's something I need to show you. Oh, and, Eva, do you actually own a pair of sensible shoes? Ones without three-inch heels?"

"Of course." She sniffed. After another sip of wine, she cast him a perplexed look and stood. "If your choice of wardrobe is any indication, I assume drive-thru hamburgers are on the menu."

"You did say you'd grown tired of extravagant gestures." His shrug perfectly matched his mild tone. "Wear whatever makes you comfortable."

"And sensible shoes."

"I would if I were you." He stood and turned his back to lean on the balcony railing, as though thoroughly bored with the conversation.

Eva scooped up her discarded *impractical* shoes and retreated to her room. She couldn't believe how badly her hands shook as she peeled off her dress. What the hell game did he think he was running? She hadn't expected a ring, but she had expected him to pour on a certain amount of romance and charm. To exert a Seth-like pressure that made it impossible for her to leave.

Did he honestly think that, by simply labeling their sexual encounters as lovemaking, she'd cast her plans to the wind and stick around to accommodate him?

And speaking of lovemaking, if he hadn't stopped when he had, Bonnie would definitely be shopping to her heart's content. She shivered, her calves and ankles still tingling from the reverent brush of his lips. He fired her up so easily it disgusted her. A few kisses and caresses, and she'd melted like ice cream on hot tarmac.

Discarding the slightly damp, slinky panties she'd had on, she stepped into plain, sensible cotton bikinis, jeans, and a t-shirt. She had to dig through a mountain of pumps and dressy sandals before she found a pair of canvas tennis shoes. Jerking the neon pink laces into tight bows, she stood and surveyed herself. Her upswept hair looked completely incongruous with her beachcomber wardrobe.

Damn him and his capriciousness. She'd looked forward to a few hours of his fawning over her in a fine restaurant. It would have made denying him that much sweeter. Instead, he'd shown up dressed like a bum—although if there were a man on earth who did bum any sexier than Seth, she'd sure like to see him—baffled her with his bullshit, and she'd been ready to go down on him on her freakin' balcony.

Her eyes stung as she viciously yanked the pins from her hair and shook it loose. He wanted anticipation? She'd revert to the rules she'd laid out the first time she bet Bonnie; promise him the action and deny him the satisfaction. He could anticipate from now until hell froze over for all she cared.

So what if he'd left her weighted and wet enough that the seam of her jeans threatened detonation? She'd heard Europeans were very forward thinking when it came to sexuality. She'd find a novelty shop and set herself up with the sort of companionship that needed no more maintenance than fresh batteries.

Good in theory, but when she turned from the mirror and found Seth leaning at her bedroom door, staring at her with a look of naked hunger on his face, heat ignited every nerve in her body.

“Ready?” His voice was as deep and sensual as the telltale warmth in his eyes.

Ready? She felt ready to tie him down and ride him into the sunset, but then there was the pesky little problem of what to do with him after sunset. If she succumbed to her urge to give Seth a physical farewell that would stick with him, she’d likely be stuck with him all night.

She glanced at the bed a few feet away and fought the immediate mental picture of spooning there with him. Definitely a bad idea. With his attempt to steer them down memory lane, this whole evening had proven to be a bad idea, but there was nothing to do but persevere through it. She could handle a few hours of whatever he tossed her way—provided they got some distance from the bed and each other.

She gave her head a shake and headed toward the door. “Surprise away, Mr. Mystery.”

“Huh. Thought I was Mr. Eveready.”

She stopped inches away from him in the doorway and glanced pointedly at his crotch. “I recently decided batteries are more deserving of that title.”

He circled her waist as she tried to brush past, tugging her close enough that he could bury his face in her neck. One hand gripped her inner thigh a fraction of an inch from where a swelling pressure instantly burst. The other traced an erotic pattern up her ribs, the same lazy pattern his tongue drew on the hammering pulse in her neck. His breath blew down the scooped neckline of her t-shirt like a warm breeze, and her nipples sprang into hard peaks.

Curving himself around her, he simultaneously nipped her neck, squeezed her breast, and ground the already bothersome seam of her jeans roughly enough to force a shiver.

“You find an appliance that can do everything I know you like, Evie, and I’ll buy you the damn batteries.”

She ignored the warm, moist pulse of his tongue at her jugular, despite the fact that it had ignited an identical warm, moist pulse beneath where his fingers continued to play teasingly over that damn jean seam. Squeezing her

legs tightly together didn't help, it only served to trap his hand, and he obligingly increased the pressure.

