

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Lily Blossoms
Summersville Secrets

N.J. WALTERS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Lily Blossoms

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LILY BLOSSOMS

N.J. Walters

Dedication

Thank you to all my readers, but especially to those of you who have been with me from the very beginning. *Annabelle Lee* was my very first published book. I never dreamed that several years later, I'd be writing the third book in the Summersville Secrets series.

Thank you to my amazing husband. I'm so glad that you encouraged me to send *Annabelle Lee* to Ellora's Cave.

Thank you to Pamela Cohen for taking a chance on an unknown writer all those years ago.

To Mary Altman, an amazing editor, thank you for making each book special.

Chapter One

His calloused fingers brushed the side of her breast, sending goose bumps down her arms. She sucked in a breath as his hand shifted, cupping the soft mound. "I want you." His voice, low and deep, made her shiver.

"Here? Now?" She couldn't restrain her shock. She'd never made love in a public place before, where anyone could come upon them at any moment. Yes, it was secluded here in the area they'd chosen to picnic, but still, they were in full view of any passersby.

"Here." He nuzzled her neck with his lips. "Now," he whispered as he circled the sensitive curve of her ear with his tongue.

Angie wasn't sure what to do. Part of her was appalled by his suggestion. The other part of her... Well, there was no doubt that she was aroused. Her panties were damp and her breasts felt heavy. A low, throbbing ache began between her thighs and her hips moved of their own accord, seeking his hardness, his heat.

His large palm cupped her ass as he tilted her hips further, bringing her pelvis up tight against his. "This is what I want." He pushed his erection against her mound and she parted her legs, trying to bring him closer. Even through the layers of their clothing, she could feel the pulsing of his cock. She wanted him too. Right here. Right now.

"Yes."

He froze, his eyes almost black in the dim light of the oncoming evening as he stared down at her. "You're sure?"

"I've never been so sure of anything in my entire life."

His wicked smile set her senses whirling. She had no idea what would come of their relationship, but she was more than willing to find out.

* * * * *

Lily Summers lifted her fingers from the keyboard, sat back and reread what she'd just written. She liked the premise of this book— young woman discovers her sensuality through a series of experiences with an older man. Sighing, she rubbed her forehead, trying to ignore the headache brewing there. The trouble was, she was running into a roadblock of sorts with this project.

Although her fortieth birthday was knocking at the door, she didn't have much sexual experience to talk about. She'd married young and had her one and only child, her son Ethan, at the tender age of nineteen. By the time she was twenty-two, she was divorced and had joined the ranks of single motherhood.

Not that she regretted it. Not for a second. Her son was the biggest joy of her life. It had been good riddance to her cheating ex-husband, but she hated the fact that he'd not only left her behind without a backward glance, but he'd left his son as well.

But that was so many years ago that she rarely thought of her ex-husband anymore. Ethan had grown into a fine young man and was now attending college. She was proud of him and proud of the job she'd done rearing him.

That brought her back to the problem at hand.

No one in the town of Summersville where she lived and worked knew that she wrote erotic romance under the pseudonym of Ms. Lillian. They all knew her as the quiet and conservative woman who owned and ran the local flower shop. Her store, Lily's Blossoms, was as much her baby as her son was. She'd built it from nothing, starting it on a wing and a prayer more than fifteen years ago.

She'd made a good life for herself and her son, but as he'd gotten older and the prospect of college had loomed, she'd worried about the cost. Books had always been her escape from the daily grind, and she'd read thousands of them. One day, she'd decided to try her hand at writing one. It had been awful— filled with bad prose, faulty grammar and a plodding plotline— but she'd persevered, writing and rewriting until what had finally emerged was something she was proud of.

It had taken her another six months to get up enough nerve to send out a query to a prospective publisher. She'd been shocked when she'd been asked to submit the entire manuscript and totally overjoyed when they'd accepted it. All her money from her writing had been channeled into a savings account for her son's education.

Her first three books had been mildly successful. They'd been filled with many of her own daydreams and desires. Things that she'd never had the nerve to speak aloud to anyone. It had been almost cathartic to write them down and to watch her characters experience them. She'd spent many nights after work, pouring out her soul onto page after page of her stories.

The problem now was what to do with the fourth book. She wanted to do something different but wasn't sure quite how to proceed. She glanced down at the glowing screen of her laptop and sighed as she picked up her cup of tea and sipped. The tea was cold, but because it was herbal peppermint, it was still drinkable.

Today was Wednesday, and she was off for the day. Her assistant was running the store, her son was no longer living at home—she ignored the pang of loneliness that accompanied that thought—and she had all day to make a big dent in her next project. She was hoping to get anywhere between ten and thirty good pages done today, but so far her progress had been slow.

