

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*

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Breaking
THE *Silence*

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Breaking the Silence

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Katie Allen

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Chapter One

William Jackson started out of his programming haze, his neck and shoulders tight from hunching over the computer. He wasn't sure what had broken his concentration since the house was silent. Automatically, he glanced at the clock at the bottom of his computer screen. *Almost time*, he thought, anticipation making his stomach jump.

"Idiot," he muttered, forcing himself to focus on the line of code he had just written. It was useless. After a few minutes, he gave up. "Just pathetic."

Pushing his chair back, he unfolded his body, reaching his arms toward the ceiling to pop the hours of sitting from his spine. He liked how it felt, to stretch the crisscrossing fibers of muscle, to feel the resistant pull of his thick chest and hard, veined biceps. With a last roll of his neck, Will dropped his arms and moved out of the study and up the stairs, two at a time, to his bedroom.

Standing at the window and glancing down at his snow-blanketed backyard, Will felt a warm twist of possession. He could not believe that he had been living here for eight months. It felt so much longer, as if the house had absorbed him, making him an integral part of its structure. It had formed a spot for him, like the indentation in his couch where he always sat when he watched TV. He fit.

He had never had a place he thought of as an actual home before and sometimes it worried him...how settled he felt. His company was always moving him around the country—from Florida to Ohio to Colorado to, most recently, Minnesota, where he had found this odd little house. He realized that he didn't want to be relocated again—ever. For the first time in his life, he had somewhere he wanted to stay.

And, Will admitted to himself, it was not just the house. It was also the path that bordered his backyard—and the woman who walked it almost every day. Although he pretended that he just happened to be at his bedroom window each late afternoon at the same time *she* walked by with her dog, he knew the truth. He liked seeing her, liked the way his heart sped up and nervous excitement made his stomach flutter. As embarrassing as it was to admit, Will knew he had a crush.

It was funny that the path had been the only thing he had disliked about his house when he first saw it, figuring that the walkers and bikers and cross-country skiers would invade his privacy, ruin his solitude. That very path now brought him the high point of his days.

Will leaned against the wall next to his bedroom window, watching the empty path, giving up any pretense of doing anything else except waiting for her.

"Which isn't creepy at all," he muttered, rolling his eyes. He'd always been solitary—not that he'd had much choice as a kid. After a while, it just became habit.

This whole watching thing though...that was new. It worried him a little, although not enough to make him stop.

It wasn't as if he was peeping through her windows at night while she undressed, he reasoned. Just the brief thought of watching her as she stripped off her clothes hardened his cock, pressing it urgently against the front of his sweatpants. Will ran an absent hand up its fleece-covered length, moving the soft fabric against his erection, his eyes still fixed to the path.

It was a mild day, warm and melting, and Will was fairly sure that the woman would show up. She hadn't walked by the day before, however. When the light had disappeared and he had known for sure that she wasn't coming, Will, feeling surly and hollow, had been left to prowling around his house for most of the night. He had been pissed at himself, disgusted that his mood had become dependant on the sight of a stranger.

He saw a flash of blue through the winter-stripped trees that guarded the path and he straightened, his hand leaving his cock almost guiltily, as if she could see him, know what he was doing as he watched her. He leaned forward, so close to the window that his breath left a cloudy spot on the glass, his palms pressed into the sill.

Yes! It was the woman—his woman. He saw the tall black dog walking in front of her, moving from side to side on the path with its head lowered, investigating scents in the melting snow. The woman had her coat unzipped, Will saw as she drew closer, and her hat and mittens were off. After the months of cold, there was something naked-looking about her bare hands and head.

She was striding along briskly and the breeze created by her movement swung the coat open, flashing the pink sweater underneath. Will could actually see her breasts bounce without having to wonder if it was just his imagination. His face burned as he stared at the movement, heat prickling under his skin, until he finally had to force his eyes off her chest.

Her hair was loose today and, without her hat, light brown strands brushed across her face when she turned her head. A bird took off in a mad flurry of wings and the woman's eyes followed the movement, bringing her gaze close to the window where Will stood. He jumped back a step, feeling caught. After a moment, he couldn't help but lean forward to watch her again.

She was greeting a passing runner, a man whose lean body was outlined in spandex, and Will could see her smile and say something that made the runner laugh. Will made a low sound, almost a growl. It was silly but he was jealous of the other man, that the guy could talk to her, could receive her smiling attention.

Will shook his head. It was crazy to feel possessive. She wasn't his girlfriend or his lover or even his friend—she didn't know *of* him. He was just a silent lurker, peeking out his windows like a crazy aunt hidden away in the attic.

Will watched her figure grow smaller until she disappeared around the bend in the path. He was hot and aching and lonely, left with only a throbbing cock and

daydreams. He ended up as he almost always did after he watched her—in the shower to jerk his frustrations out.

One arm heated the wall tiles, his clenched fist popping the veins into obscene relief where his face pressed against the hard muscle of his forearm. His other hand pumped roughly up and down his cock, moving the skin with his grip. Will imagined that the woman was in the shower with him and that it wasn't his rough, hairy hand around his erection but hers—small and delicate with soft skin, the naked hands that he had just seen.

Those hands would brush against his penis, tentative but curious, before closing around him in a gentle grip. She would sway forward, still holding his erection, and touch her lips to the head of his cock, the point of her tongue slipping out to paint him with saliva.

He imagined her mouth—such a fabulous mouth—wrapping around him, her tongue and cheeks closing on his cock with hot, wet suction. Will's fist moved faster, harder, trying to create that mind-blowing friction of his dreams. She would take his erection in deeper, deeper, until she swallowed him whole, her mouth filled with him, throat muscles working on the very tip of his cock.

He wouldn't be able to stand it anymore and would have to thrust, hard, pulling out against the dragging suction and shoving back in, filling her, fucking her mouth, and she would look up at him, her mouth stuffed full of his cock, and with her eyes she would tell him she loved this, loved being full of him, loved *him*...

Will exploded, his body jerked tight with his orgasm. As the spasms eased, he looked down at his fist wrapped around his cock and released it quickly. The daydream of the woman faded, this woman he was arranging his days around. Jerking off in the shower to thoughts of her, pretending that she loved him...for God's sake, this woman he didn't know. Fuck, he didn't even know her name!

For weeks he'd been fixated on her, using dreams of her to make himself come into his own fist. He slid down the wall, welcoming the cold shock of the porcelain tiles and staring blindly through the clouded glass of the shower door. The water poured onto him, slipping over places that no woman had ever touched, as he closed his eyes and tilted his head back so that the water splattered his face. He bumped his head back against the tile, then again, harder, because that dull pain was better than thinking about his sorry, pathetic ass—his sorry, pathetic, *virgin* ass, who was dreaming of a stranger who didn't even know that he existed.

Enough.

Enough self-pity, enough jerking off in the shower alone, enough not knowing her name. *Tomorrow*. Tomorrow, when she walked by, he was going to leave the house and meet her. Or at least follow her.

No! No more creepy, stalker behavior. He was going to say hello and introduce himself like a normal person. At least...as normal as he could pretend to be.

Jenny Fitzgerald was not having a good day at work.

Usually she liked her job at the engineering firm—it was structured enough to appeal to her OCD side but different enough each day not to drive her insane with boredom. She liked the other engineers and drafters she worked with—except for Evan, who could be extraordinarily annoying at times. Jenny even liked her cubicle, as odd as that was. She liked the façade of privacy, her cozy cube walls covered with schedules of project deadlines, equipment specs, print-outs of funny e-mails and pictures of her niece, Faith, and her dog, Rosie—more of her dog, although she would never admit that to her sister.

In her cube, she could wallow in the illusion of aloneness but, when she needed the company of other people, she just had to stand up and peek over the top of the flimsy partition to find it. Christian was always delighted to go on and on and *on* about how his latest ex-boyfriend was *still* calling him twenty times a day, even though it was *totally over*.

Over the cubical wall on the other side of Jenny's desk, Carrie could also be counted on for a chat, although ever since her first baby arrived six months ago it would almost definitely be a baby-related topic. Jenny tried, but conversations about little Riley made her eyes glaze over after five minutes. Riley was cute and sweet and all that other baby stuff, but motherhood had pushed Carrie into over-share land. Jenny had heard more about mucus plugs and baby acne and post-delivery sex in the past six months than she'd ever really wanted to know.

Today, though, everything was just a mess. She had her period, which always made her an emotional wreck, to the annoyance of her inner feminist. Jenny had burst into tears in her car on the way to work just because she heard a PSA on the radio about the local food bank.

A *radio PSA*, for God's sake, she thought in self-disgust. It wasn't even a TV commercial with baby animals or anything. Nope, just a radio ad, but Jenny had enough hormones wreaking chaos in the emotional center of her brain that the mournful ad, accompanied by the sad *plinky-plinky* music, was enough to throw her over the edge into a flood of melodramatic tears.

She had arrived at the office cranky, blotchy and bloated, and it hadn't even been 8:00 a.m. yet. The morning had continued on its downhill path with a vicious paper cut across the knuckle of her index finger. Jenny had gotten *that* while rolling up a newly finished project, which had been plotted out neatly on three-foot by four-foot plans—all eighty-six pages of it. Jenny had been tempted to just finish rolling the project, gore and all, but decided that having her blood smeared across the stacked edges of the plans was probably a violation of some health code or other and also, *gross*, so the whole project had to be reprinted.

Her mouse-button finger wrapped awkwardly in a blood-dotted tissue, Jenny grimly forged back into her latest project, a plumbing system that she was designing for an apartment complex. It was due in two days and she was close to having it finished

but the way things were going today, Jenny wouldn't be surprised if her hard drive imploded.

"If you do, just take me with you," she muttered.

A new e-mail popped into her inbox and she clicked on it reluctantly. E-mails almost always meant more work and this one had a monster-size attachment, which was definitely not a good sign.

She groaned as she read the e-mail—the architect in charge of the apartment complex project had just sent updated plans for the building Jenny was working on. She opened the attachment and glanced over the new layouts, clenching her jaw to hold back an irritated noise. Obviously she didn't stifle it very well, since Christian's shaggy blond head appeared over the cubicle wall.

"Did you just *growl*?" he asked.

Jenny looked up at Christian and found it impossible to hold her frown. With his surfer-boy hair and brown eyes, he looked just like a Golden Retriever and had the personality to match. Okay, maybe the personality of a slightly bitchy Golden Retriever. He had a permanent, easygoing grin and a slight drawl from growing up in southern "Missour-ah", as he called it, and was just all-around adorable.

"Oh the architects just switched all the bathrooms around. 'Slight changes' my ass." Jenny was growling again. "I'm going to have to redo the entire system in two days."

"So maybe this isn't a good time..." Christian started to slink down behind the partition.

"What?" Jenny asked suspiciously. "Christian Miller—did you screw up your e-mail *again*?"

Christian's eyes reappeared above the wall, looking more puppy-like than ever through his floppy bangs. "I don't know what I do to it, Jenny, I swear! It just happens."

"You swore you were watching how I fixed it last time. And the time before that. And the time before *that*. I should make you call the I.T. guy."

"Not that! Anything but that!" Christian clutched handfuls of his hair.

"Chuck's not *that* bad." Resigned, Jenny rolled her chair out of her cube and around the corner into Christian's space.

"Not that bad?" Christian looked at her in horror. "Whenever I call him, the minute he walks in here—not smelling very sweetly, by the way—the computer stops doing whatever it was doing wrong. And then Chuck gives me this look, like there was never anything wrong in the first place and I just called him over to hit on him or something. As if! And then he leaves and the computer starts doing the wrong thing again!"

"Okay, okay!" Jenny raised her hands, laughing. "I'll fix your e-mail—again. You're going to watch and remember this time, right?" She gave him her best stern glare, which wasn't all that great since she was having a hard time keeping a straight face.

Christian did that to her. She had quickly learned not to sit by or across from him at meetings, since he tended to start Skittle-hockey games or draw the big boss's face on

the side of his closed hand so he could move his thumb and make him “talk”. Jenny was always the one who would laugh and get into trouble, while Christian had mastered his innocent, I-can’t-believe-you’re-giggling-in-the-middle-of-this-important-meeting face, which almost always got him off without a reprimand.

“Yes, yes.” Christian’s happy expression was back and he put one hand over his heart in solemn promise. “I promise I’ll pay attention this time.”

“What is that, the Boy Scout swear?” Jenny rolled her chair over to Christian’s keyboard.

“No, I think the Boy Scouts just use a few fingers. Or maybe that’s the *Star Trek* salute.” Christian shrugged. “I don’t know. I was never in Boy Scouts. They don’t really like our kind.”

“What kind is that—the dopey kind?” Jenny nudged Christian’s mouse and reached over to free the cord from the Pez collection bunched around his oriental mouse rug.

Not at all offended, Christian leaned back and spun his chair in a lazy circle. “That would be the fabulous and flaming kind, of course.”

“Seriously, Chris, if you don’t start paying attention I’m going to sic Chuck on you.”

Christian stopped the chair mid-spin and scooted over next to Jenny. “I am watching your every move with complete and utter attention.” He touched one of his Pez dispensers lightly. “Isn’t that right, Mr. Incredible?”

“Christian. Focus.”

He heaved a long-suffering sigh and rested his chin on Jenny’s shoulder. “Proceed, e-mail Nazi.”

“Hey, Christian. Oh hi, Jenny.” Evan’s head popped into the cubicle entrance. “What’s going on?”

“And the day just keeps getting better,” Jenny muttered, keeping her back to Evan. Maybe if she just pretended he wasn’t there...

“Did you do that thing to your e-mail again, Christian? You really should call in Chuck when you have computer problems. I mean, it’s not Jenny’s job to fix everything for you.” Even without turning around, Jenny knew that Evan’s expression was just the right mix of helpful condescension and reprimand guaranteed to send a shot of annoyance under her skin.

She felt Christian’s chin leave her shoulder as he glanced at Evan. Jenny wasn’t the only one who found Evan irritating. Nothing made Chris as pissy as Evan being...well, Evan.

“But Jenny just *loves* helping me, don’t you, Jen?” Christian, still watching Evan, wrapped his arms around her shoulders in a backward hug. “She thinks I’m special.”

"Yeah—special in a short-bus kind of way," Jenny muttered. Keeping her eyes on the screen and her hands moving, she grimly focused on the computer screen in front of her. When Christian and Evan started in on each other, it was never pretty.

"Living to help others, that's my Jenny," Christian continued, undeterred. He gave her a smacking kiss on the side of her head and offered Evan an innocent smile. "Isn't she just the sweetest? If I swung that way, I would ask her out in a minute." He turned his sugary smile back to Jenny. "You'd do me, wouldn't you, sweet pea?"

"Chris..." Jenny muttered in warning. Even without looking, she knew that Evan's face was turning red with embarrassment and temper. Christian was well aware that Evan liked her—*liked* liked her, as Chris enjoyed pronouncing when he was having a junior high moment and wanted to bug her.

Actually, everyone in the office knew that Evan liked Jenny and the entire staff was gleefully waiting for Evan to finally dredge up the nerve to ask her out. The Accounting Department had started a betting pool.

Jenny just hoped that Evan's nerve continued to fail him for a long time. Years would be fine. It wasn't that Evan wasn't attractive—he was handsome in an even-featured, guy-in-a-razor-commercial kind of way—but he was just so annoying and had a creepy edge to him. He always brought out the worst in Christian, so she was usually stuck in the role of mediator.

Not today though. Today she was too cranky to mediate anything.

Chris sighed deeply and rested his cheek on Jenny's hair. She swatted at him with the back of her non-mouse hand. He ignored her. "The men should be lined up at your desk with flowers, begging for a date. I don't know what's wrong with the straight guys in this office." Another melodramatic sigh. "I guess they're just a bunch of pussies, too scared to ask you out."

"Why don't you ever ask anyone else for help, Christian?" Evan said in the viciously smug tone he always got when he thought he had a good comeback. "Why, I'm sure that Tom would be especially glad to give you a...hand."

Jenny winced. Ouch—a low blow.

Christian dropped his arms from around Jenny and rotated his chair in a slow half circle. Although she felt a little guilty about it, Jenny couldn't resist turning around as well so she could watch the upcoming carnage.

Evan smiled a little, oblivious to the danger. "I guess he really wouldn't want to spend too much time with you though. That might upset that cute little wife of his. What's her name—Cindy? Susan?"

"Carla."

"Right. Carla. Tiny little thing, isn't she? Funny how she was able to knock you out cold with one punch of her itty-bitty fist."

"She managed a bar for three years. I think she learned a few things about how to handle drunken idiots," Jenny offered. Actually, she wouldn't have minded having

Carla and her lethal fists right at that minute, so she could knock some thick male skulls together for her and let Jenny get some work done.

Evan ignored Jenny's interjection. "I guess it was understandable, given that you threw cocktail sauce all over her dress."

"Beanee Weenees."

"What?" Evan looked distracted for a moment and Jenny had a moment of hope that he would give up needling Christian and just go away.

"I threw Beanee Weenees all over her dress." Christian leaned back casually, his eyes steady on Evan's face.

"Whatever. Took it hard, did you?" Evan, distraction forgotten, squashed Jenny's hope for a peaceful resolution. "I guess I can see why. One day, you and Tom are all lovey-dovey and the next, he's introducing everyone to his fiancée at the Christmas party. Sad...and I could have sworn I heard you telling Jenny here just a few days before the party that you were in love. That you'd never felt that way before." Evan sighed dramatically and rested his hand on his heart.

Christian came out of his chair in one smooth movement. Evan flinched, caught himself and tried to regain his cocky expression. He was only partially successful—his face showed a peculiar combination of superiority and terror. Chris sauntered over to stand too close to Evan.

"Hey, Ev, I've been thinking..."

"What?" Evan shifted his weight back slightly, trying to move away from Christian but obviously not willing to look like he was backing down.

"Instead of sniping at each other, we should address the real issue here."

"Real issue?" Evan appeared to be thrown off-guard by Chris' gentle tone.

"Yeah." Christian ran a light finger down Evan's forearm, barely touching the skin revealed by his rolled-up sleeve. Evan took a half step backward and his elbow bumped the partition, throwing him slightly off balance but still clinging to his smirk.

"This attraction between us," Chris continued. He closed the space Evan had created, smiling a little, the same smile that Jenny had seen him use countless times to entice some new hottie into his bed. That boy was just too gorgeous for his own good, especially when, like now, he used his powers for evil.

"Attraction?" Evan yelled. "But I'm not—"

"You're not what?" Christian drawled, moving fractionally closer.

"I'm not, well," Evan fumbled, "interested—in you, I mean. Or anyone." His panicked gaze flew from Chris to Jenny, who was watching the scene play out with resignation mixed with guilty amusement. "Anyone who's a guy, I mean."

"Oh." Christian let out a disappointed sigh. "I just thought..." He moved back to his chair and flopped down, a picture of abject rejection. He eyed Evan skeptically up and down. "Are you sure you're not..."

"Yes! Positive! What made— I mean, you didn't really think that..." Evan glared at Christian suspiciously. "You're just trying to rattle me, that's all."

"It's just..." Christian shrugged. "Well, you're always over here talking to me, looking at me, engaging me in clever repartee...you could cut the tension with a knife, if you know what I mean."

"Tension?" Evan squeaked. More blood rushed to his face, until he was almost purple. He cleared his throat before trying again. "The only tension I feel is the Christian's-an-asshole tension!"

"You know what I mean." Christian glanced up at him through his shaggy bangs. "Sexual tension."

Jenny rolled her eyes. If he started batting his eyelashes, she was going to lose it.

"No!" Evan denied, shaking his head emphatically, "I just wanted to see..." He glanced at Jenny and backpedaled quickly. "I mean, I just had things to discuss with you—work-related things. In fact, you're keeping me from those things that I—" With that last garbled sentence, Evan bolted.

Christian smiled innocently at Jenny. "Love rejected. Isn't it sad?"

"Hah. You're an evil, evil man, Christian." Jenny couldn't work up too much pity for poor, panicked Evan though. "You know what you've done, don't you?"

"I got rid of the passive-aggressive little prick, I believe, for at least a few days. You should be thanking me." Christian's happy grin was back. Jenny couldn't help but laugh. He might look like an innocent choirboy but there was nothing Chris liked better than some good old-fashioned shit stirring.

"Actually, you've created a *masculinity-challenged*, passive-aggressive little prick. He's going to strut around for a week, grunting about sports scores and his visit to Hooters just to prove his non-gayness. We'll all be lucky if he doesn't start slapping Janice on the ass and calling her 'Miss Thang'." Jenny's face scrunched up at the thought.

Christian shuddered in revulsion. "Thank you for that visual. Speaking of Miss Mutton-dressed-as-lamb, did you see her fabulous new look today?"

"Nope. Should I be ready to be horrified?" Janice, the receptionist, was a blink away from her fiftieth birthday but tended to dress more in the *Tiger Beat* age bracket.

"Definitely. Ready? Low-rise stretch jeans..."

"Seen 'em—old news."

"Wait, wait, wait—I'm not finished. Low-rise stretch jeans with," Christian paused for dramatic effect, "a peek-a-boo thong."

"No!" Jenny was suitably aghast. "Don't lie."

"True, true. Go check it out."

Jenny jumped out of the chair. The plumbing job was sitting on her desk but it could wait one more minute for her to cruise past Janice's desk and check out her outfit.

Sure, it was train-wreck gawking—Jenny didn't want to look but she couldn't *not* look—but hey, anything to brighten a day that had been pretty crappy so far.

As she moved between and around cubicle walls in the direction of Janice's desk, Jenny heard the dreaded voice behind her.

"Hey, Jenny, wait for a sec."

Christian, that liar, had promised at least a few Evan-free days, Jenny thought, but she stopped and turned, letting Evan catch up. His face was red—Jenny wasn't sure if it was still red from the Christian encounter or if there was a new reason.

"Need something, Evan?" Her tone was more pleasant than usual, since Jenny did have some guilt about not doing anything to stop the whole "aren't you gay" fiasco. Not that there was ever much she could do to stop Christian on a roll but she supposed she could have kicked him or something. Really though, Evan did deserve everything he got after baiting Chris about Tom.

"Actually, I was wondering..."

His neck was blotchy with red and white patches, Jenny noticed idly. *The guy couldn't get any redder*, she thought. *I wonder what the deal is...*

Oh shit.

He was doing it. After months of stalling, he was actually asking her out.

"I thought maybe, if you're interested, we could do something sometime. Together, I mean."

"Sure, we could do something—as friends." Jenny tried a last-ditch effort to head him off.

"No, I meant as a date." Evan looked at her intently—too intently. He was quickly crossing the line from annoying to pretty damn creepy. "Not as friends. I mean, friends of course but...more than friends."

Okay, *ew*. Now he was thinking about getting into her pants, which made her picture it, which made her want to wash her brain with some industrial cleaner.

So it wasn't going to be masculine grunting or slapping Janice on her bethonged ass. Nope, he was going to prove he wasn't gay by asking Jenny out. She wondered which lucky person in the betting pool had picked today as the ask-out day.

The irritating thing—one of the irritating things—was that he didn't ask her out for a specific day, so telling him that she would be busy that night wouldn't work. Jenny didn't want to just blow him off with a flat-out, "No, never, you creepy, creepy man," because Christian was right—Evan was a passive-aggressive little prick.

Once, the big boss had torn into him in front of a whole meeting room of people about some mistake he had made. Afterward, everyone had filed out of the conference room when Jenny had ducked back in to grab her favorite pen she'd left on the table. She'd jerked to a halt when she saw Evan sitting alone, his expression so furious, so vicious, that she'd pivoted around and left without her pen. Later, she felt silly for

feeling so frightened, blaming her imagination for the overreaction, but the memory of Evan's expression on that day popped into her head now.

Jenny tried to slow her thoughts and think rationally. She needed an excuse for not going on any dates in the possible future. There were two standards—"I'm a lesbian", which Jenny found usually didn't turn a guy off but instead had the opposite effect, and "I have a boyfriend", which, knowing the gossip pipeline around the office, Evan would know wasn't true. Still, it was the best Jenny could think of right at the moment.

"I'm sorry, Evan, but I'm seeing someone." She gave him a pacifying smile and inched backward, ready to bolt.

"No you're not."

Jenny stared at Evan, startled. He sounded so sure of that. She started to get a little pissed. How would he know if she was seeing someone? Maybe she just hadn't told anyone at the office about this new, albeit fake, boyfriend so that her private life wouldn't be gossiped about.

"I mean, I hadn't heard that you were dating anyone." Evan must have seen the anger in her glare, because he backed off a little. "I asked a few people."

"It's new. We've just been out a few times and I haven't told anyone here. I don't want to jinx it, you know?" Jenny let her eyes get a little dreamy. "I really think he might be the one." *Hah*, she thought. *Christian's not the only drama queen around here.*

"Oh. Okay. Sorry to bother you." Evan took a step back to let her pass. "I hope he's a really great guy—you deserve it."

"Thanks, Evan." Jenny hurried away from him. Somehow she doubted that he believed her about the boyfriend. His eyes had gone cold and there had been a vein of sarcasm running through that last bit about her deserving a great guy. Great. There was going to be tension. Why did guys have to wreck everything?

She glanced back toward Evan and he was watching her walk away, his face twisted, reminding her so much of his expression that day in the conference room that she flinched, whipping her head back around in time to see Mary peeking from behind the wall of her cubicle, her face bright with eavesdropping glee.

Jenny sighed. Of course it had to be Mary—she was the biggest gossip at the office. Well, the biggest gossip after Christian and herself, Jenny had to admit. Now not only would everyone know that Evan had asked her out, they would all be talking about the "new boyfriend". And since the annual office party, thrown every year in January for the big boss's birthday, was coming up in less than two weeks, she would have to make up a reason for her imaginary boyfriend's absence.

Jenny sighed again. This really was not turning out to be a good day.

Chapter Two

By the time Jenny dragged her tired, cramping body through her front door, she had never been so glad to be home in her entire life. She had bailed out of work early, bringing her laptop with her so that she could work at home. It would still be a long night but at least no one would be “casually” walking by her cubicle, hoping to interrogate her about her new boyfriend. In light of that fascinating tidbit, Evan’s request for a date was quickly forgotten by everyone except for Clarence in Accounting, who won forty-eight dollars from the betting pool and, Jenny was sure, Evan, who was probably plotting revenge.

Rosie, her rangy black mutt, greeted her ecstatically. Jenny groaned as the dog raced back and forth from the hall closet, where her leash was kept, to the front door. A walk was so not what Jenny wanted right now. A hot shower, yes. A pint of chocolate mint ice cream and a spoon—definitely. Her favorite pajamas, the ones with monkeys holding pink bananas printed on them—of course.

Rosie stared at her with hopeful eyes. Okay, a walk it was. Jenny had known when she and her eighty-pound dog moved into the townhouse with its miniscule lawn that they would be taking lots of long walks. Usually Jenny enjoyed their jaunts. Her house was just a few blocks away from Beaver Creek path and her favorite loop took about an hour, winding through trees and between neighborhoods, crisscrossing over the creek with lots of cute footbridges. Tonight though, she was just so tired that a walk seemed like a Herculean task.

Jenny dragged herself upstairs to change, rolling her pantyhose down carelessly despite knowing that she would have to fight that tangled knot eventually. She did hang up her suit jacket and matching skirt—“dry clean only” inspired some respect. She threw on her favorite jeans and yanked a fuzzy sweater over her head.

Glancing at herself in the full-length mirror in the corner of her bedroom, Jenny yanked her hair out from under her collar and brushed some static-charged floaters back with her hand. She wondered if she should get some blonde highlights. Right now, in the dull gray of winter, her hair seemed so...*brown*.

She shook her head, dismissing the thought. With highlights, she would look like Christian’s freaking twin. Already people commented on their resemblance and asked if they were brother and sister.

“Yeah, he’s the brother I never wanted,” Jenny muttered to her reflection. She still hadn’t forgiven Chris for his part in driving Evan to ask her out in a testosterone-fueled panic.

A date would have been nice though. Not with Evan, of course, but with... Jenny thought but came up with a blank on datable men. It had been—she counted back the

months—holy cow! Almost two years had passed since she had gone out on a date. It had been *way* longer than that since she had gotten laid. How had this happened?

Jenny critiqued herself in the mirror. Long hair, light brown, that couldn't really decide whether it was curly or not. Eyes, brown as well, but dark brown this time. Nice eyebrows, although no one had ever gotten a date because of her eyebrows, at least that Jenny knew of. Normal nose. A pretty good mouth—Jim, her college boyfriend, had told her that guys liked her mouth because it made them think of blowjobs. Evan always stared at her mouth, if he wasn't staring at her chest, when he talked to her.

Speaking of her chest... She glanced down. Things were good in that department, although they were a pain in the, well, breast to run with, even with two sports bras. In high school and college, Jenny had made several halfhearted attempts to lose weight but now, at twenty-six, she had accepted that her body was meant to be curvy. Depriving herself of cookies and exercising like a demon never changed anything—it just made her cranky. Besides, she grew to like the softness of her hips and breasts, the smooth roundness of her bottom and the tapering shape of her legs. When she saw pictures of models in magazines or watched actresses in movies, their bodies seemed sharp and knobby, all the feminine mystery sucked out of them.

Jenny had grown up in a house of all women, her mother and three sisters, and she had grown accustomed to naked female bodies—dashing into the shower before the single bathroom was occupied *again*, dressing in a shared bedroom during the half light of early morning, tossing clothes on and off to find the perfect outfit for a date. The normality of the true sizes and shapes of women had been imprinted on Jenny's brain long before fashion magazines had a chance.

Jenny frowned at her reflection. If all features were accounted for and, if not drop-dead gorgeous, at least not *troll*-like, what was the problem? Why the dating dry spell? She was interrupted from her introspection by a questioning canine whine from the bedroom doorway.

"Enough of this," muttered Jenny as she walked downstairs and pulled her coat from the closet. She stuffed her feet into her boots. "Looking at my reflection won't help and I have a dog that has to pee." Jamming a knit hat on her head and grabbing up a pair of mittens and Rosie's leash, Jenny headed for the front door.

With Rosie tugging her forward to a speedy walk, however, Jenny couldn't stop the thoughts rolling around in her head. Why was a reasonably attractive, semi-sane, fairly young woman alone?

Her last relationship had ended three years ago and there had been no sex since. None. And not even a date for almost two years. It had been easy to slip into a pattern of work, home, walk the dog, climb into jammies, work some more, read or watch TV and go to bed. Alone.

When she did go out, she tended to hang with Christian. If they drove to Minneapolis or St. Paul to visit the gay clubs, that didn't do her much good date-wise, although she always had a blast. When they went out to places where there was the

possibility of the presence of straight men, they usually assumed that she and Christian were together — as a couple.

If she wanted a date, she obviously had to do something different, go somewhere single men might lurk. Jenny made a face. She hated change. Besides, her life was good, except for the no-date, no-sex part, and she really had no desire to start a man-hunting mission.

Jenny realized that it was starting to snow. Yesterday's warm spring fake-out was gone and she was alternating between slipping on smooth patches of ice and catching the toes of her boots on the rough edges of refrozen slush. The snowflakes were small and mean, and the wind spat them into her face.

Blinking against the assault, Jenny noticed that she and Rosie were the only ones in sight. She reeled a hopeful Rosie in and unhooked the leash from the dog's collar. Jenny generally tried to be law-abiding and obey the dog-on-a-leash pictograph signs that dotted the path. Right now though, they were apparently the only ones foolish enough to be out in this weather and the footing was treacherous enough without Tugboat Rosie yanking her off balance every few seconds. A few minutes of loose dog shouldn't hurt anything. Rosie had been great in obedience class at everything except heeling. Sit, stay, down, come — she had picked everything up with ease, until it came time to heel. Rosie had never quite gotten the concept.

Jenny trudged along, her head angled down away from the wind. She glanced up to check on Rosie — and jerked to a stop, startled.

Right in front of her was a man, a huge man, so close that if she hadn't looked up just at that moment she would have crashed into him.

Jenny took a second look. It might not have been so bad to bump into *this* guy — he was hot. Really hot. So hot he didn't look real hot. In fact, for a whimsical moment, she wondered if he was a gift from some heavenly deity sick of hearing her whine about her dateless state.

Although, if he was her date, he didn't look very happy about it. He was definitely frowning. Scowling even. Great, the deity gave her a cranky date — there always had to be a catch somewhere, didn't there?

The guy really was beautiful though. He was big — muscle big, not Homer Simpson big — and tall and had cheekbones that could cut...what? Cheese? They could definitely cut cheese. Jenny frowned a little. She had never been very good at romantic descriptions. He looked very Nordic, not that that was anything unusual for this neck of the woods. Minnesota was filled with blond people with last names like Swenson and Anderson and Olafson.

He wasn't just a typical blond though. His eyes, slanted over those cheekbones, were the see-through light blue, almost scary blue, of a Husky. They were the same color as snow at night, when it gives off an almost unearthly blue glow. He was definitely blond, close to platinum, Jenny could tell, even though his hair was cut almost military-short. His eyebrows and lashes were darker — unusually so. His brows

slashed above his narrowed eyes and a few snowflakes were trapped in the tangle of his lashes...

Jenny suddenly realized that she had been staring at this man way too closely and for far too long for him to think that she was right in the head.

She smiled tentatively as she offered a weak greeting. "Hi."

Nothing.

Jenny's brain had unfrozen just enough for her to realize that this man wasn't a gift from the gods that she could take home and keep tied in her bedroom for her own enjoyment, although the thought of that made sweat break out under her knit hat. This was a real person, a person who didn't look very happy with her...

Oh!

Comprehension dawned. She would have figured it out earlier if he hadn't been so darn distracting to look at. With her head ducked to avoid the wind, she had probably missed Rosie veering into one of the neighboring yards, bringing Mr. Crabby-Pants here out to give her a lecture on responsible dog ownership.

"I'm sorry—was my dog in your yard?" Jenny glanced around and saw Rosie innocently rooting around in the snow at the side of the path. "I try to keep her more under control usually..."

She glanced at the man through her lashes, checking to see if her apology had lightened his expression. Nope. Oh come on now, how much damage could one little dog—okay, one rather large dog—have done in the ten seconds Jenny wasn't watching?

"What?"

He spoke. Of course he had to have a voice like Barry White's, as if there wasn't enough tingling going on in her girly bits... Oops. Jenny realized that she was wandering off again. He was really going to think she wasn't quite right.

"I thought that's why you were angry—because my dog was on your property?" Jenny's voice went up in question at the end, since the hottie was looking at her like she was speaking Pig Latin.

"I'm not angry."

Oh that voice again. Jenny pressed the tops of her thighs together. "You're not?" Okay, Jen, she thought, he could fuck you with that voice alone and you're Squeaky McSqueakerson? Let's try for a little more on the sexy purr side, please.

"No. That's just my face."

Jenny laughed. He was hot *and* funny? She was doomed. "So my dog wasn't bugging you?"

"No. He's fine."

Okay. So if it wasn't to rage about the dog, why was a Nordic god standing in the middle of the path in a snowstorm—well, at least strong flurries? And an easy conversationalist, he was not. "That's good. If no one else is around out here, I like to let

her run some of her energy off. She can be a bit of a rubber ball sometimes—bouncing off the walls.”

“Sorry—I meant *she’s* fine.” He looked a little embarrassed at this, as if he had made a major faux pas. Or maybe he just wasn’t comfortable discussing canine gender differences.

“Don’t worry about it—she doesn’t care. Everyone thinks she’s a ‘he’ at first.” Feminine, Rosie was not. “She’s a bit butch.”

He made a noise, a half cough, half snort, and Jenny was pleased that she had maybe made him laugh. Or choke. She wasn’t quite sure which. Now the ice would be broken and he would carry his half of the conversational ball.

Jenny waited through a few seconds of silence. Guess not.

“So...” *Topic, topic, topic.* Jenny hunted through her brain for a conversation starter. For some reason, she didn’t want to just say goodbye and continue with her walk. She was also still curious as to why he was here. Here and not moving.

Rosie had obviously decided that now was a good time to introduce herself. She trotted over to the stranger, snuffled at his pant leg for a moment and must have concluded that he passed muster, because she sat in the snow by his foot and leaned against him. He looked down at the dog with a sort of bemused expression, like a zebra had just plopped down next to him, but he didn’t move out of leaning range.

“Do you walk here often?” Mentally, Jenny slapped her forehead in disgust. Of all the cheesy pick-up lines—why not just ask him what his sign is?

“No.”

Okay, this was just unfair. The way she was straining for conversation, he needed to put a *little* more effort into it than monosyllables. “So...do you live around here?”

“There.” He pointed to the back of one of the houses.

“Really? That’s yours?” Jenny was delighted. The quirky house was her favorite of all the homes they passed on Rosie’s walks. It did not, however, seem to fit this man. It was more of a crazy grandma house—but a kindly crazy grandma, of course. One who brought her neighbors cookies that they didn’t want to eat because they knew how very many cats she had.

At her astonished tone, he looked a little defensive. “Yeah. Why are you so surprised?”

“It’s just that I love that house! I’ve been dying to ask the owner, who is, conveniently, right here in front of me—why did you paint it purple?”

A hint of red darkened those amazing cheekbones. “It came that way,” he muttered, his eyes brushing to the side. “I’m going to paint it next summer.”

“Oh.” Jenny was a little disappointed. The purple was definitely part of the crazy-grandma feel the house gave off but it seemed a little anticlimactic to go from wild violet to standard white or some other generic color. “You don’t like the purple?”

"It's not that I don't like it, it's just..." His eyes dropped from hers again, almost as if —

Jenny looked at him sharply as an idea occurred to her. Could the Nordic god be *shy*?

"It's kind of a girl color, don't you think?" He was watching her again. Jenny shook off her distraction and made herself concentrate on the conversation. But shyness from this hot, hot man! It was too adorable.

"Not really." Jenny held her ground for only about a second and a half. "Okay, maybe it is a *bit* girly. It's just that purple seems to fit. It's a great house, by the way."

"Thanks." And then he smiled. It was such a sweet, unexpected smile that Jenny found she was grinning back at him like an idiot. A freezing-cold idiot, now that she thought about it. His large form was a great wind block but he must be almost frozen too, Jenny figured — he didn't even have a hat on.

As reluctant as she was to end this odd but entrancing encounter, Jenny couldn't feel her fingers. "I'd better get going—it was nice to meet you, Mr. Purple-House-Owner."

"My name's William. William Jackson."

"Jenny Fitzgerald." She stuck out her frozen hand and he hesitated a moment before taking it. Her mitten completely disappeared in his bare hand and, even through the fuzzy knit, Jenny could feel the incredible heat of him. She wanted to leave her hand in his forever — and that thought made her panic enough to pull free from his grip.

"Nice to meet you, William. You'd better get inside before your ears freeze off." She started back toward home, as it was too cold by now to finish their usual loop. Besides, twilight was creeping in and she was in such a dreamy, brainless mode from meeting William the Hot that Jenny didn't feel like she should be wandering around in the dark.

"Nice to meet you...Jenny." He watched her until she was out of sight.

He had done it. He had actually met her, talked to her, touched her.

Will was prowling his house, unable to sit or work or do anything except roam from room to room, his stomach flip-flopping with excitement and nerves and leftover adrenaline. He strode over to the living room window and twisted the blinds up, peering out through the snow at the silent path as if she would appear again, even though it was almost midnight. He had been pacing the house for hours, thinking about her — no, thinking about *Jenny*.

He actually knew her name now. He also knew how she smelled — good — and that her mouth looked even better up close and that she was amazing — nice and funny and she actually seemed to like him.