She tried to tell him to stop, but her breath hitched. Clearing her throat, she shifted sideways, dislodging his hand. "Maybe an appliance can't do *everything* I like, but the beauty of it is, should it begin doing things I don't like, I can yank the damn batteries."

The sizzling tension flowed out of his body, and he released her as suddenly as he'd grabbed her. His voice emerged, a low, slow rumble. "Unlike me."

"Unlike any man," she agreed mildly. "I've learned there's something to be said for reaching the same destination via the easiest route."

"Is that really all you want? No connection, no consequences, just instant gratification?"

No, that's really all you want. She wondered if he had any idea how succinctly he'd summed himself up. She cleared her throat again, swallowing back a sizable lump of emotion. "Isn't that what the whole world wants? Action and satisfaction," she concluded with a wry smile.

He didn't smile back. "I don't believe you, Eva. Tell me what you hope to accomplish working for Misty. Where you hope it will take you, and what you really want out of this deal."

To get away from you. To get over you. And maybe, just maybe, to inflict a little of the hurt of abandonment on you that you've handed me over the years. The truth tempted her, but the path to honesty was pitted with land mines that could explode into connections, consequences, and other nasty things she wanted to avoid.

She quit finger combing her hair and searched his face in an attempt to gauge his sincerity. His wary expression conveyed curiosity more than concern, and she laughed, mostly at her continued stupidity for thinking anything about her beyond the obvious would matter to Seth.

"You almost had me." She turned and headed toward the door. "It's a little late for you to worry about what I really want, Seth. Let's just say I want a friendly farewell dinner, and leave it at that." She stopped and raised one sneaker-clad foot flirtatiously. "Look, I made the ultimate sacrifice for you, sensible shoes. What more do you want from me?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Seth was tempted to answer. What more did he want? Aside from wanting her body more than he'd ever wanted a woman in his life, all he wanted was—everything. He wanted her heart and soul. Her future. The child she had lost and the other children they would make.

As usual, his timing sucked. Eva's raised brow and sardonic smile did not invite heartfelt confessions. For a second, he'd thought he had her. A hint of genuine emotion, of vulnerability, had flashed in her eyes. She'd masked it quickly with the same mixed message she'd been sending for weeks. She wanted to be his friend—or friend with benefits, he supposed, seeing as she'd teased him into a sexual frenzy—but she didn't seem inclined to discuss anything to do with the future.

Seeing as he seldom knew where he'd be living from one project to the next, he had no one to blame but himself. The same weird "weighted but take flight" sensation he'd experienced the afternoon of Eva's confession assailed him. Why hadn't he spoken up then?

Because even then it had been too late. Too late for words, anyway. Nothing he could say would be enough to convince her. He'd have to go along with the whole "actions speak louder than words" theory and just hope like hell he found the proper actions to convey his message.

"I appreciate your sacrifice." He struggled to keep his tone as light as the hand he'd placed on her back to guide her toward the door. "If it makes you feel any better, I had no idea pink sneakers could be so sexy. Of course, on you, anything would look sexy."

The compliment failed to hit its mark. She glanced back, her brow rose another fraction of an inch, and then she shook her head, masking her face with a fall of riotous ebony curls. "I take back what I said about your smooth lines. They're giving me the same reaction as a tongue depressor."

Great. He'd gone from making her giggle to making her gag. Leave it to him to be without the proper script for the biggest play of his life.

He wondered if he should say something in an attempt to—what, he wasn't sure—so he opted to leave it rather than risk digging himself in deeper. He thrust one hand in his pocket and jiggled his keys in the other. "Let's go."

Eva fell strangely silent as he maneuvered the Navigator through late Friday traffic. She appeared lost in her own thoughts, thoughts he would have given more than a penny for but felt certain she wouldn't share. She hadn't even questioned him further about plans for the evening, and he had the distinct impression that she'd withdrawn into herself in an effort to keep her distance. Like she was serving time and couldn't get away from him fast enough.

He figured her professional life would be a safe topic and questioned her about the properties Misty Jameson had bought. She didn't offer much more than monosyllabic two and three word responses, and his angst grew as he realized how desperate he was for a definitive answer to something—anything.

Her interest did appear to resurface when he turned onto the Niagara Parkway. She sat forward, hit the power window button, and sucked in a lungful of air, sighing in the same sort of ecstasy a chocoholic would, burying their face in a pan full of brownies. "I know they say the escarpment is rife with pollution, but something about the scent of fruit trees, grapevines and rushing water along here just sends me."

He bit back his smug *I know*. At least he'd done something right this evening. Hopefully, it would be the first of many points he'd score. He'd need them to win this game. Distracted by her peaceful smile, he nearly missed his turn. Spinning the wheel at the last possible moment, he bumped the Navigator onto an unmarked road that was little more than a path cut into the hillside.