Sitting back in her chair, she looked around the kitchen. She'd brought her laptop out here to work today for two reasons. The first was that, as a woman now living alone, she didn't have to worry about anyone stumbling onto her work. Her son had no idea she had a second career and she wasn't quite sure how to tell him that she wrote erotic romance novels. Christmas, she promised herself. She'd tell him when he came home for the holidays. Since it was only mid-September, that gave her three months to figure out exactly what to say to him.

The second reason she'd chosen to work in the kitchen this morning was that this room was her favorite in the house and got the morning light. She loved the mellow hardwood floors, the cinnamon-colored walls and the maple cabinets. The large

window overlooking the backyard was filled with pots of herbs, their rich scents perfuming the air. Now that she no longer had to write up in her bedroom at night, or at her desk in the family room, she much preferred to work here.

Reaching out, she plucked a paperback book off the table and traced her fingertip over the name embossed on the cover. Ms. Lillian. It was still strange to see her name in print and, even now, it sent a thrill rushing through her. The package had been delivered yesterday, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to pack away her author copies of her third book. Not yet.

Setting the paperback down next to her laptop, she brought herself back to the task at hand. She had poor Angie and Simon poised on the edge of making love for the first time. She could hardly leave them that way. She tucked away the nagging doubts as she read the page yet again.

Her notes sat beside her, listing possibilities for scenes—sex in a public place, phone sex, roses, whipped cream, a striptease...they were all things to consider. Right now it was sex in a public place. Problem was, she'd never had sex in a public place before. Sure, she could imagine the fear coursing through Angie's veins. There would be excitement as well and the anticipation of what was to come.

Putting her doubts aside, Lily began to type. The keys clicked in the quiet kitchen, punctuated by the occasional pause or sigh. She jerked when a knock came on the back door, yanking her back to reality. She cursed under her breath as she lost her train of thought. It had been going so well. Hitting the save button, she glanced at the door. She wasn't expecting anyone.

When she got up from her chair, she groaned. A quick glance at the kitchen clock told her that she'd been sitting there for two hours. No wonder she was stiff. Her stomach growled, reminding her that it was almost time for lunch. She'd make a sandwich as soon as she found out who was at her door.

Closing the cover of her laptop, she tossed her notes over the book on her table and made sure the flaps were down on the box containing the rest of them. Stretching her

arms over her head, she padded to the back door and peeked out the window. Summersville was a quiet, safe town, but it still paid to be cautious.

A broad set of shoulders and a well-muscled chest came into view and she groaned. There was no mistaking this gorgeous body for any other. Carson Granger, her son's ex-boss and the subject of many of her sexual fantasies, stood on her back step. Taking a deep breath, she plastered a smile on her face and opened the door.

"Hi, Carson."

"Morning, Lily." The deep rumble of his voice feathered over her skin like a caress, making her shiver.

"What can I do for you?" She was proud of the fact that her voice sounded normal when all she wanted to do was moan.

"I was wondering if you had Ethan's address at college. I wanted to send him his final paycheck and a letter of recommendation. He called me and asked for one. Says he's looking for a new part-time job."

That had been a bone of contention between her and Ethan. She wanted her son to concentrate on his studies. He wanted to help pay for his schooling. She was proud of the fact he wanted to do his part, even though she wished he'd just worry about his college courses. During his first two years of college, he'd held down a part-time job throughout the school year and come home to work full-time every summer. So far it hadn't affected his grades. He'd just started his third year and planned to work this year as well.

"Come on in and I'll get it for you." The quicker she could get Carson out of here, the better for her peace of mind. They'd known one another several years. It was inevitable living in a town like Summersville. Given the fact that he ran a landscaping business and she ran a floral shop, which sold a limited selection of herbs and bedding plants during the summer months, their paths had crossed many times.

Lily had been drawn to Carson the first time she'd seen him more than five years ago. What woman wouldn't notice him? He wasn't overly tall, about five-ten, but he

was built. His body was lean and strong from years of physical labor. He wore his sun-streaked dark blond hair down to his shoulders, keeping it tied back at his nape. He had an easy smile and pale blue eyes that invited a woman to smile back.

The problem was he was a good seven or eight years younger than she was. He was in his early thirties and her fortieth birthday was in a few months. She'd ruthlessly squashed the feeling of desire he stirred within her and concentrated on being friendly and professional. It hadn't been easy, but she'd managed.

It had gotten even harder when Ethan had gone to work for Carson several summers ago. Her son had not only enjoyed the outside work and the physical labor, but he'd saved enough money to buy a used car and put away some money for college. She'd seen a lot more of Carson the past two years or so and it had gotten harder and harder to hide her reaction to him.

When he cleared his throat, she suddenly realized that she was just standing in her kitchen like an idiot staring at the man. "I'll just get that address for you."

"No hurry."

He had no idea just how much of a hurry there was. The longer he was here, the more she wanted to run her fingers through his hair just to see if it was as soft as it looked. And let's not even talk about his lips. They were so firm and full, she wanted to kiss them just to see what they felt like against hers. There was every need for her to hurry. She needed this man out of her house before she did something stupid.