A thrill shot through him again. He couldn't believe that he'd actually had the nerve to leave the house and walk the few steps from his yard to the path when he saw her blue-hatted figure approaching. Once she had gotten close and saw him, his brain

had shut down and he had frozen, unable to say anything or do anything except stare at her like an idiot, but it didn't matter—she had talked to him and laughed and said that she liked his house.

Will took another turn around the living room before stopping at the window again. She had also given him a raging hard-on. He grimaced, adjusting his jeans.

He had to do something. Maybe a workout would help. As he took the stairs three at a time, heading to his room, Will couldn't stop the corners of his mouth from twitching upward, crumbling the edges of his habitual stoicism. He threw off his jeans and sweater and yanked on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt before jamming his feet into his running shoes. Earlier today, he had stood helplessly at his closet for almost an hour trying to figure out what to wear.

Like a teenage girl, he thought, shaking his head in self-disgust. The shirt he had finally picked had been covered up by his coat anyway, so it hadn't even mattered.

Will was glad of the weight bench and treadmill that he had set up in his basement as soon as he had moved in. His only other option would be running through the snowy streets, a sappy grin plastered on his face, and that would make the neighbors think he was even crazier than they had already decided he was.

He headed downstairs and hopped onto the treadmill, pushing the start button and arrowing up the speed. As his feet fell into the easy rhythm of practice, his mind repeated her name with every stride. *Jenny, Jenny, Jenny...*

Jenny tried again to concentrate on water piping and drain clean outs, without much luck. She had been sitting at her desk at home for hours, staring blindly at the plumbing drawings that she still had to finish, computer mouse motionless under her fingers.

It was his fault, William's, for breaking her concentration. If he hadn't been so hot and intriguing and, well, gorgeous, she would be happily working and not gazing off into space. The whole walk home, her stomach had fizzed with the sensation that something exciting and big and life changing had just happened, and all because she had met some guy who probably wasn't even interested in her.

Jenny frowned, trying to bring the whole encounter back into perspective. Just because she'd met some halfway-attractive man and talked with him for five minutes did not mean that anything was going to come of it. In fact, this was probably one of those meet-once-and-never-see-again situations.

Or, Jenny thought with dawning horror, I'll see him in the spring on one of Rosie's walks and he'll be painting his house with his wife! With their kids running around! He would wave casually to her and put one of his muscled arms around his gorgeous, skinny wife—

Jenny slammed her laptop shut and went to bed. It was a long time before she fell asleep.

Chapter Three

At work the next morning, Jenny hadn't even booted up her computer when Carrie's head appeared over the cubicle wall.

"Jenny, you skank, I thought we were friends!"

"What?" Jenny asked, startled out of her early morning daze by Carrie's accusing tone.

"I can't believe you would do this to me!" Carrie's voice was muffled as her head disappeared. Jenny heard the sound of chair wheels scooting across the floor and Carrie reappeared in the cube opening. Jenny sighed, racking her brain for some offense she had committed against the usually cheery Carrie.

"How can you be dating the *love* of your *life*, be practically *engaged*, be having *sex* with a *man* and not tell me about it? Do you know who I heard it from? *Do you?*"

Oh that. For a sleep-deprived second, Jenny had forgotten about her Evan-evasion tactics.

"Mary!" Carrie continued without waiting for a response. "Mary is telling me that you, my *friend*, who should tell me everything, have not only broken your non-dating streak but have found 'the *one*'!" Carrie crossed her thin, freckled arms over her baby-enhanced chest and glared at Jenny. "I've been married for seven years, you know. I have a baby. I have a minivan, for God's sake. You know that the only thrills I get are vicarious ones! I mean, I understand keeping this from the rest of the office but why didn't you tell *me*?" Carrie's tirade ended in a wail.

"Chill, Carrie, chill!" Jenny couldn't hold back a grin. Even Carrie's hair looked outraged, springing from her head in angry, carrotty corkscrews. "I didn't tell you because he doesn't exist."

"I bet you told Christian all about him. I bet he knows all the details—" Carrie broke off and looked confused. "Wait—what?"

Jenny scooted closer to Carrie and lowered her voice. "I made him up. Evan finally asked me out and—"

"Yeah, I heard. You would have thought the little asshole could have waited two more days."

"Huh?" Jenny looked confused.

"I picked tomorrow as the ask-out day in the betting pool." Carrie waved her hand in dismissal. "Quit changing the subject. Who is this guy and why did you make him up?"

"As I was *saying*," Jenny shot Carrie a reprimanding look, which Carrie ignored as she made a "hurry up" gesture. "Evan asked me out yesterday and all I could think of was the 'I'm seeing someone else' excuse. Well, *that* and the 'I'm a lesbian' but —"

"That never works," Carrie said, cutting her off again. "So this guy is just made up. There's no boyfriend."

"Nope."

"No engagement."

"Not even close."

"No sex?" Carrie's tone was disappointed and a little wistful.

"*Nada*."

"Oh." Carrie was silent for a moment. "Sorry I called you a skank."

"That's okay — that part's probably true." Jenny looked at Carrie thoughtfully. She was dying to tell someone about her encounter with William yesterday and Carrie looked so sad that she wasn't going to hear any juicy sex-related details.

"Actually, I did meet someone..."

Carrie's face lit up at that and she leaned forward. "So there *is* sex!"

"No!" Jenny eyed Carrie with exasperation. "Get your mind out of the gutter, woman. I just met him yesterday."

"Fine, fine — no sex. Tell me the rest."

"Well —"

"Did I hear someone mention sex?" The two women's heads, bent close together, jerked up at Christian's interruption. He was peering over the partition at them.

"I should have known," Jenny said. "You can smell gossip a mile away, Chris."

Carrie waved at him impatiently. "Get your ass over here if you want in on this. You're holding up the show."

Christian scooted around and jammed his chair next to Carrie's. She shoved back and they battled for position for a moment while Jenny watched, tapping her hand against her leg impatiently. The two settled down and both looked at Jenny expectantly. She laughed.

"You guys look like Rosie when she's about to get a treat."

"Forget your dog for a moment," Christian said. "Spill. Who are you having sex with?"

"For the last time, I'm not having sex with anyone." Okay, that was a little loud. Jenny lowered her voice. "I just met a guy last night."

Two pairs of eyes, one brown and one green, fixed on her, unblinking. Jenny was almost sorry she'd started this. There was so little to tell.

"I was walking Rosie and I almost crashed into this guy on the path. It was snowing, so I had my head down and wasn't looking where —"

Christian gave Jenny the exact same “hurry up” gesture that Carrie had given her a few minutes before.

“Anyway...” Jenny stretched out the word, glaring at Christian. “We talked and then...well, then I went home.”

“And...” Carrie prompted.

“Well,” Jenny admitted, squirming a little. “That was pretty much it.”

Christian and Carrie both sat back with identical disappointed expressions.

“I can’t believe I just missed ‘Celebrity Trash Talk’ on the radio for this lame tale,” Christian complained. “Was he at least hot?”

Jenny nodded, blushing a little. She couldn’t stop a small smile from pulling the corners of her mouth up when she thought about William. “Very hot. Big.”

That sparked a little more interest in her audience. “Uh-huh. And?” Christian prompted.

“And blond, with these incredible cheekbones and these slanted light, light blue eyes.” Jenny flexed her arms in a mock bodybuilder stance. “Lots of muscles.”

Carrie looked at Christian. “She’s talking about his cheekbones. I think the girl’s in love.” She turned back to Jenny. “Did he ask you out?”

“No,” Jenny sighed. “But he lives in one of the houses on the path, so I’m sure I’ll see him again.” Although she hadn’t seen him before yesterday. “Well, pretty sure.”

Carrie and Christian just looked at her.

“Kind of sure?”

“Girl, that was the most pathetic non-sex story I’ve heard in a long time,” Christian stated. Carrie nodded her head in agreement. They both started giggling.

Jenny laughed and threw the first missile she could grab off her desk—a red felt pen. “Out, beasts!” She grabbed for something else to throw, came up with the stapler and threatened the two laughing fiends. “Get out and let me get some work done.”

Carrie and Christian backed their chairs out of the entrance. “Like we’re scared of you,” Christian mocked. “You throw like a girl.”

Jenny just turned around and gave him the finger over her shoulder. She shook her head at their silliness but her smile faded. It *did* sound like nothing when she said it out loud. She talked to a guy for a few minutes. Big deal. Was she going to start having fantasies about every guy who said two words to her now? The bank teller maybe? Or the gas station attendant?

Jenny sighed, booting up her computer. She was letting her sex-starved hormones take over her brain and she needed to get some work done. She was thinking way too much about a stranger who probably hadn’t given her another thought.

Late that afternoon, Jenny was torn. Should she take her usual path, hoping to bump into William, or should she go in another direction?

She had been thinking all day about walking by the purple house, possibly even seeing the Nordic god again. Even while working frantically to make her deadline, Jenny had found herself drifting off, inventing conversations that she would have with him the next time she saw him.

As she stood planted, still dithering about which direction to go, Rosie gave an impatient whine and started walking, jerking Jenny in the direction of the path.

"We're just going where the dog wants to go," Jenny said under her breath, her stomach starting to flutter with nerves and excitement. "I'm not a desperate, sex-starved person—I'm just a kind dog owner. Right, Rosie?" Her dog just twitched an ear back for a second at her name, not even pausing in her energetic bounce, pulling Jenny toward the path and the possibility of William. An older couple walking in the opposite direction gave her a cautious look and a wide berth as they passed her.

"Great. Now I'm the crazy lady who talks to her dog. Oh and now I'm doing it again." Jenny clamped her unruly mouth shut to stop her rambling and followed Rosie.

After anguishing about whether to walk by his house or not, it was anticlimactic when she drew closer and closer to the purple house and there was still no sign of him. She slowed her steps, to Rosie's dismay, and peered at the back of his house, still hoping that he would appear and walk up to her. She wanted to talk with him again—she had been practicing, damn it! Kicking at the light layer of new snow, she allowed Rosie to tow her past the purple house.

"Fine," she muttered sulkily. "I didn't want to see you anyway, Mr. I'm-So-Hot!" Jenny had to laugh—she sounded like a cranky five-year-old. She knew that yesterday's encounter had been nothing, had told herself over and over not to blow it out of proportion, but the excitement had crept in uninvited.

"Oh well," she sighed, glancing back for one last look at William's house before they moved around the bend and it was lost to sight. "It was good for a few daydreams."

She would be walking by his house right now.

Will heard a rumbling noise and realized that it was coming from him. He was actually growling in frustration.

"Mr.—ah, William—did you say something?" Even though Josh was his boss, he always stumbled over Will's name, as if he'd be more comfortable calling him Mr. Jackson.

"No," Will bit off, irritated at Josh's condescending tone. *Great.* Everyone sitting around the conference table was staring at him now.

"Are you sure?"

Will tapped his pen on the table and debated telling Josh what was really on his mind—that he could be talking to the woman of his literal dreams right now, except

that a pompous asshole wanted to flaunt his tiny bit of power by calling an unnecessary meeting and insisting that Will attend.

The thought of actually saying the words out loud made Will smile grimly. Better not. He actually liked his job—most of the time. “Positive.”

Giving Will a suspicious look, Josh finally nodded. “As I was saying...”

Blocking out the drone of the other man’s words, Will slouched in his chair, stifling a bored sigh. He noticed that Natasha, who had been inching her chair closer to him for the past hour, was now almost in his lap. With an annoyed grunt, he shifted to his left, regaining a fraction of his personal space.

He didn’t care for Natasha. She had a predatory gleam in her eye, as if she would tear off his head and eat it for dinner if he let her get too close. Despite his best efforts to avoid her, she always found a way to sit next to him in meetings, subtly elbowing her coworkers aside to snag the chair next to his.

Glancing up, Will saw one of the other programmers, Charlie, grimacing in what Will assumed to be sympathy, either for the length of the meeting or Natasha’s stalking, he wasn’t sure. Will squeezed his eyes closed, as if he were in agony, and opened them to see Charlie smothering a laugh with his palm. An odd warmth sparked in Will’s chest at the exchange. It had been almost...friendly.

While he had been distracted by Charlie, Natasha had closed the gap between their chairs again. Rolling his eyes, Will scooted a few inches farther away. With a little space between him and Natasha’s ever-advancing chair, he could tune out Josh and think about *her* again. He felt his mouth turn up at the corners.

Jenny...

The next afternoon, Jenny didn’t let herself slow down by the purple house. Enough of this silliness. She was not going to find a gorgeous blond man by the side of the path. She marched on, eyes resolutely forward.

No looking, she commanded herself sternly. *No look –*

“Jenny.”

Yes! Okay, so maybe she *was* going to find a gorgeous blond man by the side of the path. Jenny, with enormous self-control, restrained the urge to jump up and down like a game show contestant and turned as nonchalantly as possible toward that deep, deep voice. Her happy smile couldn’t be held back by any force of will, however. Jenny knew she was grinning like an insane monkey as she looked at William, who, she noticed, had not gotten any less beautiful over the past two days.

“Hi.” For Pete’s sake, Jenny thought. Once again he had reduced her to ditz-cheerleader-speaking skills. Nothing against cheerleaders, of course—although she didn’t mention it to most people, she had been one herself back in high school.

Will nodded. Her conversational skills might be a bit scattered but his were nonexistent.

"I've been meaning to ask you..." Jenny grabbed at the first topic that came to mind. "If you weren't walking on the path the other day, what were you doing here?" She winced. That had come out more rudely than she'd intended.

The severe edges of his cheekbones reddened and his eyes slid away until he was looking at the toe of his boot.

"Sorry. You don't have to answer that—it's not really any of my business." Jenny tried to backtrack.

Sure, she thought, exasperated. I meet the guy of my dreams and then I grill him about why he's exactly where I want him to be. She shook her head a little—whoa, I confused myself with that one.

"It's okay," Will said. Jenny jerked her attention away from her non-grammatical internal dialogue and focused on Will. He was still looking at his boot. "I see you sometimes."

"Walking Rosie, you mean?" Jenny asked, a little confused.

"Yeah. From the house."

"And..." she prodded, still baffled.

Will paused. In the silence, Rosie's panting sounded loud. The dog was sitting, surprisingly, and waiting patiently, which was even more of a shock.

"And I wanted to meet you," Will said, rushing out the words so that they all ran together, without ever looking up from his boot.

Jenny stared at him, bewildered. This man, who looked like he had stepped right out of an action movie, had walked from his house on that cold, snowy afternoon just because he saw her on the path and wanted to meet her? Things like that did not happen to her. She went to work, walked her dog, put on her jammies and went to bed. It seemed surreal.

Will moved as if to turn away, just a flinch really, and Jenny realized that she had been staring at him with her mouth hanging open—quite unattractively, she was sure.

"Sorry, I was just surprised. That you would notice me, I mean." Jenny frowned a little—that had come out a little more self-deprecating than she'd planned. "I'm glad you introduced yourself though."

At that, Will's shoulders lowered a little, as if he had been holding his breath. Jenny was struck again by the contrast between his attractiveness and his shyness. It was endearing.

Their stilted conversation was interrupted by Rosie, who had exhausted her short supply of patience and decided to continue on their walk, pulling an unprepared Jenny off balance.

"Wait—Rosie, hold your horses for a sec, would you? Do you have time to walk with us?" Jenny asked over her shoulder, emboldened by Will's self-conscious admission. She would be stupid not to grab what was offered to her on a hunky blond platter, now wouldn't she?

Will looked a little startled by the invitation but nodded and caught up to Jenny easily. He reached over and took Rosie's leash. Jenny released it, surprised by the confidence of the gesture. Shy one minute, old-fashioned and manly the next—he was an enigma wrapped in a riddle wrapped in a something-or-another, however that saying went. Jenny stopped trying to figure it out and just enjoyed the freedom of walking without the hindrance of a tugging dog. She watched Will out of the corner of her eye. He didn't even seem to feel Rosie's pull but held the leash with all the nonchalance of someone walking a Chihuahua.

"You do that like a pro—do you have a dog?" Jenny asked.

"No. It's not hard. Just hold the leash and walk."

Jenny couldn't decide whether he was kidding or not—he really had that deadpan thing down—but she laughed anyway. "Hey, don't knock the skill—it's one of the few I possess. I'm a black belt in dog walking."

Will glanced at her. Probably his turn to decide whether she was kidding or not.

"What do you do?" Jenny asked.

"You mean...hobbies?" He sounded a little horrified at the thought.

"Actually, I meant what do you do job-wise but you're welcome to tell me about your hobbies too," she said sweetly. "Do you collect pinecones for wreaths, perhaps?"

He gave her that sideways look again.

"Macramé?"

She got a half smile out of him at that.

"I'm a programmer."

"Ah, one of those."

"Those'?"

"I mean that in the most positive way—I have the utmost respect for your people."

"My people?"

"Yeah. I think I'm missing that extra chunk of brain that allows a person to be a programmer. I've never learned to speak computer very well—just enough to write up a very shaky truce with my laptop. We agreed that if it doesn't crash on me two hours before a deadline, then I won't throw it out a window. Oh and I know enough to fix Christian's e-mail when he mucks it up."

"Christian?"

Jenny might have been shaky on computer languages but she was starting to understand Will's monosyllabic one a little better and, if she wasn't mistaken, that last word had definite jealous undertones. This made her happy.

"He's a friend from work. He drags me out with him sometimes to the gay clubs in the Twin Cities."

Will nodded. "Work?"

"Anderson Engineering. We do mechanical engineering—HVAC and plumbing."

"Like it?"

Jenny thought about it for a minute. "Usually. I had a bad week."

Will lifted a questioning eyebrow.

"Oh just the usual—annoying coworker, gossip, that sort of thing," Jenny summarized. Will looked at her blankly.

"Don't you have that one person in the office who gets on everyone's nerves and asks you out even though you've made it perfectly clear that you aren't interested?" Jenny asked. She meant it as a joke but she could actually picture Will walking around the office, trailing lovesick coworkers, male *and* female, oblivious to the heartbreak he left in his wake.

"No. I mean, I mostly work at home."

"Oh."

"Don't like my boss much," Will offered.

Jenny appreciated the effort. "Why—what's he like? Or she?"

"He likes meetings."

"Ugh. Say no more. Does he make you go to meetings for hours and hours that get absolutely nothing accomplished and then get mad if you fold up your notes into a paper football and try to flick a field goal across the table?"

"Yes." Will paused. "Except for the football part. Haven't tried that."

"I see that I'll have to teach you the finer points of paper football and Skittle-hockey. If you do well with those, you can work your way up to boss hand puppets. You have a long way to go, Grasshopper, but I will be your Sensei." Jenny put her hands together and gave him a little bow.

Will gave her the sideways look and half smile. So cute.

Jenny was startled to see her turnoff up ahead. She hadn't realized that so much time had passed. She was just two blocks from her house. For a one-word guy, Will was surprisingly easy to talk to. And look at.

"Here's my turn." Jenny pointed and reached for Rosie's leash.

"I'll walk you home." Will had the macho tone again. Jenny just shrugged and dropped her hand but she was secretly pleased, both at the manliness and the fact that their walk wasn't over yet.

"I was wondering—" Jenny spoke before thinking and then broke off. Did she really have the balls, so to speak, to ask him? Oh well, what would it hurt? "Would you want to—I mean, we have this work reception a week from tomorrow, boring I'm sure, but it would be a little less boring—I mean, a lot less boring—if you would want to, I mean, if you aren't doing anything—" She broke off abruptly when a nasty thought occurred to her. "You're not married, are you?"

"No."

"Engaged?"

"No."

"Otherwise entangled with a violent and jealous woman who collects weapons as her hobby?"

"No."

"How about a violent and jealous man?"

"No."

"Okay." Jenny blew out a relieved breath. "So, would you like to?"

He looked completely lost. "What?"

"Go to the work reception thingy. With me." Jenny patted his arm. "Keep up, would you?"

"Me?"

"Well, I'd bring Rosie but you should see what she does to buffet tables. Also, she always drinks too much and tells the boss off. Lots of damage control the next day, you know."

"Yes."

"Yes, you know or yes, you'll go?"

"Both."

"Cool."

Jenny and Will smiled at each other.

"That's my place," Jenny said reluctantly. She put her hand out for the leash. Will handed it to her, wrapping his hand around hers in the process. Jenny shivered. His hands were just so...big. And warm. And made her think of how it would feel to really be wrapped in him, surrounded by his strength and his heat.

"You're cold. Better go in." He leaned toward her just a tiny bit and Jenny froze. Was he going to kiss her? Panicked pre-kiss thoughts ran through her head in an instant. How was her breath? Were her lips chapped? Should she meet him halfway or just wait for it?

Nope, false alarm. Will was stepping back.

"Should I pick you up next Friday?" Jenny asked, disappointed over the non-kiss. She reluctantly pulled her hand out of his and started up her front walk.

"I'll drive," he offered.

"Okay." She was on her front porch now, her keys in her hand. Will was waiting on the street. "Thanks for the walk."

Will nodded.

"See you on the path tomorrow maybe?" The moment the words were out, she wanted to suck them back in. How desperate could she be? "Never mind! Forget I said that. You don't even have to look out the window as we walk by. In fact, we'll just go the other way so we don't bother you at all."

At Will's smile, she stopped babbling and stared at him. Really, it wasn't right that he should be that hot.

"Tomorrow. I'll be waiting," he promised, the remains of his smile lingering around the corners of his mouth.

It was Jenny's turn to dig desperately for words. Nothing came to her, so she settled for an awkward wave with the hand holding her keys. He nodded, face serious again, and waited until Jenny had unlocked her front door, fumbling a little with the key, and both she and Rosie were safely inside. Jenny looked out of the swirled window next to the door and saw Will's wavy figure, distorted by the pattern in the narrow pane of glass. He watched her house for another moment before turning and walking away.

Jenny slumped against the door, her legs suddenly wobbly. She blew out a breath and Rosie eyed her questioningly.

"I'm going on a date with him," Jenny told her dog. "An actual date with the Nordic god! I *so* have to call Christian!"

He was waiting for her the next day. Jenny hadn't let herself believe that he'd actually be there until she saw Will's bulky figure on the path ahead. She grinned, wanting nothing more than to run up and wrap her arms around him in an excited hug.

Rosie whined, pulling at the leash and straining toward Will.

"Tell me about it," Jenny muttered under her breath, close enough now to see his face lit with a happy smile. "How are we supposed to resist that?"

"Hi," he greeted her, patting a wiggly, ecstatic Rosie as he took the leash from Jenny's hand.

"Hi. How was your day?"

Will shrugged. "Didn't get much done."

"Same here." She didn't mention that he was the reason she had stared blankly at her computer screen for eight hours straight without accomplishing a single thing. "Big plans for the weekend?"

Shaking his head, he said, "Just more work."

"Ugh." She threw him a sympathetic glance. "Slave driver of a boss, huh?"

"Not really. Work is just...all I do." He flushed. "That sounds so boring."

Jenny grinned. "What happened to creating the pinecone wreaths?"

He snorted. "That'd be even worse."

"Or you could collect butterflies – talk about creepy hobbies." She made a face.

"Or be one of those birthday party clowns."

Clapping her hands over her eyes, Jenny groaned. "Anything but a clown." Lowering her hands from her face, she gave a full-body shudder. "Clowns freak me out."

"Well *yeah*." His voice was so disgusted that Jenny had to laugh. They both hated clowns. It was a good place to start.

The next day was Saturday, so they walked earlier in the afternoon than usual.

"Not that it's much warmer," Jenny grumped, hugging herself as the biting wind found tiny gaps in her coat zipper and through the knit of her scarf. "I can't wait 'til spring."

"I like winter," Will admitted.

"Are you nuts?" She slanted him a look from beneath her red plaid hat. Will had grinned at her when he first saw the cap, fleece-lined earflaps and all, which had made Jenny very glad she had worn it. She hadn't cared if he'd been laughing with her or at her – she'd just been happy he was smiling.

Now he shrugged. "When it's really cold, it feels so clean. Everything's so still and quiet and the sun gets those rainbow things on both sides – what are they called?"

"Sun devils," Jenny told him, still not convinced. "What's so clean about your nose freezing shut when you try to breathe?"

Giving a huff of laughter, he protested, "But it's beautiful. I always feel like I should be quiet when I'm outside on days like that – as if everything's so cold it'll shatter if I make a noise. Even the air would break like glass."

"Listen to you, Mr. Poet. Maybe you should've been a writer instead of a programmer."

"I *do* write." He slanted a teasing look her way. "Code."

She poked him in the arm and laughed.

"So where are you from?" she asked on their walk a few days later.

"All over." Will turned his face up toward the falling flakes and Jenny caught her breath. In the fading light, with the snow touching his skin, he looked like a snow king from some winter fantasyland. Giving her head a sharp shake, she focused on the conversation.

"Where'd you grow up, I mean," she clarified.

"Hell." He shot a quick look at her. "Sorry. I mean Miami."

She nodded, wanting to ask about his first answer but knowing she shouldn't push. Yet. "How'd you end up here?"

"My company has branches all over. They've moved me around a lot."

Worry hit Jenny. "Will you have to move again? Away from here?"

"No." He met her eyes, direct and even. "I won't leave."

Relief made her dizzy. "Good," she said.

Chapter Four

He was staring into his closet again. Since he had met Jenny, he had spent more time wondering what to wear than he had in the first twenty-eight years of his life combined. Why hadn't he ever noticed how limited his clothes selection was? A few suits for the occasional formal work meetings, sweatpants and raggedy jeans for home, and slightly less-raggedy jeans for casual meetings at the office. A few sweaters, some button-down shirts to go with the suits, and lots of t-shirts with workout-related pit stains and stretched-out collars. He dug through his clothes, vaguely remembering owning a pair of khakis.

Ah ha, there they are. Will pulled them out in triumph. They were dark gray.

Are they still called khakis if they aren't khaki? he wondered. He wasn't sure why he had gotten them—it wasn't like him to fall into The Gap—but he was glad for them now. He pulled out a light blue button-down shirt from the measly selection and tossed the pants and shirt over the end of his bed. Tie? He pulled one off its hook to consider it and was exasperated by how much his hand was shaking. No tie. Jenny had said this thing was casual.

As freaked out as he was over this, his first date at the ripe old age of twenty-eight, he would be lucky to get dressed at all and not just show up at Jenny's house in his boxer briefs. Even though they had been walking together almost every day for a week and a half, this was different. This was an actual *date*.

If things had been normal, if he had done the usual teenage things, he would have had fifteen or so years of practice by now. Dating would have been easy, automatic—it wouldn't be a struggle just to make casual conversation. Will would have known how to flirt, to kiss, to make love...

He tossed the tie back into his closet. Things *hadn't* been normal and there was no sense in thinking about how life could have been. He'd spent his teen years just trying to stay alive. He'd managed that, but corsages and high school dances and sex had all fallen by the wayside.

With a sharp shake of his head, he shut off the memories and headed for the shower. His cell phone rang before he had taken two steps. Fumbling a little, Will pulled it out of his pocket, his heart hammering at the possibility that Jenny might be calling. What if she was cancelling? His stomach clenched as he checked the display, only relaxing when he saw the call was from the office.

"Will Jackson," he clipped out.

"Hey, Will." Charlie sounded a little tentative. "This a bad time?"

"It's fine," Will reassured him, trying to mellow his tone a little. It wasn't Charlie's fault that Will was a nervous wreck due to dating incompetence. "What's up?"

"Josh overwrote my code on the development server. All my latest changes have disappeared!" Charlie sounded like he was about to cry.

Wincing in sympathy, Will asked, "Has his new code moved live already?"

"Yeah."

"You might still be able to recover it—check last night's backup tape," Will suggested.

"Oh duh, of course!" Charlie said, relief heavy in his voice. "Sorry to call you with such a stupid question. Guess I was panicking. I was here until eleven last night—if I had to stay again tonight, my wife would kill me for sure."

"No problem," Will said. "Tell Josh to quit messing with the dev code base. He's an idiot."

Charlie snorted. "I'll let *you* tell him that. Josh won't be able to fire you—*his* boss loves you too much."

Will shrugged, realized that Charlie couldn't see him and changed it to a noncommittal sound.

"Thought you were going to stab him with your pen in last week's meeting." Charlie sounded positively gleeful now. "Well, either him or Natasha. One of these days, she's just going to rip off her clothes and throw herself at you."

"Or rip off my head and eat it," Will muttered, and was startled by Charlie's shout of laughter.

"Totally, man. Hey, thanks again for saving my ass—you da bomb," Charlie told him.

Da bomb? "Um...okay." Will heard Charlie laughing again as he hung up.

"Okay, Christian, what do you think?" Jenny twirled nervously, her eyes still on her full-length mirror. Had it been a mistake to give up her stomach-flattening pantyhose for the thigh-highs? It was so hard to choose between the reality of looking good with clothes on and the possibility of looking good while clothes were coming off. Jenny knew it was only their first real date but a girl could hope, couldn't she?

Christian leaned in her bedroom doorway, his arms crossed over his chest. "*This* was your emergency?" he scoffed.

"Christian, I don't think you understand what's at stake here. He is *gorgeous*. He is funny. He's even nice and sweet and shy. Did I mention he looks like a Viking? A hot one, not one of those ones with bad teeth."

"Yeah, hate those rotten-toothed Vikings." Christian rolled his eyes.

"Come on, Chris, just tell me I look okay." Jenny looked at the mirror again and smoothed her skirt over her non-control-topped hips. "I'm nervous enough as it is."

"Well don't be." Christian swooped in and grabbed her around the waist, swinging her in a circle. Jenny squeaked.

He put her down again and stepped back, eyeing her up and down. "You look great, fabulous, utterly stupendous—you will knock your black-toothed Viking over with your beauty. Happy now?"

"I told you—he's *doesn't* have bad teeth." Jenny's eyes grew dreamy. "They're wonderful teeth—white and shiny and—"

"My God, first it's the cheekbones and now the dental hygiene—why can't you just rave about his big cock like the rest of us?"

"Everyone raves about Will's big cock? Why am I always the last to know?" Jenny laughed and took one last look in the mirror. "Okay, you're out of here. He'll be here in fifteen minutes."

"I just got here," Christian protested. "I want to see these legendary cheekbones—and all the other parts of legend." He made his best lecherous face.

"You'll see him at the party," Jenny told him, pushing him out of the room. Rosie hopped off the bed, where she had been snoozing and ignoring the fashion drama, to follow them to the front door.

"But I want a special sneak peek."

Jenny pulled open the front door with one hand and shoved him onto her porch with the other. "No. I don't want him to think that I was so insecure that I needed a second opinion on my outfit."

"Didn't you?" Christian shot over his shoulder as he very slowly ambled his way to the curb where his car was parked.

"Of course. I just don't want *him* to know that!" Jenny called after him. "See you there."

He gave her a flip of a wave and climbed into his car. Jenny swung the door closed and hurried back to the bathroom for last-minute primping. She had decided to put her hair up in a twist but it was so heavy and fine that it never would stay up for very long. She smoothed it nervously, which only made another small strand loosen and fall to curl at her temple.

She brushed it back and turned her attention to her face—she never wore very much makeup and she had left it light. She was fake smiling at the mirror, checking her teeth for lipstick, when she heard a knock on the door. Rosie barked, a halfhearted effort at best, and Jenny jumped, her stomach immediately hopping into her throat like a helium balloon. With one last, not-so-calming breath, she headed for the door.

William took a deep lungful of air and then another, trying to settle his heart rate enough to hear something other than pounding in his ears. He heard Rosie bark once and then there was silence. Will had an irrational moment of fear that this was a mistake, that she had been joking about going out and some other guy was going to

pull up and breeze past him, calling out, "Ready, babe?" She would hurry out of the house, not even glancing at Will. They would brush by him, their arms twisted around each other, laughing into each other's eyes and, as they walked away, this other guy would ask, "So who's the loser?" and she would laugh a little and say, "Nobody, darling—absolutely nobody."

The door swung open and Jenny was there, smiling at him. She wore an above-the-knee skirt and her legs were pretty and curvy. She had boots on but they weren't the lumberjack type he was used to seeing on her during their walks. Instead, the boots were tall, almost to her knees, with thick high heels and made of smooth black leather that hugged her calves. And her sweater—her sweater made his mouth dry. It was fitted closed to her breasts, striping them with thin lines of all sorts of different reds. The v-neck came to a point where he could just barely see a shadow of cleavage and he swallowed hard, trying to pull his eyes from that mesmerizing hint of nakedness. He wanted, more than anything, to press his face there, to bury himself in the comforting darkness of her breasts and her scent.

His cock stiffened and Will forced his eyes and thoughts away from climbing into her cleavage.

That's classy, he thought, popping a tent as soon as I meet her at her door. He shifted his eyes to her face, worried that he might see a what-did-I-get-myself-into expression there, but she was smiling shyly and blushing so much that she matched her sweater. Her hair was twisted up in a complicated way, all smooth and heavy looking, as if he would just have to touch it and the whole intricate style would tumble out. Will was tempted to try.

Rosie wiggled past Jenny and greeted Will with enthusiasm, pressing against his side and thumping his legs with her tail. He patted her head awkwardly, still unsure how to act around both the dog and her owner. Will wasn't quite sure what he'd done to merit the happy greeting from either of them.

Jenny stepped back and gestured him in. "Hi, by the way. Sorry—I'm a bit dating-challenged." She blushed again at the admission, holding the edge of the door with both hands.

The idea that she was just as nervous as he was amazed and enchanted Will. *She* was worried about going out with *him*, and it wasn't because she thought he would hack her to pieces with an ax once he got her to the car either. No, she was nervous because she actually liked him—at least he thought she did. Maybe, like him, she was hoping that the evening would lead to kissing and touching and—

His erection throbbed and swelled. Okay, no more thoughts about touching. Besides, any physical contact was becoming more and more unlikely, as he hadn't said a single word since he'd arrived. Jenny probably thought that something was wrong with him. He tried to clear his throat, to say something, anything, but his vocal cords were still in a state of shock from being this close to her breasts. Words were obviously not going to work, so Will held out the flower that he held.

He had spent almost as long at the florist as he had in front of his closet. He discarded the idea of a bouquet. It seemed too big, too showy, too...presumptuous, as if he was expecting way more out of this date than just the "work thingy" that Jenny had described. He had decided on a single rose, not red—he thought it was a little early to be giving her "love" flowers—and definitely not white, because he didn't even want to suggest purity, given his own lack of experience. He decided on yellow. For friendship, the florist had told him. Friendship seemed a good place to start.

He must have picked well, because her smile grew huge when she saw the flower and she pressed her hands to her still-pink cheeks.

"Oh," she said softly. "That is just so..." She shook her head, smiling. "You are almost scarily perfect, you know."

Jenny took the rose and smelled it, then ran the just-opening petals against her cheek. He really was amazing. She couldn't believe how great he looked when she'd opened the door. His coat was open and his shirt made his eyes so blue that they didn't look real. He smelled like clean man and cold and she wanted to keep him forever.

Will was watching her as she absently brushed the flower against her skin. His breathing grew faster and his eyes dilated until the blue irises almost disappeared. Jenny was amazed by his reaction to her—she couldn't help but see the bulge at the front of his pants and he seemed to be tongue-tied from seeing her in something other than a bulky coat and her clumpy snow boots.

"Thank you," Jenny remembered to say belatedly. "For the flower, I mean. It's beautiful. I'll just go put this in water. Or you can come too—to the kitchen?"

Stop babbling, Jen, she told herself. Get a grip and try to forget that it's been two years since you've done this dating thing. Not helping—could you shut up about the two years thing? Okay, now the voices in her head were arguing. She had definitely crossed the border into Crazyville.

Jenny headed for the kitchen with the rose, not even glancing back to see if Will was following. Obviously, the only way to keep her composure was to not look at him. She rummaged for a vase with no luck but she did find a very tall glass. Jenny sighed—she was sadly undomesticated. She filled the glass with water at the sink and slipped the rose stem in. It wasn't the most elegant of arrangements but it would work for tonight.

She turned from her makeshift vase to see that Will had indeed followed her to the kitchen. He was hovering in the doorway, looking around, his hands jammed into his pockets. He seemed to fill the room, his bulk shrinking her kitchen down to dollhouse size.

"Nice," he finally spoke. "Your house—I like it."

"Thanks." Jenny moved toward him, oddly pleased by his approval.

"It feels like you." Will focused on her, his eyes light and hot. She drew closer, as if he had his own gravitational pull that was sucking her in. He didn't move aside to let her pass but stood still, filling the doorway, not looking away. She stopped, too close.

He reached out, almost touching her upper arm, his hand so close that she could feel the heat of it. Her breath came light and fast.

Will dropped his hand and looked away, breaking the connection that had stretched like a hot wire between them. Jenny was jumpy from the residual adrenaline, hot and agitated and feeling like she had to do something or explode in tiny bits all over her kitchen. She stepped back.

"We should go." Her voice was high and tight. Will looked at her, a little startled, as if he had forgotten that they were going anywhere. He nodded and moved to the side so Jenny could lead the way to the door. She gathered her coat from the hall closet and had it halfway on before Will grasped the edge to help her with the second sleeve. She could feel his heat again and wondered, half hysterically, if she would even get through the next five minutes without tearing his clothes off, much less the rest of the evening.

Jenny liked his car. It was silver and sleek and it hid the outside noises. There was something intimate about being in the small car with him. She watched him drive with casual confidence, one hand on the wheel and the other resting loosely on the gearshift between them.

After the moment in the kitchen, Jenny was feeling flustered and shy. Except for giving him directions to her office, she had been quiet on the drive. The streetlights slid by, cutting the severe angles of his face into even harsher shapes. Jenny felt intimidated, much too average and normal to be going out with this man. It had been different on their walks, easier, the barrier of their winter clothes keeping them firmly in some sort of friends-only zone. As the silence lengthened, her nerves grew tighter and she knew that she had to break the silence or scream.

"I think you'll like the people I work with—most of them, at least."

Will nodded slightly. "Not the one who asked you out?"

Jenny laughed in a surprised huff. "I told you that, did I?"

He gave another half nod and the corner of his mouth tucked in, like he was suppressing a smile.

"Don't worry," she reassured him. "We can hide from Evan. It won't be too hard—he's still sulky about me turning him down." Jenny suddenly realized something. "Um, by the way..." Okay, this might be a little awkward.

When she trailed off, Will glanced at her questioningly.

"Yeah, um, about that—my Evan rejection, I mean." Jenny tried to think of a way to explain without sounding flaky. Too late, probably. "He's not very good about, well, being told that the reason I didn't want to go out with him is because he's an annoying ass," there was a slight choking noise from Will at this, "so I may have prevaricated a little."

He flicked her another questioning glance.

"Okay, so I may have lied just a squish and said that I was dating someone and didn't tell the office people because it was special and I didn't want to ruin it but that was before I met you so some people there might think that *you're* that someone and I hope this doesn't freak you out because normally I'm a very honest person," Jenny finished in a rush, before finally sucking in a breath. "Really."

"Okay."

"That's it?" She had expected his reaction to be a little more – something.

He shrugged.

Okay, Jenny thought. *I guess that's it*. Relieved that the explanation was over, she settled back into the leather seat. "Oh – turn into that parking lot. We're here."

Will hadn't really thought about the part of the date that involved going to the reception. All he had been focused on was the fact that Jenny had actually asked him out and that meant he was one step closer to getting to touch her.

If I actually get up the nerve, he thought in self-disgust. He'd been so close in her kitchen, just breaths away from brushing against her before he had chickened out.

As they crossed the parking lot, Will saw light reflecting off an icy patch just as Jenny's boot lost traction. She regained her balance quickly but Will was already reaching his hand out to her. Jenny walked on, unconcerned with her small slip, and Will almost dropped his arm but caught himself, determined not to keep missing these opportunities to touch her.