She glanced over her shoulder at the five-by-five bold black and red *no trespassing* sign he steered around.

"It's okay. I know the owner." He drove until the path became impassable, threw the transmission into park, and killed the ignition.

Eva sat numb as he sprang from the driver's seat. In the rearview mirror, she watched as he popped the tailgate and pulled something from the cargo

area of the Navigator. She wiped the sudden clamminess from her hands. He hadn't gotten to her quite the way she'd expected, but he'd gotten to her nonetheless.

She closed her eyes, immediately picturing a cooler and the pate, champagne, and selection of gourmet cheeses it would hold. Envisioning the dappled sunlight playing across the sculpted muscles of Seth's bare chest the first time they'd shared that very picnic in nearly the same location.

She felt too motion sick from her recent change of direction for a trip down memory lane, but apparently he was determined. Blinking back the unexpected burn behind her eyes, she stepped from the SUV. The air hung moist and heavy, and she breathed in the sweetness of pine needles and the lacy ferns that carpeted the ground beneath her feet. Just a few miles up from the Niagara Parkway, and they were in a secluded nature land of all the best the escarpment had to offer.

Seth slammed the tailgate closed, and she saw he held a camera instead of the cooler she'd expected. He gestured upward. "If we get above this tree line, there's a nice view. It's a bit of a hike but worth it if you think you're up for it."

"I'll manage. I am wearing sensible shoes, after all." She smiled, feeling more confused than ever about his intentions.

He set off at a sedate pace, pausing regularly to hold back brush that snatched at her clothes and slapped sharply against the bare skin of her arms. By the time they broke through the trees, the humidity had dampened the hair at her nape. When Seth turned toward her, she saw the gleam of sweat on his brow. He wiped it carelessly on the sleeve of his bedraggled t-shirt, slung the camera around his neck, and placed his hands on her shoulders, turning her.

The breath whooshed from her lungs. She hadn't realized how high they'd climbed. Above the thick line of scrub and pines, she had a window to one of the most beautiful areas of the Niagara Gorge. The Parkway fanned below like an endless gray ribbon; beyond that, she could see the dark green depths of the Niagara River surrounded by craggy cliffs. Between the trees, the odd roof broke the landscape, and she recognized the terra-cotta tiles of the Jameson house.

Her heart sank. "This is the land Howard bid on, isn't it?"

Seth took his time, snapping a few pictures before he lowered the camera and nodded. "We confirmed the sale this morning."

We. So that was his big move. He thought informing her he could commit to two projects in a row in the same location would make her fall at his feet. Ironically, it probably would have before the New Years' fiasco. Now, it was too little, too late.

She shook her head and turned away from the breathtaking view with a sigh that was half resignation and half anger. "What a crime."

"Why do you say that?"

"These people have spent hundreds of thousands, in some cases even millions of dollars designing homes to fit and blend with the landscape. They paid a premium for building lots because they truly love it here. A collection of characterless, tacky-town homes will be blight, and yuppies that have no interest in nature or the environment will probably occupy them all. Boneheads who will cut down the pines to make room to park their gas-guzzling SUVs," she concluded pointedly.

"I assure you, no trees were harmed in the parking of the Navigator." His tone was mild, and he turned away, casually shooting a few more pictures. "I had no idea you were such an environmentalist."

Frustration for his feeble attempt to con her rose in waves. "You have no idea about a lot of things."

"So tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Everything. Start by telling me what you'd build here."

"How should I know? You're the architect."

"Work with me here, Eva. You know I value your opinion. What do you think would enhance rather than detract from the landscape?"

A dreamy part of her brain immediately conjured a two-story house built of pine, with the foundation constructed of natural stone. She'd leave the land as pristine as possible and have a wraparound porch to look out on all the wonders of the escarpment and the natural flora and fauna that grew in abundance.

When visions of tire swings and tricycles somehow crept into the picture, she shook off her dementia and snorted. "Look, Seth, I'm not buying it. Okay? If you think you can feign interest in things that have never interested you before and expect me to drop all my plans just because

you've agreed to stick around for another month or two to build a sorry-ass town home complex, you better think again." She started down the hill, calling back. "I'm tired. I'm hungry, and I've got a long day tomorrow. I want you to take me home."

He caught up to her in a few long strides and folded her in his arms. "I want to take you home. I want that more than anything, baby."

He threaded his fingers in her hair, tilted her face, and kissed her. The kiss was so deep and tender, Eva felt dizzy when he finally shifted his lips to her cheek and whispered, "Say you'll come home with me."