Carson watched Lily scurry out of the room and swallowed a curse. The woman was always running from him and he didn't know why. He knew she was attracted to him. There was no way to miss the physical signs she gave off—the way her pupils dilated and her cheeks flushed—even though he didn't think she was aware of them.

The way she looked at him—as if she were starving and he was lunch—always made him hard, which was unfortunate in public settings. He'd always been attracted to women with plenty of curves until he'd laid eyes on Lily. She was slender and

athletic in build, with what his experienced eye told him was a B-cup. Her face was slightly rounded, her chin stubborn. She had blue eyes that were almost the color of violets and peered at the world with a sense of good humor and calm. Her brown hair was chopped off short, with bangs falling lightly against her forehead. His hair was longer than hers, yet it suited her.

All in all, Lily was attractive, but not a knockout. Yet every molecule of his body cried out for her. There was something about the woman herself, something intrinsic that reached out and grabbed him. He'd fought it the first few years he'd known her, reading the "keep-away" vibes she'd sent out. He'd respected the fact that she was a divorced woman rearing a child on her own and wasn't interested in dating.

He'd gone out with his fair share of women over the years, but none of them attracted him as Lily did. Finally, a year ago, he'd pretty much given up dating. He wanted Lily and had worked hard to get her to relax around him, but nothing seemed to work. Stopping by to get Ethan's address was just an excuse. He could have just as easily phoned her, but he'd wanted to see her.

Letting out a huff of breath, he prowled around her kitchen. It was much like the woman herself—calm and welcoming, with a hint of spice. She'd obviously been working. He ignored the laptop but couldn't resist glancing down at the papers strewn next to it.

His eyes skimmed and then jerked back—sex in public, roses, whipped cream and striptease. The words jumped off the page along with the underlined word "research". He knew he was invading her privacy and that he should just walk away, but he couldn't stop himself from picking up the sheet to study it further. When he did he noticed the book hidden beneath—*Hidden Desires* by Ms. Lillian.

Laying the sheet aside, he picked up the book and flipped it over, whistling under his breath as he read the blurb on the back. This was hot stuff. He knew it couldn't be a coincidence, but his brain could hardly reconcile the Lily he knew with the woman who'd penned an erotic romance.

A slow smile split his face. He'd always known that Lily had hidden depths.

"What the hell are you doing?" Lily stood in the doorway, practically vibrating with anger. He was busted.

"This is amazing." He laid the book back on the table. "I had no idea you were a published author."

She seemed taken aback by his compliment. Her cheeks flushed as she hurried into the room and shuffled her papers together, once again covering the book. He noted that this time the papers were turned facedown. "No one does." She shot him a glare. "Not even Ethan."

He held up his hands in mock surrender. "Your secret is safe with me." He paused as he watched pleasure at the compliment he'd given her war with the embarrassment she obviously felt. "Although I think you should tell Ethan. It's not like he's a kid anymore." He'd gotten to know Lily's son very well the past few years and thought a lot of him. Mother and son were very close and he wouldn't want to see that change for any reason.

"I know he's not." She crossed her arms defensively as she scowled at him. "I plan to tell him when he comes home at Christmas." Lily nibbled on her lower lip and Carson wanted to groan as his jeans suddenly became much too tight for comfort. He hoped she didn't look down below his waist because there was no way to hide his raging hard-on.

"That's good." He cleared his throat, wondering exactly how to approach the touchy subject of the list. A plan had popped into his mind the moment he'd read the words on the seemingly harmless sheet of paper. It was outrageous and she might very well boot his ass to the door. But nothing ventured, nothing gained and he'd wanted this woman for a long, long time. "I was wondering..."

She uncrossed her arms and gripped the back of one of the kitchen chairs. Even wearing a plain pair of khaki pants and a beige T-shirt, she made him hotter than hell. "What?"

"I saw your notes." Now she looked horrified instead of embarrassed. He rushed on before she could tell him to get out. "I want to help you research. We don't have to do anything you don't want to do, but I'm more than willing to do anything that's on your list." And a lot more things that weren't, but he kept that little tidbit to himself for the moment.

Her face lost all color and then flushed even redder than before. She swayed and he was afraid that she might faint, but she was made of sterner stuff than that and steadied herself immediately. "I don't need any help."

"We all need help." He softened his voice as he took a step closer to her. Her eyes widened, but she didn't shy away, so he took two more. When he was standing right next to her, he stared down at her. She was only about four inches shorter than him and would fit him perfectly in bed and out.

Reaching out, he traced the line of her jaw with his finger, noting the slight shiver that shook her and the goose bumps that raced down her arms. She wasn't as unaffected as she wanted to pretend. Good! "We don't have to do anything you don't want to, Lily." She shivered again when he said her name. "It will be our secret."