He rested his open hand just barely on her lower back. Jenny slowed when she felt the contact and moved infinitesimally closer, fitting herself into the space by his side. They walked together, connected. Will's hand shifted with her back muscles as they moved in rhythm with her stride, the motion obvious even under her coat and sweater. He hadn't expected her to feel the way she did. He didn't know what he *had* expected but the reality of it surprised and fascinated him.

She's so...alive, he thought, amazed by the motion he felt through her clothes. It made him desperate to touch her skin, to delve even deeper than that. He wanted to burrow into the innermost part of her and live there, protected, rocked to sleep by her heartbeat and the rhythm of her breathing.

Will was flushed and prickly with want, flooded by such a deep desire to be connected with this woman that he was a little afraid. If a touch through her coat could inspire these intense feelings, what would happen if he kissed her, if he touched her bare skin?

Caught up in his thoughts and the feel of Jenny's back beneath his hand, Will blinked a few times when they passed through the glass doors into the well-lit reception area. He was startled by the number of people and his uneasiness with the actual party part of this event, forgotten in his obsession over Jenny, returned. When he hesitated, Jenny grabbed his hand, giving him a reassuring smile.

"I know I dragged you to this thing where you don't know anyone. I promise not to abandon you and we'll only talk to the fun people, I swear." She towed him through the knots of partygoers standing and chatting in groups of three and four, greeting people, introducing him quickly but not stopping.

A tall blond man suddenly swooped down on them and grabbed Jenny around the middle, trapping her arms to her sides and lifting her a few inches off the floor. Will made a jerky movement toward the pair as a surge of jealousy and protectiveness flowed through him but the man released Jenny as quickly as he had snatched her up.

"Finally!" The man looked Will up and down, his eyes widening. "You must be the gorgeous William. That's a direct quote, you know." At this, Jenny turned bright red and smacked the blond man on the arm.

"Christian, you shouldn't be allowed out of the house," she retorted, turning to Will. "As you might have guessed, this is the notorious Christian, although I know I'll regret letting him talk to you at all."

Will took Christian's outstretched hand and shook it. Chris flipped his hand over and studied Will's palm, running his fingertips lightly across the calluses where fingers met palm. Will's hand flinched closed at the touch and he pulled out of Christian's grip.

"You lift weights." Christian's brown eyes were slightly narrowed, watching him with a sleepy burn.

"Chris, stop." Jenny interrupted the smoldering look by stepping between the two men. "Quit trying to lure my date away, you man ho."

Christian laughed and shrugged. "Can't blame me for trying, darlin'. You weren't kidding about those cheekbones." He stepped around Jenny to stand next to Will, slapping him lightly on the back of his shoulder. "Sorry, Will—force of habit. And you're way too pretty to resist."

"Try." Jenny took Will's arm and tugged him out of Christian's reach. "I still haven't forgiven you for stealing my last potential date away from me."

Christian looked blank. "Who?"

"Trevor? Bike messenger guy? Ringing any bells?"

"Oh please," Christian scoffed. "If you don't want me to steal them, then don't go out with closet cases."

Will's muscles tightened at this, his shoulder blades pulling together.

"Don't worry." Christian must have noticed the small movement. "I can tell you're as straight as an arrow. The flirting before was just...staring through the candy shop window without a penny in my pocket, that's all."

He grabbed Jenny and Will by the hands and hauled them toward the table at the far side of the room that was serving as a bar. "It is time, my dears, to get some drinks and head over to chat with the big boss. He's already plastered, so we have to be there when our horny Yosemite Sam lets something slip in front of his wife about his little something-something with a certain thong-wearing receptionist."

Will felt a sense of unreality. He was on a date with the woman he had been longing after for weeks, being hauled around by a gay man who had just come on to him, on his way to talk to a tiny drunken man who really did bear a startling resemblance to Yosemite Sam with his short stature and handlebar mustache.

If nothing else, this party could be an interesting experience.

Jenny felt happy. Having Will with her at the party was even better than she had hoped. He didn't seem to mind being thrown into a bunch of strangers—at a work party, no less. Everyone seemed to either like him or at least be impressed by him, which Jenny could completely understand.

He had such a presence, so big and so beautiful, and when Will talked to people, he locked onto them. When his attention was on her, Jenny felt like the most important person in the world—all that focus directed at her. He'd reduced Carrie to stammering confusion by listening to her chatter about her baby with intense interest. When Christian asked Will a question, drawing his attention away for a moment, Carrie had caught Jenny's eye and fanned her face, mouthing, "He's so hot!"

The men talking to Will all sucked in their stomachs and deepened their voices, sending off waves of competitive testosterone so strong that Jenny, looking around the half circle of machismo, rolled her eyes and laughed. Will glanced at her in question but she just shook her head and smiled at him.

The only downside of the evening was Evan, who was apparently not any happier knowing that her reason for rejecting him was real. Several times during the evening, Jenny had caught him watching them. Now, hours after she and Will had arrived, Jenny noticed Evan approaching them with the careful walk of the almost drunk. She stifled a groan. Shouldering his way into their group, Evan smirked at Jenny. "Why don't you introduce me to your 'special someone'," he said, slurring just slightly over the sibilant sounds.

Jenny moved a little closer to William. She had hoped not to subject him to Evan, at least not on their first date. "Evan, this is Will. Will—Evan."

Will nodded silently, watching Evan closely but not extending a hand.

"So, the mysterious boyfriend has decided to reveal himself?" Evan's expression made Jenny uncomfortable. She didn't know if he was going to take a swing at Will or burst into tears. Will didn't respond but he made another of those quickly repressed motions, as if he was going to put himself between Jenny and Evan but stopped himself when he realized that they were at a civilized reception and he didn't need to go all *Call of the Wild* on her. As caveman as it was, Jenny liked his protective instincts.

"Oh." Evan mock-frowned. "A little slow, is he? Well you can't have everything—a guy who looks like that can't be expected to be a rocket scientist, can he?"

"What was it that Mark Twain said?" Jenny jumped in, sliding her hand through Will's arm and moving even closer to him. "I think it goes something like—'It is better

to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and prove it.' You might want to keep that in mind, Evan."

Christian snickered as Evan flushed a blotchy red. Evan opened his mouth as if to say something then snapped it shut, turned and stalked off. His grand exit was ruined by his collision with the corner of a table, which threw him off balance. When he recovered from his stagger, he gave the offending table edge a shove, like a little kid in a temper. Jenny shook her head, dismissing him mentally, and looked at Will.

"Sorry—he's the worst one you'll meet tonight. I was actually hoping to avoid him altogether."

Will shrugged, his eyes locked on hers. "That was nothing," he rumbled, his voice sending shockwaves through her chest.

She squeezed his arm and pressed her thighs together, thinking, *I'm in so much trouble.*

The car was quiet again on their way home but it was a gentler quiet than the thrumming tension of the ride to the reception. Jenny was sitting back against the soft leather seat with a drowsy smile and half-closed eyes. She had only had a drink and a half at the party but had told him early in the evening that she was a "cheap date" and that even one drink could usually knock her on her ass. Will had nursed a beer the whole night—he had enough to deal with without blurring the functioning part of his brain with alcohol. He wasn't big on drinking anyway. In his experience, getting blasted never made anyone nicer.

The party hadn't been bad at all. He had been worried for nothing, really. With the two chatterboxes, Jenny and Christian, flanking him all night, no one had expected him to get more than a word or two in edgewise. True to her promise, Jenny hadn't abandoned Will even once during the whole evening. Neither had Christian, who also had, true to *his* word, restrained from hitting on Will for the rest of the night. The two had surrounded Will in a protective bubble of words, deflecting questions he hadn't wanted to answer and chasing away any potentially awkward silences. Will was grateful to them and a little proud of himself—he had gotten through his first date without any major blunders.

He looked over at a sleepy Jenny and amended that thought—no major blunders *yet*. The evening wasn't over.

Jenny stole quick glances at Will's profile as he drove and her smile grew a little wider. He was so beautiful. They were getting close to her house and her stomach's resident butterflies, calmed into a stupor by her drink and a half, woke up and fluttered around. Should she ask him in? She didn't want him to think her slutty but she really, really, *really* wanted to sleep with him. They had been walking together for a week and a half—did that count as nine dates?

She bit the inside of her cheek. She didn't think that she had any condoms at the house and if she did have a few stashed in a corner of some drawer, they would be

pretty old. Would he have any? What if she slept with him and then he never called again?

Arrrgh! Enough! He might not even want to sleep with her—although if he hadn't been happy to see her earlier in the evening, that had been a pretty big gun in his pocket.

Jenny's frantic thoughts still swirled around her brain as Will pulled his car up to the curb in front of her house.

"Oh what the hell," Jenny muttered and took a deep breath. "Would you like to come in?" she asked, mashing the words together as she rushed to get them out. His face was lit by a nearby streetlight and she saw the muscles bunch in his jaw. Jenny held her breath.

Will gave a short nod, just a single jerk of his head, and got out of the car.

Chapter Five

It was happening. The surreal feeling surrounded Will again as he circled the car to open Jenny's door. He took her hand to help her out, feeling the pulse of heat from the contact, and realized that it had been less than two weeks ago that he had watched her naked hands from his window, safe in anonymity behind the glass. He kept her hand as they walked to the front door and she allowed it, her fingers curled lightly around his. His muscles were ribbed with tension, from his hand all the way to his shoulder, but he tried to keep his grip gentle, fighting the urge to clamp down, lock her to him.

Jenny fumbled with her free hand, pulled her house keys free of her purse and Will took them from her. His hands were probably as unsteady as hers but the rules of dating had somehow lodged themselves in the back of his brain. He wasn't sure where they had come from—he definitely hadn't had a sit-down chat with dear ol' Dad about the right way to treat a girl. In reality, though, they seemed to fit with how he wanted to act, to open doors, pull out chairs, smooth the way for her while staying between her and possible danger.

Who was he kidding—he just wanted to stay between her and anyone else.

The door swung open and Rosie was there to meet them as if they had been gone for years.

"Hey, Rosie-toes," Jenny crooned, sounding a little relieved as she greeted the furry distraction. Will wondered if she was nervous too, if he had thrown her world into chaos just like she had done to his safe little routine.

"I should take her out—just to the yard," Jenny said, flicking on the hall light on her way to the closet to grab Rosie's leash.

"I'll do it."

Despite his catapulting nerves, Will managed to remember to help her slide her coat off. He hung it in the closet and grabbed a leash hanging on the back of the door. Rosie scampered up to him.

"Walk-slut," Jenny muttered to the dog, making Will smile. She made him smile a lot. "You don't care who's holding the leash, do you?" Rosie just gave her a panting dog grin and trotted out the front door with Will close behind.

Rosie trotted right over to the tiny patch of snow-covered lawn and squatted. She moved back toward the house but hit the end of the leash and stopped, looking questioningly at Will. He was frozen in place, the cold night having shocked him back to reality, and that reality was that he was completely, totally, utterly out of his depth. He took a deep breath, feeling the frigid air as it dropped into his lungs, and let Rosie tow him back inside.

Jenny was coming down the stairs as he entered. He froze again, leash still in his hand. His daydreams of her as he had jacked off in the shower were nothing compared to the reality—to being so close to her that he could see the texture of her skin, individual strands of hair, the shadow between her breasts. And her smell—like fruit and warmth and *her*. He couldn't really define the exact scent but he knew it was lodged in a permanent place in his brain. Even if she kicked him out of her house, right at that moment, he would never forget how she smelled.

Jenny hesitated, slowed. She stopped two steps from the bottom. No man had ever looked at her like that. His eyes burned with white-blue heat, so piercing and hot that she was surprised he didn't leave smoking holes in her skin. She forgot to breathe, every cell of her body focused on him.

Rosie whined and Will glanced down, breaking the burning contact. He unclipped the leash from her collar and shrugged out of his coat, tossing both across a delicate chair. He stalked toward Jenny, who was still immobile on the stair, all her half-made plans of offering coffee or pouring him a drink or even making civilized conversation completely forgotten. It was all she could do just to stand there, clinging to the curve of the banister, watching him get closer and closer.

Jenny was actually taller than him with the boost of two stairs. It was a change from the usual chest-level view she had of him, although he still overwhelmed her with his size. He stopped, so close that she could see each separate eyelash, the edge of his teeth behind his slightly parted lips, the tiny muscle flicking over his temple. He moved his hands to her sides and gripped the fabric of her sweater, fisting his hands against her waist. Jenny could feel the heated pressure of each separate finger through the soft knit and realized that she was more turned on by that than actually having sex with either of her two previous boyfriends.

Will's eyes locked on the small section of almost-cleavage that her sweater revealed. Her breathing was short and fast, raising and lowering the mounds of her breasts. He lowered his head until his forehead pressed against her breastbone. His fists slowly stretched the neck of her sweater down, uncovering the rounded tops of her breasts and the scalloped edge of her black bra. Will burrowed his face in the revealed skin, pressing between her breasts.

Jenny jumped at the touch of his nose and cheeks, still chilled from the outdoor air. She could feel his long eyelashes brushing against her as he closed his eyes and the hot pants of his breath on her skin. Her nipples tightened from the contrast of cold and heat. The feel of his breath and skin and lashes buzzed at her nerve endings until her entire awareness was focused between her breasts. He hadn't even kissed her yet, Jenny realized with dazed wonder, and she was already liquid and melting.

He had been imagining this all evening, ever since he saw Jenny and the hint of her cleavage, but he was unprepared by the tidal wave of sensations that overwhelmed him. Her skin, in the hidden depths between her breasts, was warm and damp and so soft. It startled him, how soft it was. Jenny shifted and Will's hands tightened on her sweater, pressing against her sides to stop her from moving away, but she was just

bringing her hands to his head, cradling his skull with her fingers to bring him even closer.

Will felt a hot prickling run through his sinuses and he was horrified that tears were so close he could taste them at the back of his throat. The thought of crying in front of Jenny made him pull his face away from her but he was immediately swamped by a feeling of loss. Desperate to regain their connection, he pressed toward her again, this time higher, brushing against her with his lips and cheeks, nuzzling into the dip above her collarbone.

As he tried to get even closer, Will's foot bumped the base of the stair. He climbed up, only one step below Jenny now, never pausing in his exploration of her.

God, she felt amazing—better than he could have ever imagined. He brushed against her neck, under her jaw, next to her ear—the smell and taste of her was driving Will crazy. He moved his lips across her cheek, feeling a rush of heat when she turned her head, seeking his mouth with hers. This, his first kiss, he wanted more than anything he could remember.

Their lips touched, barely clung. Will felt the heat of their mouths mingling and then he was kissing her—hard.

Releasing her sweater, he thrust his hands underneath to grasp the bare skin of her waist. Somehow, the momentum of the kiss and the lift of his hands brought them down against the stairs. Their mouths fought to get closer, lips and teeth and tongues crashing together. The rawness of the kiss, as if they were trying to climb into each other through their mouths, sent shocks of desire through him. Jenny pressed her soft curves against his hard edges and he clutched her closer, desperate to ease the almost unbearable wanting, the feeling that he was going to explode from his skin.

Will's hands pressed upward, moving her skin over each rib until his fingers pressed against the bottom edge of her bra. She arched her hips upward, pressing against his erection, and he sucked in a breath, not sure if he could stand the pleasure. With a moan that almost made Will come right then, Jenny clamped her thighs against his hips and hooked her ankles together behind his back, opening herself wide.

At the back of his mind, this all-encompassing lust terrified him. Who was this wild, rutting beast who had taken over his body? In all his daydreams, Will had never felt anything close to this overwhelming need to be inside her. This was more than desire or lust or hormones—this was survival, necessary for him to continue living.

He tucked his knees against the crease of a step for leverage to push himself off her, just enough to shove Jenny's sweater up. She released his head to raise her arms and he pulled his mouth from hers long enough to yank the sweater over her head. Jenny wrapped her arms around Will—one across his shoulders and the other pressing his head to her. Their lips connected again with bruising pressure, their tongues mating.

As Will tried to press closer to her, his knee slipped back and caught the edge of a step. The pain cleared his lust-fogged mind enough to realize that Jenny was lying on the stairs with his weight pushing her into the edges of the steps. She wasn't

complaining but it had to be hurting her. Will shook his head to clear it, which only partially worked, and stood up, bringing Jenny with him. Her legs were still wound around his waist and her arms locked around his neck as he held her easily.

"Bedroom?" he gritted out.

Jenny buried her face in his neck, panting. "Up," she said. Her legs tightened around him, rubbing herself against his ribbed stomach. "That voice of yours is enough to make me come," Jenny half laughed, half groaned against his shoulder.

"Fuck." Will almost ran up the rest of the stairs.

"Please."

He gave a choked laugh and shouldered his way through the first doorway he came to. He didn't care if it was her room or not – if it had a bed, it would do. Actually, a bed was optional – any horizontal surface would have been fine.

There was a bed, thank God, and from Will's blurred impression of the room, he was fairly sure that he had managed to find her bedroom. He strode forward without slowing, hitting the bed at his knees and toppling them both onto the soft surface. Will released her before they hit the mattress and caught himself on his hands so that his weight wouldn't crush her. Jenny clung to him like a tick, her breasts mashed against his chest. It felt as though her hard nipples were burning holes through his shirt and into his skin.

Frantic with need, Will took her mouth again, thrusting his tongue inside before slipping back out to tug her bottom lip with his teeth. Jenny moaned and sought his tongue with hers, luring it back into the humid depths of her mouth. He didn't know where it was coming from, what was driving his actions, how he knew where to kiss and touch. With desire crashing into him, there was no time, no chance to analyze or evaluate his movements. Will just did what he wanted, what his mouth and body and cock demanded.

His lower body was flattening hers against the bed but he wasn't satisfied with the contact. Will shifted his hips, pressing upward toward the joining of her thighs. Wrapping her legs around him had bunched Jenny's skirt around her hips. The hard bulge of Will's cock, still enclosed in too many clothes, rubbed against the narrow crotch of her black thong, slipping against the wet fabric, pressing it to her folds.

Will's breathing quickened. He could feel the dampness and heat of her excitement. The proof of Jenny's arousal, the reality that she wanted this, wanted *him*, made his erection throb. He felt that if he got any harder, he would burst out of his skin.

Balancing his weight on one arm, Will reached between their bodies to grasp the edge of his shirt. Jenny moaned and tried to tighten her arms, pull herself against him, but Will resisted, yanking at his shirt.

Buttons popped and fabric tore but the shirt clung stubbornly together. She must have finally realized his intent, since Jenny released his shoulders to help reveal his skin. Her back dropped against the quilt that covered the bed. She fumbled for the remaining buttons, tugging at the fabric, her fingers scrambling to expose his chest. The

last button popped free and Will's shirt hung open. Jenny pushed the edges back, tugging it down his arms. The shirt refused to cooperate, stretching taut and unmoving across his bulging triceps. She growled, yanking at the fabric.

Frustrated, Will dug his knees into the mattress and sat up. The movement rocked his erection against her pussy – hard. Jenny mewled, moving restlessly against the bed.

Clenching his teeth at the sound, Will stripped the shirt off his arms and unbuttoned his pants. For a moment, he hesitated—he couldn't get his pants down without unwrapping Jenny's legs from around his waist and he didn't want to break the contact of their groins for even a second. He was deathly afraid that any pause in the action, any time that allowed Jenny to think, to reconsider, would make her decide not to go through with it. Will wanted to be considerate, to be a gentleman, to let her decide with a clear mind if she really wanted to do this—but he wanted to fuck her more.

During Will's moment of indecision, Jenny untangled her legs from his hips and scrambled to her knees, facing him. She had his pants and boxer briefs shoved down his thighs before he realized what had happened. They both paused, staring at each other in the soft light that leaked in from the hall, chests heaving in equal time—and then Jenny touched his chest with both palms.

She slid her hands downward, her touch electric as she smoothed over the dampness of his skin, pausing at the eager points of his small nipples. Moving her palms down across those brown nubs, Jenny scissored her fingers, trapping the nipples between them and squeezing gently. Will's stomach jerked and his eyes flinched closed, as if she had slapped him.

Releasing him, she curved her fingers and lightly scraped him with her short nails as she moved her hands farther downward to his stomach. Jenny bent her head and pressed a kiss to Will's bellybutton, slipping her tongue inside. Her chin grazed the leaking head of his cock and her hair brushed against the tops of his thighs.

At that, Will's control snapped. He caught Jenny under the arms and tossed her onto her back. She squeaked as his weight flattened her into the bed. His hands fisted in her hair, holding her head still as he ravaged her mouth, kissing her so hard that his lip hit the edge of her tooth and split. Will could taste the blood in his mouth but didn't care about the small pain—didn't care about anything except getting inside Jenny.

Releasing his handfuls of her hair but not taking his mouth from hers, Will tugged the cups of her bra down, not bothering to release the hooks in back but instead just pulling her breasts up and free from their restraints. He left his hands on the soft mounds, holding them as he moved his mouth slowly downward, licking kisses on her chin and throat, teeth scraping lightly against the tendon in the side of her neck, feeling the beat of her pulse with his tongue, the length of her collarbone with his lips.

Will pushed her breasts up and finally lowered his head, rubbing his cheeks along the white skin. Jenny's nipples, stiff and pink, demanded attention, asking for his

mouth, but Will licked a path around one of the eager nubs instead. Her hips jerked, as if trying to find solace against his hard stomach.

Pressing the mounds together, Will licked the seam between before turning his head and touching his tongue to her nipple. Jenny twisted her hips and hooked a leg around him, opening herself to his body. She kneaded his head, both hands working his scalp. His breath puffed onto her wet nipple and it stiffened even more.

Back arching, Jenny strained toward him. He lowered his head and drew her nipple into the hot depths of his mouth. Will sucked hard, pulling at her breast, his cheek and throat muscles working, as if he were actually trying to pull nourishment from the very center of her. One hand massaged her neglected breast while the other kneaded her hip beneath her wadded-up skirt. Will pulled his mouth off her slowly, closing his lips and allowing just the slightest pinch of his teeth on the point of her nipple, drawing another moan from Jenny as she clutched his head closer to her.

Will moved to the other breast, sucking it in as if he was starving, shifting so that both of his hands held her hips. He pressed his palms against her skin and moved one hand along the leg that was hooked around him, sliding across her thigh and playing with the top edge of her stocking. His hands moved to her ass cheeks, pressing and squeezing the soft flesh. Will's fingertips explored the dip where her thighs rounded into cheeks before his hands slid upward to the base of her spine. Jenny whimpered, drawing her other knee up so that both legs were twined around his torso and she was fully open to his exploration.

He moved his hands down, fingers curling into the crevice between her cheeks. The tips of his blunt fingers met beneath the strip of thong that divided her bottom and slipped down her crack. When his fingers found her puckered anus they paused, and one finger circled the small hole. Jenny froze.

Will's finger pressed into her, just the tip, testing her resistance. His mouth stilled at her breast, all his focus on his one finger barely breaching her rear entrance. Tightening her muscles around him, a tiny squeeze of acceptance, Jenny pushed back toward him, impaling herself a little more on his invading digit.

The movement released a beast inside Will. He grasped her thong and yanked. The silky fabric resisted his pull for a bare second before snapping free of her body.

"Condom," Jenny gasped out, and he swore, his voice thick and guttural. His pants were still tangled around his calves and he struggled to dig into the pocket. He yanked out a few packets and tossed them on the bed. Grabbing one with shaking fingers, he tore it open with his teeth and hesitated. Jesus, he was practically quaking. He felt Jenny's fingers take the condom from his hand.

"Let me," she murmured, kneeling in front of him again. She rolled it carefully over his erection and paused at the base. When she cupped his balls in a gentle hand, Will's hand shot out to grab her wrist. He couldn't speak, so he just gave a short shake of his head. If she touched him again, it was all over. A lifetime of control all leading up to this shuddering moment, and he would explode in her hand if she touched him again.

Clasping her other wrist, Will bore her down until her back touched the quilt. He slid her arms above her head and interlaced their fingers, still not trusting his control if she were to touch him anywhere except his hands. Her arms were relaxed, accepting his confinement, and she pulled her knees up to press against his sides. Will rolled his hips, working himself between her thighs, seeking the wet center of her.

He pressed into her, the head of his cock working into the tight space of her pussy. With just the tip of his erection buried in her, Will paused, panting.

This was...amazing.

Nothing had prepared him for the way her wet heat gripped him, not his fist, not his imagination, not any of the few pornos he had watched when the empty lust of loneliness had gripped him. Will pressed in another inch. Her wet passage squeezed against him, fighting him at the same time as it welcomed him.

He began to thrust, small movements that moved him almost out of her before pushing in a little farther each time. He still held her hands above her head and her fingers clenched and opened in his, whether in rejection of his invasion or a desire for more, he didn't know. Will glanced at her face. Her eyes were closed, her mouth, swollen from his harsh kisses, was slightly open. She was panting, hot little breaths hitting his skin.

"Okay?" he asked, thinking, *please don't say no, please don't say no*. He hadn't even wanted to ask, to give her an opening to tell him to leave her body, where he had already decided he wanted to stay.

Jenny's eyes opened halfway, still glazed with passion. "Please," she moaned.

He stilled, watching her warily.

"Please, Will—I need you inside me now. Please fuck me!"

At her words, a red haze settled over Will's vision and desire roared through his body. Teeth bared, he thrust the entire length of his erection into her, forcing apart the gripping flesh of her pussy, burrowing deep until he filled her completely.

Air hissed from Will at the sensation, at the blissful squeeze of her body. Jenny tightened her muscles around him and he almost screamed at the pleasure, so intense that it was almost painful. He pulled out halfway and Jenny moaned, whether from the slippery friction or from the loss of his cock, he wasn't sure. Her pussy sucked at him as he slammed into her again.

He felt his release approaching, his balls drawing up against his body, but he didn't want that yet—not so soon. Will wasn't ready for this to be over, for this incredible gripping ecstasy to stop, for Jenny's soft gasps and moans to end. He gritted his teeth, pressed their joined hands harder into the bed and slowed his thrusts, drawing almost completely out before slowly, slowly pushing back into her, separating the clenching walls of her pussy with each pass.

"Faster, please—harder, harder, harder!" Jenny's breath came out in gasping sobs and, with a guttural groan, Will obeyed, slamming into her hard and fast, shoving her body across the bed with the force of his thrusts.

"Oh God, Will!" Jenny screamed and the clenching pulse of her pussy as she came drove Will into his own orgasm. He arched, every muscle in his body drawn tight as he came and came and came, the residual quivers of Jenny's release sparking off his own shudders.

When it was over, he collapsed on top of her, releasing her hands to wrap his arms around her back, burying his face in the sweating curve of her neck. He was filled with a tangle of feelings—gratitude and connection and completion, as well as other emotions he couldn't even define. Spread over everything was a growing feeling of sleepy contentment and his eyes closed as his muscles slid into relaxation, melting into the body beneath him.

The body that couldn't breathe. Jenny hadn't minded at first, still reeling and euphoric from her mind-blowing climax, but her need for air was getting urgent and she was pretty sure that Will was falling asleep with his pants around his ankles. They both still had their shoes on too.

"Will?" she whispered but didn't feel any reaction from him, except that he grew even heavier.

"Will?" It was louder this time and she gave him a nudge with her foot. He growled and squeezed her harder.

Okay, Jenny thought with a grunt, that is not helping the breathing. She pushed at his shoulders. "William!"

He finally raised his head, blinking sleepy eyes at her.

Jenny grinned at him. "We still have our shoes on."

Will pushed himself onto his elbows and glanced toward their feet, which were currently hanging off the side of the bed. He looked a bit self-conscious. "My pants too."

"At least you have fewer clothes on than I do," Jenny laughed, gesturing at her twisted bra and skirt. "We mostly just shoved things out of the way. Your poor shirt, though—it will never be the same."

"And your, ah..." Will nodded at the sad remains of her panties and red touched his cheekbones. "Sorry. I'll get you new ones."

"No need. I bought those special for you. Besides, that was fun—clothes flying everywhere, almost not making it up the stairs. Good times. I might frame what's left of that thong."

Will smiled at her, the rare, happy smile that always surprised her. He raised his hips and his semi-erect cock slid out of her. Jenny felt it go with a sense of loss. As Will pushed himself to his feet, she wondered if he would leave now, promising to call her, but he just toed off his shoes and stepped out of his pants before sitting on the edge of the bed to strip off his socks. He glanced at the pretty wicker wastebasket by the bed, obviously hesitant about tossing the condom into such a decorative receptacle. Jenny propped herself up on her elbow and correctly interpreted his glance.

"Bathroom," she suggested, pointing to the adjoining door, and Will padded through it, bare-assed naked. A fine bare ass it was too, Jenny thought, watching him. She stood up, unhooked her bra and slipped it down her arms. Her skirt was tougher—it took a moment for her to straighten it out enough to find the back fastening—but she had it and her stockings and boots off before Will returned, as impressive to watch from the front as he was from the back.

"Can you stay?" Jenny asked, still half afraid that this was it—he was going to leave, taking his huge cock and sweet smile with him, never to be heard from again. She hadn't done a one-night stand before, or even a sex-on-the-first-date stand, but she was hoping that this wasn't the former. The fact that he was still naked was a good sign.

The light from the hall lit the bedroom fairly well and Jenny grew a little self-conscious of her bulges and lumps, standing naked by the bed as Will walked toward her. Reaching out, he ran his fingers over her shoulder and down the slope of her breast, brushing her nipple with the lightest of touches.

"Yes," he rumbled.

Jenny had already forgotten what she'd asked. Oh right, whether he could stay. Good—he was hers for the rest of the night at least. She shivered suddenly, her sweaty body quickly cooling in the chilly air, and Will frowned. He reached past her to pull down the covers so she could climb into bed. He followed her in, pulling the quilt over her and covering himself to the waist, leaving his chest bare. Turning toward Jenny, he pulled her against him, wrapping his arms around her waist and nestling his face against her breasts. His arms tightened, cutting off her oxygen again, but then he let out a breath and relaxed, slipping quickly into sleep.

Well, Jenny thought, *he certainly likes to cuddle*. She couldn't help a small, pleased smile that this fabulous man was in her bed. A little taciturn, maybe, but she talked enough for two and his intense, wild interest in her was definitely a turn-on. The sex had been animalistic, all biting and licking and tearing off clothes. She had never felt as desired before, as if Will had to fuck her or die. It was...exciting. Maybe a little scary.

Jenny had always just assumed that she wasn't that sexual a person. Sex had always been something she could take or leave and she had always felt a bit smugly above it all. This, though—whatever this was that she had with Will—this couldn't just be *left*. This was something that she had to have, desperately, something vital to her existence.

She needed Will—a man she had only known for less than two weeks—like she needed air or sleep or food.

She glanced down at the blond head buried in her breasts. Okay, nothing scary about him now. He had sex like a wild beast and then cuddled up to her like a child.

Oh well, she thought with a mental shrug. She had already decided he was a contradiction but she liked him anyway.

She wiggled, trying to get comfortable, and Will's arms tightened for a moment. As Jenny settled down to sleep, she stroked his head, feeling the surprising softness of his hair. It was so short that she had expected it to be bristly. She ran her other hand along

the top of his shoulder, enjoying the damp feel of his skin, the slight give of his relaxed muscles. Yeah, she could get used to sleeping with this man—both figuratively and literally.

She drifted off, lulled by the slow sound of his breathing and the security of his body wrapped around hers.

Will woke before Jenny did and he was glad about that, since he could enjoy resting against her. They were still tucked into each other—Jenny on her back and Will halfway on top of her, tangled together like two sleepy puppies. Will was still shell-shocked by the night before, amazed that he had been inside her, that he was still curled around her, feeling her skin against his and listening to her small, snuffly sounds of sleep. Although he wanted to stay where he was, breathing in the skin of her shoulder where it curved to meet her neck, the temptation to look at her in the pale, early morning light won out.

Slowly, Will pushed himself up on an elbow, careful not to jostle Jenny out of sleep. He was fascinated by her body. Not just the obvious places—her breasts, her pussy—but the other parts as well. Small stretch marks on her hips, the near-invisible hairs on her arms, her small fingers curled in sleep with their neat, short nails—all these little details seemed amazing to him, as if he was privileged to know these intimate things about her.

He loved the curves of her, the differences between their bodies, the way they were both strong but she was soft over the muscle. That softness drew him, made him want to bury his face between her breasts, against her belly, in the curve of her arm. He rested his cheek on her stomach, sliding across her belly until he could move the short hairs that bordered her pussy with his breath.

From there, he could smell her—secret and musky and different from him. He shifted his body down in the bed so he could lie between her legs. Hooking his hands behind her knees, he pushed them up and apart until she was sprawled open for him and he could see everything.

Will kissed her tentatively, touching her lightly with his tongue. Knowing how she tasted was another private thing he relished learning about her. He felt an awareness in her muscles and he knew she was awake. He paused but she remained still, allowing his exploration. Will ran his tongue between the folds, around the top and back down the other side.

With one hand he pulled her pussy open and licked, a broad stroke of his tongue. He felt Jenny shudder at this and moisture leaked from her opened flesh. Pleased at her response, Will thrust his tongue inside her, as far as he could, withdrew it and thrust again. Jenny was pushing her hips at him now, small, involuntary jerks.

He licked her with a flat tongue again, bottom to top, and felt her hips thrust in reaction when he flicked her clit at the end of the stroke. He focused on the small bud, circling it lightly with the tip of his tongue. When Will heard her breathing roughen

from his attentions, he sucked it lightly into his mouth, grazing it just barely with his teeth.

Jenny almost came off the bed and her excited juices ran from her. Will brought up his other hand and touched her, following the path that his tongue had taken with his fingers. He pressed a fingertip into her and her body accepted it with eager wetness. He felt the smooth slickness of her walls and explored, noticing what places and which way of stroking brought the strongest motions of her hips, the loudest moans.

When he pulled away from her pussy with his fingers and mouth, Jenny groaned her disappointment, desperately tugging on his head, trying to move him back into place. Instead of obeying, Will explored downward, caressing the skin below her pussy with his tongue, licking his way to her anus.

This was another secret place he wanted to learn, wanted to invade. He didn't know if Jenny would let him but he wanted to know all of her with his tongue, his fingers, his cock. He was desperate to explore all the ways to be inside her body.

He circled her back opening with his tongue, and her breathing quickened again. She tilted her pelvis up, offering him better access, and he took it. He pushed into her with a pointed tongue and the strong muscle around the opening clamped around him, making his cock jerk with the thought of fucking her here, feeling that tight squeeze around his erection.

He moved his tongue in and out, slipping two fingers into her pussy at the same time. She jolted at his double invasion.

"Oh please, oh please, oh please," she muttered over and over, tightening around his tongue and fingers, but Will forced himself to ignore her pleas and moved his mouth away. Jenny gave a protesting moan and pressed vainly at his head again.

He pressed one of his fingers, slick from her pussy, into the puckered entrance to her anus, pushing until he was allowed in to the first knuckle. He moved his fingertip in and out in tiny motions while his mouth found her clit again and he flicked it lightly with his tongue. As Will sucked the swollen nub gently between his lips, he pressed the full length of his finger into her ass.

Jenny came hard, screaming her pleasure as she curved her body upward in a stiffened arch, clamping down on his finger, her liquid pleasure dampening the sheet beneath her. At her orgasm, Will remembered vividly how amazing it felt to have his cock inside her as she came, feeling the vibrations of her pleasure, and he was frantic to be buried in her again.

He was above her, the tip of his erection poised at her entrance, when he remembered that he needed a condom. Last night's scramble for protection had scattered his supply and none were within easy reach. Gritting his teeth, he moved his rigid cock to her belly with a groan.

"My turn." Jenny, still panting from her climax, pushed at Will's shoulder, urging him to turn onto his back. He obeyed and Jenny straddled his chest, leaning over him so that her breasts brushed his chin and her hair formed a curtain around his head. Will

moved so his mouth was beneath a nipple, catching the sensitive nub between his lips. Jenny jumped, startled, and pulled her breast free with a teasing shake of her head. She smiled at his sulky pout.

"I said," she reprimanded him, ducking down to nip at his lower lip, "that it's my turn."

Jenny sat back on his stomach and she could feel him on the insides of her thighs. His muscles moved, just the slightest ripple under his skin, and the living, breathing motion of him filled her with such an intense feeling of—she didn't know what. Lust? Possession? Love? Okay...it was *way* too early for that last one, wasn't it? Tangled in a confusing mess of emotions, Jenny stared at Will. He held her gaze, still and patient beneath her, only the blue-flame heat of his eyes betraying his excitement.

Jolted back to the reality of the aroused man she was straddling, Jenny lightly flattened her hands over the top of his chest. With beautiful Will lying so obediently underneath her, she should take full advantage of this opportunity. Jenny smiled a little cat smile, watching his eyes flare and his throat flex as he swallowed.

Kneading his chest, Jenny just looked at him. In the mad rush of passion the night before, she hadn't had the opportunity to do more than get blurred glimpses of his body. Even lying down, Will was huge. Jenny liked how petite she felt next to him, how tiny and feminine. Any niggling concerns she might have about being too fat disappeared when she was close to him. The way he watched her helped too—that intensely sexual stare left no doubt in her mind that he thought she was perfect, curves and all.

While she was busy examining him, Will laid his palms over the heels of her feet. The heat of his hands was shocking—Jenny hadn't even realized her feet were cold until he covered them, wrapping his fingers around her ankles.

She smiled at him again, slid her hands around his thick wrists and stretched his arms over his head. "You're cheating again," she murmured. "Stay."

"Woof." Will mocked her command gently but obeyed, keeping his arms above his head when Jenny moved her hands from his wrists. With her fingertips, she traced the raised veins of his forearms to the insides of his elbows, where the skin was as soft as hers. Jenny moved to lick one creased hollow, tasting salt and Will, the masculine essence that clung to him. Will quivered at the touch of her tongue, turning his raspy cheek against the side of her breast that rested next to his head. He stretched up toward her, trying to kiss her mouth.

Jenny shook her head at him, her loose hair brushing his face, teasing his skin. "Behave yourself," she purred, dragging both of her pink nipples across his lips as she moved to his other side. Will groaned and followed her breasts with his mouth, trying to catch one of the elusive nubs. She laughed huskily and ran her tongue along the inner elbow of his other arm, keeping her lips on him as she moved toward his shoulder, kissing and nipping his flexing triceps. Will flinched a little as she kissed his armpit and reflexively lowered his arm.

Jenny stopped him, meeting his eyes. "I want to know all of you—not just the pretty parts," she said. Instantly, Jenny was afraid that it had been the wrong thing to say—not casual enough, too girlfriend-y—but Will just nodded and moved his arm back to where she had placed it above his head. She rewarded him with a graze of teeth along the top of his shoulder.

Tracing the grooves of the tendons on his neck, Jenny explored him with her mouth, using her lips, teeth and tongue to find all the places that made him shiver and groan and turn his chin up in a silent request for more. The tender space behind his earlobe was one of his favorites. When she gently pulled at his lobe with her teeth, Will clenched one hand in the other until sweat shined on his skin. Jenny investigated his face too—cheeks, nose, forehead, eyelids, chin—circling around his mouth, teasing, touching her tongue to the groove above his top lip.

"Please, Jenny," Will groaned.

She couldn't resist him when he said her name like that, so she kissed him with parted lips, continuing her exploration of him inside his mouth, tracing the shape of his teeth, feeling the smooth sides of his tongue and the only slightly rougher top. Will strained against her, pushing his chest into her breasts, his small, stiff nipples rubbing against hers, grinding his stomach into the heat of her pussy. Too soon, Jenny ended the kiss, breathing hard against his mouth.

"More," Will grunted, lifting his head toward her, but she laughed and shook her head. She sat up, pushing herself back and sliding easily across his flexing belly, mixing the wetness of her excitement with the liquid of his sweat. Straddling his hips, his erection nestled between her buttocks, Jenny leaned down again, licking the salt from his chest. She circled his nipple with her tongue before closing her lips on it.