The urge to melt against him and say anything he wanted to hear overwhelmed her, but she squelched it. Pressing a firm hand to his chest, she pushed him a step back. "Home, Seth. As in, my condo." Turning before another glance at the dark wound that shone in his eyes undid her, she jogged back to the Navigator and flung herself into the passenger seat.

Seth tossed the camera in the back and climbed in beside her. "Eva, I wasn't asking you for sex. I just—there's something I'd like to show you."

She cast a sidelong smirk. "Bet you say that to all the girls. I've seen everything you've got, Seth. Nice as it all is, I think I'll play it safe and not look again."

"I wish you weren't going."

She had no idea he'd play so dirty. The plaintive tone in his voice and the softness in his eyes almost made her believe him. It annoyed her to the extreme. "I wish you'd stop talking."

"Why?"

"Because you're not playing fair, that's why." She reached over and turned the key in the ignition. "Drive."

"How is it unfair to tell you I'll miss you?"

"Funny, you never missed me when it was you who did the leaving."

"Yes I did. Maybe I didn't realize it, but I did."

"Shut up and start driving, or I'm going to get out and walk."

By the tone of her voice, he guessed she really meant it. Suppressing a sigh, he wound the SUV slowly downward and eased into the steady stream of traffic. Eva's silence was unnerving. It felt like she'd zipped herself into a bubble he had no idea how to penetrate. Random declarations surged into his throat like knife blades, and he swallowed them all down. Maybe he wasn't the master of communication, but he knew damn straight certain

things weren't meant to be blurted while you were at the wheel, flanked by a passenger tense enough to practically vibrate the car off the road. He wanted her to relax so she'd be receptive to other things he needed to say.

"Where would you like to eat?"

"I'm not hungry anymore."

"Do you want to go for a drink?"

"No."

"Do you want to take a spin to the falls? Might be a while before you see it again."

"No."

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

"N—What? What did you just say to me, you manipulative bastard?"

Keeping a steady hand at the bottom of the wheel, he reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. Her palm was clammy, and in his peripheral vision, he could see bright spots of color stain her cheeks and a dark flush creep up her neck. "I love you."

The sputtering noise she made was a cross between laughter and a sob. "You'd say anything at this point. You just can't stand to lose, can you?"

"I can't stand the thought of losing you, no."

"What an asshole you are, Seth. Calling it love-making doesn't make it love, and loving to be with me—in the carnal sense—doesn't mean you love me."

"I love you." He felt surprised that saying it again was easier, and he meant it even more. Apparently she failed to hear the note of sincerity. She swung a fist, hitting him in the solar plexus hard enough to make him grunt.

"Stop the damn car right this minute."

She yanked at his arm, and he swerved and hit the brakes hard enough to fling her forward. The SUV fishtailed and came to a shuddering halt amidst blaring horns and squealing tires, and he blurted, "Do you wanna get married?"

She swung at him again, the pitch of her accompanying warrior cry hurting much more than the small fist that glanced off his shoulder. "Did you really just propose to me in the middle of a traffic jam? You're unfucking-believable!"

Before he had a clue how to respond, she unhitched her seat belt, leapt from the car, and began to jog along the edge of the busy road. Caught off guard, he threw the transmission into park and chased her.

The Navigator blocked traffic in both directions. Cursing and blaring horns chased his every step. He didn't care. In a few strides he caught Eva in a hold like a running back. "Stop. Just listen to me for a minute."

"I can't. I won't." She twisted away from him and broke into a run again.

"Get your car outta the middle of the goddamned road, you asshole!"

Seth cursed as he glanced back at the Navigator and then toward Eva's rapidly retreating form. Ignoring the vehicle, he ran on. "I'm not asking you to give up your plans. Eva, ple..."

An enormous weight crashed against his back. He hit the ground like a felled redwood, the breath rushing from his lungs. Gasping, he lunged to his feet, spotting the police cruiser seconds after his fist made contact with the hulking man who'd knocked him down.

So much for the whole stereotypical, roly-poly, donut-scarfing cop, Seth thought. Leave it to him to act out while the youngest, buffest member of the entire Niagara Regional Police Department toured past. The kid had him cuffed and crammed in a cruiser quicker than he could say, "Assault and battery."

Still breathless with the fall and the adrenalin rush, he watched the rest of the scene play out through the smeary rearview window of the barred back seat, feeling more impotent than he ever had in his life. From a distance, he saw Eva gesture wildly while she spoke. He'd have given anything to hear what she said. He thought she was crying, and his heart rolled unhappily in his chest when she buried her red face in her hands, but when her arms dropped to her sides, he realized it was tears of mirth that streamed from her eyes.