She opened her mouth, but he placed a finger over her lips before she could say no. "Think about it. I could caress your body with a rose. You wouldn't have to be naked. You could wear shorts and a halter top." He wanted her naked, but he wanted her to feel safe with him. When they made love, and he was more determined than ever that they would, he wanted her to want him as much as he wanted her.

"You could do whatever you wanted with me," he continued. He could see the outline of her nipples against the fabric of her top and wanted to howl with pleasure. His entire body tensed as his cock continued to throb. "You could practice a striptease, but you wouldn't have to take it all off. Maybe just down to your underwear." Imagining Lily clad in nothing but her bra and panties threatened his composure. His breathing got heavier and harder, his voice rougher. "Anything you want, Lily. Anything at all."

Her eyes were wide, her rosy lips parted. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly. Her tongue came out to lick at her lower lip and he barely stifled his groan of need. "I could call you later tonight if you wanted to try out phone sex." The top almost came off his head as he imagined what that would be like. "What do you say?"

Chapter Two

What could she say? Lily didn't know what to say. Couldn't manage a coherent sentence if her life depended on it. She wasn't totally convinced that she hadn't fallen asleep at her keyboard and was now having the most amazing dream. Carson Granger, the man she'd lusted over and fantasized about for the past five years, was standing in her kitchen, offering himself up for research.

This had to be a dream. Either that or she was losing her mind.

"Lily?"

She shook her head, trying to clear it, and licked her lips, which were suddenly dry. His pale blue eyes followed the track of her tongue, their color deepening. For the first time since he arrived, she forgot about her self-consciousness and really looked at Carson.

He was wearing his usual uniform of boots, jeans and T-shirt, yet it didn't detract from his commanding presence. If anything, it enhanced it. His shoulders were broad, stretching the seams of his snowy white shirt. The fabric clung to his chest like a second skin, leaving very little to her imagination.

She knew he had an impressive set of abs and that he had a small amount of chest hair that was slightly darker than the hair on his head. She'd seen him with his shirt off more than once when she'd gone to pick up Ethan from work before he'd bought a car of his own. The first time she'd seen Carson naked from the waist up, the sight had fired her sexual fantasies for months.

And how pathetic was that? She was a cliché—older, divorced woman lusts after young stud. "I'm sorry, Carson. I don't think that's a good idea." It was harder than she'd anticipated to push the words past her lips. A part of her really wanted to take him up on his outrageous plan.

"I think it's an excellent idea." He leaned closer. His presence seemed to suck all the available air from around her. She swallowed as his mouth touched hers. It was barely a touch, more of a grazing.

Lily felt it all the way to her toes. Her entire body began to hum as he leaned back and stared down at her. She wished she knew what was going on behind those pale blue eyes. Tension vibrated from him, and she sensed his determination.

She opened her mouth to reiterate her position but never got the opportunity to speak. Carson swooped down and captured her lips again. His lips were firm and warm against hers. He didn't force anything, just moved his mouth over hers. In spite of her resolve, she found herself leaning into his kiss.

She wanted to know what he tasted like.

Her tongue snaked out and traced the contours of his mouth. He groaned and parted his lips. She took advantage of the invitation and slid her tongue inside. He tasted like coffee and mint and hot male. It was scary and intoxicating at the same time. She didn't think she'd have had the nerve to continue, except Carson seemed to be as involved in the kiss as she was.

His breathing was harsh, his chest brushing hers with each breath he took as they were standing so close together. Yet she didn't feel threatened by him. His hands were resting lightly on her shoulders, but he wasn't holding her. She could step away at any time. She sensed that this was his way of letting her know that she was in charge. Anything they did was up to her.

There was power in that. And it made her head spin.

Slowly, she slid her hands over his chest, lightly kneading. She could feel the muscles jumping beneath her palms. He was all tense muscles and tendons as she stroked her fingers over his chest before linking them behind his neck. The action brought her chest tight to his. She swallowed back a moan as her taut, beaded nipples pressed against the solid planes of his chest.

Carson broke their kiss, burying his face in the curve of her neck. His breath was hot against her skin. "Does this mean yes?" He raised his head and she found herself pinned by his laser blue gaze. She could see the heat behind it. The passion.

Her body responded immediately. An ache began to throb low in her belly. She felt empty and needy. Arching her hips slightly, she brought her pelvis into alignment with his. The hard bulge behind his jeans both fascinated and terrified her. It had been such a long time for her.

Not that she was considering sleeping with Carson – not exactly.

Then what exactly was she doing?

Flustered, she broke away and took a step back, sucking much-needed air into her starving lungs. "I don't know. I'm not sure." And how stupid did that sound after being plastered all over the man? "I'm sorry." She waved her hand between them. "I don't know what happened. I didn't mean for things to get so out of control."

He stared at her for so long, she began to squirm. The man had a right to be angry with her. She was certainly sending out mixed signals. Problem was, she was even confusing herself.