At the sucking contact, Will's cock surged against the crack of her ass. Tugging at the nub with her teeth, Jenny pulled up gently and let it go. She worked the other nipple in her mouth, nipping, pulling, sucking, while feeling the reaction of his eager erection against her.

His excitement multiplied her own and Jenny could hear her own breathing, felt her chest heave as she panted. She slid down his body until her pussy slicked over his erection, heat against heat. Will's hips jerked against her, begging for entrance. Jenny ignored his silent pleas and moved down until she straddled his legs.

Will growled at the cessation of contact as his cock throbbed, dark and desperate, against his lower belly. Jenny's hands climbed his thighs, pushing them apart as she moved to kneel between his legs, running her thumbs along the connection between thigh and groin and making air hiss between his teeth as his erection jumped. Moving her hands together, she circled the base of his cock and caressed his hardness. Will jolted at the touch, his body vibrating with tension.

Slipping her curled fingers from base to tip, she moved her other hand down to stroke his balls, cupping and fondling the delicate pouch. Not able to wait any longer to taste him, Jenny ran her tongue along the underside of his erection, tracing the vein that

throbbed there. She licked the moisture seeping from the tip, lapping gently against the head before probing the small hole with a pointed tongue. Will's back arched and he panted, sounding like he had been sprinting for miles.

Jenny moved her lips to his scrotum, pulling him into her mouth, sucking his balls lightly, pulling down gently before allowing them to pop free. She lapped her way back to the tip of his penis and enclosed the head with her lips. Swirling her tongue around him, Jenny relaxed her throat and took him as deeply as she could, her lips touching her own hand wrapped around the base of his erection.

Her cheek and throat muscles massaged his flesh, sucking at him as Jenny pulled back until just the head was still captive in her lips. She plunged down again, swallowing him whole. His control snapped and he seized her head, tangling his fingers in her hair and holding her down while his hips thrust upward, fucking her face wildly with only her hand on his cock preventing her from choking on him.

Will exploded, his body jerking as he shot his release down her throat. She swallowed him eagerly, her throat and cheeks working on him, pulling hungrily as new shudders racked his body, draining him until he lay limp against the sweat-soaked sheet.

Unclenching his fists from her hair, Will smoothed her head with small, jerky strokes. Jenny's cheek rested on his hip and he patted her face, muttering, "Sorry, sorry, sorry..."

She turned her head so she could look up at him, flattening her hands on his lower belly and resting her chin on them. "For what?"

Will closed his eyes. "Being too rough."

"You weren't too rough. Don't worry, if you get too rough I'll definitely let you know." Jenny grinned, amused. "I have teeth, you know, and that was a very sensitive part of you in my mouth at the time."

"I pulled your hair."

She shrugged. "Eh. Didn't feel it. I was...caught up in the moment, shall we say."

"I came in your mouth." Jenny could actually see him brace for her reaction.

When she laughed softly, Will opened one eye. Jenny burrowed up next to him and snuggled against his side, kissing his throat.

"That you did," she murmured. Raising her face until their lips were just a breath apart, she asked, "Want to know how you taste?"

With that, she kissed his stunned mouth. After a bare second, he broke the kiss, catching her against his chest and burying his face in her neck. Jenny squeaked at the hard squeeze of his arms, the rasp of his prickly cheek against her delicate skin. His arms were already relaxing and she realized he was falling asleep. She was amazed by how quickly he could drop off—awake and rolling her around one minute, dead to the world the next. Smiling gently, she ran a hand across his drowsy head and kissed his ear.

A soft whine from the doorway interrupted her thoughts and Jenny turned her head to see Rosie, anxious for breakfast and a trip outside. Jenny carefully untangled herself from Will and blankets and slipped out of bed. Rosie dashed down the stairs and back up again, spinning in canine excitement.

After pulling on just enough clothes to not get arrested or frostbitten during their quick trip outside, Jenny stumbled downstairs after her dog. *Rosie is way too happy for this hour of the morning*, she thought sourly, shoving her bare feet into her boots. Jenny couldn't hold onto her bad mood, however, since she knew that she was just a few chilly minutes away from sliding back into bed with a fantastic man and his almost-as-fantastic body heat.

Chapter Six

The sunlight woke Jenny, heating her eyelids and turning the light behind them red. It was late, she could tell, and Jenny had an instant of half-asleep panic that she would be late for work before she remembered that it was Saturday.

Good, she thought, burrowing more deeply into her pillow. Her hard pillow. Her hard, warm, covered-in-muscles pillow. Jenny's eyes popped open. *William*. Here, in her bed. She watched his sleeping face inches from hers and felt a sense of unreality about the whole situation.

Asleep next to her was a man she had met ten days ago, a stranger in many ways, but she already knew so many little details about him—his smell, the taste of his excitement, the feel of his stomach rippling under her thighs. He was crazily familiar to her, enough to make her feel pretty sure that, even if she were blindfolded, she could pick him out of fifty naked guys. Giggling quietly at the visual that thought conjured up, she watched his eyes move under his lids, noticing his long, girly eyelashes, so out of place on that severely planed face.

Blond stubble caught the light and Jenny remembered how it had felt between her legs early that morning—the contrast between his raspy cheeks and his soft lips and tongue. At the thought, blood rushed to her pussy and she pressed her legs together in reaction. Sore muscles protested the movement, reminding Jenny that it had been three years, after all, since they had been used in such a way. A shower sounded tempting and she really had to pee, although not enough to move out of the warm tangle of their bodies. At some point after their latest go-round, Jenny had pulled the covers over them and it was delightfully cozy in the bed.

As she snuggled back into the warm wall of man next to her, Jenny's squirming woke Will. She watched his expression, still partially softened from sleep, change from the confusion of waking up in a strange bed to comprehension to such complete and utter contentment that Jenny gave another wriggle, this one from happiness.

"Good morning," Jenny said softly, kissing him on the nose.

Will smiled, a slow, sleepy curl of his mouth, and returned her kiss, skipping her nose and going straight for her lips. Deepening the embrace, he rolled her onto her back, ending up on top. He kissed her again and Jenny melted, almost forgetting her soreness, her morning breath, everything—except she really *did* have to pee. She pulled back, breaking the kiss. "I'm going to shower—want to join me?"

Will nodded, his eyes still hot from the kiss.

Jenny waited with an expectant expression.

"What?" he asked. His voice was even growlier in the morning, she noticed.

"In order to get to the shower, I'm afraid we have to get out of bed. I wanted to go with one of those in-bed shower options, but it was just too expensive — Eek!" Jenny broke off with a squeal as Will rolled off her and out of bed, scooping her up in one smooth movement. Laughing, she threw her arms around his neck as he carried her toward the bathroom, the bed covers trapped between their bodies and trailing along behind them.

"If the shower won't come to the bed, bring the bed to the shower huh?" Jenny teased, holding up a corner of the sheet. Will untangled the sheet and quilt, switching Jenny from one arm to the other but never putting her down. She marveled at his easy strength, loving again how small and delicate he made her feel, how safe.

When they were unencumbered by bedding, Will strode into the bathroom with his giggling passenger. Once in, however, he was a little uncertain how to proceed. Jenny decided for him, squirming free of his hold and heading for the toilet.

Unsure of where to look, Will busied himself with turning on the shower, testing the temperature with more care than was really necessary. Somehow, Jenny peeing in front of him seemed more personal than having sex. He didn't even know if he would be able to go with her in the room. The possibilities for embarrassment seemed endless. What was easy and effortless in the darkness of night, in a sweeping wave of desire, now seemed fraught with uncertainty. Eating together, dressing, talking — how could he forget the years of solitude, of silence, and suddenly become a normal person, someone who knew how to exist with another human being?

The sound of the toilet flushing startled him from his thoughts. He had to smile at being brought out of his personal crisis by such a prosaic sound. Jenny squeezed by him to step into the shower.

"Hurry up!" she ordered as she tipped her head back to wet her hair. "I'll need someone to wash my back pretty soon." She reached for her shampoo and started to sing.

Since she wasn't even paying attention to him, relieving himself wasn't a problem. He even carefully lowered the seat lid. Will didn't know if that was just a myth made famous by the advice columnists or if women really did get annoyed by men who went around leaving the seat up, but he thought it better to err on the side of caution. Jenny was still singing when he joined her in the shower. Her voice was nice — nothing fancy, but she made up for it with enthusiasm.

"Sounds good," he said, enveloped in a cloud of steam that smelled like her — fruit and soap with female undertones.

"Thanks!" Jenny grinned at him through the spray. "Want to join in?"

Will smiled and shook his head. He reached for whatever it was that she had been using to wash herself. Will examined it more closely. It looked like a mesh snowball.

"It's good for exfoliating," she explained. Will nodded as if he knew anything about exfoliation — or cared — before handing it back to her. He would rather use his hands, he thought, reading the label of one of the multitude of bottles — cleansing serum. He wasn't exactly sure what that was but he was pretty sure it was for hair. The next one

was conditioning balm. Probably for hair too, Will thought, putting it back. The next one was leave-in conditioner. With all the things she put in it, no wonder her hair was so shiny and soft. On the fourth try, he actually found body wash and squeezed some into his cupped palm. Working up lather, he started smoothing his slippery hands down her arm.

"So, what are you going to sing with me?" Jenny asked him. He heard her breath catch and hoped it was his touch that caused it.

"Hmm?" he asked, massaging the bubbles over her hands. Jenny's eyes half closed as he rubbed between her knuckles, his fingers slipping across the flesh between her fingers and massaging her palms. Moving back up her arm, he soaped her shoulders and the sides of her neck, slipping beneath the wet fall of hair that hung down her back.

"How about Aerosmith?"

Will went back for more body wash. He turned her away from him before gathering her hair over one shoulder so he could wash her back. Beneath the wet skin, he could watch the muscles move at his touch. Was it just last night that he had felt her back for the first time and been amazed by the life and movement of her body? It seemed as if he had been with her forever, that he'd always known that she had a small mole just above her right butt cheek. He touched it and saw Jenny quiver at the touch, as if she had gotten a small shock.

Jenny started singing "Love in an Elevator". Will choked a little and Jenny turned her head to grin at him, droplets from the mist clinging to her eyelashes and eyebrows and her face flushed from the steam.

"Well," she admitted, "I would change it to 'Love in a Shower', but 'shower' doesn't work—not enough syllables. Come on—just admit you know all the words. You can't resist the hair band." She started singing again, throwing in some air guitar.

Will laughed—he couldn't help it.

Jenny joined in, unable to keep singing. She loved that she had gotten him to laugh—it was the first real belly laugh she had heard from him that wasn't stifled or masked by a cough or a grunt. His hands slipped around her to give her a hug, her back to his front. Jenny leaned her wet head against his shoulder and wished they could stay like that forever in the hot shower spray.

"You're distracting me from my washing duties," Will told her, sliding his hands across her stomach.

"Sorry—what could I have been thinking? I can't go around only half clean," Jenny said in mock horror. She stood obediently and let him turn her so he could wash her other arm. That hand got the massage treatment too.

"Where did you learn how to do that?" Jenny asked and then immediately wished the words back in. He probably had a stunning ex-girlfriend who was a masseuse and taught him all about pressure points and release.

Will glanced at her face, puzzled. "Do what?"

"Do that amazing hand massage thing." *Please, no hot masseuse ex, no hot masseuse ex...*

Shrugging, he looked back down at her hand. "I just touch you how I want." He gave her that adorable, bashful, corner-of-the-eye look. Jenny was positive that he had to practice that in the mirror – it was just too cute for words.

"You like it?" he asked, his hands still.

"Are you kidding? It's bone-melting!"

Will gave her another one of his shy, happy smiles. *Speaking of melting*, she thought, although that smile was directed more at her heart.

No – no heart action here, Jennifer, she reprimanded herself sternly. *You haven't known blondie here long enough to –*

Oh who was she kidding? She was a goner for sure.

He was washing her breasts now, crouching down in front of her so that he was at eye level with her chest. He swept his slippery hands across the tops and soaped underneath, dabbing soap suds on the erect points of her nipples before moving down to her belly.

"Tease," Jenny said, her voice husky.

Will slid the tip of one slick finger into her bellybutton, ignoring her accusation. His hands slipped around the triangle of hair and trailed down to her thighs. He washed her legs and her feet, lifting one foot at a time, nudging his fingers between her toes, massaging her heel and the arch while Jenny tried to keep her balance with one hand against the tiled wall.

Working back up her calves, rubbing and kneading, Will's slippery hands slid around to the front of her thighs and between, higher and higher until he just brushed her pussy with the barest tips of his fingers. He worked soapy lather into her curls, working the hair into sudsy twists, each twirl pushing Jenny further and further into mindless pleasure. She groped blindly for the shower door, trying to stabilize her suddenly boneless legs.

After a teasing flick of a single finger, Jenny's clit was abandoned as Will tugged at her hips, turning her around to face the spray. The water washed the suds from her front and Will, soaping his hands, turned his attention to her backside. He ran slippery hands across her ass cheeks, tracing the sides, sliding underneath where her buttocks met the tops of her thighs and back up, massaging the muscles and running both thumbs in the slick crevice.

Will slid three soapy fingers from the base of her spine into her crack, slipping easily between her cheeks to the tightly drawn entrance of her anus. Without warning, he slid a finger into her with one smooth thrust.

Jenny's body clamped on the digit, her hips twisting as she almost came. In a dim corner of her mind, she was amazed by that – how could he make her come with just one soapy finger up her ass? Slipping out as quickly as he had snuck in, Will moved his

hand to her lower back and pressed, tipping her forward until Jenny was bent over at the waist, hands against the wall above the faucet, legs spread, open to his slippery, invading fingers.

Will soaped her pussy, sliding between the folds, brushing her clit teasingly before sliding two soapy fingers into her. Slowly he pulled them out, rubbing against the slick walls of her vagina as he went. When he pushed in again, he added another finger, stretching her around the thick digits. Jenny's soreness from earlier was forgotten, buried in the crushing desire to be filled, crammed full of him—fingers, cock, it didn't matter. Just something to ease this aching need. She pushed against his hand, trying to hurry his stroke, but he pulled his fingers out instead.

Jenny whimpered in protest, almost frantic now for him to plunge into her, hard and fast. Will filled his mouth with the shower spray and moved his head so his mouth was almost touching her pussy. He pressed the water out between his teeth in a sharp stream. Jenny jumped as the needling spray hit her, amazed by the incredible sensations emanating from that tiny pulse of water coming from his mouth.

"How—?" she began to ask, breaking off when the stream of water hit her clit sharply and her climax struck with instant force.

Her legs buckled and Will grabbed her around the waist just in time to keep her from falling. Her orgasm had caught both of them by surprise—Will had just been playing with the water, like a kid at the swimming pool, never imagining that he could make Jenny come with just that. He was awed by how they could make each other feel, the incredible and terrifying power that each had over the other's body—and mind. Wrapping his arms more tightly around her, Will pulled her back against his chest, supporting her weight until Jenny was able to get her legs underneath her.

"Wow." She glanced up at him, her expression of startled amazement slowly being replaced by humor. "That was quite a trick. You are one dangerous man."

Will just shrugged and shook his head a little. He suddenly realized that the water was lukewarm—more on the luke side than the warm.

"I think our time's up." Jenny had noticed the chill in the water too. "I have a big water heater but even it has its limits." She shot him a laughing look and ducked out of the shower.

Will grabbed for the soap again and did a fifteen-second scrub-down, his hands much rougher on his own skin than they had been on Jenny's. Not bothering with shampoo, he did a quick scrub of his head—his hair was so short it was like washing his scalp anyway—and rinsed quickly. The water had become definitely cold now and he reached for the faucet, turning off the spray. He shook his head, throwing off the excess water. Jenny, waiting for him with a towel, laughed.

"You look like Rosie when you do that," she said, briskly rubbing him with the towel. Drying his chest, she worked her way downward, her eyes on his cock, still erect even after his mini cold shower. Under her gaze, his erection swelled.

"You get all the washing during our next shower," Jenny promised, tossing the towel to him. Will grabbed it, surprised.

"Let me just take care of this," she purred, running one still-damp palm from root to tip, hardening him even more.

"You don't have to do that," Will protested, even as his cock eagerly bobbed in excitement.

"I know I don't *have* to." Jenny slid to her knees on the bathroom rug, slanting a look up at him. "I want to."

She kissed the flared head, a chaste kiss except for the quick slip of her tongue that jolted him, almost making him lose his balance. He fumbled for a handhold, clumsy in his excitement, and ended up with one hand on the wall and the other knotted in her hair. He didn't trust himself to not go all brutish with her again, trying to force himself down her throat, but he couldn't keep his hand away from her head.

Licking her way down as if he were a Popsicle, she tortured him with tiny kisses and nibbles.

"Please," he begged, pushing his hips toward her, trying to make her take him into her mouth. "Suck it."

A lock of her hair fell forward and curled itself around his shaft, the cold wet of it shocking against the throbbing heat of his skin. He made a tortured sound, half moan and half growl.

He saw Jenny press back a little smile.

"What?" he asked gruffly.

She shrugged, still smiling. "It's just funny how being on my knees makes me so powerful."

He gave a pained laugh that turned into a gasp as she sucked her finger in her mouth and pulled it out slowly, watching him from beneath her lashes. Twirling the wet finger around his cock in a lazy spiral, Jenny teased him until he was trembling under her touch. Her mouth was so close to the tip of his erection that he could feel her breath in the beading wetness that welled from the tiny hole at the tip.

She traced a path with her slippery finger back to his balls, brushing them lightly. Will's hips jerked and the tip of his cock brushed her mouth, yanking a moan from him. Her teasing finger slid to the sensitive skin behind his balls and his muscles tightened in his back and thighs as a faint uneasiness stirred behind his excitement.

In one move, she swallowed his cock to the back of her throat, instant suction pressing against his flesh. At the same time, she slid her finger into his anus.

"Wait...!" Will gasped out but the feelings were too intense—her mouth and tongue surrounding him, her invading finger stroking against an erotic spot, waking nerve endings he didn't realize he even had. He was drowning, fighting to breathe, muscles clenching against themselves, making sweat pop from his skin and trickle down his body, mixing with the water still clinging to him. The pull of her mouth, the thrust of

her finger—all his awareness focused on those two spots, as if the rest of him did not exist. Jenny's hand followed her mouth up and down his cock as she swallowed him hungrily.

Reality and vicious memories mixed with his daydreams of her, overpowering him, stripping him raw until he was bare nerves and feelings, exposed. He watched her suck him, helpless in her hands and mouth, and he exploded into her, his release ripped from him in pounding jets.

He was crying. His breath sobbed from him like a baby, his legs shaking so much that he had to sit on the floor hard, naked and crying and not able to do a damn thing about it.

Wasn't this a sitcom punch line? he wondered viciously. Lame-ass guy who cries after sex? He wanted to leave—get up, exit the house, walk in front of a truck—but his muscles refused to work. His body, the body he had trained so hard to be strong, tough, obedient to his will, refused to do anything except sit on the floor of Jenny's bathroom and shake.

She had watched his collapse to the floor with startled eyes and now knelt in front of him. Will couldn't look at her. He didn't want to see the pity or, worse, disgust—not from her, of all people.

"Will," Jenny said, reaching out to touch him. He flinched away, just the tiniest jerk of muscle, but she must have seen it because she pulled back. "What is it? Did I do something wrong?"

She reached out again and brushed her fingers against his temple, stroked the side of his head. Will leaned into the touch—he couldn't help it. He hated this intense need for her. All those years of not needing anybody and she had broken him in just days.

At his small movement, Jenny grew bolder and caressed his head with both hands, gently pulling him toward her until his face rested against her chest. He was still for a moment and Jenny held her breath, expecting rejection, but then he clamped his hard arms around her and burrowed his face deeper into the soft mounds of her breasts.

She held him, clutching him to her, trying to hide the fact that she was completely panicked. Jenny still wasn't sure what was going on but she did know that she was in *way* over her head.

The two held each other, naked, on the bathroom floor. Jenny's sense of humor was quickly reasserting itself—they were in the bathroom, for God's sake. Not exactly a place for high drama. Her stomach was also chiming in, quite loudly in fact.

"Hey," she said, giving his head a little shake. "What do you think about breakfast?"

He was silent for a moment and then, with his face still buried against her, said, "As a general concept?"

Jenny laughed, partially in relief and partially because that was a pretty funny answer. She grabbed his ears and used them to pull his head back enough that she could look at him.

"No, as in an 'I'm starving and if we don't get something to eat I might start considering cannibalism' type of thought about breakfast."

"Pancakes?" Will looked hopeful.

"Yep. I might even have some bacon in the freezer."

At this, he looked almost blissful. Jenny untangled herself and started to stand up. Her legs had fallen asleep and she had to grab the vanity edge for support. "We worked off quite a few calories last night, I'm thinking. This is no cold cereal type of morning."

"Afternoon." Will pulled himself up as well.

"Shit, really? Oops." Jenny covered her mouth with her hand. She usually tried to keep her potty mouth relatively clean, at least until she had known someone more than a couple weeks.

"Shit yeah." He was almost smiling again.

"Okay then. Clothes and food." Jenny walked on still-tingling legs toward the door.

Behind her, Will said quietly, "I can leave if you want."

She glanced back, surprised, but his gaze was fixed over her shoulder, avoiding her eyes. The muscles in his jaw were tensed, ridging his skin.

"But who will I eat if I have to turn to cannibalism?" she asked, her voice light. His jaw relaxed a little and he finally met her eyes. She smiled at him and jerked her head toward the bedroom. "Come on, slowpoke, I'm starving here." With that, she left the bathroom.

He heard her voice drift back to him. "And no distracting me with sex either—even a love machine needs fuel."

Will felt something deep inside him release, a pressure he didn't even know was there until it eased. He followed Jenny into the bedroom.

She had already headed for the kitchen, Will discovered. She had also stolen his shirt. He found that he really didn't mind. The bed was a mess, covers and pillows strewn across the room, unopened condom packets scattered over the floor. After he pulled on his pants, Will tossed the bedding back onto the mattress and collected the rubbers, muttering, "We could have used you guys last night." He jammed them back into his pocket.

Jenny's bedroom was nice. Pretty and feminine and a little old-fashioned, full of light and girly touches—nothing too frou-frou, but wispy curtains and a delicate lamp, a few candles spotted around the room and an upside-down paperback on the nightstand that, judging from the flower on the cover, was probably not from the horror genre. Not that he read much horror himself—he'd had enough blood and pain in real life. He didn't need it in his fiction.

"Will!" Jenny yelled up to him. "Get your ass down here and be my kitchen slave!"

Will grinned and headed down the stairs. He propped a shoulder in the kitchen doorway and watched Jenny as she leaned a hip against the counter, beating the pancake batter. Rosie lounged at her feet, watching the bowl hopefully.

All Jenny wore was his shirt. A single button had survived his removal efforts the previous night and that one fastener clung by a mere thread halfway down. Jenny's whirlwind stirring pressed her breasts together and the blue fabric framed the white mounds. The shirt fell past her thighs but the front teased open and closed, revealing glimpses of the shadows between her legs.

Will was aroused *again*. It seemed to be a permanent state around Jenny.

"Sorry I took so long," he growled. "I was looking for my shirt."

Jenny grinned at him. "If you treat your belongings with disrespect, they get taken away from you. Want to be the pancake pourer?" She offered the bowl to him.

Will stepped over Rosie to take the bowl, closer to Jenny than he needed to be. He bent and touched his lips to the side of her neck, a light "good morning" kiss, and paused, his face close to the curve of her shoulder, smelling the sweet, fruity scent of her body wash. A jolting thought interrupted his pleasant moment.

"Do I smell all fruity now too?" he asked in dawning disgust.

Jenny laughed. "I like it—you smell like me now. It will warn all the other women away, lest I poke their eyes out and spit in the bloody holes."

Will glanced at her sideways, the corner of his mouth tucked in as he pressed back a smile.

"Sorry, that was a bit gory for only," she glanced at the clock, "one-thirty in the afternoon. Holy cow, it's late." Now it was her turn to look at Will from the corner of her eye. "It was a little possessive for this stage of the game too, wasn't it? Sorry if I freaked you out at all."

He almost smiled at that as he shook his head. He had thought of little else but her since the first time he had seen Jenny. Her idea of possessive was nothing compared to his. Will began to carefully pour the batter into the pan. Jenny watched him, smiling.

He paused. "What?"

"Your expression," she explained, grinning now. "It's so intent, as if making round, even pancakes is a life-or-death situation."

"Oh." A little flustered, he looked back down at the batter.

For a few moments, the only sound in the kitchen was the pop and sizzle of the cooking bacon.

"Um," Will began, watching as bubbles began to form on the tops of the pancakes. "Do you want to do something tonight?" Was that too soon, too desperate?

He didn't really care. He *was* desperate and it definitely didn't seem too soon to him—he didn't want to leave her at all. Will wanted to spend the day with her, and the next day and the next, going to bed together and waking up together, making years' worth of pancakes and bacon.

"I can't," Jenny said regretfully, handing him a spatula, and Will's stomach dropped. This was it. One night together and breakfast and then over forever. He stared

at the pancakes so hard his eyes burned as he gripped the counter edge with his free hand, digging a groove into his palm.

"I promised Christian and Carrie that we'd go out tonight and I can't bail on them." Jenny slid Will a wry grin. "I'm sure they're dying to ask all about you and they would draw and quarter me if I cancelled. We could do something tomorrow afternoon if you're free?"

Will was able to start breathing again. "Okay."

Jenny's eyes lit up with a thought. "Could I see your house?" she asked eagerly. "You know I've been dying to take a look inside ever since I first saw it."

"Yeah." He didn't care *what* they did, as long as he could be with Jenny. Although it would be nice if there was some sex involved. Will smiled a little at the thought—how quickly he had become addicted.

"Cool," Jenny said, peering around him. "Not to be a backseat cook, but you'd better turn those unless you like your pancakes carbon-based."

As he flipped pancakes, Will couldn't stop smiling. He was in Jenny's kitchen, in her *house*, he had just had lots of incredible sex and he was about to eat a bunch of pancakes and bacon. He was, Will realized with some surprise, very, very happy.

Chapter Seven

"Carrie's baby has a cold and she is so pissed that she's missing this," Christian reported with some glee, snapping his cell phone closed. "It's just you and me tonight, girl."

"She'll corner me on Monday and yank every detail out of me, I'm sure. It won't kill her to wait a couple days to hear all about it." Jenny took a sip of her rum and Coke, eyeing it with slight embarrassment. It wasn't the most sophisticated of drinks, she knew.

Despite the fact that Jenny was only on drink number one, her interrupted sleep of the night before was catching up with her and she already felt pretty punchy. Christian, who must have been talking, snapped his fingers in front of Jenny's face.

"Hey, wake up. As the one with the newest boy toy, you have a moral obligation to share all, so start sharing," he demanded.

"Sorry, I'm a little out of it – sex hangover, you know."

Christian groaned, covering his eyes. "Sure, rub it in. I haven't seen any action in *weeks* and –"

"No fair!" Jenny thumped her drink down on the small bar table. "You just said you wanted to hear all the details – do you want vicarious sex or not?"

"Yes, yes," Christian admitted meekly. "Tell all. So you really did the dirty with tall, blond and moody? How was it?" He leaned forward avidly.

Jenny fanned herself with one hand in memory and felt a goofy grin spread over her face. "Hot." She considered for a second. "Intense. A little *too* intense at times, actually."

"Too intense?" Christian asked, puzzled. "You mean like he wanted to get kinky?"

She shook her head. "No, more like emotionally intense."

"Really? Emotions, huh? So this is more than just a weekend fling?"

"I don't know." Jenny blushed. "He cried."

"What? You mean after sex? That's so...gay! And not in a good gay way either. Did he say something about your souls becoming one?" Christian looked disgusted.

"No," Jenny protested. "It wasn't like that. It wasn't like a romantic gesture or something. It was...ugly crying. You know – real. Like something broke in him when he came." She shook her head. "I'm not explaining it right."

"Hmm." Christian considered that. "I think you've found yourself a Heathcliff."

"Huh?"

"You know – dark, tortured, obsessive. That sort of thing. That's fascinating. When I met him last night, I assumed he was a grunter."

"Grunter?" Sometimes it seemed as if Christian had his own language.

"Hetero to the point of caveman."

"Oh." Jenny flushed again as she thought about their encounter on the stairs, and on the bed, and in the shower, and out of the shower. "Well, he can be caveman-esque sometimes and he's a little quiet –"

Christian snorted. "A little? Girl, he said a total of five words last night."

"But he's so *focused* on what I'm talking about, you know? And when he does say something, he's smart and funny and I can tell that he was really listening and his brain's been working through everything that I was saying. Am I making any sense?"

Christian was watching her thoughtfully and, unusual as it was for him, seriously. "Actually, you're making total sense. I just didn't expect you to end up with a Heathcliff. I thought you'd finally settle down with someone simple and jolly and have lots of simple and jolly kids and they would just know me as 'poor Uncle Christian, the cautionary tale'."

"You make me sound like Mrs. Claus," Jenny told him plaintively, not sure if she should be offended. "And one night does not an 'end up with' make. I'm not even sure if I want to end up with William. The thought scares me a little."

"Scares you in a he-might-be-a-serial-killer way?"

"No!" Jenny laughed. "It's just...it doesn't feel like light, fluffy sex. There are feelings, really strong ones, and it freaks me out a little. It seems really early for it to be this intense, you know?"

Christian was grinning at her. "Jenny's in lo-ove," he teased. She laughed and threw a wadded-up cocktail napkin at him.

"Do not mock me now," she warned, "for Karma is watching and will strike you down. Some cute little twinkie will steal your heart and then I'll have the last laugh. It isn't kind to make fun of those whose brains have been mushified by really great sex."

"Great?"

"Wild."

"How great?"

"Let me just say that there was much ripping of clothes and we almost didn't make it off the stairs."

"The stairs?" Christian considered this. "Ouch."

Jenny grinned and shifted a little in her chair. She did have a few bruises, not that she had noticed at the time.

"This calls for another drink!" Christian gestured at the waitress. "You went without sex for so long, I think you became an official re-virgin."

He raised his vodka cranberry in a toast. "To getting laid," he pronounced solemnly. "It is a good thing."

"I'll toast to that." Jenny grinned and lifted her almost-empty glass.

"Th' thing is," Jenny told Christian a few hours later, "is that he is very, very hot." She thumped her glass on the table for emphasis.

Christian nodded owlishly. "I'll drink to hotness," he slurred, raising his glass. He peered at it, surprised to find it empty. "It's all gone."

"Mine too."

They regarded each other in drunken sadness for a moment before breaking out in giggles.

Jenny stopped laughing abruptly. "Th' thing is, that it doesn't matter."

"What doesn't matter? Our drinks being gone?"

"No! His hotness doesn't matter."

Christian shook his head. "Hotness does matter," he told her solemnly.

"But it's less than a month away!" Jenny wailed.

"What is?"

"The day of evil and dis—despair." Jenny flattened both hands on the table and leaned toward Christian. "You know I'm cursed."

"Oh," he said, realization slowly seeping into his alcohol-steeped brain. "Valentine's Day."

"Zactly." Jenny nodded once and then stopped when it made her dizzy. "I have never—not once—had a good Valentine's Day."

"That's sad," Christian pronounced. They looked at each other and started to giggle again.

"We'd better go, 'fore they kick us out for bein' drunk and disord-er-ly." He sounded out the words carefully. Jenny nodded in agreement and then remembered why she had decided to stop moving her head.

Stumbling to their feet, they weaved their way through the noisy crowd toward the door—or at least where Jenny was pretty sure the door had been.

"Come to my place, my Jenny friend," Christian invited, starting down the street. Jenny grabbed his arm and circled him around until he was facing the right direction. Christian's navigational skills, never that great during sober moments, disappeared completely when he drank. Finding his condo, which was less than two blocks east of the bar, would have eluded him for hours were he on his own. "We can have a slumber party and talk about boys."

"We always talk about boys." Somehow this struck her as funny. "Boys, boys, boys, boys!" She giggled, holding Christian's arm for balance. She remembered the invitation and shook her head, which made the streetlights move in a very unnerving way. "No, I

want to make a *booty call*." Her voice lowered on the last two words to a not-very-quiet whisper.

Christian sighed wistfully. "I wish I had a booty to call."

After patting his arm comfortingly, Jenny fumbled in her purse for her elusive phone. How could such a tiny, tiny bag hide her cell phone so well? "Ah hah!" she exclaimed in triumph, pulling out her prize. She flipped it open and squinted at the keypad.

"I put him on speed dial," she said dreamily. "He's number two." She snickered.

"How old are you—five?" Christian asked loftily but ruined the effect by laughing and snorting, which made both of them laugh harder.

With great ceremony, Jenny pushed the button on her phone, raised it to her ear and waited. And waited. "Oh. I forgot to push 'send'."

They both thought this was hilarious and Jenny was still laughing when Will answered. His voice sobered her up a little.

"William."

"Jenny." He sounded wide awake and not at all upset at being drunk-dialed in the wee hours of the morning.

"Did you know that your voice makes me tingle?" Okay, so maybe it didn't sober her up *that* much. Will was silent.

"Sorry. Was that inappro—probri—inapbo—" Jenny huffed an exasperated breath. "Not good to say?"

"No. That was fine to say," he rumbled. Jenny's eyes slid closed at the sound and she almost walked into someone's fence. Christian snatched her away just in time, pulling them both off balance.

"Christian and I had a few drinks," Jenny informed Will. "We're walking to his place now." She paused and glanced around. "Oops, we've passed it. Christian! Chris, this way!" They turned in a wide circle and started back toward his condo building.

"Are you staying at Christian's?" Will asked.

"Actually, I was wondering..." Okay, so she wasn't drunk enough not to still be a little shy. "Well, it's been *hours*, so—"

"Give me that." Christian wrestled the phone from her. "What Miss Coy is trying to say is that she wants your big—"

"Hey!" Jenny snatched the phone back. "This is *my* booty call!" She spoke into the phone. "Will?"

"Yeah?" He sounded like he was trying not to laugh.

"Don't listen to anything Christian says. He's drunk."

"Okay." Now he was definitely trying not to laugh. "Do you want me to pick you up?"

"Yes, please."

They were at the door of Christian's building and he was struggling with his key card. Jenny reached for it with the hand not holding the phone. "Here, you have it in backward —"

Christian jerked it out of her reach. "I've got it," he said huffily, holding it above her head. Jenny jumped for it but it was out of her reach.

"Jen?" Will asked.

She jumped for the card again as Christian grinned smugly at her.

"Jenny!"

"Oh sorry," she panted, remembering that Will was on the phone. "It's just that stupid dummy Christian thinks he's so great just because he's tall. Stupid Christian," she muttered sulkily, turning her back to him. "What were you saying?"

"Where are you?"

"Christian's house, silly," Jenny giggled. "I told you."

"Where is that?"

"Oh. Sorry. It's right at the end of that street with the big tree that always has those annoying things that fall off it in the spring and it's the big building with the brown whatchamacallits outside." She looked around. "By the white house." Another pause. "With two drunk people outside because one of the drunk people can't get the card key to work because he won't let the other drunk person, who actually knows what she's doing, help." At that, Christian managed to get the door open and gave Jenny a superior look. "Okay, forget the part about the two drunk people. They're not there anymore."

"What? Jenny, just give me the address and I'll find it."

"Address?" Jenny heard Will sigh.

"Ask Christian what his address is."

Jenny complied and parroted the information to Will.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes." He hung up.

"Okey-dokey. No hurry. We'll just... Will? William?" Jenny stared at the phone. "Chris, wait up!" She trailed after him toward his condo door. "I think something's wrong with my phone!"

Thanks to his car's navigational system, Will found Christian's building easily. When Jenny had called, Will had been staring at his bedroom ceiling, his thoughts running around his brain and his cock hard. The sound of his cell had startled him a little, not the noise of the ring but the idea that he had been thinking about her right before she called, like he had conjured her up or something. Although, since he thought about her almost constantly, Jenny calling him at the same time she was in his brain was no great miracle.

He buzzed Christian's condo and a few seconds later, the electronic lock disengaged on the outside door. Will was a little surprised that they had the presence of mind to let him in. He wouldn't have been shocked if they had forgotten about him completely in the fifteen minutes since Jenny had called him. She and Christian had both sounded a bit wasted.

Will knocked on the condo door and Jenny let him in. He was barely inside the door when she pushed him against it, slamming it closed, and pulled his head down for a kiss. She tasted of sugar and rum, her body soft and relaxed as she leaned against him.

Heat slammed into him in a rush and he was instantly hard. Will pressed his erection into her belly, rubbing against her as he rediscovered her mouth. Her slight weight collapsed against him and he pulled away from the kiss. Jenny's eyes were closed and, if Will was not mistaken, she was falling asleep.

"Sure, torture the pathetic, dateless loser." Christian's mournful wail came from the couch. "Why don't you just screw each other's brains out right in front of me and show me what I've been missing for almost *nineteen* days!"

Will wiggled out of his coat and tossed it over the back of a nearby chair. He scooped Jenny up with an arm under her hips and carried her to the couch. Her dress was short and soft, the fabric slightly slippery against his arm and warm from her body. She nestled against him with a sleepy murmur.

"Hi, Will!" Christian chirped, as if he hadn't just accused him of torture. "Have a seat. We're watching *Bring It On*." Chris patted the couch next to him.

Will settled on the sofa, shifting Jenny easily until she was snuggled on his lap, her head against his chest. He hadn't seen the movie before but it seemed to be about...cheerleaders?

Christian scrunched down so he could rest his head against the back of the couch. "Oh this is a good part—spirit fingers!" He chortled, watching the flat screen.

Baffled, Will watched the movie with the same sense of unreality that he had felt the night before—actually, for much of the time during the past week. He was sitting next to a guy he could almost call a friend, watching a cheerleading movie of all things, holding his sleeping girlfriend—could he call her that yet?—who had gone out with him, had sex with him, sucked him off and made him pancakes, all in the past two days. He wasn't hating it. In fact, he was pretty fucking content.

Idly playing with a strand of Jenny's hair, Will relaxed against the couch to watch the rest of the movie. He had to see which team won the national cheerleading competition, after all.

Will woke with a stiff neck. Reality came slowly, piece by piece, as he gradually figured out where he was and who was on top of him. He was wedged into the corner of the couch—Christian's couch, he remembered—legs stretched across the middle cushion and his feet propped on a metal and glass coffee table. Jenny was draped across

his right side, curled in the circle of his arm, her legs tangled around one of his, her face buried in his chest.

Christian's sleeping head was on his left thigh and Will didn't know how he felt about that, except that it seemed mean to move and wake either of the sleepers, especially considering the hangovers that awaited them. The rest of Christian's body was curled in a very uncomfortable-looking pretzel twist, his lower legs dangling over the other end of the couch. Will had no idea how Christian managed to sleep in that contorted position.

They shouldn't call it the sleep of the dead, thought Will. *It should be the sleep of the drunk.*

He held still for a few minutes, twitchy with the need to stretch—and take a piss. He shifted slightly and the movement, as small as it was, made Jenny turn her head against him, groaning softly. She blinked sleepy eyes before focusing on Will's face and smiling.

"Hey," she whispered.

Will smiled back. "How do you feel?" he asked, brushing the hair off her cheeks with gentle fingers.

"Oh, fine now but I'm sure the embarrassment will come. I have an inconveniently good memory after a night of drunkenness and debauchery."

He quirked an eyebrow. "No hangover?" As drunk as she had been the night before, he would have expected her to be laid out for most of the day.