The cop led her to the Navigator, and Seth nearly dislocated his shoulder twisting with his hands cuffed behind him so he could see what was going on. She appeared to be showing identification. He muttered every curse he knew and even made up a few new ones when she climbed behind the wheel of *his* vehicle, carefully maneuvered it back to her own side of the road, and drove past, offering a cheeky little toot of the horn.

He quit struggling and dropped his chin to his chest in defeat as the Navigator disappeared behind the stream of traffic.

Once he'd believed marriage was the biggest mistake a man could make. For him, proposing had proven to be the fatal error.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The nice young police officer had assured her the man who attempted to assault her would be locked up until at least Monday when he was arraigned. No matter what she said, she couldn't seem to convince him there'd been no malice in Seth's passionate pursuit. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. The guy he'd slugged wanted him charged, and the young officer had also muttered about dangerous driving and public mischief. A host of annoyed drivers seemed only too happy to step in as witnesses and convict him—of anything.

She drove the Navigator to Howard's and couldn't quit laughing while she explained the entire tale, despite the fact that unshed tears swelled in her throat.

Howard hummed and hawed in his distracted professor way, finally scratching his head in confusion and asking, "So, um, does this mean you're going to stick around and get married?"

"Married!" Eva squawked. She thought of Seth pounding his foot to the brake pedal, his eyes averted while he shouted *do you wanna get married*, and she choked out another bray of horse laughter. Boy, she'd said his over-the-top romance was nauseating, but really. And to propose in a last ditch effort to get what he wanted was overtly relentless, even for Seth. "Howard, the man is in jail."

"As you say. A misunderstanding, most certainly. I'll um..." He spun, both hands accosting his unruly mop of hair. "What exactly would you like me to do?"

Eva sighed. Her hysterical laughter subsided with a final hiccup and left her unexpectedly exhausted. "I'd appreciate it if you'd drive me home."

"Certainly, but, well, what about Seth?"

“Personally, I’d prefer to be as far away as possible when they spring the lock on that cell, but I suppose someone will have to post bail for him.” She shrugged. “Not my problem.”

“Bail, hmm, yes.”

Howard mumbled about marriage, bail, and lawyers while he drove her home. Eva felt too preoccupied to even pretend to listen.

After a night of angst, the likes of which she hoped never to experience again, she debated calling Misty Jameson and begging off the flight to St. Martin. She’d actually dialed six of the seven digits a dozen times but decided sticking around while Seth cooled his heels in a holding cell all weekend would be pointless. Besides, he’d probably be mortified he’d fallen desperate enough to do something he’d sworn to never do—propose.

When she wasn’t crying over hearing words she thought she’d never hear from him, in such a bloody horrible and untraditional way, a devilish little part rose up inside her and wanted to head straight for the jail and say, “I do,” just to see if he’d pitch a fit.

At dawn, she brewed a pot of coffee and took her mug out to the balcony. The early morning air already felt thick and heavy with the promise of another day of relentless humidity. She tried to garner enthusiasm for the mornings of refreshing ocean breezes she was about to partake in. Enthusiasm failed to appear. Instead, she kept picturing the odd expression on Seth’s face while he’d talked about Napa and her white sundress. The way his eyes had flickered like a candle flame with flashes of heat—and worse—warmth she’d never seen before.

Could she really just up and leave in the midst of such upheaval? She fiddled with the buttons on her cordless phone again. She could still call and back out. Misty would be up. The woman had a health and beauty regime that rivaled a designer’s entire stable of fashion models; just doing her hair and make-up was a two-hour extravaganza.

Do you have any idea how much I love you?

She couldn’t deny that he meant it—when he said it—but was it true? Maybe separation would be a good thing. If he’d spoken in desperation, it would give them both time to forget his impulsive words. If, on the other hand, he did mean it, having the opportunity to miss her might give him the focus to deliver the line under more appropriate circumstances—if he ever proposed to her again. Philosophically concluding that if Seth really thought

they had a chance at a future together, a few months away shouldn't matter, she resolutely cradled the cordless phone and headed for the shower.

Shaking with nerves and exhaustion, she crawled into the Jameson limo at seven-thirty. Once she'd loved the luxury of a limousine, but today it only served as another reminder of Seth. An unbidden picture of him behind bars sprang to mind. Her stomach heaved, and with a choking cough she swallowed the bilious surge of bitter black coffee that rose in her throat.