Suddenly he began to smile and a twinkle entered his eyes. "I'll take that as a good sign." Reaching out, he hooked his fingers into her belt loops and tugged her closer. She didn't resist. "Why don't you take the time to think about it? I'll call you later tonight. If you're not interested in phone sex, you can just hang up on me. Okay?"

"That's not fair to you," she blurted out. God, could she really be considering this? Yes, she realized. Not only could she be, she most definitely was.

"Why don't you let me decide what's fair to me and what's not?"

Lily shook her head. "I don't understand." Why would a much younger, sexier man even bother? A thought entered her head and she scowled. "Just because I write erotic romance doesn't mean I'm easy."

"Believe me, Lily. There is nothing even remotely easy about you."

Her frown deepened. She couldn't tell from his expression what exactly he meant by that. Deciding the best course of action for the moment was to simply ignore it, she continued. "Nor does it mean I'll do anything kinky."

"A man can only hope," he said under his breath, but she heard him anyway. It sent her insides to quivering. "Whatever we do is up to you. You're in total control of the situation."

Lily quite honestly didn't know what to say or to do. Fortunately, Carson didn't seem to expect a reply.

"I'm going to go now." He released his hold on her and took a step away. "I'll call you later, okay?"

She managed a jerky nod.

He brushed a lock of hair off her forehead, looking as if he wanted to say more. She waited with bated breath, but instead of speaking, he spun on his heel and headed for the door. Her eyes were drawn to the long line of his muscled back and his tight ass, which looked incredible, encased in faded denim.

He opened the door and walked away without looking back. Lily was left standing in the middle of her kitchen, staring at the closed door.

The sound of an engine coming to life galvanized her and she rushed to the window just in time to see Carson's truck pulling away from the curb.

"Oh God." She placed her fingers over her lips and swallowed a half-sob, half-laugh. At this point she didn't know whether to cry or laugh. Her emotions were all over the place.

Groping her way back to the table, she practically fell onto her chair. She'd stood in her kitchen and kissed Carson Granger. Not only that, he'd kissed her back. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about that.

The kiss had been amazing. Incredible. Stupendous. And they'd barely gotten started. That man was lethal to her well-being. She touched her lips again. But he sure

as heck knew how to kiss. It wouldn't have taken a whole lot more for her to orgasm, which for a woman who hadn't had one of those in the presence of a man for...well, too many years to even think about, was exhilarating.

Then there was the whole *research* issue. What was she going to do about that?

Her eyes strayed back to the list she'd made last night while curled up alone in bed—sex in a public place, phone sex, roses, whipped cream and striptease. Thank heavens she hadn't put sex toys on the list! Although she doubted that Carson would have a problem with it if she had.

Images of blindfolds and silk scarves flitted into her brain.

Groaning, she dropped her head into her hands. What was she thinking? Scrubbing her hands over her heated cheeks, she slowly raised her head. She was a woman with a grown child for heaven's sake. This was nothing to be embarrassed about. She'd known Carson for years and trusted that her secret was safe with him.

That gave her pause. At no time had she even for one second thought that he'd betray her secret career. That told her just how much she trusted him.

What if... She shook her head, but the thought wouldn't leave her. What if she took him up on his offer? A little hot phone sex wouldn't hurt anyone and it would certainly allow her to write the scene realistically.

The irony of the situation struck her. Her book was about a younger woman being educated in the ways of sexual enticement by an older man. In reality, it would be an older woman being educated by a younger man.

Her sex clenched and she squeezed her thighs together to help alleviate the growing ache. She hadn't wanted a man this much in...well, she really couldn't remember wanting a man this much. Ever. There was something about Carson that had drawn her attention from the first time they'd met, but now that it had moved beyond the realm of fantasy and into reality it was even more pronounced.

Okay, maybe the phone sex would be okay. What was some sex talk between two consenting adults? It wouldn't hurt anyone. Neither of them was in a relationship. She

knew that Carson wasn't seeing anyone because Ethan had mentioned it just before he'd left to go to college two weeks ago, seeming surprised by the fact. Lily ignored the fact that that little tidbit of information had made her feel good. It gave them something in common. They were both single.

As for the other things on her list, they would take some thinking. Carson didn't seem to have any problem with them. His suggestion that she could remain fully clothed during the rest of them was completely sensible.

Why did it depress her so much?

Did she really want to get naked with Carson? Her stomach jumped and her breasts ached. She cupped them with her hands, desperately trying to make the empty feeling within her go away. Her nipples were tight and her breasts felt heavy. Touching them seemed to make the problem worse, so she dropped her hands back into her lap.

She knew one thing for sure—if she didn't engage in phone sex with Carson tonight, she was going to have to break out her vibrator or she'd never get any sleep. She was so wound up right now she thought she might implode.

Ignoring the dampness between her thighs, she squirmed on her seat, trying to get comfortable. It didn't help. Putting it out of her mind the best she could, she raised the lid on her laptop and stared at the glowing screen. The only sensible thing to do right now was to channel all this pent-up sexual energy into her work.