"Nope. With the curse of a good memory comes the blessing of no hangover." Jenny shrugged. "Never get 'em. Now Christian, on the other hand, is going to be a sad, sad wreck of a man today. Is he still sleeping?"

Will nodded at the head resting on his thigh and Jenny looked down then gave a stifled laugh. "Oh poor Will! You were stuck playing Dad, thanks to us degenerate kids. You must be so sore, sleeping like this!" She stretched up to kiss him, only able to reach as far as his chin. She glanced down at Christian again and started to giggle.

"Isn't he *sweet* when he's sleeping," she cooed. Jenny reached down to poke him and Christian, still mostly asleep, shrugged her hand away and turned his head, burrowing into the hard thigh beneath him.

Will jumped—Chris' movement had brought his face a little too close to his crotch for comfort. Jenny must have noticed Will's predicament because, biting back a smile, she gave Christian's shoulder a determined shove.

"Hey Sleeping Beauty! Get your head out of my boyfriend's privates!" she barked and Christian moaned, lifting his face a mere inch.

"Why do you hate me, Jen?" he whimpered. "It's your fault I'm in this state to start with, forcing drinks down my throat like the evil bitch that you are, and now you're shrieking like a banshee at me and my head is pounding hard enough to jump completely off my neck and land on the floor." His face a sickly greenish-white,

Christian slowly pushed himself out of Will's lap and off the couch. Still muttering invectives, he shuffled his way to the bathroom, cursing the furniture for bumping into him.

Will was a little concerned but Jenny just grinned and stood up, straightening with a groan of her own. Will imagined she must be a mess of stiff muscles. "Don't worry, he'll be fine. He just needs the magic hangover cure."

"Not more alcohol?" Will asked.

"God no!" Jenny looked slightly green at the idea. "I was talking about coffee. I don't get looped very often but when I do, it puts me off liquor for weeks. Just the thought of it... Ugh." She shuddered then grabbed his hand to tug him off the couch. "I don't know about you but I'm starving. Let's see what kind of breakfast we can dig out of Christian's kitchen—I hope he's not still on his celery diet."

"Celery diet?" Will was horrified. He didn't even like celery *in* things, much less as the whole meal.

"He read something somewhere about how chewing celery burned more calories than the celery actually contained, so *voila*, the celery diet. Before that he tried the dancers' diet and before *that* he tried to go vegan but he's just not really into soy, so that didn't work so well, and before that—"

"Why? He's not fat."

Jenny shrugged. "I think he just likes being trendy." She started the coffeemaker and turned to rummage through the chrome fridge, listing food as she went. "It looks like the celery diet's history. Okay, we have Chinese leftovers, pickles, a few condiments, milk," she opened the carton to sniff, "nope, scratch the milk. Hmm...I'm not sure what this is...and some slightly shriveled baby carrots." Jenny shut the fridge. "Looks like we're going to the diner for breakfast. Let's see if hangover boy is game to try some solids."

As if on cue, Christian shuffled into the kitchen, still looking slightly worse for wear. "Coffee?" he croaked, looking hopeful.

"Almost," Jenny told him, reaching over to pat his rumpled hair. He jerked his head away from her hand and then clutched his temples in pain.

"It's not right that you could be that drunk and feel nothing the next morning." Christian scowled at her sunny face. "You're like some freakish freak person."

Jenny just grinned at him. "I do so feel something," she retorted. "Hungry! Want to go to the diner for some chow?"

Christian shuddered, carefully lowering himself to a kitchen chair, his hands holding his head steady. "Why don't you just shoot me instead?"

"Too messy." Jenny thought for a moment. "Hey, Will. Why don't we run to my place and take care of Rosie, I'll grab a quick shower and maybe some different clothes." Looking ruefully at her crumpled dress, she continued, "I don't even want to think about what kind of mess my hair and face are in."

Will thought she looked beautiful. He ran a hand over his morning stubble. "I'm the mess," he said.

"Please," Jenny snorted, eyeing him up and down. "You're positively tidy, especially for someone who just spent the night being squashed and drooled on by two drunks." Her gaze dropped lower until she was staring at his crotch. His cock began obediently swelling under her gaze. Jenny must have noticed, since she flushed and jerked her head up to meet his eyes.

"We can stop at your house too, if you need to," Jenny offered, her voice a little gruff. Will hoped she wasn't embarrassed. He was always staring at her, eating her with his eyes. It was nice to see her have a horn-dog moment. So nice, in fact, that Will had to press back a beaming grin.

"We'll give you a call on our way to the diner and see if you're up for breakfast by then," Jenny said as she poured coffee into a mug and offered it to a pathetically grateful Christian. He nodded and waved them off, looking slightly cheered by the shot of caffeine. There was a slight delay as Jenny looked for her coat while explaining to Will that she *might* have left it at the bar and stumbled to Christian's house in just her dress, but Will found it wadded under the end table. Obviously, it had seemed to Jenny like a good place to put it the night before.

Will helped her into her coat and guided her out of the building with his wide hand on her back. The connection felt good and Jenny moved more closely into his side. The morning was gray and early, and she was still slightly muzzy from the lack of sleep the night before – and the night before that. He helped her into the passenger side of the car and she snuggled into the seat.

Although this was only the third time she had ridden in his car, it surrounded her with a comforting feeling of familiarity – just like Will did. It was nice to be taken care of, to be held while she slept. It had only been two nights but Jenny didn't want to go back to sleeping alone in her bed, not even in her favorite monkey-patterned pajamas.

Will climbed into the driver's seat and started the car. Jenny reached over and interlaced his fingers with hers. He glanced at her.

"Thank you," she told him, smiling softly.

"For what?"

"For coming when I called you. For watching *Bring It On* with Christian while I slept and drooled on you. For letting Chris sleep on you and not freaking out about it. For...I don't know – existing, I guess."

His hand tightened on hers for a second. He shrugged and looked through the windshield. "It wasn't that bad."

"What wasn't? The movie? Will, it was a cheerleading movie. I can't imagine it was on your list of must-see films."

"We watched *Bad Boys* when it was over."

Jenny laughed and released his hand so he could shift into drive. "Christian's DVD collection is nothing if not eclectic. What did you get, like an hour of sleep?"

Will shrugged again. "I wasn't sleeping anyway." He watched the road ahead of him intently. Too intently, Jenny thought, for the early Sunday morning lack of traffic.

"When I called, you mean?" She watched his profile curiously.

He nodded, just a short jerk of his head.

"Couldn't sleep?" Jenny asked.

Another nod.

"Was something wrong?" Sometimes, she thought wryly, talking to Will was like playing twenty questions.

After a brief hesitation, he glanced at her quickly before his gaze bounced back to the straight-ahead position. "You're...easy to get used to," he said finally.

"Oh." Jenny settled back, a smile tweaking the corners of her mouth. He couldn't sleep because she wasn't there. A bubble of contentment rose in her chest. It seemed wrong to be so glad about his insomnia but Jenny couldn't help herself. He couldn't sleep without her and that made her happy.

Rosie was very glad to see both of them. Jenny hopped into the shower for a quick wash while Will prowled the house. He wanted to join her but wasn't sure about the rules of shower-sharing etiquette. Since she had invited him in once, did that give him permission to join her in all future showers? Or did each shower need its own invitation?

As he tried to dredge up the nerve to join her, he moved from room to room, moodily looking at the evidence of how different she was from him—her family pictures in frames arranged around the living room, crayon drawings fastened on the fridge with magnets, a calendar on the counter with notations like "Steph's B-day" and "Dinner at Mom's". He was pleased to see that last Friday night had "Will!!!" inked in under the more sedate "Work Recept".

Feeling a little guilty at his prying, he flipped the month over to February and noticed that the fourteenth had a scribbled drawing of a monster face and "Ick!" on it.

Will wondered about this for a second before it dawned on him that the date was Valentine's Day. He had never taken any notice of the holiday before but now he had gift-giving responsibilities. Even as a mild panic itched at him—what should he get her?—warmth flowed over him at the idea that he had someone to buy for on Valentine's Day. It was as if he had gotten an invitation to a members-only club.

This feeling buoyed him and he took the stairs two at a time. He went into the bathroom just as the water shut off, so Will grabbed a towel and waited for Jenny to step out.

"I didn't think you were ever coming in here," she said, sounding pleased, and stretched up to kiss him. He bent his head so that she could reach, wrapping the towel

around her as he deepened the kiss. Her mouth was wet from the shower, her skin steamy and slick. Jenny pulled back from the kiss, laughing.

"If we keep this up, we're never going to get any breakfast," she said, blotting her hair with the towel. She nudged his chest.

"Back up," she told him. When he reluctantly took a step back, Jenny turned and flipped her hair upside down, deftly wrapping the towel turban style around her head. She straightened as Will watched, totally charmed—not just by her nakedness, which was definitely entrancing, but by the feminine knowledge of the movement. He wondered if all baby girls were born knowing that very hair-wrapping trick.

He followed her curved backside out of the bathroom, mesmerized, as if he was a rat and she the pied piper.

She rummaged in her top dresser drawer. "I know I have something without holes," she muttered. "Ah ha!" She pounced, triumphantly pulling out tiny bits of something dark blue and silky-looking while bumping the drawer closed with her naked hip.

William watched her, his eyes unblinking, muscles tense. She bent to slip on the panties, her breasts swaying, and she glanced up at him through her lashes. He swallowed hard, his mouth dry. Slowly sliding the silky fabric up her legs, she made it a striptease in reverse—a dress-tease? Unable to move or look away, all he could do was stare, fascinated, and suck in hard, quick breaths.

Tugging the panties to her hips, she turned around to give him the back view as she ran a finger under the lace edge of either side, smoothing the fabric across her ass cheeks. She slid her arms through the bra straps and peeked over her shoulder at Will. "Could you hook me?" she asked huskily.

He managed to break his frozen stance and stalked toward her. When he took the two sides of the back of her bra from her, his fingers trembled just slightly against her skin. He slid the hooks through the matching eyes, smoothing his fingers over the skin beneath the fabric. Brushing his hand across her shoulder blade, Will tipped his head closer to her until he could inhale her scent—clean and female and utterly addictive.

"While you're back there, you can put some lotion on too." Jenny's eyes gleamed at him, bright with arousal, as she handed him a bottle from her dresser. Will poured some into his hand, warming it between his palms before smoothing it onto her back. Her skin rippled beneath his touch, the shivering movement vibrating all the way down to his throbbing cock. He spread the lotion farther down, along the small of her back. His fingertips slid beneath the lace edge of her panties, lower and lower until his hands massaged her ass. Jenny pressed back against him with a small moan and Will almost came in his jeans.

Rosie whined from the doorway.

"Walk," Jenny gasped.

"Right." Will blew out a hard breath and stepped back, reluctantly slipping his hands from her silky panties and even silkier skin.

"Dress," he commanded, his eyes burning hers before he stalked from the room.

"Whoa, Nellie," Jenny breathed.

Despite his arousal, Will had to smile at that.

Chapter Eight

She had known that she was going to love his house but this was just ridiculous. Jenny turned around in a slow circle in his sparsely decorated living room and immediately decided that she didn't want to leave. Ever. Her townhome was cute and new and clean, but this house was...special.

She turned to Will, who was watching her carefully, waiting for her reaction. They had walked over with Rosie and the dog had headed off, her nails clicking on the hardwood floors, to explore the house on her own.

"Your house is making me fanciful," Jenny told him, feeling a little silly.

Will cocked an eyebrow in question.

Jenny shrugged. "I don't know. It's like for years and years, happy things happened here and all that joy absorbed into the walls or something until the house itself is this...I don't know, kindly being. Sorry, I'm being stupid aren't I?" She laughed, abashed, but Will was regarding her seriously.

"No, it's not stupid." He paused for a second and his gaze went to the window and the bare trees beyond. "When I first saw it, I thought—" Breaking off, he glanced at her before dropping his eyes.

"What?"

"Just that...it felt like home. *My* home. And..." He tossed another fleeting look at her and his cheeks darkened a little. "I thought..." The rest of the sentence was a mumble.

"What?" Jenny asked again, very curious now.

"Nothing." His mouth clamped shut.

"No way," Jenny told him, shaking her head. "You can't just start saying something like that and not finish. I could die of curiosity, you know. It did kill the cat, after all. So it would be your fault that I'm dead and wouldn't you feel really, really bad?"

"I said that it felt like the house wanted me," he rushed out defensively. "Okay?"

Jenny just nodded. "It does seem like you fit here. Good choice, house!" she told the ceiling, her tone warm with approval.

"Come see the rest," Will offered, grabbing her hand and pulling her into the kitchen. Jenny laughed and tried to keep up. Will was more excited than she had ever seen him—out of bed, at least. He towed her behind him through the rooms and she exclaimed over little details—the smooth wooden stairs curled into a corner, the small stained-glass window above the front door that painted colors on the hallway floor. Jenny sat at his desk in the study and spun the leather chair, wiggling back into the impression of his body. Feet dangling off the floor, she felt as tiny as a little girl. She

glanced curiously at his desk, neatly stacked with sticky-note pads and CD cases and manila files.

"What are you working on?" she asked.

Will sat on the corner of his desk. "Copyright protection for online materials."

Jenny cocked her head curiously. "But then how will kids write their school papers without copy and paste?" she asked, grinning at him. She touched his wireless mouse. "Christian needs one of these. He's always getting his mouse cord tangled up in his Pez collection."

Will looked at her blankly.

"You know, Pez? The little plastic cartoon characters with really disgusting candy that pops out of their necks?" Jenny looked at his face for any sign of recognition.

Nothing.

"How can you not know about Pez? Did you grow up on Mars?"

Rubbing his thumb on some imaginary smear on the desk, Will smiled grimly. "Kind of."

An awkward silence dropped over them. Jenny jumped up and tugged him off the desk, eager to bring back the excited, happy Will of just a few minutes ago before she had opened her big mouth and shoved her foot inside. "Show me the rest," she begged.

He stood up, not meeting her eyes, and Jenny gave him an impulsive hug. "Sorry, Will—you should just ignore most of what I say. I forget that most people don't live in the strange and wonderful world of Christian and Jenny, the land where Pez run free and Skittle-hockey is the national sport."

After a moment, his arms went around her and he pressed Jenny against him gently. "It sounds nice," he said. "Can I live there too?"

Jenny laughed and swung her arms around his neck. She pulled herself up and wrapped her legs around his waist, climbing him like a jungle gym. Kissing him quickly, she smiled against his mouth. "I think we've already kidnapped you and dragged you there."

"Good," he said and smiled back.

Jenny's breath caught—she didn't think she would ever become immune to the startling sweetness of Will's smile. Blinking away silly tears, she kissed him again, just to feel the happy curve of his lips against hers.

"Show me the rest of your house," she demanded imperiously, still clinging to him.

"Yes, ma'am." Traces of his smile lingered as he wrapped a strong arm under her hips and carried her toward the door. "Would you like to see the bedroom?" Will's blue eyes, normally so serious, were teasing.

"Only if you have etchings." Jenny jumped when she felt his big hand settle on the curve of her bottom, his thumb sliding naughtily along the seam of her jeans. He climbed the stairs and the movement of each step rocked his hand harder against her.

Jenny moaned and tightened her legs around him, rubbing herself against him, feeling the moisture gather between her legs.

Will gave her the insta-tour, stopping at each door for a glimpse before heading to the next room.

“Bedroom, bedroom, bathroom, my bedroom.” He actually walked into the last one.

Tour guide was obviously not a potential occupation for Will. Jenny looked around curiously. His room was very...guy-like. Nice, but a little too practical for her tastes.

Her attention was caught by the view out his window and she squirmed to get down. She found, however, that wriggling against Will did not encourage him to release her but instead had the opposite effect. He grunted and the arm against her hips tightened, grinding her against him. His other hand massaged her ass cheek through her jeans, working her flesh with strong fingers.

Nice, Jenny thought, distracted from her efforts to get Will to put her down.

She leaned forward and brushed her lips against his neck. Her forehead rested against his jaw and she could feel the prickle of his day-old stubble. With a rough inhale of breath, he gripped her ass even tighter, rubbing her pussy against his hard stomach. A shock of lust roared through her.

Without thinking, Jenny grabbed the muscle running from his neck to his shoulder with her teeth and bit down. She heard Will grunt in the same instant that his hand lifted off her ass and fell again—hard. The sound of his hand smacking her jeans-covered cheek shot through the room as Jenny and Will stared at each other in shock.

Jenny was the first to move, giving him a small, cat-like smile before lowering her head to lick the spot where she had bitten him. Will shuddered as her tongue swept over his skin. He fisted a hand in her hair and pulled her head back, opening her mouth to his. For a moment she focused on his face, his eyes blind with lust, the same shocking, mindless need that tore through her. The room, the house—everything disappeared until all that was left was this man, this compulsion to pound their bodies together, to meld into each other, to fuck. His desire fueled hers, flaming it even hotter, before his mouth crashed down on hers as their bodies thudded against the wall.

Mouths twisted into each other, sucking on tongues and teeth. Subtlety was ignored—they had to have each other in that instant, their need too urgent for gentle petting and exploring. Their hands groped blindly, tugging on zippers, shoving down jeans and underwear. Will’s erection sprang free, thrusting demandingly toward her.

Jenny almost cried with frustration as she attempted to tear off her jeans without taking her legs away from Will’s hips. The thought of losing that contact with him, even for a second, was unbearable. Will snarled and grabbed her ankles, pulling them away from him, peeling off her jeans as she clung around his neck.

“Hurryhurryhurryhurry...” she panted, almost sobbing the words. Will gave a final yank on her jeans and her legs were free to wrap around him once again. Jenny hooked

her ankles behind his back, twisting hard against his belly, trying to assuage the burning emptiness.

With a hard twist of his hand, Will tore off her panties. Grabbing her hips, he buried himself deep inside her, his thrust shaking the wall. The second that Jenny felt him fill her, pressing against the walls of her pussy all the way to the mouth of her womb, she climaxed.

Will froze. The feel of her surrounding him, gripping him, so hot and tight and alive, stopped his breath. Every nerve in his body was centered in his cock, throbbing as her pussy squeezed him, the sensation so exquisitely good that it was almost painful.

The contractions from her climax milked him, clutched him, skin sucking at skin. He began to thrust, pushing her body against the wall, pulling her hips down to him, emotion and sensation blurring together until he came—locked up tight inside her, exploding into her as he gritted out a sound so guttural that it didn't sound human.

The strength drained from his muscles and Will leaned into Jenny, pinning her against the wall. She didn't seem to mind, or at least didn't have the energy to complain. Her sweaty face pressed into his neck and her arms and legs were still twined around him. He could feel her panting against his collarbone—hot, damp spurts of air. His breathing matched hers and their hearts thudded hard and fast in their chests, as if they had been racing.

Will came to reality slowly, piece by piece, feeling first the plaster against his arm, the hardwood floor under his feet, panting breath on his leg—Wait, his leg? He glanced down at Rosie.

"Were you watching?" he asked her. Jenny raised her head at the question.

"Well I was a little busy participa— Oh." She glanced down at the dog. "Aren't you the pervy one, Rose?"

She glanced behind Will and smiled. "Do you realize that we are just six feet away from a perfectly good bed?"

Will grunted and straightened, pulling them both away from the wall. He started to lift Jenny off him but she clung, resisting.

"No, stay in a little longer," she begged, delaying the moment that their connection would be severed and the empty feeling would return—an emptiness that only Will's hard cock could assuage.

He glanced down at them and the corner of his mouth quirked. "We have even more clothes on than last time."

Jenny laughed, the sound muffled against his shoulder. "Yeah, except for— Oh shit!" She jerked back, staring at him. "We didn't use anything."

Will looked baffled for a second before understanding dawned. "Are you taking anything?" he asked.

"No—it's been so long since there has even been the remote possibility of me having sex that it seemed like a waste of money. I was thinking that I'd go to the doctor

tomorrow to get a prescription for the Pill now that we, well, it seemed like we're going to be—you know. Having lots of it. Sex, I mean." She babbled, flustered. While she was talking, Will had slipped out of her and gently lowered her feet to the floor—kind of like shutting the barn door after the cows came home or something, Jenny thought.

"Hope so."

"Hope what?" Jenny asked, confused.

"That we'll be having lots of it." Will kissed her softly on the mouth. "If something does happen, you know," he gestured in the general direction of her stomach, "I'll take care of you."

Jenny blushed, flustered again. A baby? Ack! Although, when she thought of a little Will, with the same sweet smile, pregnancy didn't seem like that bad of a thing—

Jenny caught herself sharply. What was she *thinking*? No baby thoughts until they had been dating at least a year—at least! She had never heard her biological clock ticking before, never longed for a child, never even cooed over the teeny-tiny-ness of baby shoes, so these infant-type thoughts were alien to Jenny. She shoved them away.

"You don't have to worry about anything else," she said, bringing up yet another awkward topic. "I'm clean."

Again, Will stared at her for a moment before comprehension entered his eyes. "Me too. I haven't...I mean, I don't have anything either." He glanced at the floor and red colored his cheekbones. "I'm glad you're going to...that you..."

He raised his eyes and met hers. "I loved being inside you naked."

Just like that, the surge of heat rose in Jenny again, as strong as before. She clutched his shoulders and pressed her face against his chest, forcing out a breath.

"You," Jenny told him, poking him in the chest with one finger, "are a menace. We just had wild sex against the wall but you say one thing and I'm ready to jump you again." She poked him again for good measure and then shivered. She realized that she was naked from the waist down—no wonder it was breezy. Jenny collected her jeans and turned them right-side out, glancing around for her panties. They were lying in a small, torn heap on the floor.

"That's two," she said, slanting a teasing look at Will. She picked up the panties and dangled them in front of him. "You're going to have to get a line of credit at the lingerie store if you keep ripping my underwear off like this."

"Sorry," Will offered.

"Hah," Jenny scoffed. "Sure you are, caveman. I see that proud, macho twinkle in your eye."

Will tried to look innocent but his smile grew. Jenny gave him a mock glare.

"Hmmp." She started to pull on her jeans, resigned to her panty-less state. "Commando, here I go."

Rosie had settled unnoticed on Will's bed during all the commotion.

"Rosie, get off," Jenny commanded, glancing at Will. "Sorry."

"It's fine." Will shrugged, his voice preoccupied as he watched Jenny's ass jiggling as she tugged on her jeans. Jenny turned her head to hide a smile. She had a feeling that Will would give her anything she wanted if she just got dressed in front of him. She'd have to try the undressing part sometime — they needed more work on that one.

Pants on, Jenny wandered over to the window, remembering what she had noticed earlier before being...distracted.

"You have a great view from here," she told Will, looking out. "Hey, there's the path we always walk on!"

Will came up behind her, close enough for her to feel his body heat. "I know."

"Oh yeah?" Jenny craned her neck to look at him. "Did you ever see us out there? Wait, you told me that you saw us that cold day when you came down and introduced yourself..." She trailed off when she realized that Will was turning a dull red. For a big, muscular guy, he sure blushed a lot, she thought.

"What?" she asked. He shook his head and hunched his shoulders in a shrug, not looking at her.

"No, really, what is it?" She was intrigued now. "You know I'm as stubborn as a pit bull, so you'd better just tell me." Jenny grinned at him. "And you know I bite like one too. Which I'm sorry about, by the way."

"I'm not. I'm sorry I spanked you though."

"I'm not. Quit changing the subject. What's the deal with the path?" Jenny prodded him gently in the stomach with her elbow.

"I saw you," Will finally said.

"I know, you told me. You saw me on the path and wanted to meet me. I'm not sure why, since you couldn't have had any idea what I looked like with all my layers. It's my marshmallow woman disguise, you know."

He was quiet again, not responding to her teasing. He still wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Okay, now I'm *really* curious," Jenny said, twisting to bump his chest with her shoulder. "What's the deal?"

"I watched you," Will admitted. "A few times."

"Watched me? It must have been a slow work day," Jenny joked but Will didn't smile. He just nodded seriously.

Jenny wasn't sure what to think. It was flattering but also a little spooky to know she had been observed and didn't know it.

"It took me a few weeks."

She cocked a curious eyebrow at him. "What did?"

"Getting up the nerve to go outside and meet you." Will gestured toward the now-abandoned path.

"Why?" she asked, honestly surprised. She'd always thought of herself as approachable—to the point that total strangers would often strike up conversations with her on elevators or in the produce section of the grocery store.

He raised his shoulders in an awkward shrug. "Well just look at you," he said, waving a vague hand at her.

"What?" Jenny looked down at herself, totally baffled. "What am I looking at?"

"Forget it," he muttered, turning away from the window.

She shook her head and bared her teeth. "Do I need to remind you that I'm a pit bull? Now explain."

He pivoted to face her. "When you were just a stranger, I could imagine..." He trailed off. The longing in his voice prickled Jenny's skin and she shivered.

Will gave his head a single hard shake. "If you had turned out to be..."

"A raging bitch?" Jenny filled in for him helpfully.

With a small smile, he gave an affirmative shrug. "Well yeah. And then I wouldn't even have had that. The possibility." During his admission, Will's eyes focused over her shoulder.

"Really?" Definitely more flattered than spooked now, she took a step closer to him. "What if, up close, I had been hideous?"

He met her eyes, locking his gaze with hers in that intense way that made her heart stutter. "I knew you were beautiful."

Now it was Jenny's turn to blush and look down. Will's obvious fascination with her, his single-minded focus on her, made her feel beautiful, exotic, interesting. She had always felt fairly ordinary but Will had picked her out, *her* specifically, to pursue. Obsess over, really, she gleaned from the little that he'd said. His fixation on her was a touch disconcerting but hard to resist nevertheless.

Jenny stepped toward him, wrapping her arms around his waist and linking her fingers at the small of his back. His arms encircled her and she basked in the embrace, held close to him, safe in his care.

"I'm starving," she announced.

Will barked a laugh. "Woman, you're always hungry." He gave her a gentle shake. Jenny tipped her head up to grin at him.

"Well, you do tend to keep me from my breakfast. It's the most important meal of the day, you know."

He gave her a final squeeze and a kiss on the side of her head. "Give me ten minutes to clean up."

"I'll call Christian—see if he's up for breakfast." Jenny glanced at her watch. "Okay, brunch I guess."

She headed for the bedroom door, calling Rosie, who hopped off the bed and stretched.

"Come on, Rosie-toes – if we stay to watch him change, I'll never get fed."

Although he lived just a few miles from the diner, Will had never been inside before. He didn't like eating alone in restaurants, trying to ignore the curious glances of the other patrons, so he avoided going out to eat as much as possible.

Growing up, he had learned to cook a little, mainly so that he didn't have to eat one more meal of bright orange macaroni and cheese or spaghetti from a can. He never progressed much past the basics though – grill a steak, fry up a hamburger, boil some pasta, heat up soup – just enough to get him fed.

Christian waved them over to a corner booth, looking much better than he had a few hours ago. Will looked around as he crossed the café. It was very...frilly, as if someone's kooky aunt shopped in bulk at the lacey, cutesy-stuff store. Will frowned a little – that store needed a better name. There were lots of country colors and crocheted doilies and poorly done paintings on the walls of adorable moppets doing adorable things and the whole place gave Will an itchy, out-of-place feeling. Jenny slid into the booth across from Christian and Will followed, nodding a hello.

Jenny glanced at Will and grinned. "I know, isn't it frightening? Did you notice the teddy bear collection? Or the dolls?"

Will had not and he didn't really want to. The dusky pink booth they were in and the dried flower arrangement on the table was plenty for him without having a bunch of glass eyes staring at him. No wonder he didn't go to restaurants.

Jenny patted his knee. "Just don't look around and you'll be fine, especially when the food comes – it's great. The owner has odd ideas about decorating but she sure knows how to cook."

A tall blonde waitress stopped at their table. "What can I get you folks?" she asked. They all ordered but the waitress lingered for a few seconds, leaning a hip against Will's side of the booth and brushing his fingers with her own when she took his menu. By the time she sashayed away, Jenny was growling.

"Down, girl," Christian snickered. "You have nothing to worry about – she was a total butter-face."

"She couldn't see that I'm right here?" Jenny was not placated. "She couldn't see that we're," an angry hand gestured back and forth between her and Will, "together?"

Will looked from Jenny to Christian, puzzled. "What's a butter-face?"

"You know," Christian explained. "It's all good *but her* face? Butter-face."

"Her body wasn't good either," Jenny said spitefully. "Those boobs were totally fake."

"Whose?" Will was lost again. He wondered if he would ever learn the language of Jenny and Christian-land.

"The blonde bitch hitting on you."

"Christian?" He still looked totally baffled.

"Hey!" Christian said indignantly.

"No." Even Jenny laughed at that. "The waitress."

Will shook his head. "She wasn't hitting on me."

"Uh-huh." Jenny was unconvinced.

"She wasn't. People just...look at me." He stared intently at his spoon, turning it over and over on his napkin.

Christian was watching him with an intrigued expression. "Why do you think people look at you?" he asked curiously.

Will shrugged, eyes still on his silverware. He began lining up his fork with his knife. "I'm big." He shrugged again, smoothing the edge of his folded napkin. "Strange—I mean, people think I'm strange."

"Wow." Christian sat back against the bench, eyes wide. "You have no idea, do you?"

"What?" Eyebrows knitted together suspiciously, Will glanced at him.

"How drop-dead gorgeous you are," Christian told him, shaking his head a little in disbelief. "If I looked like you, I'd be on my knees every night thanking the gods who created me—or I would at least be on my knees every night." He grinned wickedly.

Will flushed, sneaking an uncomfortable glance at Jenny. "I'm not gorgeous," he protested.

Jenny patted his arm. "Yes, you are, sweetie."

The blonde waitress returned and Will eyed her uneasily. When she leaned across to give Jenny her juice, she brushed the side of her recently maligned breast against his shoulder and Will jumped away, almost landing in Jenny's lap. He couldn't look at the waitress. Instead, face flaming, he stared at the brown coffee pot in front of him until she walked away, disappointed in his lack of response. Jenny and Christian burst out laughing.

"Sorry, sorry," Jenny choked out when Will glared at her. She patted him, obviously trying to stifle her giggles. "But your face—" The reminder of his horrified expression set her off again and she and Christian howled.

Jenny tried again to collect herself, breathing deeply and wiping her eyes. "Sorry, Will. I love that you don't notice other women—"

"Or men," Christian interjected.

"Other *people* checking you out," Jenny continued, squeezing his arm and stretching up to place a smacking kiss on his cheek. "I also like that you're gorgeous."

"I'm not." Will turned red yet again.

"Of course not," she said, rolling her eyes at Christian. "You're a horrific, hideous, un-look-upon-able beast of a man, really."

Will smiled a little at her teasing and she hugged his arm against her side, which was nice. He relaxed a little, only to freeze again when their food arrived. As the blonde

waitress set plates on the table, Will inched closer and closer to Jenny until she was crammed in the corner of the booth, giggling. The waitress gave them a glare, obviously suspecting that she was the butt of the joke. Christian shrugged innocently, palms up. The waitress whirled and left their table.

Jenny gave Will a shove. "Move over, Romeo. I can't breathe!" He shifted a fraction, still keeping his side pressed against her.

Jenny was right about the food. It was amazing. Will ate until his stomach was full and tight and then leaned back in the booth, letting Jenny's and Christian's chatter wash over him, enjoying the heat from Jenny's body against his side, feeling warm and content and a little drowsy. Jenny gave him a nudge.

"Come on, sleepyhead, let's get you home to bed." She reached for her purse but Will stopped her hand and pulled out his wallet. He shook his head when Christian went for his back pocket as well.

"Got it," he said, tossing some bills onto the table and sliding out of the booth, holding out his hand to Jenny. He pulled her to her feet but didn't step back, letting her bump into him. Will looked down at her, one hand still wrapped around hers and the other at her waist.

"Oh for God's sake," Christian complained. "Do I have to tell you guys *again* to get a room?"

As Jenny hurried toward the door, towing Will along, he saw her flip Christian off behind her back.

"No reason to get a room," she murmured, slanting a hot look at Will, "when we have two perfectly good *houses* to choose from."

At that, Will sped up and took the lead, almost sprinting out of the restaurant, pulling a laughing Jenny behind him.

"Noooo," Jenny groaned, groping for a pillow to pull over her head to block out the insistent beeping of her alarm clock. Her search was unsuccessful, however, and she realized that she and Will must have knocked all the pillows to the floor again. She settled for using Will's arm, pulling it over her ear and burrowing her face against his chest.

There, she thought in satisfaction. *That works*. She slipped halfway back into sleep but the wall of muscle against her rumbled and moved, stretching over her to reach the "off" button on the alarm.

Will's movement shifted the covers off them and a cold draft crept around Jenny's naked body. She wiggled in protest, still refusing to open her eyes and acknowledge that she had to get out of bed.

I don't want to go to work, she thought, her lower lip sliding into a pout. She wanted to stay in bed with Will...

Speaking of Will, where was he? He should be keeping her warm. Jenny heard his deep chuckle and she squinted one eye open to glare at him.

"What?" she muttered darkly. "No laughing until at least ten o'clock — it's a rule."

"You." Will stuck his bottom lip out in imitation of her sulky look, which should have irritated Jenny but instead was so sexy on him that it turned her on. She rolled onto her belly in pretend annoyance, burying her head in her crossed arms and pulling her knees beneath her. Jenny heard his hiss of breath at her upturned bottom.

That stopped his laughing, she thought smugly, spreading her knees slightly so that he had a good view of her pussy. Waiting for him to touch her, not knowing when or where it would be, she tightened her muscles and felt the chill of the room brushing against the heat of her most vulnerable areas. This turned her on even more and she felt her pussy dampen and warm.

Jenny heard a crinkling sound and then silence. Her tension grew until her muscles were quivering and excited moisture leaked out of her. It was amazing how much he could turn her on just by looking at her. At least, she hoped he was looking at her. For all she could hear, he could be in the bathroom. Jenny stifled a nervous giggle at that thought. She arched her back, spreading her knees even farther to feel the cool air on her wet skin.

Hard fingers dug into her hips at the same time that he slammed his cock into her.

Jenny gasped at the shock of it—complete emptiness to total fullness in a split second. Her inner walls contracted against him, trying to hold him inside her body, but he slid out slowly, dragging a longing moan from her before he plunged back in, penetrating even more deeply than his first thrust. He massaged her ass, digging his fingers into the skin and muscle, pulling her cheeks apart and letting cool air tickle the crease between. Jenny arched her back even more, thrusting her hips back at him, trying to make him move in her, to force him to create the friction that she needed.

Will ignored her pleading wriggles and leaned forward against her back, the motion pressing his hard flesh into her another blissful fraction. One of his hands slid under her belly and across her ribs, finding and cupping her breast, his fingers tightening on her nipple, tugging and pinching until Jenny couldn't breathe. Releasing the stiff tip, Will let the weight of her breast press it into his palm and Jenny squirmed urgently, caught between his unmoving cock and his hot, still hand against her nipple.

"Please," she whimpered, twisting her hips against his but only succeeding in making herself more frantic. "Please..."

Will moved his other hand to her stomach, sliding it lower. He traced the stretched lips of her pussy where it swallowed his cock, his fingers gliding up to tap her clit teasingly. Jenny shuddered and sought his hand with her hips but he held her in place with his body. Flicking her taut nipple and her stiff clit at the same moment, Will began thrusting, pulling out and slamming in, driving Jenny higher and higher until she exploded around him, sobbing from the force of it, the incredible pleasure pulsing through her in endless waves.

Instead of following her into orgasm, Will grabbed her hips with both hands, holding her still. He pulled out, still hard. Jenny protested his withdrawal with a plaintive mew.

Placing a hot hand on one of her ass cheeks, Will commanded, "Stay."

Still dazed, Jenny almost laughed at that. *As if I could even move*, she thought languidly. She did turn her head to the side to watch Will cross the room and pick up her lotion.

Her breathing sped up again as she realized what he intended. He had taken the condom off, she noticed, and he was liberally stroking lotion over his erection, white against his dark, aroused flesh. He poured more lotion into his hands and warmed it between his palms as he moved behind her again.

Jenny quivered with nerves and excitement—she had never done this with any of her previous boyfriends but the thought of Will's rigid cock pumping into her ass made her swallow hard and press her swollen nipples against the bed, offering the round softness of her bottom to him. She could hear his raspy breathing, feel her skin heating as she waited for his touch. When he placed his slick hand against her hip, Jenny jumped, her heart slamming against her ribs in anticipation.

His other hand touched her skin, slippery from the lotion, and he kneaded both of her ass cheeks with his strong fingers and palms, raising goose bumps on Jenny's skin the same time a drop of sweat ran down her temple. Will shifted his hands so he could trace the cleft between her buttocks, teasing the clenching hole with the barest brush of a single fingertip. Jenny pressed up toward him, wanting penetration, her initial nervousness buried by her need to feel the shock of fullness.

At her encouraging motion, Will's hands became purposeful, his palms pressing the flesh of her ass cheeks apart. One slippery thumb pressed against her anus, pushing against the initial resistance until the thick digit was buried in her tight hole. Jenny gasped at the strange sensation, dark arousal filling her lower belly at his invasion.

"Okay?" he grunted, his hands still as he waited for her response.

"More," Jenny begged, pushing her hips against his hand, clenching around his thumb, trying to pull him more deeply into her. Will swore gutturally and began to move his hand, pulling his thumb back and shoving it home again. When her muscles relaxed enough to take him easily, he eased his other thumb in with the first, making Jenny's hips buck from the arousing pinch of the stretched hole.

"Please," she cried, clamping hard around him. "Fuck me, Will—please!"

Will growled and pulled his thumbs away, yanking a whimper of protest from Jenny. His fingers clenched into the sensitive flesh of her ass cheeks as he held her open and pressed the head of his cock into the tight hole. She felt his breath blowing out of him in hard pants, like an excited bull.

The sheer size of him startled Jenny out of her fog of arousal and some of her nervousness returned. He felt huge, forging into her, stretching her virgin muscles until Jenny couldn't distinguish the pleasure from the pain. He pressed on, burying the

burning length of his erection deep inside her. Only then did he pause, panting, petting Jenny's back with short, soothing strokes.

"Jen?" he grated. "Should I stop?"

"No." Jenny shook her head, her face buried against the bed. Her body was shaping around his hard flesh, adjusting to the invasion. Although her ass still burned from muscles stretched to their limit, she flinched away from the thought of Will pulling out of her body, leaving her open and empty.

"Don't stop," she gasped, her muscles clenching on him in an effort to hold him inside her.

She felt him shudder and groan as her body clamped onto his burning cock. He began to thrust wildly, as if the last shred of control, of consideration, evaporated, so only the lust-ridden beast remained. Wrapping hard hands around her hips, he slammed into her, his balls slapping against her pussy with each stroke.

Pleasure built in Jenny at the myriad sensations—the friction of his thrusts, the fullness of his cock pressing against the walls of her back passage, the wet smack of his scrotum against the swollen folds of her pussy. Even Will's animalist grunts, the clamp of his fingers and the slide of his sweaty skin across hers drove Jenny higher, until she climaxed sharply, twisting her hips against his, her muscles tightening around Will's cock until he bucked with his own orgasm, bellowing her name as he pumped his release into her, her body wringing every drop from him.

Drained, Will collapsed onto her back, soaked with sweat.

"All right?" he managed to mumble.

"Mmm-hmm," came the muffled voice beneath him, the drowsy satisfaction in her tone making Will smile.

Sleep pulled at him but reality was creeping back. He knew that Jenny had to get ready for work and he had to get home to start on the projects piled on his desk. Will realized that he hadn't done any work for two days—three really, because in his anxiety about the date, he had been pretty much useless on Friday for anything except staring blankly at the computer screen. He hadn't taken two days off in...well, years.