Misty gave her the once-over, her surgically lifted cat's eyes narrowed and her Botox lips pursed.

"Darling, I must say you look a tad more ravaged than ravishing this morning. Did that delicious architect of yours design a send-off that kept you up all night? Oh, do tell."

She smiled wanly, wondering if the snotty faux culture of Misty's tone would deteriorate to shrieking laughter if she told her the entire tale. What the hell. It was a long drive to Pearson International airport. Entertaining her new employer with the horror story that was her so-called love life would pass the time quicker than sulking—or bursting into tears.

"I'm sure that's what he intended, until persuasion became desperation, and an unfortunate incarceration threw a wrench in his plans." She offered the abridged version of the evening, surprised when Misty didn't even snicker.

"*Mon Dieu*. For such an intelligent, together young woman, Eva, you certainly know precious little about men. What on earth are you doing here? You had him right where you wanted him." She mewed in displeasure and then jerked her head around, her sculpted brows flying upward. "Or don't you love him?"

"I do. I've always loved him." It didn't occur to her to lie. Her emotions were too raw for any sort of subterfuge, and for some reason, it made her feel better to admit it aloud. Maybe if she faced the symptoms, she could cure the disease. "But then, for a long time I thought I'd *love* to be blond," she continued wryly. "I've always had a penchant for things I couldn't have." A home. A normal family. Commitment from a man who was fully committed to his freedom.

Misty sniffed. "And apparently a proclivity to run away from things you can have. Men do not randomly toss around marriage proposals, so when they do choke one out, it's seldom wise to make them chase. If I hadn't

kicked Kyle's Calvin Klein-covered keister to the two-carat-and-up counter the minute the words were out of his mouth, I might still be Misty Marie Morrison. A nauseating mouthful, not to mention a lonely existence," she concluded, her spaghetti-thin eyebrows disappearing into her hairline with her pointed look.

She tried to explain her "whole absence makes the heart grow fonder" theory to Misty, but somehow, as the limo carried her farther and farther away from Seth in his moment of need, it didn't seem like such a reasonable action anymore.

"*Mon Dieu*," Misty muttered again, flagging a dismissive hand. "Just stop. I suppose I should be relieved you're such a fool. At least I'm assured to get my first few projects completed without your running off to elope."

Eva laughed at the very thought. If she'd said yes to Seth's impulsive proposal, she wondered if it would have led to a record-setting fifteen-or twenty-year engagement, with the two of them spending the majority of their time on separate continents. "Not going to happen," she said with conviction.

She didn't bother to add that was mainly because she thought the same careful planning should go into a wedding that went into a marriage. If she ever got to the "forever and ever, 'til death do us part" place in her life, it wouldn't be fifty bucks in a Las Vegas chapel with an Elvis impersonator.

In Eva's estimation, eloping was as bad as—proposing in a traffic jam.

* * * *

Seth didn't care what strings Howard had pulled or at what cost. He was out, and ultimately, whether he paid financially or in favors, it would be less than what it would have cost him if he'd failed to be released.

Eva! He had to stop her. Somehow he had to convince her he hadn't simply spouted the first thing that popped into his head in an effort to coerce her into giving up her plans. A night of pacing an eight-by-eight holding cell had helped him clearly see how easily she'd reached that conclusion.

Do ya wanna get married? Christ. No ring. No romance. He'd never fucked anything up so badly in his life. And she was his life. Somehow he had to persuade her he wasn't making a play for control; he was playing for

keeps. Except by the time they'd finished jerking his chain with paperwork so he could reclaim his belongs, he feared he'd missed the game altogether.

He snapped the clasp of his Rolex, wincing when he noticed it was already past nine. Prodding Howard toward the door of the detention center, he asked, "They flying out of Buffalo or Pearson?"

"Hmm, well, I can't say really. It never occurred to me to ask. I..."

"Find out." While they stood on the police station steps and Howard exchanged cell phone pleasantries with Kyle Jameson, he resisted the urge to shake Howard until an answer fell out of his mouth.

After what felt like hours to Seth but was really only a few minutes, Howard signed off. "Pearson. Ten-forty flight."

"Shit." Seth spotted Howard's Mercedes and shoved his friend toward the car. "Move your ass, man. I need to stop at my place then get to Toronto before that plane takes off."

One massive speeding ticket, a parking job illegal enough to get the Navigator impounded, and seventy agonizing minutes later, Seth sprinted through the crowds at Pearson. His head pounded like a hammer drill had been set full tilt in his skull. He'd rolled hours and hours of painstaking work into a crumpled mess he'd bundled under his arm, and he was pretty sure the sourness that coated his tongue and stung his nostrils was the *aue du prison* seeping out of his pores. But he'd made it.