She thought about her vibrator, tucked away in the back of her nightstand drawer. It was a long time until tonight.

She considered it for the briefest second, but immediately decided against it. Anticipation was part of the process, the buildup for tonight. And she wasn't the only one who was aching right now. Carson had been sporting quite an erection when he'd left.

As her fingers poised over the keyboard it occurred to her that she'd never given Carson the address he'd wanted. The corners of her lips turned up in a smile. She'd

have to talk to him when he called later, if only to give him Ethan's address. Maybe they'd talk some more and who knew where that could lead?

Anticipation flooded her and she tamped it down, focusing instead on the screen in front of her.

* * * * *

Carson clenched the steering wheel of his truck so tight he was amazed that the damn thing hadn't cracked. His knuckles were white, his arms rigid. The hardest thing he'd ever done was walk out of Lily's home, acting like tonight was no big deal.

No big deal! He'd almost come in his jeans while standing in the middle of her kitchen. And that was from nothing more than a kiss. He hadn't been with a woman in way too long and he'd wanted Lily for far longer.

Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to relax. He rolled his shoulders and concentrated on the road in front of him. Yet the image of Lily with her face flushed with desire, her lips parted and her breasts plastered against his chest captivated his thoughts. His cock was so tight it ached as he remembered the way she'd tilted her hips to rub against his erection. He'd wanted to grab her hips in his hands and grind her mound against his hard length.

Swearing, he pulled into the parking lot of a local convenience store. The way he was feeling right now, he was a menace on the road. Putting the truck in park, he sat there, remembering every word, every movement that Lily had made. It was imprinted on his brain.

He knew that she'd talk to him this evening when he called her. Knew it as sure as he was sitting here. She wouldn't be able to resist. Not after what had occurred between them. He'd always known that if and when they came together it would be explosive and the kiss they'd shared had only solidified that belief. Lily was an amazingly passionate woman even if she didn't seem to realize it.

God, he wanted to be the man to tap into that reserve of passion. But first he had to get her trust. Seducing her slowly. Letting her set the pace. He had a good imagination and had no problem picturing Lily naked and splayed across her bed waiting for her lover. Waiting for him.

Her legs were long and shapely. He wondered if she shaved her pubic hair or if she had a nice tuft of dark brown hair. Would it be curly or straight?

"Fuck." He pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes. He had to stop or he'd drive himself crazy. Lowering his hands, he stared out the windshield at the world around him. It was almost lunchtime and the convenience store was doing a brisk business. Mike Sloan, a buddy of his who was a general contractor, had pulled in next to him and was climbing out of his truck.

Knowing he had no other choice, Carson opened his door and willed his body into submission. It wasn't easy and he'd only partially managed it by the time he got to the front of his truck where his friend was waiting for him.

Mike stared at him, his head cocked to one side. "You okay, buddy?"

"Yeah." He forced a smile. "I'm fine. How's Annabelle?" Annabelle was Mike's wife and a surefire way to distract him from a topic of conversation that Carson didn't want to pursue. What was between him and Lily was private.

A huge smile split Mike's face. "Annabelle is great." Carson envied the relationship that Mike and his wife had. They were obviously in love and didn't care who knew it. "Got time to grab some lunch?"

Carson checked his watch. He had to meet a client about a prospective job, but he still had an hour to spare. "Sure."

Mike motioned to a sub shop that sat next to the convenience store. "I just got a contract to revamp an old apartment building downtown. It's the one Tucker used to live in before he and Emma married."

Tucker was a mutual friend and Carson nodded. He knew the apartment building well.

"They're going condo and upscale," Mike continued. "You interested in putting in a bid on the landscaping?"

The mention of new business got his attention, or at least most of it. "I'm interested. You can give me the details over lunch and I'll see about putting a proposal together."

"Good enough. They're talking about plants in the foyer and a rooftop garden as well as the landscaping around the building."

Carson followed Mike into the sub shop, his mind already focusing on the project. "They'll need someone to upkeep the gardens as well." That was a service that Granger Gardens also provided, for a tidy fee.

"For sure." Mike placed his order and waited as Carson did the same. Their conversation was curtailed as they waited. When their sandwiches were ready, they carried them over to a corner table.

As Mike continued to give more information about the project, Carson concentrated on the details. But always in the back of his mind, teasing his senses, was Lily and what would happen when he called her later tonight.

Chapter Three

Lily was a nervous wreck by the time nine o'clock came. She'd managed to keep her attention on her work for most of the day and, to be truthful, she'd gotten a heck of a lot more done than she'd thought she would after Carson left. She smiled ruefully. What she'd done was transfer all her pent-up sexual energy onto the pages of her manuscript. Her poor characters, Angie and Simon, were just as frustrated as she was.

She paced back and forth across her bedroom floor, her bare feet making no sound on the area rug. The sheets of her bed were turned back invitingly. They were fresh too. She'd changed them late this afternoon.