Will was dreading it though—pulling his body out of Jenny's, going back to his too quiet house to work, not seeing her for hours, possibly days if she wanted a night alone. Maybe she wouldn't want to see him until their next date. When would she want to go out again—next weekend?

No, he thought. He wouldn't be able to stand it. She could have a day alone—at the most. After that, he needed to be with her. He sighed against the warm skin on the back of her neck and felt her shiver at the brush of air.

Jenny was wiggling under him, so he pushed himself up on his arms and raised his hips to slip out of her, stifling a groan at the loss of contact. She turned over onto her back and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling herself up so that she could kiss him. The kiss was slow, gentle and ended with a quick nip from Jenny on his bottom lip. He raised an eyebrow at her.

"It was the lip that started it all," she explained, starting to smile. "If it hadn't looked so cute sticking out like that..."

"So all I have to do is..." Will started to jut it out again but Jenny screwed her eyes closed.

"No, no!" she cried. "Must...go...to...work!" The last sobered her and she opened her eyes and made a face. "Ugh. Work."

Will hauled himself out of bed, pulling Jenny along with him. He held her against his chest, her feet dangling almost a foot off the floor, and gave her a quick, hard kiss.

"Mmm..." she sighed and he felt the sound ripple against his own chest. "You would have thought we would have gotten each other out of our systems yesterday."

"Never," Will stated. Sunday after brunch had been a blur. They had tumbled around in her bed until they were forced from it by hunger or an antsy dog needing a walk. They'd fallen asleep with their bodies still connected, wrapped around each other in a tangle of limbs and blankets, and had woken up with Will's face tucked into the curve of her shoulder or between her breasts or against her stomach.

"Shower?" Will asked hopefully, moving toward the bathroom with Jenny still caught against him.

She shook her head. "Are you kidding? If we shower together, I won't get into work until noon."

Will just looked at her. "So what's the problem?"

Jenny grinned and shook her head in mock disapproval. "You work-at-homers. So lax."

She squeaked as he growled, burying his face in her neck, rubbing his morning stubble against her skin. Giggling, she wriggled free of his hold and dashed for the bathroom.

Chapter Nine

Jenny actually did get to work on time but that didn't mean that she got much done. Carrie, still bitter about missing a rare night out, was the first to corner Jenny in her cube, demanding details.

Without the tongue-loosening effects of alcohol that she had experienced the past Saturday night with Christian, Jenny kept to the facts. Yes, Will was hot. Yes, he was big. Yes, he had a good job. Yes, his cheekbones were to die for. Yes, he was good in bed. Yes, he was sweet and funny and...

At that point, she lost all objectivity and gushed about Will like a twelve-year-old girl with her first crush. Carrie lapped it up, oohing and ahing appropriately.

"At first, I didn't know what to think about him—I mean, he's a little bit scary, isn't he," Carrie admitted. "Those light eyes and the way he looks at you...he seems very intense."

"Yes!" Jenny seized on the word. "Intense. As I was *trying* to tell Christian on Saturday," as if summoned, Christian's blond head popped over the partition, "Will's definitely intense." She lowered her voice. "He used to watch me walking Rosie on the path from his bedroom window."

"What? I can't hear. Hold on, I'm coming over. Don't say anything else until I'm there." Christian's head disappeared and they heard the mad scramble of his chair scooting toward Jenny's cubicle entrance. Jenny and Carrie ignored him.

"Really?" Carrie asked, half fascinated and half alarmed. "That seems a little bit—"

"Obsessive?" Jenny nodded. "I know. If it had been anyone else, I would have run away when he told me that but...is it flattering or is it just weird?"

"What? What?" Christian asked. "I slept with the man—I have every right to hear all the details."

Carrie stared at him with her mouth open. "He's *bi*?" She whirled around to face Jenny. "And he slept with *Christian*? And you're worried about him watching you *walk* your *dog*?"

"Shhhh!" Jenny flapped her hands at Carrie in a shushing motion. "He didn't *sleep* with Christian. We just all fell asleep on the couch watching *Bring It On*."

"Huh." Carrie looked unconvinced. "A cheerleading movie? Are you sure he's not gay?"

"Positive," Jenny stated emphatically and then blushed. Carrie and Christian watched the color rise in her cheeks and glanced at each other, snickering.

"Jenny's getting laid, Jenny's getting laid," Carrie singsonged.

"Do you think maybe you guys could get some work done today?" The cold voice came from Evan, who appeared behind Christian.

Oops, Jenny thought. She wondered how long Evan had been listening to their conversation. She mentally shrugged. At least it proved her I-have-a-boyfriend claim.

After a mutual eye roll, Carrie and Christian returned to their own cubicles and Jenny was left to work. Actually, she was left to stare dreamily at her computer and resist calling Will. It had only been—she glanced at her watch—an hour since she had kissed him goodbye and already she wanted to see him or at least hear his voice.

Her hand crept toward her cell phone but she snatched it back. She was positive that there was some dating rule that said an hour was too soon to be calling him.

Just as her hand moved toward her cell phone again, it rang.

Jenny jumped and dove for it but forced herself to wait a full ring before flipping it open.

"Hello?" she said, realizing that she had been so flustered by the call that she hadn't even looked at the display to see if it was Will.

"Hello."

At the rumbling voice, Jenny pressed her hand against her suddenly jumping stomach and smiled.

"Hi." *Okay*, she thought. *This could go on all day*. There was a short pause.

"How's work?" he finally asked.

"Eh. You-know-who is being irritating and I'm having a little trouble concentrating..."

"Oh?"

Oh God, his voice made her hot. "Well, something happened this morning that was a little...distracting." Jenny could hear Will's breathing roughen and she realized that they were having phone sex at—she checked the time again—8:47 in the morning.

"Yeah."

"What?"

"Distracting for me too," he elaborated.

"Oh. Are you staring blankly at your computer screen?"

"Pretty much."

"And not getting a single thing done except gossip with Carrie and Christian?"

"Yeah—except for the gossip part." He paused. "I was going to take Rosie for a walk. Would that be okay?"

"That would be great. Did I show you where my spare key is?"

"No."

"It's behind the porch light in one of those magnetic holders."

"That's not safe," Will growled. "Anyone could find it and let themselves in when you're home alone."

A little thrill shot through Jenny at his concern. "But I have Rosie."

"Yeah. Not much of a watchdog."

"Well," she lowered her voice, "maybe you'll be in bed with me. You can jump out and surprise any intruders."

"Get rid of the key."

"But I lock myself out at least once a week," Jenny wailed. His concern was not so sweet now that he had demands.

"So give *me* the key and call me if you lock yourself out."

"Okay." That sounded—good. Permanent. Key exchange. Wow. "Just keep it after you get Rosie."

"Okay. Can she come to my house after the walk?"

Jenny grinned at the phone. What, was she arranging play dates for her dog now?

"Definitely. She'd love that." She lowered her voice again. "I miss you already. I wish we were still in bed together." Okay, that had just slipped out. Jenny held her breath at the silence on the other end.

"Shit." Not the most romantic of words but his growl, full of frustrated longing, made Jenny smile in satisfaction. She wasn't the only one walking around hot and horny only two hours since they last made love.

Had sex, she quickly corrected herself. No love talking yet—way, way, way, way too early for that, right?

Oh God, Jenny thought, dropping her head until her forehead thunked on her desk. *Too late.*

"What was that?"

Oh right. Jenny hurriedly straightened, rubbing her head. Will was still on.

"Nothing. Anyway, should I come over to pick up Rosie after work tonight?"

There was a pause. "Maybe you could stay?" Will asked. Jenny had the impression that he was holding his breath waiting for her answer.

"Sure," she agreed, a happy shiver running through her body. If she was this desperate after being away from him for an hour, she didn't know what she'd do if they were apart for the whole night.

She heard Will's breath come out in a rush. "Good."

"Okay."

"Right."

"Well...I'll see you tonight then?"

"Yes."

"Okay." *What are we – seventh graders?* Jenny thought, rolling her eyes. Pretty soon, they would be starting with the "You hang up!" "No, you hang up first!" thing.

"Goodbye. I'm glad you called," Jenny told him.

"Bye," Will said, or Jenny *thought* he said, since it was more of a grunt. She shut her phone slowly and stared at it, smiling fatuously. She turned away from her desk – and jumped.

Evan was standing behind her. Eavesdropping again, she suspected, squashing the urge to call him out on it.

"What's up, Evan?" Her tone was brusque.

"Was that him? Einstein?" he sneered.

A flush of rage heated her cheeks. Jenny opened her mouth to defend Will but bit off the words before they could escape. Evan had that look again, his eyes flat and mean, and she figured he was looking for a fight. She didn't feel like obliging him.

"Did you need something?" she asked through a bared-teeth smile.

"I have to get the Meadow Glen project done by tomorrow morning and the boss said to have you help," he told her, his eyes gleaming with malice. He had definitely been eavesdropping, since he was so happy to be wrecking her plans with Will. She nodded shortly at Evan and he paused for a moment as if he was going to say something else. Instead, he turned and walked stiffly away.

"He is such a little prick." Christian's scowling face appeared over the cube wall again.

"You heard?" Jenny asked.

Christian nodded. "The soundproofing in these," he thumped a fist against the partition, "still needs some work. So Evan's determined that if he's not getting any, ain't nobody getting any."

"You should offer to stay late too," Jenny suggested with a wicked grin. "Tell him that it will be a chance for the two of you to spend some quality time together."

"You are an evil, evil bitch, Jen," Christian told her. "I just love that about you." With that, his head disappeared from view. Jenny hoped that he was off to offer his services to an uncomfortable Evan.

Christian's offer did not go over well.

"He didn't appreciate the joke," Christian, looking abashed, had reported to Jenny. "Thought he was going to take a swing at me."

Jenny had winced and nodded, regretting her devilish urge to sic Christian on Evan. It would only make it an even longer, more uncomfortable evening.

It was. She ended up working until after nine. Driving home, she thought in irritation that Evan had probably just made up the deadline to upset her evening with Will. The two of them had worked in tense silence. Every so often, Jenny had turned to

see Evan staring at her. She had even wondered if he had slipped something alcoholic into his water bottle, since he was becoming more flushed and acting more oddly as the interminable minutes dragged by.

To top off the night, Evan had bailed on her and left the office before the plans were printed, leaving her to sort and roll the sheets alone. It had taken her a good forty minutes, and she had fumed for every single one of them. As she'd snapped a rubber band around the end of the roll of plans, the sound loud in the deserted office, she had resolved to talk to the big boss the very next morning. She wasn't sure if it would help but Jenny couldn't take much more of Evan's eavesdropping, sly digs and petty punishments. Besides, he was getting pretty damn creepy.

Men can be a real pain in the ass sometimes, she thought as she stopped at a red light. *And sometimes*, she reflected, smiling for the first time in hours, *men can be a pleasure in the ass*. With that thought, she called Will.

"Hi. I'm finally free," she told him when he answered.

"Good. I'll come over."

"You don't need to do that—I'll just grab some things and head to your place."

"No. I'll come over."

"Okay." It didn't matter where—she just wanted to see him. They could meet in the woods halfway if he wanted, although that might be a little chilly. Actually, it would be nice not having to pack her clothes and Rosie's food and... Will was right—it was easier for him to come over. "See you soon."

"Give me five minutes," he grunted and hung up. Jenny glanced at her phone, amused. His phone manners were a little abrupt. She slipped the phone back into her purse and turned onto her street.

She drove her car into her driveway, punching the garage door opener clipped to the sun visor. She was already getting excited about seeing Will, her body warming and softening at the thought of him.

Pulling into the garage, she jammed the vehicle into park and turned the key in the ignition. Swinging open the car door, she pushed the button to close the garage door before gathering her purse and the bag from the pharmacy. Her doctor had called in the prescription that morning, as promised, and Jenny was able to dart out to pick up the pills at lunch. She gave a little shiver, thinking about Will inside her without any barrier between them.

As Jenny climbed out of the car, she saw a shape in her peripheral vision and knew, with the instinct all women have, that the shape was a man. For an illogical moment she thought it was Will, there to greet her, having made it from his house to hers in record time.

In the next moment, she knew it wasn't him and she felt a slamming rush of fear and adrenaline hit her as she spun around to flee toward the door of her house.

The shadow moved toward her, fast, grabbing her arm and jerking her around toward him as she screamed, a high, startled shriek. Her purse flew, scattering contents across the concrete floor, and her prescription bag skidded beneath the car.

In the fraction of a second before the dim light on the garage door opener clicked off, Jenny saw the man—recognized him. Then darkness covered everything and they both froze momentarily.

“Evan, what are you doing?” Jenny asked, pissed. “You scared the shit out of—”

His fist smashed into her face. She felt the skin break on her lip, as if it was in slow motion, tasted his knuckle as it slammed across her open mouth. She was stunned, not by the pain but by the fact that someone, *Evan*, had punched her, actually *hit* her.

He struck her again, this time in the stomach, and she felt her breath jerk out of her body, which was strange because she didn’t breathe in her belly.

Fight back! a voice in her head screamed. *Do something!* Jenny obeyed, scratching and kicking and trying to bite, frantically trying to remember moves from the long-ago self-defense class she had taken in high school. She opened her mouth to scream but couldn’t get enough air in her lungs to make more than a rasping croak.

A lucky flail of her arm knocked her hand against his head and she grabbed a handful of his hair, pulling him toward her and head-butting him, hard. She felt a crack—his nose?—against her forehead and heard him swear. The grip on her arm loosened and she yanked away, dazed from her own blow to the head.

Go, go, go! The voice in her head was yelling again. *A good voice to listen to*, she decided dazedly, stumbling toward where she thought the stairs were—just four stairs and she’d be in her house.

She ran into her plastic recycling bin, bouncing off it and hitting the ground. She scrambled to her hands and knees, groping for the edge of the stairs that led to the safety of a solid, locking door. She hit something with her fingers—there! The first step was under her hand. Her breath sobbing from her lungs, Jenny half crawled, half dragged herself up the stairs.

A hand fisted in her hair and jerked her head back just as Evan’s body hit hers, flattening Jenny beneath his weight, the hard edges of the steps gouging into her breasts and belly and thighs. He shoved her head forward, slamming it into the edge of the top stair.

“Bitch!” he spit out, his voice stuffy from blood. “Fucking bitch!” He slammed her head down again. Jenny actually saw stars, floating pinpricks of light, and wondered at it for a second. *The cartoons are right*, she thought, still dazed from the last blow.

Wake up! screamed the militant voice in her head, the one that kept her moving, fighting. She started struggling again, kicking backward, trying to get her hands beneath her to buck him off. He laughed at her efforts, using his weight to press her down, yanking her hair to hear her pained gasps.

Jenny couldn’t dislodge him—she was trapped.

She had always considered herself a strong woman, had imagined that if she ever was attacked, she would keep her head, fight him off, outwit her assailant with a clever ploy like some fucking Charlie's Angel. Instead, here she was, trapped under Evan, a guy she had always considered something of a weenie, fighting with all her strength—and she was helpless, not even able to pull in enough breath to scream.

A wave of rage and hysteria flooded her and she fought with an extra surge of power, managing to elbow Evan in the stomach. The sharp joint buried itself in the soft flesh of his belly, driving the air from him with a whoosh.

Now go! the voice commanded, the Amazon in her head who was obviously determined to keep her alive. Bucking her body hard, she felt him slide backward until only her legs were pinned. She kicked with renewed strength, pulling her body forward with her hands, her fingers scrabbling for purchase on the smooth landing. Jenny felt one of her nails break and tear but she dismissed the small pain.

Almost there, almost free! she thought but then he was on her again, grabbing her upper arms and flipping her onto her back.

She saw him every day at the office but his face was almost unrecognizable to her now, savage and blood-smeared. His lips were drawn back in a snarl and blood, black in the dim light filtering through the small garage windows, had streaked his teeth.

"Think you can just *dismiss* me, you fucking cunt?" he hissed, spit and blood spraying her face, stinging her eyes. "Tell *me* no and then open your legs to the next muscle-bound pretty boy?"

Jenny was still fighting, trying to pull up her legs so she could knee him in the groin, but he flattened his legs against hers and she didn't have enough leverage to do more than bump against him.

"You're nothing!" Evan shook her, the back of her head hitting the landing. She scratched whatever she could reach—his arms, his chest, his sides—snapping at him with her teeth like a trapped shark, mindless in the need to free herself. "You're just a fat fag hag—you're *nothing!*"

Jenny met his eyes, gleaming in the dark. "Why do you want me then, you cowardly little fuck?" she panted, terror and rage and pain smashing together inside her until she couldn't tell what was what.

"I don't. Not to *keep*," he answered, grabbing both of her wrists and pinning them above her head, holding them with one hand. With his other, he reached between them.

Oh God, Jenny thought, realization striking as she tried to strain away from him. *He's unzipping his pants!* She cursed her skirt—why hadn't she worn slacks today?

But she knew why. Knew that, after waking up with Will, she had felt soft, feminine. She had dressed in her favorite gray skirt and a soft pink sweater set and—oh fuck—stockings! She hadn't wanted to wear practical pantyhose, she had wanted to wear stockings—but for Will, not for Evan! Not to make it easier for this asshole to rape her!

She fought him with renewed strength, twisting against him and rearing up to sink her teeth into his cheek. Evan screamed, jerking his head back, but Jenny held on, feeling the hot blood run down her chin, taking a vicious satisfaction in his pain.

He let go of her wrists and used both hands to pry her jaw open, pulling his face free. He held his cheek with one hand and backhanded her across the face with the other. Jenny was stunned for a few seconds, just long enough for Evan to slam her hands above her head, wrapping a handful of hair around his palm, sticky with blood, before seizing her wrists with the same hand.

When she tried to move, her hair held her captive, pinning her head to the landing. His hands were shoving up her skirt, ripping her panties, and her brain skipped back and forth between Evan and Will—lying on the stairs, tearing away her underwear. Evan's actions were a perversion of what she and Will had done, a twisted parallel that made what was happening even more terrible, more surreal.

She felt his erection against her, shocking her back into the reality that this was actually happening—Evan's cock was against her leg, he was going to rape her and she could not do anything to stop it. The horrific unfairness of this battered her, even as she continued to twist and kick, her hair pulling jaggedly at her scalp as she bowed her body. He tried to push into her, the blunt intrusion shoving against her clamped muscles—Jenny could finally scream.

Light flooded her eyes and Jenny thought for a second that she had died or passed out. She heard a roar and Evan was suddenly gone, lifted away, thrown across the garage into her car, bouncing off and tumbling to the concrete floor. He scrambled up, weaving as he stood, and ran jerkily for the opening garage door, crouching low to escape beneath the slowly rising door.

Will vaulted over the railing after him but he hesitated at a small noise from Jenny and turned back toward her, his face fierce and pale in the overhead light. He moved toward her slowly, then faster, falling against the stairs just like she had minutes before. He crawled up the steps to her, scrambling to reach her.

Jenny had curled onto her side. Rosie was licking her face, whining and licking. Will pulled her into his arms, clutching her hard against him, muffling the continuous sound she was making, a low moan that went on and on. Will pressed her head against his chest, his hand wrapped around her skull, feeling wetness soak through his shirt. It took him a moment to realize that it was blood. His other hand ran over her back and arms, as far as he could reach down her legs, feeling for injuries.

She jerked at his touch but then folded herself into him. They pressed against each other, clutching, trying to get so close as to be inside the other's skin. Will rocked her, not realizing that he was repeating, "Not Jenny. Not Jenny. Not Jenny. Not Jenny," as she keened low in her throat and Rosie leaned close against their sides, the three of them a broken huddle of skin and hair and blood and fur and frantically beating hearts.

Neither Will nor Jenny heard the hum of the car engine, the squeal of brakes, the double thud of a large object hitting the hood of a car and then the pavement. They

didn't hear the teenage driver scream, sobbing, "Oh God, mister, are you okay? Are you okay?" They didn't hear the babble of the gathering neighbors or the approaching sirens.

They didn't hear anything except the sound of their own hearts, their own breathing, Jenny's soft keening and Will's frantic muttering, until the police officers gently pried them apart.

Chapter Ten

When Jenny woke at the hospital, the first thing she saw was Will. He was sitting in a chair by the bed, watching her, those light, light blue eyes steady although bloodshot. *He has his stubble again*, she thought, almost smiling.

Just that slight movement of her mouth pulled painfully at her cut lip and her hand came up to touch it. It was swollen and sore. She left it to investigate the rest of her features gingerly with her fingertips. Except for a throbbing lump on her forehead, her face seemed relatively intact. Her head felt like it had been used as a soccer ball though—it hurt in so many places that she couldn't pinpoint the source of the pain.

Will leaned forward, reaching to touch her, but he pulled his hand back at the last minute, as if he was afraid that he would hurt her. Jenny caught his hovering hand in hers and brought it to her cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered and winced. Talking didn't feel so great on her lip either. He stared at her, scowling fiercely like a child trying not to cry, and then tipped his forehead to her chest. He barely touched her but Jenny flinched—she definitely had some bruises, she realized—and Will immediately jerked his head up, his expression stricken.

"Sorry," he said hoarsely and cleared his throat. "Sorry," he tried again.

She shrugged a little and then stopped when her muscles protested. *Maybe just not moving at all would be a good idea*, she thought.

"It's okay," she reassured him. "I'm just a little sore."

"You have a concussion." He watched her as if her head would fall off and roll away at any minute, which she was pretty sure would actually be a relief.

"Figured that," Jenny said. "Since my head feels like a throbbing balloon and I can remember just bits and pieces of last night after...I mean when..." She stared hard at the wall behind Will, shoving the rising panic back. Taking a deep breath, she met Will's eyes again. "After you arrived, I mean."

Will nodded. "Is that the worst?" he asked, looking at the lump on her forehead.

She shrugged again and winced. She really had to stop doing that.

"From the stairs?"

"No." Jenny stopped herself from shaking her head just in time. Her head hurt enough just staying still. "His nose."

Will looked confused.

"Head-butt," she elaborated, trying to keep her tone light, but the images were flashing in her brain. She shoved them back.

"Brave girl." Will kissed the hand he still held.

Jenny looked away again. Brave? Hah. She didn't think bravery was stumbling around her garage, not even able to scream in her terror.

They were quiet for a minute.

"Cops want to talk to you," Will finally said.

"Shit."

He almost smiled but sobered quickly. "The car killed him."

Jenny stared at her battered hand, the bandage over her torn nail.

"I should have been faster," Will said, his voice rough with guilt. "I got to your house and turned some lights on, looking for you. I knew something was wrong right away, but I thought maybe you had planned something, that you were going to surprise me...I don't know." Will blushed, looking down at their clasped hands. "I should have been faster. I should have known—"

Jenny squeezed his hand a little. "How could you have known?" she asked.

He just frowned harder and shook his head. "I heard noises, a thump, so I walked down the hallway. I was standing right at the door to the garage when you screamed." Will's face was haunted, his eyes filled with horror, as if he was still hearing her scream.

"I opened the door. It felt like I was in a nightmare where I was moving in slow motion, you know?" He glanced at her.

Jenny nodded.

"And then I saw you, saw him. I was fumbling for a light switch—I must have hit the garage door opener. He ran out, right in front of a car."

"Good!" Jenny spat. "I don't care. Fucking asshole! I don't care, I don't care, I don't care!" She was crying, harsh sobs that squeezed her bruised body painfully but she couldn't stop. Will reached to hold her but Jenny pushed him away, turning onto her side away from him, her chest convulsing with each ragged breath. He patted her, small touches to her arm, her hip, her hair. She swatted at him a few times, knocking his hand away. Finally she went still, exhausted, sucking in hard, shuddering breaths. Will's hand tentatively returned and he touched her arm with his fingertips, just holding them against her lightly.

Jenny grabbed his hand and Will jerked as if expecting her to smack him again, but she pulled his hand to her chest and hugged it to her, circling her body around it. Eventually she fell asleep, still holding Will's hand captive.

Jenny did not want to remember what had happened and found herself irrationally angry with the police officers and their tactful questions. Recounting the events of the previous evening brought the attack back in flashes, mental images so real that, at one point, she jerked back against the bed, trying to escape.

She still couldn't believe he was dead. She couldn't believe that he had tried to *rape* her. She tried to mesh together the pictures in her mind of him at the office—sweating

as he asked her out, smirking as he told her that she had to stay late, turning red at some jibe from Christian—and the image of him above her, teeth bared, blood painting half his face black, his eyes wild and furious. But it was impossible, like trying to combine a stuffed bunny with Jack the Ripper into a Picasso figure, with pieces and parts that didn't fit together.

Will had been banished from the room during the police interview but came back in as soon as the two officers left. He looked her over carefully, as if checking for any damage done by the cops' questioning. "Up for company?"

"You? Always."

His face lightened at that, the tense lines softening just a little, but he shook his head. "Christian."

Jenny made a face and then felt bad. He was her good friend, but thinking about the drama that followed him around like a shadow made her tired and he wasn't even in the room yet. Will was quiet, waiting for her answer. She sighed.

"Send him in," she said, forcing a smile.

"Sure?" Will asked, his face serious.

"Yeah." Jenny braced herself for the onslaught.

Will left and when Christian slipped into the room a few moments later, Jenny felt bad for hesitating. He was pale under his tan—the *only tan person in Minnesota at this time of year*, Jenny thought irreverently—and his eyes were serious. There was no sign of his ebullient spirit. He even walked quietly to the bed.

"Hey, Jen," he said, voice muted.

"Hey, Chris." She gave him a smile. "Those for me or is there a hot male nurse waiting outside?" she asked, pointing at the bouquet he held at his side.

"Oh right." He looked at the flowers as if he had never seen them before and handed the bouquet to her. "Sorry, they're a pretty sad bunch but the hospital florist left much to be desired." He attempted a smile but it collapsed in on itself and he plopped into the chair next to the bed.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Jen," he said quietly. "Who would have thought that Evan..." He shook his head. "I keep thinking about the things I said to him, how I kept poking at him, if that pushed him into it, you know?" He dropped his head and scrubbed his hands through his hair. "I didn't think...I mean, my God, *Evan*..."

Jenny ran a hand over his head and gave his hair a gentle tug. He looked up at her. "First Will and now you," she said, shaking her head. "It wasn't your fault, Christian. Don't you dare take any of the blame off that bastard." She glared at him, suddenly enraged. "Don't you dare."

"Okay, okay!" Christian said meekly, reaching up to untangled her fisted fingers from his hair. "Be gentle with me, okay? I've had a rough day."

"*You've* had—" Jenny had to laugh at that, just a muffled snort but still. She was sorry she had considered not seeing Christian. He was good for her.

"Your mom's on her way," he told her. "She was visiting some friends in Des Moines but headed back as soon as I called her. She's going to call the sisters."

"All of them?" Jenny grimaced. The thought of her entire family descending on her was horrifying. As much as she loved them, her three sisters together were exhausting when she *wasn't* concussed and traumatized.

"When I told your mom that your injuries were minor and that you should be out of the hospital in a jiffy, she said that she'd encourage the sisters to stay in their respective states and just send cards and call," Christian reassured her with a grin.

"Thank you, Mom," Jenny breathed, closing her eyes in relief.

"Oh your mom might have spawned them but she's fully aware of the terror they strike in lesser mortals' hearts. I've only met Julie and Tara and they both scare the shit out of me," Christian admitted with a frightened shudder.

"Well if you weren't so chicken-hearted, Christian..." came an amused voice from the doorway.

"Mom!" At the sight of her elegant mother, childish tears burned in Jenny's eyes and she held out her arms for a hug. Pearl hurried to sit on the edge of the bed and gathered her daughter against her, stroking her tangled hair. She cupped Jenny's face in both hands and looked at her closely.

"My poor baby," she crooned. "If that rat-bastard who did this to you wasn't already dead, I would kill him myself."

Jenny gave a tearful choke of laughter at that and squeezed her mother's arms. Pearl turned her head to fix a stern eye on Christian.

"By the way, Christian, I'll have you know that I did not *spawn* any of my children."

"Of course not," Christian assured her smoothly, leaning over to kiss Pearl's smooth cheek. "I can't imagine anyone saying that you did."

Pearl grinned at that and reached out to rumple his hair. "Smart-ass," she accused fondly. She turned back to Jenny. "When do you get out of here?" she asked.

"Tomorrow, if all goes well."

"You're coming home with me then," Pearl told her firmly. For a moment, Jenny was tempted to let her mother bundle her home, bring her hot tea in bed and rub her back after a nightmare. She quickly shook off the childish desire to be babied.

"No, Mom," she told Pearl, just as firmly. "You live over an hour away from my work and you know that your cats hate Rosie— Oh no, Rosie!" Jenny remembered in sudden panic.

"It's okay," Christian reassured her. "Will brought her to his house. He's been running home every so often to take care of her."

Pearl looked from Christian to Jenny, her eyes sharp. "Will?"

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Well, I wasn't going to introduce him to my family yet, since I didn't want to scare him away," this last was said with a stern glance at her mother, who gave her an innocent look in return, "but since he's just right out in the hall..."

"I'll get him," Christian offered, popping out of his chair with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. "It would be my pleasure." He hurried out.

"Is this a serious thing then?" Pearl asked.

"Mom, I'm concussed. I'm in the hospital. I've been through a traumatic event. Aren't you supposed to be smuggling in chocolate for me and rubbing my feet instead of grilling me about my new boyfriend?" Jenny asked plaintively.

"Boyfriend, is he?" Her mother always could zero in on the important points.

Christian bounced back into the room, tugging a more subdued Will behind him.

Resigned, Jenny introduced them. "Mom, this is Will. Will, this is my mom, Pearl, who will make your life miserable for the next ten minutes or so."

Will looked startled and wary as he extended a cautious hand to Pearl. She took it, giving him a sharp once-over.

"What do you do, Will?" she barked out and Will jumped.

"Ah, programming. For, um, computers." He blushed, obviously mortified by his stammered response.

Time for Operation Rescue Will, Jenny thought. "Mom," she sighed, in her most pitiful voice. "I'm feeling so tired..." Her mother just gave her an appraising glance and then turned back to Will.

Will, however, had flinched at Jenny's mournful tone and hurried to her side to take her hand, his face worried.

"Hmm..." Pearl hummed knowingly. "Wrapped around your little finger, isn't he?"

Jenny just gave her an innocent look.

"Okay, I'll let you sleep then." Pearl leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Just don't think you're off the hook yet, missy."

"Oh I'm sure of that, Mom," Jenny agreed with a half smile. Although she had said it to get the focus off Will, she really *was* tired and her lids felt swollen and weighted.

"Are you sure you won't come home with me tomorrow?" Pearl asked.

"Positive. But thanks, Mom." Jenny didn't know where she was going when she left the hospital. She just knew she didn't want to go home.

"You can stay with me," Christian offered.

"Thanks, but your one-bedroom condo sees a little too much action for me to be hanging out on the couch," Jenny told him, although she had to smile at the thought of bunking with Christian. They would kill each other within two days.

"Come home with me."

There was a startled silence in the room at the sound of the deep voice.

"Really?" Jenny found herself getting teary again. The thought of staying in that wonderful little house with Will was incredibly tempting. Just having him next to her made her feel safe and settled the deep panic that kept flaring up all too frequently.

"Really?" Pearl's tone was more skeptical. Will met her eyes steadily and nodded.

"Thanks, Will. That would be great," Jenny said.

"Are you sure?" Pearl asked her, looking from Jenny to Will.

"Positive." Jenny's eyes were definitely drooping now and her mother gave her hand a pat.

"Well that's settled then." She gave Will another hard glance. "You *will* take good care of my daughter?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Pearl considered him for a moment and then nodded. "I'll be back tomorrow morning," she said firmly. "Get some sleep tonight."

Jenny gave her mom a sleepy smile. "I will. Thanks, Mom."

Pearl eyed the two men sharply. "I trust you both will be leaving shortly after I do so that Jenny can get some rest?" Somehow, it was more of a command than a question. Both men nodded obediently. Satisfied, Pearl left.

Will let his breath out. Christian grinned at him. "She's something, huh? Wait until you meet the sisters."

"Quit scaring him, Chris. The sisters aren't *that* bad," Jenny said unconvincingly.

"Uh-huh," Christian said skeptically. "Whatever you say, dear." He turned to Will and said in a mock-whisper, "You must humor the concussed one."

Jenny looked for something to throw at him but had to content herself with flipping him off.

"Well, I'm out of here." Christian leaned down to kiss Jenny's cheek. "Don't let this guy talk your ear off," he said, nodding toward Will, who gave him a small grin. Jenny laughed a little.

"Bye, Chris. I'm glad you came."

With a final wave, Christian bounced out of the door. His "I'll call you" floated down the hallway to Jenny, who leaned back and closed her eyes, exhausted.

"Do you think he was talking to me or the cute nurse he bought the flowers for?" she asked Will, who had taken the chair by the bed. When there was no response, she opened one eye. Will was watching her somberly.

Such tragic eyes, as if what had happened to her had happened to him at the same time. Jenny offered him her hand and he wrapped his own around it, dwarfing hers. He pressed a kiss to her knuckles before lowering their clasped hands to the bed next to her. As Jenny prepared to let sleep overtake her, she wondered why Will's touch was so reassuring when she couldn't stand to have any of the nurses or doctors touch her in even the most clinical of ways.

She could only remember small flashes of her trip to the hospital and her first hours there. The rhythm of the seams in the road during the ambulance ride, lights—so many lights—flashing red and blue at the house, white in the emergency room, pen lights

glaring into her eyes, fluorescents overhead that silhouetted strangers' heads and blinded her. She'd had a rape exam and Jenny remembered screaming during it. It was stupid of her, a small part of her brain understood. They were trying to help her. She knew that, but it hurt and hands were touching her between her legs and Jenny was exposed and powerless to stop anyone from doing whatever they wanted with her.

The coldly logical part of her brain had reminded her how useless it was to cry out now, safe at the hospital, when she had been muted during most of the attack. It was as if her lungs had been trying too late to make up for their failure, for not doing their part to protect her body.

So she had screamed and screamed and the nurse told her later that it had taken a medical student, two interns and a nearby janitor to keep Will, waiting in the hallway, from crashing into her exam room.

Jenny's mother had driven home to Rochester the night before and an unexpected snow had kept her away from the hospital the next morning. Pearl lived on a turn-around street with almost no traffic, so it would be at least another day before the snowplows got around to clearing it.

She called Jenny, who was both disappointed and relieved—it had been reassuring to have her no-nonsense mom around but Jenny would like to feel a little less fragile before she had to be the buffer between her mother and Will. The CIA had nothing on Pearl when it came to interrogation techniques.

Will had brought her clothes from her house. She had to press a smile away when she looked through the duffel bag he'd proudly placed on the bed. He had packed almost every single pair of panties that she owned, even the ragged cotton granny-panties that she had forgotten lived at the very bottom of her underwear drawer. Jenny had a moment of embarrassment that Will even saw the white monstrosities. He must be a strong believer in the "you should always have clean underwear" maxim.

She wasn't so lucky with her bra selection. Will had chosen only three—all of them wispy, lacy bits of nothing. Jenny held one up and sighed. What she really needed was her sturdy, comfortable support bra that clipped in front—not as pretty but much more practical and easier to get into.

She dug through the rest of the clothes and found some yoga pants—for those, she forgave him for the deficiencies in his bra selections—and a hoodie sweatshirt that zipped up the front. He must have just grabbed a handful of socks, because none matched. She did find two wool ones that looked kind of like a pair, if you didn't look too closely and were colorblind.

Will was waiting to help her dress but he was muddled together in Jenny's mind with sex and nakedness and self-consciousness and she didn't want him seeing her battered body, the bruises and scratches livid on her skin. She still felt the taint of Evan's touch clinging to her, hovering around her like a nasty smell. It was one thing to

have Will hold her hand but another to let him see her naked, marked flesh. She wasn't ready for that yet.

She opened her mouth, trying to think of a way to explain how she felt without hurting his feelings, and then shut it again without speaking. Jenny wasn't supposed to feel shame and embarrassment for something that wasn't her fault—she knew that. She was *supposed* to feel cleansing rage and pride of survival and other empowering emotions, but it didn't matter. She just knew that if she had to strip naked in front of Will right now, she would just curl up into a huddled ball of humiliation and wish to die.

He was watching her as she stood unmoving in her backless hospital gown, her wild thoughts rampaging through her head. It ended up that she didn't have to say anything.

"I'll get a nurse," he told her and left the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

Angie, a petite brunette nurse, popped in just moments later.

"Need a hand?" she asked.

Angie was efficient, touching her as briefly as possible, for which Jenny was grateful. She was soon dressed with a minimum of pain or fuss.

"Thanks, Angie," Jenny told the nurse as she zipped up the duffel.

"No problem. You take care and just let us know if you need the name of someone to talk to, okay?"

A rape counselor had stopped by but the idea of talking about what had happened, especially to a stranger, was horrifying to Jenny. The counselor had left her with a card and instructions to "call anytime". Jenny had thrown the card away.

Now she just nodded, fussing with the zipper tab on her sweatshirt.

"Go get that handsome man of yours," Angie said, grinning. "The rest of the nurses are ready to tackle him and have their way with him. You better not leave him on his own too long."

Jenny gave a huff of laughter at the thought of Will running from a hoard of nurses. She hobbled to the door—holy balls, every muscle in her body hurt—and swung it open. Will was leaning against the wall, arms across his chest, staring at the floor with a moody expression.

"Hey," Jenny said. His wary gaze shot to her and he pushed away from the wall. Will took a step forward and then hesitated.

"Ready to blow this joint?" she asked with a tentative smile.

"You don't—" He looked away, rubbing a hand over his head and blowing out a hard breath. "You don't have to go to my house if you don't want to. I'll take you home or to Christian's or your mom's or wherever you want to go."

It was Jenny's turn to flinch. "Don't you want me there?" she asked, hating the little-girl-lost note in her voice.

"Yes! I want..." Will moved another step closer to her. "I *do* want you to come home with me. But if you're afraid...you don't have to."

"Will." Jenny closed the distance between them and slid her arms around his hard waist. His body went rigid and it was like hugging a statue. *A warm, breathing statue with a racing heartbeat*, she thought, resting her ear against his chest and breathing in his Will smell. "How could I be afraid of you?" she asked.

Will's hand cupped her skull so gently that it didn't hurt any of her various lumps and sore spots. "I would never hurt you," he said, the bass in his voice shuddering through her. "I'm not like him."

"Of course you're not," Jenny said in surprise when his words finally registered. She pulled her head back a little so she could see his face. He was staring hard over her head, his jaw muscles bunched so tightly they were vibrating.

"Will." She laid a hand on each cheek, soothing those tense muscles with her fingertips and gently tipping his face until he met her eyes. "I'd never think you were *anything* like him. You're the opposite of him—the anti-Evan. The dressing thing wasn't because I was scared of you. I mean, it *was*, but only because I didn't want you to see me. I'm embarrassed about how I look right now...the bruises and everything...so ugly." Jenny's hands slid away from his face and she dropped her eyes to his chest.

Will lowered his head until his forehead was touching hers, creating a closed space that held just the two of them. "You're not ugly. You could *never* be ugly. You're *hurt*."

He turned his face and his rough cheek rubbed lightly against her temple. Something contracted hard inside her chest, forcing tears up behind her eyes and nose. Jenny concentrated on blocking their exit, pushing them back down where they came from. If she started to cry, she didn't think she could stop until there was nothing left of her.

"Your wheels are here," said a cheery voice—Angie. She rolled a wheelchair toward them. Jenny knew it was traditional to complain about the ride out but she was grateful. Whether from the muscle strain or emotional turmoil, her legs were definitely shaky. Will pulled away from her with a small sigh and helped her to sit.

"Go grab her bag, Tarzan, and we'll get this show on the road." Angie was already pushing Jenny down the hall toward the exit.