Provided he could get through security.

* * * *

Misty perched on the hideous orange plastic chair at the departure gate as calmly as a queen on her throne. She sipped a jumbo latte and flipped a glossy fashion magazine, thrusting the pages in front of Eva's face periodically to exclaim over some new fad or health craze.

Eva didn't comment. She couldn't see the pictures, never mind the writing. Her eyes kept misting over, and the aching pressure in her chest had swelled until it crawled through her entire body.

Do you have any idea how much I love you?

Whether she did or didn't, they certainly shared enough history that she had no business blithely hopping on a flight while he languished in a jail cell for a crime he hadn't committed.

She fingered the boarding pass poking from the pocket of her purse, wondered how much a first-class plane ticket to St. Martin would set her back, and decided it didn't matter. "Misty, I can't..."

The announcement system crackled to life, cutting her off. "Flight nine-seventy to St. Martin is now boarding at gate C." Indecision and panic rolled over Eva in equal measure. The message was repeated in French, then after a brief silence, she heard her own name. "Passenger Eva Delucca, please come to the courtesy counter. Eva Delucca to the courtesy counter."

She leapt to her feet and pushed to the front of the crowd already gathered at the counter, ignoring the griping and muttering, "I'm Eva Delucca."

The clerk's cheeks colored, and she averted her eyes. "Yes, Ms. Delucca, if you could please follow this gentleman." Behind thick glasses, the nervous girl's eyes shot toward a massive security guard.

"But I don't understand." As panicked as she was confused, Eva shrugged away from the firm hold the guard took of her elbow.

"Please, Ms. Come along, my supervisor will explain everything."

She fished the boarding pass from her purse. "I can't. I have to exchange my ticket first."

The security man stepped close, gripping her arm again. Leaning close, he lowered his voice, "Please don't make a scene that will disturb the other passengers. You're not getting on this flight, Ms. Delucca. Come along peacefully, and we'll explain everything."

Forgetting that she'd already chosen not to fly, Eva jerked out of his grasp and glared disdainfully. "How dare you. I am a first-class passenger on this flight and a..."

"Security risk, according to a reliable source," the guard hissed.

Several other guards stepped into the fray. As Eva was hustled down a nearby corridor and into a stark office, she could hear Misty's imperious tone rising to an argumentative pitch.

She sputtered indignantly, but the guard merely thrust her toward a chair, confiscated her purse and carry-on bag, and closed the door. A security risk? She hadn't put so much as a toothbrush in her hand luggage. She couldn't decide whether to kick and howl or give in to her childish urge to curl in a fetal position and bawl her eyes out. Tears had already surfaced,

but when a man entered and flashed a badge, accompanied by an evil smirk, she became incensed.

“Listen, you rent-a-cop, I cleared security well within the pre-flight time limits. There’s not a damn thing in my luggage that could harm anyone. I’m a Canadian citizen with a valid Canadian passport. I demand you explain yourselves right this second or get me a telephone so I can call my lawyer. I won’t be...”

Much to her chagrin, the man chuckled. “Relax, Ms. Delucca. I came to tell you you’ve been released. We had to act on the report of a gentleman who claimed you were attempting to flee the country with something that belonged to him, but apparently the misunderstanding has been resolved.”

“Misunderstanding! I’ve missed my flight and quite possibly lost a very lucrative job, and you’re telling me this was a stupid misunderstanding? What is it I allegedly have? Who made this claim?”

“I’m not obligated to tell you either of those things. We did our best to ensure that every precaution was taken. Sorry for the inconvenience. There isn’t another flight to St. Martin today, but we’ve booked you a first-class ticket on Monday’s flight.”

“How noble of you. In the meantime, am I supposed to sit in an airport for thirty-six freakin’ hours because of your mistake?”

“I believe your companion has already arranged for hotel vouchers. Come with me, and we’ll verify that. If not, we’ll take care of it.”

“Well, thank you for small favors.” Eva sneered. She felt a modicum of relief that Misty hadn’t simply flown off and left her to face her problems alone. She wondered if the older woman would be angered or amused by the situation.

The guard led her along another deserted corridor that ended in the terminal. She gazed around in search of Misty and felt her pulse, which had barely resumed a normal rate, speed up all over again. She didn’t see Misty Jameson, but there was no mistaking the tousled, burnt caramel hair that appeared half a head above the crowd, or the broad back that shouldered past people with the disregard of a charging bull.