She'd also taken a long, hot bath using the lavender bath salts that Ethan had given her for Mother's Day. She almost hadn't used them. Somehow it had seemed wrong to use the bath crystals her son had given her to prepare for an evening of phone sex.

Lily heaved a sigh and rubbed her hands over her arms. She was losing her mind if she was worried about such things. In the end, she'd decided that Ethan would never know so she didn't need to feel guilty over it. She'd also shaved her legs and slathered moisturizer all over her body. Which was ridiculous when she thought about it. Nobody would see her. Still, it helped her relax and made her feel better.

But that had been an hour ago.

Pausing by her dresser, she plucked her brush up and gave her hair an absent swipe or two before tossing it back down. She glanced in her mirror and sighed. She looked exactly like what she was – an almost forty-year-old woman with the beginnings of crow's-feet around her eyes, wearing a slightly faded nightshirt and no makeup.

The nightshirt was her newest one, but it was still about a year old. It didn't have any holes or anything, but it was faded from many washings. Her underwear and nightclothes weren't something she normally worried about.

She didn't even have any sexy lingerie to wear. Not that she would have worn it. She spun away from the mirror in disgust. Of course she would have worn it. Hadn't she almost gone to the local mall to look for some? Maybe just a new satin bra and panty set or a silky teddy. The only thing stopping her was that she didn't want to end up feeling totally ridiculous if Carson didn't call.

In the end, she'd opted for wearing no underwear at all. That was better than wearing her plain white cotton bikini panties with the stretched elastic at the waist. She really needed to buy some new underwear.

Perching on the side of her bed, she shivered. It was too early to go to bed, besides which, she wasn't tired at all. If anything, she was far too wound up to sleep. Grabbing her terrycloth robe, she tugged it on and belted it. The bedside clock seemed to mock her as the number changed again. It was now five minutes past nine.

"This is just stupid," she muttered as she stood and stalked to the closet for her slippers. She was through with waiting. There was a tub of double fudge ice cream in her freezer for emergencies, and if this didn't qualify as an emergency, she didn't know what did.

She'd shuffled halfway down the hallway when the phone rang. It seemed unnaturally loud in the quiet house. Lily halted, uncertain what to do. Then she scolded herself. "Just because the phone is ringing doesn't mean that it's Carson. He probably changed his mind. It's probably Annabelle or Emma." She hadn't talked to either of her two best friends in a few days. They all had busy lives but tried to keep in touch on a regular basis, even having lunch together every week or so. "Or maybe Ethan." She kept up a running commentary as she hurried back into her bedroom and grabbed her phone off the bedside table.

"Hello." She was slightly breathless, her heart pounding in anticipation.

"Hi." Carson's deep voice came across the phone line. Lily sat down hard on the side of her bed.

"I wasn't sure you'd actually call," she blurted out. Her stomach was in knots waiting for him to say something else.

The silence on the other end grew until finally he spoke. "This is your decision, Lily. If you want, we can pretend I called to get Ethan's address. Or," he paused and Lily gripped her phone tighter, "we can relax and enjoy our conversation and wherever it leads."

"I'm not sure what to do." God, could she sound any more lame? "I mean I know how this works, in theory. But I've never actually done it."

"Me neither. Why don't we both take a deep breath and try to relax?" She could hear rustling in the background.

"Where are you?" Curiosity compelled her to ask. She fiddled with the belt of her robe.

"I'm lying on my bed. Where are you?"

Visions of Carson reclining against his pillows made her swallow. She kicked off her slippers and curled her legs beneath her. "Me too."

He made a deep, rumbling sound that made her smile. "I thought about you all day."

"Really?" Beginning to relax, she transferred the phone to her other ear and stretched out on top of her comforter.

"Yeah, really. Made it hard to work at times." She could hear the self-deprecating humor in his tone.

"I noticed you had a bit of a problem when you left here today." Her breasts grew heavy as she remembered the large bulge in the front of his jeans.

"I've still got that problem." His voice was little more than a husky whisper that set all her nerve endings tingling. "What are you wearing?"

She wanted to tell him that she was wearing some fabulously sexy nightgown or a slinky teddy, but she knew she wouldn't. Lily couldn't lie to save her life and she'd only

trip herself up if she made something up. "My old terrycloth bathrobe and a cotton nightshirt." She traced her finger over one of the yellow roses printed on her comforter.

"I'll bet you look all cozy and soft."

She laughed. He'd surprised her with his reply. "I'm warm and comfortable. How about you? What are you wearing?"

"Boxers. Navy blue boxers."

Lily pressed her thighs together as the image of Carson wearing nothing but a pair of boxers fired her imagination. His legs were long and muscled. Maybe his hand would be resting on his belly, emphasizing the six-pack abs. His other hand would be tucked behind his head as he relaxed.