The drive home was cold. Most of the snowstorm that had trapped her mother had missed them and only sparse snowflakes spun off the windshield of Will's car. She could tell he was driving carefully, avoiding any possible bumps or swerves that would jar her sore body. The heater was on full blast but Jenny was still freezing. She shivered and each vibration made her head pound a little more.

After what seemed like hours, although it was only a few miles from the hospital to his house, Will pulled into his driveway. Even feeling as sick and sore as she did, Jenny felt a glad warmth at the sight of the welcoming purple house. Will opened her car door

and helped her out. By this time, her shivers had turned to shudders and she had to clamp her sore jaw tightly closed to stop her teeth from chattering.

"Are you okay?" Will asked with concern. He looked ready to shove her back into the car and take her back to the hospital.

"Fine." Jenny's voice was tight. All she wanted to do was get inside and go to bed. She wasn't quite sure how she was going to walk but she could do it. Going back to the hospital, with the probing lights and questions and examining hands, was *not* an option.

The world suddenly tilted and she thought she was fainting until Jenny realized that Will had picked her up.

Good, she thought woozily. That solves the whole walking problem.

She closed her eyes and rested her head against his chest as he managed to unlock the door, let them both in and fend off a hysterically happy Rosie, all without dropping Jenny on the floor. In a half-conscious way, she was impressed. Mostly, though, she was just very, very tired. Will climbed the stairs and Jenny remembered the last time he had carried her up these stairs, under very different circumstances. Was that just three days ago? Four? *Too tired to do math*, she thought, giving up the effort.

Finally, the wonderful softness of a bed surrounded her, cushioning her sore muscles and pulling her deeply into sleep. Her last awareness was Will pulling off her boots.

The images came in stuttering strobe lights. She saw movement, the shadowed outline of a man's shoulder, then darkness. A flash and he was in front of her, Evan and not Evan, the flesh of his face curling away, widening his grin obscenely. *Run!* Her mind screamed but her muscles were frozen, her legs as stiff and useless as a mannequin's. He was dressed in a multicolored clown suit and his erection, glowing red and cartoonishly large, poked out between two of his puffball buttons. Clown Evan looked down at it and then his empty eyes focused on her.

"I'm going to rip apart your insides, little girl." His hot breath hit her face. She tried to break the paralysis, to turn and run, but she could only scream inside her head as the grinning death face came closer and closer, until all she could smell was blood.

Jenny woke sitting up, a shrill noise in her ears and throbbing pain in her arms. Will was in front of her, his face close to hers, saying—something. She couldn't hear him because of the screaming.

Such a loud noise, she thought, her brain halfway between nightmare and consciousness.

She realized that the screams were coming from her and stopped abruptly on an inhaled choke, not sure if she was crying or just couldn't breathe. Will, his face starkly

white in the dim light, was gripping her upper arms, pressing into her bruises, and Jenny shoved at his forearms as she struggled to breathe.

He resisted the push for a moment but realization struck his face as he looked at the indentations of his fingers in the knit of her sweatshirt. He released her, his hands suspended an inch above her shoulders, as if he were trying to hold her without touching her, without hurting her.

"Sorry," Will said, studying her face, his eyes wary. "Are you awake?"

She nodded, letting out a shuddering gasp of air. Jenny almost had this breathing thing down again. "Bad dream," she croaked, her voice breaking in the middle.

"Figured." A little color was creeping back into his cheeks. "You wouldn't wake up. You were just staring through me and screaming."

"Sorry," Jenny sighed, rubbing her eyes with both hands, letting her fingers slide into her hair and wincing when they hit the forgotten bump. Will was still kneeling in front of her, his hands hovering.

"Do you need...something?" he asked.

"Yeah—amnesia." Jenny flopped back against the bed and then gave a little groan. "Ow." Will settled next to her on one elbow, his eyes still fixed on her face.

"No, I meant something like...I don't know...warm milk?"

Jenny looked at him in horror. "Warm milk? That's disgusting."

"Water?"

Jenny shook her head a little. Her body was exhausted, crying for rest, but her thoughts jumped wildly, resisting sleep, the images of her fear still too vivid to risk another dream.

"Just hold me, okay?" she asked quietly.

Will reached toward her but stopped before he touched her. "I don't want to hurt you," he said, his eyes haunted.

She rolled onto her side toward him, shifting closer with a small wince. Tucking herself against him, she fit her body into his, her head nestled where his shoulder and arm met, one leg stacked between his, her hip folded into his stomach. When she could feel his heat surrounding her, she relaxed her muscles until she molded against him.

Will tentatively encircled her waist with his arm, his hand flattening on her back. He pressed his face into her tangled hair, wrapping her in his body as gingerly as possible. The muscles in his arm quivered with the need to tighten around her but he resisted the urge to clutch her to him. He breathed her in, smelling the residue of hospital that still clung above her usual scent.

The feel of Jenny made the blood rush to his cock. Will sucked in his breath, trying to quell his thickening erection, feeling like a beast for getting excited. How could his body be thinking about sex, he wondered in self-disgust, when she lay so trustingly against him, battered and bruised, still sticky with sweat from her nightmare?

Will tried to will his lust away but Jenny's soft body resting against him, her breath stirring the hair on his chest, hardened his cock even more. He tried to move his lower body away from her but Jenny, half asleep, made a soft, disgruntled noise and tugged on the side of his hip, urging him back against her.

Sighing, Will complied. He stared at the dim outlines of the room and gritted his teeth, desire humming through his body and frying his nerve endings. He smiled, a humorless grimace. For years he had gone without sex but one week with Jenny had made him insatiable. As her limp body slept against him, Will lay wide awake, vibrating with need.

Chapter Eleven

Jenny slept most of the next day. She woke several times, disoriented and groggy, to find Will propped up in bed next to her working on his laptop and Rosie sleeping against her feet. Jenny got up long enough to go to the bathroom or eat some chicken noodle soup that Will made but it wasn't long before her body was crying out for bed. She didn't mind. After the first nightmare her sleep had been deep and heavy, and unconsciousness was better than having to be awake and think about what had happened.

Late that afternoon, the cell phone ring woke Jenny.

"It's Christian," Will told her, handing her the phone. "Sorry. I tried to grab it before it woke you up. I should have switched it to vibrate after your mom called."

"That's okay. I've been sleeping too much anyway." Jenny took it and talked to Christian lying down, curled on her side. "Hey, Chris."

"Jenny! How are you feeling? Is the big guy taking good care of you?" His voice was muted – she could tell that he was calling her from work.

"Okay. Sleepy. Yes. Did I miss any questions?"

"Nope, you got them all. Plus I think you answered one that I didn't even ask. Everyone here sends sympathy, get-well wishes, thoughts, prayers – basically everything that can be sent."

Jenny hadn't even let herself think about work – or Evan's empty cubicle. She cringed at the thought of going back, enduring the glances – pitying, curious, malicious? She didn't know what everyone was thinking or what monster the gossip pipeline had belched out by now. Still, it was her job and she would have to go back eventually. The idea of it was overwhelming – all she wanted to do was sleep.

"Jen?"

"Sorry. Spaced out for a second there. Did the boss ask when I'd be back?" Jenny asked.

"No. Everyone's walking on eggshells around any mention of you or...well, of you or what happened, although I'm sure the boss is scrambling with you gone and..." Christian trailed off.

"You can say his name, you know."

"It's just so crazy," Christian told her. "For this to have happened. For Evan to be...gone and you to be just out of the hospital. I mean, it seemed like such a normal office – in its normally dysfunctional way of course."

"Yeah." Jenny closed her eyes and wished she could close her ears as well. Sleep pulled at her with greedy hands and she let Christian's chatter lull her back into unconsciousness.

Will gently lifted the phone from Jenny's limp hand and put it to his own ear. Christian was in the middle of some story or another.

"So I told Ted that he should —"

"Christian." Will interrupted the flow of words.

"Will? What happened to Jenny?"

"Asleep."

"Oh." Christian paused. "Should I be insulted?"

"No. She fell asleep during her mom's call too, only faster."

"Oh. Should I be worried then?"

Will studied Jenny's sleeping face. "I don't know," he admitted. "I don't know what's normal."

"I would think that lots of rest is probably a good thing." Christian sighed. "I don't really know what normal is either, but I would give her a couple more days of sleeping before getting too concerned."

Will was silent.

"How are you doing?" Christian asked tentatively.

"Me?"

"Well, I would think it would be pretty traumatic—with what happened to Jenny and you walking in on that and then Evan getting killed. It just seems like a lot for you to deal with."

Will stared unseeing at his laptop keyboard, his hand tightening around the phone. "I can't think about it—not now," he said finally.

"Okay," Christian said. "I know that I'm just a friend of Jenny's who you kindly put up with but if you need anyone to talk to—someone besides Jenny of course—feel free to give me a buzz. And it's not like we're strangers or anything. After all, we did sleep together."

"Thanks," Will said awkwardly.

"Sure. Have Jen give me a call when she feels up to it. And tell her that she has done untold damage to my self-esteem by falling asleep in the middle of one of my best stories."

"Okay," Will agreed with a chuckle. He snapped the phone shut and slid it onto the dresser. Will glanced down at Jenny's sleeping face. Her forehead was mottled with a multicolored bruise and her lip was still swollen. He brushed her hair behind her ear and cupped the back of her head with his hand for a moment, feeling the delicate contours of her skull. She was so small and fragile that Will felt a rush of delayed fear—how had she survived Evan's violence?

He would protect her, he vowed. He would make up for letting her get hurt. Nothing like that would ever happen to her again.

When she woke up early the next morning, Jenny felt an intense, itchy need to shower. Brushing her hair had been a painful ordeal with her bruised head, so now it was a knotted, tangled mess. She detached herself from Will's enveloping body, noticing as she brushed against the front of his sweatpants that he had a raging erection. Jenny didn't know how she felt about that—all she knew was that she did not want to think about penises in any form yet, so she shoved it from her brain with some effort.

She stood tentatively, carefully easing onto legs shaky from the long stint in bed. Except for a mild swirl of dizziness, Jenny felt much better. Her bruises were still tender but the worst of the soreness had faded from her muscles. A slight throb was all that remained of her pounding headache.

As she slowly undressed in the bathroom, Jenny purposefully avoided looking at the mirror. From what she could feel of her hair and body, she knew that her reflection would *not* be a pleasant sight. She tested the shower temperature with her hand before stepping beneath the spray, feeling the sting of water hitting her scrapes. Soaping her body carefully, she resisted the urge to scrub hard against her skin.

Rubbing yourself raw will not help, Jenny told herself firmly. Nothing she did in the shower could clean Evan's taint from her, nothing would empty her mind of the horror as his hard, vile flesh tried to force its way into her.

Jenny leaned her sore forehead against the tile, concentrating on pushing back the memories and replacing them with the cold ache of the shower wall against her bruise. She took a deep breath, moist from the steam, and reached for the shampoo determinedly. Washing her hair was harder than she'd expected. Although her muscles were not as sore as they had been a few days before, they still protested any movement. Jenny was gritting her teeth, trying to force her shaking arms to stay up long enough to work the shampoo through her hair, when the shower door slid open. Her head whipped around at the sound.

"Can I help?" Will asked, standing uncertainly right outside the shower, his drawstring pajama pants hanging low on his hipbones.

Need won out over modesty and Jenny nodded. "The shampooing part is still a little tough," she said, gesturing at her head and then grimacing a little as the movement pulled at her shoulder. His eyes flicked once down her body and then returned to her face and stayed. Will moved to step into the shower.

"Aren't you going to take those off?" Jenny pointed at his pajama pants.

Will hesitated.

"Off," she ordered, flicking her hand at his legs. "I think we've passed the point of showering while clothed."

Nodding, he shucked off the pants and stepped into the shower. Jenny glanced quickly at his swollen erection and then away. She felt guilty about dropping her gaze—she liked Will's cock. It was a perfectly nice penis. In fact, in her opinion, it was outstanding. She had willingly taken it into her hand, her mouth, her pussy, even her ass, just a few days earlier.

There is nothing similar between Will and Evan, she told herself firmly. They were completely different, just as Evan's attack was nothing like Will's lovemaking. It pissed her off that, even dead, Evan still had this power over her, to make her afraid of Will's lovely cock.

Defiantly, Jenny forced her gaze back down to Will's groin. She didn't think she was capable, either mentally or physically, of kneeling in front of him yet but she could touch him, couldn't she? She tried it, reaching out and brushing the underside with a quick finger. Will sucked in a breath and froze, all muscles still, which emboldened Jenny to try again, this time a light touch to the tip.

His cock darkened even more and bobbed in entreaty. At that surge of excitement, like an eager puppy, Jenny felt some of the tension in her stomach release and she tried two fingers against his balls this time. Will groaned, the sound so low that it was just a vibration in his chest, reverberating down his body until she felt the movement against her fingertips. She glanced at him anxiously but his utter stillness reassured her enough to wrap her fingers around his cock, holding him with the lightest of touches.

His hips jerked toward her and Jenny dropped the contact, startled.

"Sorry, sorry!" Will gasped, pulling away from her until his back was wedged into a corner of the shower.

"It's okay," Jenny murmured, reaching for him again. And it was. The fascination with him, with his huge, hard cock, was returning and his care not to touch her made it somehow safe. Her fingers wrapped around his flesh more firmly this time and Will hissed between his teeth.

"You don't have to..." he gritted out, his eyes closed and the back of his head pressed against the shower wall.

Jenny slid her hand to the tip and ran her thumb around the head.

"Oh Jesus," Will panted. "I can't make it stop! I can't stop wanting you."

"Will. It's *okay*." She traced a spiral with her fingertips to the base of his erection and let her fingers comb through the blond hair there, scratching lightly with her nails.

"Fuck!" His body jerked again but it didn't bother her this time. She wrapped both of her hands around his hot, hot shaft and pumped up and down, sliding easily against his slick skin. Will's hips thrust in rhythm, bumping her encircling fist against him and then almost pulling the tip from her grasp. Jenny felt her pussy begin to heat, to moisten, sparked by an arousal that she had been so afraid was tainted and ruined. A rush of relief hit her, making her tighten her grip around Will. His body arched in a rigid bow as he came, spurting on her belly.

Jenny stroked him gently and released his softening cock with a little pat, which made Will smile. He entwined his fingers with hers and rested his head lightly against her shoulder, careful not to hurt her. He wanted to clutch her to him and bury his face against her neck but he resisted the urge, more than happy with what she had given him.

He breathed in her fragrance. When he had picked up her clothes from her house he had also packed the entire collection of bottles from her shower, so she smelled like herself again, the hospital odor gone.

Will remembered his hair-washing duties and raised his head. He kissed her nose softly and was rewarded with a smile. He glanced at the multitude of products now populating his shower and his eyebrows drew together.

"Which one?" he asked. Jenny handed him a bottle.

"Cleansing serum? What the hell is 'cleansing serum'?" he asked, eyeing the label suspiciously.

"Shampoo," Jenny told him, turning her back to him and tipping her head to give him access to her hair.

"Why don't they just call it that then?" he grumbled, working some into her hair. He massaged her scalp with his fingers, forgetting about her sore bumps until she yelped.

"Sorry," he told her and lightened his touch. Turning her back to the spray, he rinsed out the suds, reaching over her shoulders to separate the strands and let the water wash away the last traces of shampoo.

"Done," Will said with satisfaction—but Jenny handed him another bottle with a smirk. This one was "conditioning balm". It was harder to work in since it didn't bubble up, but it gave her wet hair a slick feel that he liked as it slid through his fingers. Will turned her around again so he could rinse her hair, tipping her head back to keep water out of her eyes. Smoothing his hand from her hairline to the ends clinging to the small of her back, Will absently moved closer to her, concentrating on finger combing the strands.

Jenny felt like a well-stroked cat. His blunt fingers worked against her scalp and lower, brushing her back as he worked out the tangles. When he shifted closer, his erection, as hard and hot as before, pressed against her stomach. Jenny stiffened instinctually but gradually relaxed as Will continued to work on her hair. Remembering his gentle care of her, his offer of hot milk, of all things, after her nightmare, his constant presence while she slept—it was hard to be wary of any part of him.

She softened her muscles, easing against him, and his strong body began to feel comforting, even the stiff pressure of his cock where she cradled him against her body.

They had stayed in the shower until the water had gone cold. Jenny figured that they must hold the record for longest showers ever taken. After drying off, she sat on the bed wrapped in a towel. Will knelt on the mattress next to her, his pajama pants

back on, carefully combing her hair with a look of serious concentration that made her want to laugh. And cry. And if she had one more mood swing, she was going to...well, do something drastic. Closing her eyes, Jenny relaxed into the rhythm of the comb.

Will stopped after one last stroke of his hand. Jenny's hair flowed smooth and untangled, fat curls pulling upward as they dried. He noticed her closed eyes.

"Back to bed," he ordered and began pulling the covers back.

"No." Jenny crossed her arms over the towel and stared stubbornly back at him. "I've been sleeping for days. I want to stay up."

Will eyed her for a second and then nodded. "I'll take Rosie out while you dress."

Rosie, who had been hovering hopefully during the hair combing, gave an excited yip at her name. She galloped out into the hallway and Jenny could hear her thundering down the stairs.

Jenny grinned at Will. "Guess she's ready to go out. Thanks for taking care of her, by the way."

He shrugged off her thanks. "I like it, actually. It's nice having her around."

"Ah," Jenny said, her smile turning a bit wry. "More than you can say about me, I'm sure."

"No." Will touched the top of her head lightly before heading for the door. "It's *very* nice having you around."

Will was driving her crazy.

So sweet, so thoughtful, so...there. Constantly there. He even hovered outside the door while she was in the bathroom, just in case she needed help. The first week at his house, she had liked his persistent presence, how safe it made her feel. He had helped push her thoughts away, distracted her brain from the frightening playbacks of the attack. Every day she adored him more and more – but she needed a break.

Once the snow had been cleared her mother had also been coming each day, so Jenny had two people watching every move she made, examining her face for any sign of pain or exhaustion or a mental breakdown. On Friday, almost two weeks after the attack, Jenny had finally convinced Pearl that she was going to be *fine*, that she wasn't going to fall apart and she didn't need two babysitters following her around.

Her mom finally agreed to stay in Rochester, although she made Jenny swear that she would call if she needed her for any reason. Jenny would have promised anything at that point, her nerves rubbed raw by the constant presence of other people. She was relieved that her sisters had only called – if they had descended on her as well, Jenny didn't know what she would have done.

Jenny desperately needed alone time. After being gone from work for nearly two weeks, she was planning to go back to the office on Monday. She needed to organize her thoughts, clear her head, prepare her responses to her well-meaning but rabidly curious coworkers. She still hadn't processed how she felt about sex with Will, about

men in general, about what had happened with Evan. About the fact that he was actually *dead*. There would be no clear thinking, she knew, with an overprotective bear of a man lurking close by.

"I'm going to take Rosie for a walk," Jenny announced at breakfast on Saturday morning.

Will nodded. They had been walking Rosie together almost every morning, stretching the distance a little more each day as Jenny's sore muscles eased and her bruises faded. Pushing away from the table, he started to stand.

"Where are you going?" Jenny asked him. She knew her tone was surly but she couldn't help it. She wanted to go *alone*, damn it!

Saying nothing, Will watched her warily.

Fine, she thought. *If he wants me to say it straight out, I will.* "I'm taking Rosie by myself. I need some time alone to think."

"No."

"No?" Jenny was practically snarling now. "I don't remember asking you if it would be okay."

"It's not safe."

For some reason, Will's rational tone was making her even more furious. Jenny could feel the anger bubbling up in her, burning the back of her throat. "I have walked that path hundreds of times," she gritted out, trying to match reason with reason. "I have Rosie. I'll be fine."

"I'll walk behind you," Will said evenly. "I'll stay back."

Staring at the coffee mug gripped in her fingers, Jenny noticed that her knuckles were stark white. Her fury deepened, building pressure against her skull until all she could hear was the rushing of blood in her ears.

"All I want to do," she said, "is to take my fucking dog on a fucking walk by my-fucking-self!" Jenny heard a crash, saw coffee running in transparent brown rivulets down the wall and she realized that she had thrown the mug.

She looked at her hands, startled, as if they belonged to someone else. Jenny pulled her feet onto the seat of her chair and wrapped her arms around her legs. She rested her cheek on her knee, her face turned away from Will.

"God," she said in a shaky voice, all her anger gone. "What am I doing? I don't even know who I am anymore."

"I know how you feel," Will said and she turned her head to look at him accusingly, another spurt of anger surging through her.

"How?" Jenny demanded. "How can you know? You don't know what it's like to be held down, totally powerless, as if your strength is nothing! I was like a helpless doll and he did whatever the fuck he wanted to me. How can *you*," she gestured wildly at his muscular body, "know how that feels?"

Will's face went completely blank, his eyes empty. All animation was gone from his expression and his stillness made her stomach cold. She wrapped her arms around her knees again, watching him carefully.

"I—" He broke off, his jaw clamped shut, and he turned away from her. Jenny's eyes followed his back as he walked to the basement door and opened it with measured care. Will closed the door behind him with a soft click.

The small noise released Jenny's paralysis and her forehead lowered to her knees, bumping against the bruise that still lingered in greens and yellows.

"Shit," she said, defeated.

Twenty minutes later, Jenny stood, unmoving, in front of the basement door.

"Chicken," she muttered. Taking a deep breath, she turned the knob and opened the door with a defiant yank, nearly pulling herself off balance when it opened easily. Jenny clunked down the stairs, purposefully making noise so she didn't startle Will. She paused when she neared the bottom.

"Wow," she breathed, looking around. "This is great!" Jenny knew that he worked out in his basement but she hadn't expected it to be so...elaborate. Will had transformed the space into a well-equipped gym, complete with treadmill, free-weights, a heavy bag dangling on chains from the ceiling, mats and other things that Jenny didn't have the slightest clue what they were used for. Will was sitting on a weight bench, sweat running down the sides of his face and making wet blotches on his t-shirt. He swiped his forehead against his upper arm, not looking at her.

Jenny stepped down the last few stairs and walked over to him. She stopped uncertainly a few feet away, chewing her lower lip. "Will, I'm sorry."

He shook his head, flinging a few droplets of sweat. "Don't be. You didn't do anything." He still didn't meet her eyes.

Jenny inched a little closer. "Besides be a raging bitch, you mean?"

Will just shook his head again.

"The thing is—I didn't even *want* to take a walk by myself. I mean, I thought I did but once we started talking about it, the thought of it scared me." Jenny straddled the end of the bench, her knees close to his but not touching. Although he was still avoiding her gaze, she saw his muscles tense when she sat down. "And then I was pissed off that I was scared, so mad that Evan could control me like that—keep me from walking on a perfectly safe path in broad daylight. He's *dead*—why am I still afraid?" Jenny looked at Will for an answer but he just stared at the floor.

"All I want," Jenny continued, "is to stay in your house forever, lock the doors and just let the grass and trees grow wild and the newspapers pile up on the porch." She gave a small laugh that emptied into a sigh. "Stupid, huh?"

"I thought..." Will cleared his throat and started again. "When I first saw the house, the realtor was telling me that I should clear all the brush and trees out—you know,

have a green lawn like all the neighbors, for barbeques and swing sets and shit like that – but I liked it wild. I pictured it growing around the house like Sleeping Beauty’s castle – only I *wanted* to be trapped inside.”

Jenny slid closer, letting her knees bump his legs. She hugged his arm with both of hers, pulling it against her chest, feeling the wet heat of his skin through her shirt. Kissing his arm, she could smell the musk of his sweat and taste the salt. Will shivered when her lips touched him and Jenny felt goose bumps pop up against her mouth. She explored the texture with her tongue.

Leaning into her hands, Will felt something loosen inside him. Until he had met Jenny, he hadn’t known how incredible it felt to be touched by another person.

“It wasn’t true, what you said...” He stumbled to a stop. The words were tangled together in a writhing heap in his brain and he was too anxious to sort them out. His skin, so hot a moment ago, felt freezing cold and he thought that he might throw up. He concentrated on the floor, focused on taking slow breaths – five seconds in, five seconds out. Jenny waited patiently, his arm still hugged against her. It was the only part of his body that felt warm.

“I wasn’t always big. Well...I was for my age but I was still a kid, you know? And people...they can do whatever they want to kids. It doesn’t matter what the kid wants.” The words were easier now, still not making much sense but tumbling out of him like pebbles down a slide.

“You can fight and fight but all that does is get you labeled a troublemaker. They want you to give in, just nod and smile and say ‘yes sir, whatever you say, sir’, and keep your mouth shut even when he knocks your head into the wall so hard you have chunks of plaster in your hair.” Will felt Jenny inhale, a sharp movement of her chest against his arm. He felt vaguely guilty for making her hear these things – shouldn’t part of keeping her safe mean keeping her away from stories like this? But the dam had cracked and the words leaked out, unstoppable.

“Your dad?” she asked.

“No.” Will shook his head hard. “No. Dad wasn’t mean—he was just sad. And quiet. Jesus, the house was always so quiet—like the air had solidified or something. I’d go to school and there was talking and laughing and yelling, and then I’d come home and it was like someone hit the mute button.

“I think he used to be normal, when my mom was there, but I can’t really remember—not real memories, more just feelings.” Will shrugged and his shoulder moved against Jenny’s cheek. “Maybe I just made it up.

“I came home from school one day and I didn’t even realize anything was wrong at first, ‘cause I was so used to the silence. Something smelled weird though—a bad smell—and so I checked in his room. He had shot himself in the head.” Jenny jerked against him and he heard her small, choked sound but the words kept coming, falling out of him.

"It was funny—that he used a gun. Something so loud." He was silent for a moment and he felt Jenny inhale, as if she was going to ask a question. Will spoke again before she could get the words out.

"I was an odd kid. Well," he gave Jenny a sideways glance and a humorless quirk of his lips, "you probably figured that. Anyway, I wasn't really a hot commodity as far as families went. They found a foster home for me. I stayed there for four years, until I was eighteen. They were okay. I learned to stay out of his way when he was in a mood and she wasn't mean, just...kind of empty. Like she had been used up and was too tired for anything, really. Except for being knocked around once in a while, it was pretty much what I was used to—stay quiet, stay out of the way."

His heart began beating faster and nausea rose again. "I was—" His voice caught and he tried again. "When I was fifteen, another kid moved in. No big deal—kids were always coming and going. This one though..." Will stopped and took a breath.

"He was seventeen—just eight months left in the system. Big kid—constantly pissed off. He'd shove me around a little, call me 'Wilma', but it was minor stuff, didn't really bother me. It got worse when he couldn't get a reaction, so I started avoiding him. I would stay at school until the janitor kicked me out so he could lock up. My grades had never been so good.

"You can't keep avoiding someone you live with though. I woke up one night—" He choked a little and the fingers of his free hand made deep crescents on his thigh. "I was lying on my stomach and I felt this weight on top of me, crushing me. His hand was pushing my head into the pillow. I was a big kid but he was heavier and stronger and I couldn't breathe..."

"Oh God, Will." Jenny was crying, clutching his arm and dragging rough sobs out of her lungs. He was vaguely aware of her distress but he stared at the wall, his eyes unfocused, seeing a different place, a different time.

"After that night, I got a butcher knife from the kitchen and slept with it under my pillow. I thought of a thousand different ways to get kicked out of the house and put somewhere else—anywhere, even juvie would've been better than living with him. For three nights, I didn't sleep—just lay in bed with my hand around the knife handle. The fourth day, he got arrested and sent to jail for stealing a car."

"Stealing a car?" Jenny asked indignantly, hiccupping from her tears. "Why didn't he get arrested for what he did to you?"

Will finally focused on her. "I never told anyone."

"Never told? But what if he hadn't been sent to jail? What would you have done?"

He shrugged, staring at the floor again. He felt ripped open, exposed, as if she could see all the dark, squirming secrets of his insides. "I don't know. Killed him, maybe." He paused. "Killed myself, probably."

Wiping her hand across her cheeks, Jenny sat back a little with an exasperated huff. "Killing was a better option than just telling someone?"

"Better?" Will shrugged again, just a small rise and drop of his shoulders. "Probably not. More like the only option. There was no one to tell."

To Jenny, that was almost the saddest part of the whole wretched story. Fresh tears rose in her already burning eyes but she blinked them away determinedly as she wiggled her way onto his lap until her legs straddled his hips.

"I'm glad you told *me*," she said fiercely, holding his face still with both hands and pressing a hard kiss on his mouth. Jenny felt his cock harden against her, pressing against her pussy, spread open and vulnerable even through the layers of clothing. A snap of panic rushed through her but she refused to acknowledge it, shoving it to the back of her mind.

She held his eyes, those haunted eyes the color of shattered icicles. "I'm sorry you had to go through that alone," she told him, cupping the hard edge of his jaw with her palms and stroking his cheeks with her fingers. "I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been around these past couple weeks."

"I wish I knew what to do—how to help you," he rumbled, the words moving his jaw against her hands.

"You *are* helping." Jenny kissed him again, a butterfly touch against his chin. "A lot. Letting me stay here, talking me down after a nightmare—even letting me scream at you and break your mug was helpful."

Her hands traced his face, caressed his ears and slipped into his hair. She looked at the short blond spikes clinging to her fingers and massaged his scalp. Will's eyes slid closed halfway, his lids heavy. A rumble so low that it was almost inaudible emerged from his chest.

He's purring, Jenny thought in delight. As her fingers moved to the back of his skull, he lowered his head to the curve where her shoulder met her neck. Jenny kneaded the nape of his neck and lower, marveling at how hard he was—it was like massaging iron.

Will's arms snaked around to her back and he hugged her, hard. Jenny started at the sudden squeeze.

"I love you," he said against her collarbone, so softly that Jenny thought that she had misheard. Her heart began slamming against her ribs and her stomach flipped over. A tense stillness rippled through Will's back to where her hands rested against his shoulders.

"Oh baby," she almost whispered, her voice trapped by the adrenaline coursing through her. "I think—I think I love you back. I'm not really sure, since I've never done this before—the love thing, I mean, but if it's supposed to make you feel nervous and excited but safe at the same time and really freaked out and happy but with a constant stomachache, then I'm definitely feeling that." Jenny felt his breath puff against her neck in a silent laugh.

"Sounds about right," he said, tightening his arms again until she squeaked. Will raised his head to kiss her, a gentle meeting of lips and breath that quickly deepened into a licking, sucking, devouring embrace. Will's arms loosened enough to slip under

the back of her shirt. Pushing the fabric up, he traced each bump of her lower spine and the curving muscle on either side.

Jenny strained to get closer, feeling as if she would climb into him if she could, her hands locked on the back of his head, pressing his mouth deeper into hers. His hands moved down, lower and lower, until they slipped beneath the waistband of her yoga pants and his fingers pressed into the flesh of her ass, kneading the cheeks firmly.

"Hello?" The voice filtering through the open basement door made them both freeze, their only motion the heave of their chests as they worked to get air into their starved lungs.

"Oops." Jenny turned guilty eyes to Will. "I forgot that Christian was coming over."

"Christian?" Will shook his head to clear it, trying to think past his pounding heart and demanding cock.

She slid off his lap, tugging down her shirt, and his hands reluctantly slid out of her pants. He sighed as the luscious feel of her ass slipped away and then tried to focus.

"Why is Christian here? How'd he get in?"

"Down here," Jenny yelled up the stairs and then turned a sheepish face back to Will. "I knew he was coming over, so I left the door unlocked. And he's here because...umm, because you guys are..." The rest of the sentence trailed off in a mumble, which he already knew was *not* a good sign.

"We're what?" he asked suspiciously.

"Going shopping," she said quickly and then whirled to greet Christian, who was clattering down the stairs.

"Hey, Jen. Hi, Will. This is amazing," he chattered, checking out the gym and not noticing Will's dumbstruck expression.

"Hey, Chris!" Jenny chirped, far too cheerily.

"Shopping?" Will growled.

"Yep." Christian gave him a hearty slap on the shoulder. "Jenny mentioned that you need a little *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* action."

"What?"

"You know, the TV makeover show?" Chris peered at Will, who just looked back blankly. "No? Not ringing any bells? Well, the short story is that Jenny here thinks you are in desperate need of wardrobe augmentation."

"I like my clothes," Will muttered, scowling.

"I know," Jenny said soothingly. "But Will, you only have, like, four shirts." She grinned at him, ignoring his stormy expression. "That's what you get for bringing me here. Of *course* I checked out your closet."

She patted him and kissed his sulky mouth. "It'll be *fun*, you'll see."

Will highly doubted that but he let her pull him to his feet. He did need more clothes now that his solitary life had been overrun by these two. And he could have

Christian's help with the other shopping dilemma that Will had been worrying about as well.

Resigned to his fate, Will grunted, "Fine. I'll go shower. Give me ten minutes."

Giving his waist a hug, Jenny smiled up at him. Another thought occurred to Will.

"I don't want you here alone," he told her.

"I'll be fine," Jenny insisted. "Rosie's here with me and I'll lock all the doors and not let anyone in until you guys get back. I'll keep my cell phone with me and you can call every five minutes if you want."

Will nodded grudgingly. He knew his fear for her safety was unreasonable but he couldn't help it. Just the thought of leaving her here by herself made his stomach knot up.

"Now go get ready," Jenny teased, slipping away from him with a final smack on his ass. Will jumped and then headed up the stairs, trying to hide his blush—and his pleased smile.

Jenny turned to Christian after Will disappeared into the kitchen.

"Thanks, Chris."

"No problem," he assured her. "Although most people would kill to have a hottie like that pandering to their every whim. You, my contrary Jen, just want him out of the house."

"Just for a few hours," Jenny protested. "I love having him around but I need some alone time to get my head straight—I'm already throwing the crockery. It'll be knives next."

"Remind me to stay out of throwing range, which, for you, is about three feet." Christian ignored Jenny's offended sputter and started up the stairs. "Any special clothing requests? French maid uniform, perhaps?"

She laughed, following. "Can you imagine me in a French maid's uniform? I don't think so."

"Sweetie," Christian said, looking over his shoulder at her. "I wasn't talking about you."

Jenny didn't know whether to laugh or be horrified by the mental image of Will in a frilly apron holding a feather duster. She was starting to think that Christian taking Will shopping was a bad idea.

"Just be careful with him, okay?" she said to Chris' back. "He's a shopping novice. You have to let him dip his toe in the water before you throw him in with the sharks."

"Don't worry," Christian threw back casually. "He'll be as safe as can be with his kindly Uncle Christian."

"Huh," Jenny grunted disbelievingly. Poor Will.

Chapter Twelve

Shopping with Christian was by turns terrifying and exhilarating. Chris and the store salesman—Justin, according to his nametag—eyed him up and down with assessing gazes as Will shifted his weight awkwardly. He felt like a bumbling giant next to the other two men, who were just the right amount of casually elegant. Christian and Justin cut a confident path through the store, plucking items off racks and tables until their arms were piled in fabric, while Will trailed behind.

Will was bundled into the changing room with strict instructions about what went with what ensemble.

Jesus, Will thought. *Ensemble*. It had been so easy before—pants and shirt. Suit if he had to. Coat if it was cold. Now he had ensembles. He shook his head and reached for the bottom of his shirt to yank it over his head. Christian stuck his head in.

“Do you need help?” Chris asked, eyeing the piles of clothes anxiously. Will put his hand on Christian’s head and gave him a push.

“Okay, okay,” Chris laughed on the other side of the door. Will pulled off his shirt and reached to unbutton his jeans but paused. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and pushed the speed dial button.

Jenny answered, “I’m fine.” Then she hung up.

Will closed the phone. He had expected that response. It was the same as the last eight times he had called. The first three times she had actually chatted with him, probably still feeling a tinge of guilt for sending him out at the mercy of Christian, but her patience had worn thin by the fourth call.

“Are you calling Jenny again?” Christian’s disembodied voice floated through the door.

“No,” Will lied, shoving the phone back in his pocket.

They exited the store an hour later with three shopping bags, leaving behind an extraordinarily large amount of money and a jubilant Justin. Will was shell-shocked and couldn’t even remember what he had bought—it was just a blur of trying on one thing after another, being critiqued by Christian and Justin before being sent back into the dressing room with even more clothes. Why anyone liked to shop was beyond him but a lot of people seemed to enjoy it, judging from the hordes crowding the mall.

Christian seemed happy too. “Good job, Will. You held strong when most men would have cracked.”

Will just rolled his eyes at him and dodged a toddler pushing an empty stroller. He moved aside again as the little girl's harried mother chased after her. A couple holding hands passed them and Will was reminded of the other shopping he had to do.

"Valentine's Day," he stated.

Christian looked amused. "Is next week? Is the day for lovers? Was invented by florists and whoever makes those disgusting little candy hearts with words on them? Am I close on any of these?"

"I need to get Jenny something," Will elaborated.

"Oh ho," Christian caught on. "You need a little more shopping assistance?"

"Yeah. I mean, if you don't mind."

"Mind finding pretty things and putting them on your nifty little platinum card?" Christian grabbed Will's arm and towed him toward an intimidating-looking jewelry store. Will hesitated at the entrance but Christian hauled him toward the counter. Three salespeople subtly jostled each other for position and a tall blonde woman with a toothy smile won out, due, Will felt, to her extremely pointy elbows.

"How can I help you gentlemen?" she asked smoothly, flashing a terrifyingly white smile. The other two salespeople withdrew, shooting a few discreetly irritated glances at the triumphant blonde.

"He," Christian nodded toward Will, "is looking for a Valentine's Day gift. A very *special* gift."

The saleswoman's smile widened even farther and Will wanted to back up a step but Christian gave his arm a warning squeeze.

"What did you have in mind?" she asked, moving toward the glass cases. "Is this special as in engagement-ring special?"

Will gave Christian a panicked glance. If he had been out of his depth in the clothing store, Will was positively *drowning* now.

"No, it's a little early for that," Christian stepped in. "He was thinking maybe a pendant..."

With a mental sigh of relief, Will watched as Christian and the saleswoman conferred about stones and settings. The woman showed them piece after piece, most of which Christian waved away, and one ugly set of earrings that Will shook his head at. They finally found a necklace that Christian approved and Will liked—it was delicate and sweet and he could see it on Jenny. The blonde woman wrapped it up and Will paid. Shopping with Christian was turning out to be expensive but the relief Will felt at having Jenny's Valentine's Day gift taken care of made it worth every cent.

They made their way back out into the mall and headed in the direction of the parking garage. Christian was positively bouncing—shopping sure made him happy. Will, on the other hand, was exhausted.

His flagging energy received a boost when he stopped at the overwhelmingly pink display window of a lingerie store. Christian, who had continued for a few steps before realizing that he'd lost Will, glanced over his shoulder.

"Ooh—bad idea." Christian retraced his steps and tugged on Will's arm. "Women don't really like getting lingerie as gifts—*men* like women getting lingerie as gifts."

Will didn't move. "I promised her I—" He broke off. There was really no way to explain without sharing way too many details of his and Jenny's sex life with Christian.

Actually, explanation wasn't necessary. Christian's mouth quirked and his eyes lit in comprehension. "Bodice ripper, are you?"

Blushing, Will shook his head. "Actually..." He made an awkward gesture toward his groin.

Christian grinned. "Panty ripper." He gestured for Will to proceed into the store. "'Nough said."

"Too much said," Will muttered and walked into a sea of pink. And black and other colors that were just colors but somehow seemed intensely girly. His face flushed red and he stopped so abruptly that Christian crashed into his back.

"Oh for Pete's sake," Christian grumbled, rubbing his nose that had been squashed against Will's shoulder. He detoured around a frozen Will and took the lead, plunging between frilly displays and scantily dressed mannequins. "You should know more about this than I do, being the hetero of our dynamic duo. When would I ever need to buy lingerie? Because I'm not really into trannies, you know."