“Seth?” She wondered if she was having a stress hallucination. Stepping backward, she swayed enough that the guard propped her with a hand in the small of her back. When his lone-wolf grin revealed that crooked tooth, it all

crystallized, and she leaped forward, fueled with a bizarre mixture of rage and relief.

He caught her in his arms before she could slug him, spinning her off her feet in a hug that squeezed the breath from her lungs. "You are a sight for my aching eyes. I thought I'd missed you."

"Oh! You are totally un-fucking-believable. You had me busted for a fake crime just so I couldn't leave."

She struggled in the confines of his arms, but instead of loosening his grip, he tightened it, burying his face in her neck. "And you let me get arrested rather than admit you love me. Let's call it even."

"Not by a long shot, pal. Get your hands off me. I should report you. Do you know what sort of trouble you can get in for messing with airport security? A hell of a lot more than you'll be in for punching that redneck jerk on the side of the road, you asshole. Listen, I..."

"No, you listen. I love you. I don't want you to change your plans. I just want to share mine with you so we can find a meeting ground in the middle."

For a second, she allowed her gaze to meet his; the whiskey shade of his eyes appeared darker than usual but every bit as probing, like he'd looked into her very soul. Or like he was trying to show her his, she thought, feeling her resolve crumble when she thought of everything he must have been through in the last few hours to get himself here.

She had to remind herself that she didn't even want him here because she'd decided they needed a cooling-off period. A chance for him to come to terms with what he'd really asked of her and figure out if he meant it or not. Obviously not, she concluded, or he would have been glad of the opportunity to show her he could be there for her, even if she pursued her own dreams. He still just wanted his instant gratification, she concluded sadly. "There will never be a meeting in the middle with you. You just..."

"Eva, shut the hell up. I love to fight with you, but lately I've had to fight like hell to love you, and I'm tired, babe. Tired to the bone of you hanging a label on me. If I let you go, will you stay here for a minute and let me show you something?"

The combination of exhaustion and earnestness in his face forced her to quit struggling. She nodded. "Not like I have much else to do in the next while."

He released her slowly, like he feared she'd renege and make a run for it. She crossed her arms and tapped her foot impatiently. He bent to reach for a rumpled sheath of papers that were fanning across the floor. Sinking to one knee, he smoothed them. With a blunt index finger, he outlined the multiple peaks of a unique roof.

Eva leaned forward, light-headed enough that she propped her hands on her knees. She blinked to clear the mist of tears from her eyes and saw he'd flipped the big page. A two-story house had been sketched in bold pencil strokes, the fieldstone foundation and post and beam construction shown in impeccable detail. It couldn't have been any closer to the dream home she'd envisioned along the escarpment if she'd drawn it herself.

Tremors ran up and down her spine, and a strangled cry of emotion caught in her throat. She noticed a small crowd had gathered in a semicircle around Seth. He didn't seem to notice or care. Still on one knee, he twisted and grasped her hand, folding it in both of his. She thought a sheen of moisture accentuated the dark glow of his eyes, but before she could be sure, he bent his head and pressed a soft kiss to the palm of her hand.

"I kyboshed the ticky-tacky town homes the minute Howard suggested it. When he refused to go along with me, I outbid him on the land."

Her knees buckled, and she sank to the cold linoleum beside him.

He raised her hand again, brushing his lips across her knuckles. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"I—um—Is that a wraparound porch?"

He laughed, and she decided his eyes were definitely glossier than usual. "The biggest mother of a wraparound porch I could make work. Look, Eva, I know I'm fucking this up again. I'm on my knees in a freakin' airport, I smell like a damn convict, and I don't even have a ring, but I want to marry you, build us a dream home, and work for the rest of my life to make all our dreams come true."

She lunged forward, wrapped her arms around his neck, and peppered his face with kisses. The small crowd that had gathered cheered, clapped, and wolf-whistled. She nuzzled her face against his neck in embarrassment and whispered, "I think this is the most romantic thing you've ever done for me."

"Give me time, babe. You ain't seen nothin' yet."

“But, Seth, I gave my word to Misty that I would help her with the three properties she’s already purchased.”

“Fine by me, as long as you can fit in a little time to volunteer your opinion on our property.”

She threw her head back and laughed, joy making her blood rush as fast as the water over Niagara Falls. “Oh, I’ve got plenty of opinions. But I’m still going to St. Martin on Monday.”

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her deeply, causing another roar of approval from the onlookers. She burst with enough heat to shiver in anticipation as he drew his tongue gently along her bottom lip and whispered, “That gives me twenty-four hours to remind you of everything you’re going to miss while you’re gone.”

THE END

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