Will slowly followed, carefully averting his eyes from...well, almost everything. He caught up with Christian, who was picking through a dizzying array of panties. Will watched for a moment and then reached out a tentative hand to touch a silky, light pink pair.

"Those are nice," Christian approved, grabbing them up. "And let's get this black bikini-cut pair, a red thong—everybody needs at least one red thong—and then these blue ones with the little stars. They're fun. Do you like the sequins? No? Oh well, they look uncomfortable anyway—and these green boy shorts. Should that be good? How many pairs have you wrecked?"

Will managed to turn an even darker red. "Just two, I think."

"We're set then." Christian headed for the register, panties in hand. Will stopped on the way, caught by a mannequin wearing a delicate, silky...something. He didn't know the name, but he was getting hot just thinking about Jenny wearing it. Christian popped back over to his side.

"Very pretty," Chris told him approvingly. "You have good taste. We'll get one of those too." As he talked, he flipped through the rack until he found one in Jenny's size. Will pulled out his card again and followed Christian to the register. He fingered his cell phone in his pocket as he waited for the cashier to ring him up. It had been—he checked his watch—almost eighteen minutes since he'd called her last. Will pulled out

the phone and pushed her speed dial button before he could reconsider. Christian sighed deeply and rolled his eyes.

"I'm fine." *Click.*

They headed back out into the mall. Will rolled the tightness from his shoulders and glanced at Christian and then away.

"Thanks," he said gruffly.

Christian looked at him in surprise. "Are you kidding? This was fun. Hey, anytime you need help spending your money, just give me a call. Oh shit-balls!"

Startled, Will's eyes flew to Chris but he was looking at someone else. Will followed his gaze to a dark-haired man who had spotted Christian and was heading their way.

"Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck," Christian was muttering. He plastered on a fake smile as the other man approached. "Tom. Imagine seeing you here."

"Christian," Tom greeted him but his eyes were on Will. "Doing some shopping?"

"No, we're mountain climbing," Christian responded, deadpan. "What do you think we're doing at the mall, short bus?"

Tom flushed a little and his eyes narrowed but he managed to hold onto his tight smile.

"Who's your friend?" Tom asked. He made the hair prickle on the back of Will's neck. Will didn't know this man but he already knew he didn't like him.

"Oh right—you weren't at the big boss's birthday bash. This is Will. Will, this is Tom, my current coworker and former fuck buddy." Will nodded shortly at Tom, who had narrowed his eyes even more until they were just glittering slits.

"Yes," Tom said, the word oily and smooth. "You always do bring that up. Time you got over me, don't you think?"

Will's fists had clenched at his sides and he had to force them to relax. He really did *not* like this man or the condescending way he was looking at Christian. An idea flickered in Will's mind and he acted on it without giving himself time to reconsider.

Throwing a possessive arm around Christian's shoulders and ignoring his friend's startled glance, Will gave Tom a cold stare. "Don't worry. He's over you."

With that, Will stalked off, pulling Christian along and forcing Tom to move out of the way.

Christian couldn't help it—he glanced back to see Tom gaping after them, his face furious. Once they passed through the doors into the parking garage, Christian yanked Will around a corner out of Tom's view and exploded with laughter. He gave Will a hard hug.

"You. Are. Fabulous!" Christian hugged him again. "I will love you forever."

Feeling a little sheepish, Will stammered, "I didn't mean..."

"Oh don't worry. Tom has that effect on a lot of people. You know, the inexplicable desire to crush him like a bug. He's a slimy bastard, that one." Christian headed for the car, still chortling. "The look on his face – it was a beautiful, beautiful thing."

"Are you sure it was okay?" Will asked. "I mean, if you and he..."

"No." Christian shook his head emphatically. "There is no more me and him. He's married. And a sorry rat bastard."

"Married? I didn't know you guys could do that."

"No, married-to-a-woman married. As in, back-in-the-closet-like-a-good-little-son-and-heir married," Christian explained. "Actually, it was the best thing in the end. It showed me what a sorry, cheating, clap-ridden slut of a man he really was."

"Oh." Will beeped open the car doors and climbed into the driver's seat.

"The best thing," Christian repeated as he buckled his seatbelt, looking sad and vulnerable for a moment, which unsettled Will. He was used to the confident and breezy Chris, not this lost and lonely person. Will wondered uncomfortably if he should offer some kind of comfort, pat the other man's shoulder or something, but before he could do anything, Christian blinked and the look was gone.

"Wait 'til I tell Jenny how you punked Tom," Christian grinned, all happy eyes and mouth now.

That reminded Will that it had been a while since he last called her – ten minutes at least. He reached for the phone and Christian groaned.

Will was annoyed. He glanced at his watch again. It was creeping toward four and he had to leave soon if he was going to get home before Jenny did. It had been her first day back to work and he hadn't even wanted to come to this meeting but he had already shaken off three requests by his boss to come in to the office during the past two weeks. Will figured he'd better show his face, especially since he had definitely been slacking in the work department since meeting Jenny.

He tossed his pen down onto the nearly blank pad of paper. A two-hour meeting and he hadn't taken a single note. He had doodled some geometric shapes and started writing a "J" before he caught himself in that junior high maneuver.

He sighed and sat back. Josh glanced at him. "Did you have something to contribute, ah, William?"

The room was silent. Except for Charlie, who looked amused, the other six people sitting around the conference room table stared at him apprehensively, as if Will was going to jump up and tear their heads off with his teeth. Hey, if it would end this interminable meeting, he was willing to try it.

Will shook his head, grabbing the paper and pen and shoving them into the side pocket of his laptop bag. He stood up, and Josh looked startled.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving," Will said, turning around and walking toward the door. The meeting had been a waste of time, as most of Josh's meetings were. The same issues had been discussed over and over again, circling around on themselves like a dog chasing its tail, only with less resolution. Usually Will could tune out the others and occupy himself with his own thoughts until the meeting was over, but not today. His mind was filled with Jenny – worry that she'd had a hard time at work, that she would get home before he did and have to walk into an empty house, that she would decide to take Rosie out by herself. Worried that there would be someone on the path, someone as crazy and dangerous as Evan, waiting to prey on her...

Will's thoughts drew panic back to the surface and his heart sped up. He reached for his cell phone. He had only called her twice so far, so surely she wouldn't mind if he checked in with her one more –

"Wait!" Josh's voice had gone up a few octaves. "We're not finished here!"

"I am," Will replied, pausing to look at his boss. "You've wasted enough of my time." He glanced around the conference table. "Of everyone's time." Will took another step toward the door before turning around again. "And quit fucking up Charlie's code."

Will left the room, surprised to feel no regret. He'd worked for different branches of the same company since he'd left college but if he was fired for walking out, Will wouldn't care. It would be worth it to get back home to Jenny. Plus, it had been a great feeling to finally tell Josh what he thought.

Pulling out his cell and pressing the phone to his ear, he held his breath as it rang, only relaxing when he heard her voice.

"Hi, Will." Jenny sounded tired, although her tone was warm.

"Hi." His cock stirred at the sound of her voice and he smiled a little, the muscles that had tightened around his lungs relaxing in relief. "You okay?" he asked. Will punched the down button on the office elevator.

"Yeah," Jenny yawned. "I'll be packing it in here pretty soon."

Will glanced at his watch again. "Wait a half-hour or so and then I'll be home first."

"Okay," she agreed.

"No argument?" he asked, a little surprised.

"Nope," she told him. "The thought of someone at home waiting for me is nice, especially when that someone is of the human variety, no offense to Rosie."

"Well good," he said. "I'll be there."

"Are you going to start dinner too?"

"Sure."

"And meet me at the door in a frilly apron with a martini?" He could hear the smile in her voice.

"If you want – except for the apron." Will stepped into the elevator.

"Or the martini," Jenny said. "I'm not really a gin girl."

"So just me at the door," Will said quietly, ignoring the sidelong glances of the other people in the elevator.

"Mmmm...sounds nice," Jenny purred, making Will's cock harden. He should have known better than to call her before he got to the privacy of his car. Every call ended with an aching bulge ruining the elegant line of his new Christian-selected pants.

"I'll see you then. Be careful driving home," he told her, trying to keep the lustful growl from his voice. Judging from Jenny's husky laugh, he didn't succeed very well. Closing the phone, he glanced at the man next to him who quickly averted his eyes, pretending he hadn't been listening. The elevator doors slid open and Will stepped out, heading for the lobby doors.

"Will!" A female voice hailed him and he reluctantly stopped, itchy to leave, to get home. Natasha was striding toward him. Although irritated, Will had to be impressed that she could walk at all in her high, high heels. It had to almost be like walking on stilts. Natasha was all blunt angles and hard points, cut sharply in her crisp suit. Will felt the familiar discomfort he always felt when she was around. The only positive part of the meeting he had just left had been Natasha's absence.

"Will," she said, stopping close to him—too close. Will backed up a half step. Natasha casually closed the gap.

He looked over her shoulder and smiled a little, an honest smile of relief. Jessi was behind her, grimacing at him and rolling her eyes at Natasha's back. He didn't know Jessi very well but what he did know, he liked. She was small and curvy, like Jenny, but with black hair, tawny skin and enormous, innocent brown eyes that were contradicted by her wicked grin. She was one of the few people he worked with who didn't seem intimidated by him, and would throw a casual "Hey, Will" his way when they occasionally passed each other. Now she was struggling to keep a straight face and not succeeding very well.

"I haven't seen you around lately," Natasha said, pulling his attention back to her. Will shrugged a little and shook his head, unsure what he was supposed to say to that.

Natasha looked nonplussed for a moment and then plunged on. "I've been meaning to talk with you—do you have a moment?"

"No," Will said abruptly, glancing at his watch again. "I have to go."

"It will just be a second," she coaxed, curling her red-tipped fingers around Will's wrist.

He jerked it away instinctively and she frowned. Behind her back, Jessi was mouthing "Run!" and gesturing toward the door. Natasha caught the motion from the corner of her eye and whipped her head around to glare at Jessi, who clasped her hands in front of her and smiled cherubically.

Natasha turned back to Will, her fierce look slipping away. "Surely whatever it is that you're rushing off to can wait a few minutes."

"No. She can't." Will turned and walked away. He heard a choke of laughter — Jessi, he was sure — and an angry hiss of inhaled breath — Natasha, most likely. He dismissed them both from his mind and headed for the lobby doors. If he didn't hit much traffic, he could be home in half an hour.

Will's mouth curled up at the thought of meeting Jenny at the door and, lost in his imaginings, he missed the startled glance of the building security guard, who had never seen Mr. Jackson actually *smiling* before.

When Will was five minutes from home, his cell rang. He grabbed for it, immediately worried about Jenny.

"Will, hi."

Will relaxed a little at Charlie's voice, relieved that there was no Jenny-related emergency. "Charlie."

"Hey, I just wanted to tell you how awesome that was! That you told Josh off and walked out, I mean. Those constant meetings are a killer. I'm too big of a chickenshit to have done it, but I'm glad *somebody* stood up to him."

With a huff of a laugh, Will said awkwardly, "Thanks. Or no problem, I guess. I had to get home."

"Everything okay?" Charlie asked.

The concern in the other man's voice surprised Will. "Yeah. My, uh, girlfriend went back to work for the first time after...an accident and I wanted to be home when she got there." The fact that he had explained even that much startled Will even more.

"Sure, I get that," Charlie told him. "Hey, why don't you and your girlfriend come to Dave's with the rest of us on Thursday night?"

"Really?" Will blinked. This entire conversation was a little surreal.

"Yeah." It was Charlie's turn to sound uncomfortable. "I've...we've...been meaning to ask you before but you're...ah..."

"I'm what?"

"A little intimidating," Charlie admitted. "I mean, you're a genius with computers and the way you look — it's like working with fucking Zeus, for Christ's sake."

Will choked. "Zeus?"

"Whatever, man, you know what I mean." Charlie laughed. "So are you guys coming?"

A month ago, the invitation would have filled him with terror. Now he was pretty sure he could handle a night out with the guys, especially with Jenny next to him. It might actually be fun. "Okay. I mean, I'll check with her."

"Sweet. Just let me know. Later." Charlie hung up.

"Later," Will echoed. Tucking the phone into a cup holder, he started to laugh.

Fucking Zeus?

Jenny walked up the steps to Will's door, her exhaustion falling away at the thought of seeing him. Although the few hours of alone time on Saturday had been blissful, she had become used to spending days—and nights—with him. Work had been tough. Her coworkers, with the exceptions of Christian and Carrie, had treated her with a mixture of curious babble and awkward pauses.

Walking past Evan's empty cubicle had been eerie. He was still split into two people in her mind—the coworker and the rapist—and her feelings were completely muddled when she thought about him being dead. The work had piled up during her absence, overwhelming Jenny, and she had been ready to go home and back to bed by ten that morning.

The door swung open before Jenny could even touch the knob and she swallowed at the sight of him. He was wearing some of his new clothes and the elegant fabrics emphasized his size and power, like wrapping a sledgehammer in silk.

They hadn't made love since before the attack. Jenny had avoided even thinking about it as much as possible and Will had been quietly patient, although she knew that he was hard most of the time. Looking at him now, the tentative curl of his lips and his gentle eyes, Jenny felt a hot surge of longing flush through her, hardening her nipples. She pressed the tops of her thighs together, increasing the tingling heat of her swelling pussy lips, already damp with her need.

She exulted in the heat stinging her skin—she had her body back! Jenny had felt as if Evan had stolen her arousal, her sense of sexual fun, her joy in the hard masculinity of Will's body, and replaced them with fear and anger and hatred and self-doubt. She was triumphant—everything that was *her* was still there, it had just been hiding away in dark corners.

She moved toward Will, stalking him, and his smile fell away uncertainly. He shut the door behind her and, as she unbuttoned his shirt—showing great restraint, Jenny felt, by not ripping it from his body—Will's eyes heated until they glowed with blue-white light. Jenny let his shirt fall open and stared at his chest hungrily.

Grabbing his hand, she hurried him up the stairs, almost running into the bedroom. Jenny tumbled onto the bed and Will followed, trapping her body beneath his. She froze, the panic returning as quickly as it had disappeared, and Will must have felt her stiffen. Rolling off her, he lay on his back and stared blindly at the ceiling, all the muscles in his face taut as he struggled for control. Jenny watched his chest lower with a deep exhaled breath and he turned his face toward her.

"Okay?" he asked, which drove the tears toward Jenny's eyes in a burning rush, gratitude and frustration and affection all tangling together in her chest.

"Yes. No. I don't know," she answered and tried to laugh but it came out closer to a sob. It was her turn to stare at the ceiling, refusing to cry. Will rolled off the bed onto his feet, yanking Jenny's gaze to him. Despite her fear, she didn't want him to go.

He wasn't leaving though—he was undressing, stripping out of his clothes efficiently, and Jenny swallowed hard, anxious but aroused.

When he was completely and beautifully naked, he walked to his closet and Jenny was reminded of how much she loved his ass, so smooth and hard and round. Will emerged with a handful of ties and Jenny watched him, her face confused. Tossing the ties by her hip, Will stretched out next to her on his back, turning his cheek against the comforter so he could see her. His eyes were serious.

"Tie me up," he rumbled, stretching his arms above his head and crossing his wrists.

Jenny sat up and stared at him. "It's a strange time to go all kinky on me, Will."

The color rose in his cheeks but he held her gaze. "This way, you do whatever you want to me," he explained, "and I can't touch you."

As she considered the idea, Jenny's excitement began to return. Tied, there was no way Will could overpower her, use his strength to force anything—not that he would, but the panic in Jenny eased at the idea of a restrained Will. She still hesitated though.

"Are you sure?" Jenny asked carefully. "Won't it be hard for you to be...held down?"

His lips tightened but Will shook his head. "Not with you," he said, watching her fiercely. "Never with you."

Jenny slid off the bed slowly, her eyes on Will's set face. "You'll tell me though, if you start freaking out or feeling claustrophobic or anything, right?"

Will nodded.

"Promise?" Jenny asked, unbuttoning her blouse and letting it slip down her arms.

"Promise." His voice was raspy as he watched her pants drop to her ankles. She sat on the bed to pull off her dress boots and socks, her efforts jiggling her breasts in the cups of her peach bra. Will's breathing roughened and his fists clenched, although he kept them crossed above his head.

Jenny stood up, clad in just two wisps of fabric. She reached behind her back with both hands to unhook her bra but paused before it was undone and lowered her hands to her sides. Will held his breath, hoping that she hadn't changed her mind, that they weren't going to spend another chaste night together, holding each other in an innocent embrace. Although he cursed himself for being such a coarse animal, he wanted to rush Jenny out of her fear, push her objections aside and bury himself into her so deeply that she couldn't ever get him out. Ever since the first time Will had felt the hot, wet squeeze of Jenny's pussy around his cock, he had felt naked outside of her. Naked and lonely.

An excited thrum of hope tightened Will's muscles as Jenny reached for a tie. She wasn't finished, he realized, his entire body vibrating. She wasn't walking away, fearful and disgusted at the thought of making love to him. In fact, her eyes had dilated with arousal and the hard points of her nipples shoved against the thin fabric of her bra.

Jenny looped the tie around his wrists and knotted it carefully. Will tested the tightness of the fastening instinctively and Jenny's breath came quickly at the sight of his sinewy wrists straining against the fabric. Grabbing another tie, she attached his wrists to one of the slats in the headboard.

"Okay?" she asked in a husky voice, brushing her fingers over his bound hands. Will jerked his head in a nod, apparently not trusting his voice. Jenny, a tie in each hand, slid her way backward to the foot of the bed, trailing the silky fabric over his torso, making his stomach muscles clench and his erection bob sharply in response to the light touch. Jenny pulled on his left leg until his foot lay near the corner of the bed. She bound it to the footboard and then, crouching between his legs, she tied his other ankle to the opposite side before focusing on her fabulous balls-eye view.

Trailing a hand up each leg, Jenny knelt between his thighs. She traced her fingers through the blond fur on his stomach, her knuckles barely grazing his aroused cock, and she could feel goose bumps rise on his skin. Knowing that she had caused that reaction, that she was responsible for his excited shivers and the iron-hard erection that pulsed against his belly, made Jenny flush with power and her own soaking arousal. She had never tied a man up before and she found herself enthralled by the vulnerable places left exposed.

She bent her head and ran her tongue along the tender crease between his leg and groin, her hair falling across his inner thighs. Will groaned and Jenny could feel the vibration against her tongue. She licked between the base of his cock and his balls, nuzzling him with her nose, absorbing his scent and taste, the twitching of his muscles and the rumblings of the excited noises he was making—he was purring again. Jenny smiled against his skin. Cupping his balls in one hand, she rubbed her cheek against them, petting them like they were a small animal. Jenny gently lifted his scrotum and smoothed her tongue along the tight skin behind. Will's hips left the bed, arching into her touch.

Caressing him with the flat of her tongue, Jenny slid her mouth back to the base of his balls and moved her hand away. She took him between her lips, suckling gently on the soft skin of his sac, and Will jolted against the bed. Pulling away from him with a gentle, swirling lick, Jenny raised her head to check Will's expression. The skin was pulled taut over his features and his eyes were narrowed, almost glowing in the dim light.

"Still okay?" she asked.

Will could feel the air from her words hitting the damp skin of his crotch. "Fuck yes," he growled. "Don't stop."

Jenny smiled, a small, sultry curve of her lips, and curled her fingers into his pubic hair, giving a soft tug. "Impatient boy," she teased and bent her head to him again. She licked at the underside of his straining cock and his head snapped back, eyes squeezed shut. Her hair tumbled over his belly and groin, teasing the sensitive skin with silky brushes each time she moved. Jenny gently lifted his erection away from his belly for better access and used the tip of her tongue to trace tiny circles on the seeping head.

Will's hips pushed up eagerly, his cock trying to bury itself between her lips, but Jenny teased him with tiny licks and brushes of her hair until he was groaning, his body straining toward her.

Without warning, Jenny swallowed him, her throat muscles relaxed and welcoming. Will gasped and almost came but he clenched his fists, digging for control. He didn't want to climax already, didn't want this to be over – not yet. As tormenting as it was, Will didn't want the intimate contact of Jenny's hands and mouth on him to end.

She pulled back until her lips were closed on just the head of his cock and she played with him with her tongue. Closing a fist around the base of his erection, she slid her hand up his shaft to her lips and then down again, spreading the moisture from her mouth along his entire length. Her mouth followed her hand down until her throat muscles were massaging the head of his penis. She matched the suction of her cheeks with the gentle squeeze and release of her fist around the base.

"Stop," Will gritted. "I'm going to come."

Jenny pulled her mouth away and looked at him. Just her gaze made his hands flex against his bonds, his face and chest wet with sweat.

"So?" she asked, panting a little. "If you do, we just start over." The teasing smile was back as she reached back to unfasten her bra. Her breasts, full and heavy, fell free and Jenny tossed the bra off the bed. "And over and over and over..."

She lowered her head and took him into her mouth again, sliding her lips over the head and down until her mouth was stuffed full of him and then pulled back, following her lips with her pumping hand. Will's hands yanked against his restraints, wanting to bury his fingers in her hair and push her head down against him, but the ties held and he could only thrust his hips toward her mouth, trying to bury his cock deeper into the hot, heavenly depths of her mouth.

Will came hard, shooting bursts of semen down her throat. His body arched and twisted with each jolt of intense pleasure, over and over, until it felt like he had been coming forever, as if everything inside him had melted down and was spewing out of his cock like lava. Jenny held him in her mouth until the final shudders had passed, sucking at him gently, soothing him with her tongue. When he finally lay still, empty and spent, she crawled up to cuddle his head against her breasts.

Burrowing his face between the soft mounds, Will marveled at how quickly they had grown to know each other, that she knew this was his favorite place to be, buried so deeply in the warmth and smell and comfort of her that the intensity of his feelings hurt his heart. He rested quietly, his breathing slowing, but he fought off sleep, wanting Jenny more than he wanted unconsciousness. Nuzzling the inner curves of her breasts, he slid his tongue against her sweaty skin, the salty taste of her reviving his cock, making it swell and stiffen. He felt Jenny move against him as she giggled.

"Ready for round two?" she asked, scratching his scalp lightly with her short nails. Will nodded, his face still buried in her breasts, which made Jenny laugh softly again. Running her hands up his arms, she checked the tightness of the ties around his wrists.

"Too tight?"

Will shook his head, bumping his raspy cheeks against her soft skin. He pulled back just enough to latch onto a nipple, sucking it in and pressing it against the roof of his mouth with his tongue.

Jenny's breath rushed out in a gasp as lust hit her lower belly, causing her to clamp her wet pussy muscles together. Swinging a leg over his chest, she straddled him, pressing her crotch against him and cursing her panties.

Why are they still on? she wondered, yanking at them frantically, not wanting to separate his mouth from her nipple or his chest from her inner thighs. She felt the fabric of her thong digging into her hip before the delicate single string holding it together snapped. She lifted up just enough to pull the intrusive material from between their bodies. As her open pussy met Will's chest, Jenny closed her eyes with a moan, her senses caught between the soft-rough hair rubbing against the wet heat between her legs and the light scoring of Will's teeth against her nipple.

Pulling his mouth from her breast with a sucking pop, he caught the other nipple dangling above his face, drawing it between his lips and teasing it with his tongue. Jenny, gasping for breath, ground her pussy against his chest, the wetness of her excitement mingling with their sweat. Sliding backward toward his stomach, she tugged her breast from Will's mouth. With a protesting grunt, he tried to hold onto the nipple, following her movement with his head, but Jenny pulled free.

"I want to kiss you," she gasped and his sulky expression vanished as he turned his face up to hers. Their lips met, open and hot, her lips already swollen from sucking him.

She wondered if Will tasted himself as their tongues twisted together, exploring all the hard and soft corners of each other's mouths. Jenny tugged at his bottom lip with her teeth and Will strained up to meet her mouth but his bound hands held him back. At his frustrated growl, Jenny raised her head and a wicked smile curled her lips. Will watched her warily, breathing hard.

Wet skin against wet skin, Jenny slid down until she almost straddled Will's hips, the damp head of his erection rubbing against her lower back. Reaching behind her as she lifted her body up, she tucked his cock between the cheeks of her ass, so the hot skin was pressed against the contracting pucker of her anus. Jenny could feel him pulse against her and she placed her hands against his chest, feeling his rib cage heave with each breath. His head was thrown back again, his eyes screwed shut, as if just looking at her would be too much for him and he would explode with his erection trapped between her ass cheeks and his body.

Tipping forward, Jenny shook her hair so that the strands brushed the erect nubs of his nipples. She felt his cock jerk against her, the wet head pushing insistently at the sensitive edge of her back entrance, and an intense need to have him inside her again, in the place where only he had been, vibrated through her like an electric jolt. A little shocked by the intensity of her desire, Jenny tucked her head down and kissed his chest with an open mouth, hiding her face with her hair. Her breasts were pressed against

him, his skin burning her nipples, and his erection nudged against her tightly drawn anus.

A savage wave of lust broke over her and Jenny pressed her teeth into the hard muscle of his chest, her jaw aching with the urge to bite. Will hissed, his hips thrusting toward her, pressing against her swollen pussy, the head of his cock sliding wetly through the cleft of her ass. Impatient to have him inside her, Jenny slid off him sideways, scrambling for the drawer in the nightstand.

"No..." Will groaned as she moved away from him, cool air taking her place.

"Hang on a sec," Jenny told him, her voice husky with need as she rummaged in the small drawer. She knew she had seen some— There they were! Jenny pounced on the elusive condoms and grabbed a wild handful, knowing that she was scattering the packets over the bed and floor and not caring. Ripping one open with her teeth, she knelt between Will's thighs to roll it on him. As soon as she got it on, she straddled him again and guided his erection into her wet, grasping pussy. They both groaned, the sound vibrating through them, tightening their muscles. She could see the muscles bunch in his jaw when Will clenched his teeth against the incredible sensation, as if he was ready to come again from just the clinging grip of her body.

Jenny was still, gasping at the sense of fullness, of completion, like Will was the missing puzzle piece that fit perfectly into her. This was nothing like Evan's unwanted invasion—it was a completely different act. It was not frightening or obscene, there was nothing in this to make her want to shower for hours, scrubbing at her skin until the filth of it had rubbed off. This was...right.

She began to move, sliding her body up and down on Will's erect cock, her pussy grasping him, not wanting to let him go. She felt the power of her climax begin to build and she thrust faster, pounding her hips against his on the down stroke, squeezing him tightly on the way up. Will arched against her, meeting each plunge with his own, never taking his eyes off hers. The pressure built, emotion and sensation swirling inside her until everything crashed together in climax, her muscles tightening, rippling against Will as he exploded with her.

Dazed, Jenny collapsed against his chest. She heard Will talking, felt his words vibrating in his chest, but the sound seemed far away, impossible to hear. His tone was insistent though, nudging her back to reality.

"Jenny, baby?" He sounded so anxious, she thought. "What's wrong? Was it too soon? Should I have done something else?"

She lifted her head from his chest and stroked his cheek with her fingertips. "Nothing's wrong. It was perfect," she reassured him.

His worried expression didn't lighten. "Then why are you crying?"

Jenny touched her face and looked at her wet fingers in surprise. She hadn't even realized that she had been crying. She wasn't sobbing or choking with her tears, they were just leaking out, flowing down her face. "I don't know why. Relief? Release? Because I love you?"

Emotions flashed across Will's face, too fast to read. "Untie me," he commanded, yanking at the ties around his wrist.

Jenny gave a startled laugh—she had forgotten. She scooted up by his head and tugged at the bindings.

"Stop pulling," she scolded. Once he relaxed his arms, the knots came out easily and he helped her undo the ties at his ankles. As soon as he was free, Will tossed the ties away from him and wrapped his arms around Jenny, who squeaked at the tight hug. They tumbled down onto the bed, entwined so closely that Jenny could see the striations in the irises of his eyes.

"Move in with me," he ordered roughly.

"I think I already have." Jenny tried to repress a smile. He was being so *serious*.

He frowned at her. "I mean permanently."

"Okay," she agreed.

"Marry me." He positively *growled* this command.

"Shit, really?" *Oops*, Jenny thought. That definitely was not the correct response according to *A Nice Girl's Guide to Responding to Marriage Proposals*. Although even the nicest girl would have been shocked into profanity at being proposed to after only knowing the guy for—what, a month?

Will just looked at her, tensing in preparation of rejection.

"Oh what the hell. Okay!" She knew that it was crazy and that everything had happened *way* too quickly but Jenny could see herself with this man—sleeping with him every night, coming home from work and telling him about her day, loving him forever—and the idea of not being with him was so depressing that she couldn't even consider it.

"Really?" His face was so vulnerable that it made Jenny want to cry and then he smiled his happy, open, crazily beautiful smile and she *did* start to cry—again. The smile dropped away and his panicked expression returned as he started patting her awkwardly.

"It's okay," she laughed while still crying. "Happy tears."

Will nodded uncertainly, his eyes still wary.

"You're going to need to get used to these," Jenny warned him. "Just wait until I'm PMS-ing."

At that, he looked even more alarmed.

Way to scare a guy off, Jenny scolded herself. *He'll be retracting that proposal pretty soon.*

Instead of running from the room though, he leaned in to kiss her softly. "I love you," he said, brushing her hair off her cheek with big, gentle fingers.

"Yeah, I figured." Jenny grinned then squealed as Will rolled on top of her, kissing her hard. She half expected panic to swamp her as his heavy weight pressed her into the

mattress but she just felt safe and loved – and horny. She wrapped her legs around his waist and kissed him back.

“You made it – great!” A baby-faced man with floppy brown hair hopped up from his chair and slapped Will on the shoulder.

“Hey, Charlie. This is Jenny,” Will introduced as he pulled a chair out for her. The three other guys at the table chorused their hellos.

“Jenny!” Charlie shook her hand enthusiastically. “It’s great to meet you. Who knew Zeus here actually had a life?”

Jenny laughed, glancing around the ring of male faces. “I hope I’m not intruding on guys’ night out.”

“Nope,” one of the men answered with a cheery grin creasing his round cheeks. “The wives are welcome to come – they just usually would rather not. We can be obnoxious. I’m Tim, by the way.”

“Sam,” another one introduced himself. He was strikingly good-looking, with caramel-colored skin and dark doe eyes. “I don’t have a wife.”

“Sammy here likes dudes,” Charlie explained. “Well, usually – he’s going through a rough patch right now.”

“Charlie!” Sam protested.

Charlie slapped a hand over his mouth. “Sorry,” he mumbled through his fingers. “I’m an over-sharer.”

Jenny had to laugh again, she couldn’t help it. “I see that,” she told him, mock-seriously.

“I’m Marcus,” the final man at the table said. “I’d tell you all my dark, deep secrets but I’m sure Charlie will beat me to it.”

“Drink?” Will asked Jenny, leaning in close.

“A beer would be great...*Zeus*.”

He rolled his eyes and she giggled. After giving her a light, teasing tug on her hair, he walked away from the table and wound his way through the room toward the crowded bar. She watched the mouthwatering view of his tight ass for a few seconds before turning back to the guys, who were all looking at her expectantly.

“What?” she asked.

“What did you *do* to him?” Marcus asked in awe, his eyes huge behind his glasses.

“Do to him?” Jenny repeated, confused.

“Seriously,” Charlie chimed in. “It’s like an alien took over his body.”

Jenny blinked. “An alien?”

“A much nicer alien,” Charlie amended. “We’ve worked with him for months and he’s never come out with us before. You’re like Wonder Woman.”

“Nah, more like Lois Lane. You know, bringing out the softer side – ”

Marcus interrupted Tim, shaking his head. "You guys are nuts. She's definitely a Pepper Potts."

"Um, is that as dirty as it sounds?" Jenny asked tentatively.

The men burst out laughing.

"Don't worry about it," Sam reassured her. "These guys are just dorks. They're talking comic books."

"Ah," she nodded. "Well, I didn't do anything to him. He's just shy."

"Not too shy to tell off the boss," Tim said. "You should've seen him. It was such a smack-down."

Charlie nodded. "Told me he had to get home to meet you on your first day back to work. Hey, he mentioned you had an accident—you okay now? What was it—car? Bike? Street hockey?"

"I'm fine now," Jenny non-answered, her stomach clenching at the question.

Sam reached across the table and slapped Charlie across the side of his head.

"Ow! What was that for?" Charlie rubbed the spot.

"I'm trying to smack some tact into you," Sam growled. "She doesn't want to talk about it, so quit pushing."

"Fine! I'll be quiet. You could have just said something, you know. There's no call for violence."

Jenny looked at Sam, her head cocked to one side.

"What?" he asked. "Don't worry—his head is hard. I only killed a few brain cells."

She shook her head. "No, it's not that. I was just thinking about setting you up with someone but you're way too nice for him."

"Christian?" Will asked, setting two beers on the table and sitting down in the chair next to her. "He's nice."

"Of course I love him," Jenny explained. "But he's a real asshole to the guys he dates."

"That's just because he's scared." When she raised an amused eyebrow at him, Will flushed but continued in a mumble, "Tom hurt him."

Everyone at the table stared at him.

"No really," Charlie asked Jenny earnestly, "what did you *do* to him?"

She raised her hands and shrugged. "I take no credit. He's just a really sweet guy." She leaned over to kiss his cheek.

As the other men hooted, Will flushed even darker and choked a little on his beer.

"You get a call from Grimmitt yet?" Tim asked, changing the subject.

Will nodded. "Meeting with him tomorrow." Grimacing, he traced an absent circle with his glass. Jenny knew he was dreading it. He had mentioned leaving the meeting

and, when the call came from Josh's boss, Will had told her he figured it was either a reprimand or that he'd be fired.

"Hey, don't look so worried," Marcus said. "I have a feeling it's not going to be as bad as you expect."

The other guys looked at each other, pressing back grins.

Eyeing his coworkers suspiciously, Will asked, "Why? What do you know?"

Charlie grinned. "I can't keep a secret. We all went into Grimmitt's office on Monday after you left. You were the only one with the balls to say what we were all thinking, so we didn't want Josh in there telling Grimmitt to fire you. Told him that Josh was an idiot who didn't know his own ass from a hole in the ground and that he was destroying any synergy left in our team with his constant meetings. Grimmitt loves that word, 'synergy'. We must've used it a dozen times in fifteen minutes. He listened to what we had to say and said he had to think about things but that he'd take what we told him into consideration."

"So on Tuesday," Tim continued, looking gleeful, "I was talking with Susan, Grimmitt's assistant, and she told me that Josh is out of there. Guess who's lined up to take his place?"

Jenny was bouncing in her chair. "Is it Will? It's Will, isn't it?"

"None other," Tim confirmed with a happy nod.

With an excited squeal, she gave Will's arm a hug. "Congratulations! That's fantastic. Will, I'm so happy for you!"

He stared at Tim, looking completely flabbergasted. "Josh's job? Me?"

Sam raised his glass. "Here's to our soon-to-be supervisor—who is *not* an idiot and will hopefully only have a meeting when there's actually something to talk about."

Everyone except Will clanked their glasses together so enthusiastically that beer spilled onto the table.

"Wait," Will protested. "Are you sure? *Me?*"

"Positive," Tim beamed. "You'll have to give up that cushy work-at-home bullshit but I'm sure Grimmitt will make it worth your while." He rubbed his fingers together and winked.

"I'd suck as a boss," Will said, shaking his head. "You guys don't want me in charge."

"Are you kidding?" Sam rolled his eyes. "You know what you're doing. That's a huge step up from Josh right there."

"You're the one I always call when I have a question," Charlie added. "You might as well get paid for it."

"Josh set the bar so low, there's nowhere to go but up!" Marcus lifted his glass in a salute.

"You'll be a great boss, sweetie," Jenny told him, watching as his expression slowly changed from disbelief to wary pleasure. So much happy excitement bubbled inside her that she had to squeeze his arm again in a hard hug.

"Yeah?" he asked, smiling down at her.

She nodded, swallowing hard at the sight of his gorgeous smile. "The best."

Chapter Thirteen

Saturday night, Will asked Christian to help him pick out a ring. He had to yell the request, even though Christian was standing right next to him, since the club music was pounding around them. They had been sent to fetch drinks for Jenny and Carrie, who was finally getting her night out.

"A what?" Christian yelled back.

"A ring!"

Christian stared at Will, his mouth hanging open. "An *engagement* ring?"

Will nodded, grinning and blushing a little.

"An honest-to-God, we're-getting-married-and-I'm-not-shitting-my-good-friend-Christian engagement ring?"

Laughing, Will nodded again.

"Well, ho-ly balls! Congratulations!" Christian grinned and grabbed Will in a hard hug, pounding him on the back. "Don't waste any time, do you?"

Will shrugged. "Jenny wants a long engagement—just to be sure. So it'll probably be a couple months before the actual wedding."

Christian laughed at that and tossed an arm over Will's shoulders. "We need some drinks!" he called to the bartender. "This guy is getting married!"

Several of the men gathered around the bar gave Christian envious looks. "No, not to me—not that *that* wouldn't have been fabulous," he gave a mock-wistful sigh and gazed at Will with puppy-dog eyes. Will just laughed and, in an overflow of happiness, grabbed Christian in another hard hug.

"Okay, big guy, need to breathe here," Christian choked. He turned back to the bartender. "Lemon Drops all around—we've got some celebrating to do!"

Back at the table, drinks in hand, Will was almost knocked down by Carrie's whirlwind hug. He held the glasses safely above her head and looked at Jenny, startled.

Grinning at him, she mouthed, "I told her."

Will nodded and inclined his head to Christian, who carefully set the drinks on the table before pulling Jenny up. He hugged her and swung her around in a circle as Jenny laughed, flushed and happy.

The dance floor lights glinted off the necklace Will had given her the day before, Valentine's Day, to a very enthusiastic reception. His cock thickened as he thought about Jenny's way of saying thank you. She had told him that he had broken the Valentine's Day curse, which he didn't really understand, but he happily accepted her gratitude for said curse breaking.

"This calls for a dance," Carrie announced, blotting at her eyes with a cocktail napkin, careful of her mascara. Will looked at Jenny in panic but she just tugged him by his arm to the dance floor. He shook his head.

"I can't dance," he yelled above the music.

Jenny waved off his protest. "If you can have sex, you can dance to this. Watch." She pressed against him and started undulating to the beat. Jenny kept her hands on Will's hips, moving him with her until he began to relax and follow her body with his own.

Jenny was right—it was a lot like sex, only more sideways. Will smiled, pleased with himself. Jenny saw his self-satisfied grin and laughed, turning her back and tucking against him.

Yeah, Will thought, as Jenny's ass ground against his hardening cock. *I definitely like dancing*. Glancing around, he saw Christian and Carrie moving in the crowd. He watched Christian and even copied a few of his moves, making Jenny grin in approval.

A feeling of unreality struck him. He, Will, was dancing. With his soon-to-be wife, no less, while out with their friends. His life before he met Jenny, so solitary and silent, was gone, banished by her laughter, her chatter, her friends—even her dog.

Overcome with gratitude and love, Will wrapped an arm around Jenny's waist. She turned a merry face up to him and Will kissed her, the taste of her laugh filling him with joy.

About the Author

Katie Allen grew up in the Midwest with a horde of sisters (five) and one beleaguered brother. After an enjoyable four years working on her creative writing/art degree, and two not-so-pleasant years struggling toward her MBA, Katie somehow ended up as a mechanical engineer in Denver, Colorado.

When she's not writing or working to pay for her unfortunate equine addiction, Katie rides horses, reads (of course), paints and is learning to knit (having completed one slightly deformed sock so far). She also enjoys exploring Denver with her Lab mix, especially when their walks pass the neighborhood fire station...the firemen are always an excellent source of inspiration for her stories.

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

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