Ignoring the dampness between her legs, she allowed her mind to wander. She followed the line of his arm back down to his stomach. His chest was magnificent. Wide and muscular, she could stare at it all day. He had flat brown nipples with a light dusting of hair between them. The thatch of hair then narrowed and the thin band arrowed down his abdomen, disappearing into the band of his boxers.

"Are you still there?" Carson's voice shook her out of her fantasy.

"Yes." She gulped in a mouthful of air. "I'm still here."

"What were you thinking? Your breathing got heavier."

"I was thinking about you lying there wearing nothing but a pair of boxers." She was starting to sweat and tugged at the tie on her robe until it gave. Peeling back one of the sides, she flapped it back and forth, hoping the slight breeze would cool her off.

"Hmm, I was imagining you without the robe."

Her hand stilled and she stared down at the plain white terrycloth. "Okay."

"Okay, what?" She could hear the mounting tension in his voice and it thrilled her.

"I'm taking it off." Tucking the phone between her shoulder and her ear, she removed her robe, tossing it to the end of the bed.

"What about your nightshirt?" Was it her imagination or was his voice getting deeper?

"I'll take off mine if you'll take off yours." She heard a swish of fabric in the background.

"I'm naked." Those two words had her heart pounding and her sex throbbing. "Are you?"

She tried to speak, but nothing came out on the first attempt. "Hang on." Laying the phone on her pillow, she grabbed the hem of her nightshirt and pulled it over her head. The fabric grazed her nipples, making them pucker even tighter. She moaned, unable to hold it in. Her entire body felt over-sensitized. She felt ripe and ready. All the sexual feelings she'd suppressed throughout the day came roaring back.

She clung to her last covering, unable to make herself release it. Once she did, there was no going back. Not for her. If she dropped the nightshirt, she wasn't going to stop until she orgasmed. Her feminine muscles spasmed as if to encourage her.

Taking a deep breath, she let the nightshirt go and watched as the pale lilac fabric drifted to the mattress beside her. Resolved, she shoved it the rest of the way off the bed and grabbed her phone. Carson was calling her name. "I'm here." She sounded breathless.

"Good," he sighed. "I thought I lost you there for a minute."

"It took me a while to...you know."

"I know." His voice was low and gentle and she could hear the understanding in his tone. He really did know how hard this was for her. That made her feel slightly better.

"I think we should get on with this before I chicken out." Already goose bumps were running up her thighs and arms, partly from arousal and partly from the cool air touching her naked flesh.

"Touch yourself." His blunt words made her freeze in place.

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Everywhere. Pretend it's my hand that's touching you, Lily. I wish it was my hand cupping your breast." Her hand automatically went to her breast and she gasped. "That's it. Are you doing what I asked?"

"Yes," she groaned.

"Rub your thumb over your nipple. I'll bet it's already puckered into a tight little bud, isn't it?"

She moved her legs restlessly against the comforter. "It is." She watched, enthralled as her thumb rotated slowly around and over her nipple.

"What color is it? Dusky pink or deep red or maybe mauve." Cream trickled from between her thighs. His graphic commands and questions were turning her on, and she had some of her own.

"Dusky pink," she managed to get out. "I want you to wrap your hand around your cock." If she could write the word in her books, she could darn well say it out loud even if it was a first for her.

Carson groaned. "I wish it was your soft hand gripping me. My hand is calloused and rougher."

Lily almost swallowed her tongue as she imagined those hands cupping her breasts, skimming down her torso and grazing her hips on the journey to her sex. Her hand followed her imagination and she suddenly realized her fingers were poised just above her pubic hair. Her body jerked and she almost lost the phone. Grabbing it, she placed it close to her ear, jamming another pillow into place to keep it secure and free up her other hand.

"Lily?"

"I'm here. I was just fixing the phone so I wouldn't lose it."

"I've got you on speakerphone." His low chuckle made her inner muscles clench. "I knew I'd want both hands free. I'm stroking my hand up and down my cock all the while wishing it was yours. What are you doing?"

She tried to picture what he'd look like. His erection was substantial. That much she knew from this morning in her kitchen. But just how long and thick was a mystery. She wanted to run her fingers over the deep blue veins that ran the length of him. She wanted to place her lips on the darker, bulbous head and taste him. He'd be salty and warm and musky. She licked her lips, able to imagine his taste. The crisp hair of his groin would tickle her cheek as she licked a path from the base to the tip.

She shuddered and moaned.

"Talk to me." She could hear the growing desperation in his voice and knew he was as close to the edge as she was. That alone gave her the courage to continue.

"My hand is poised just above my pubic hair."

"Curly or straight? Or do you shave?"

Perspiration dotted her forehead as she sifted her fingers through the thatch of hair. "Curly and thick."

Carson groaned. "You're killing me here."

"Pump your hand faster."

"I will if you spread your legs and touch yourself." His heavy breathing came through the line. "You've got to talk to me. Tell me what you're doing."

Lily's entire body felt more alive than it had in years. The comforter touching the backs of her legs, bottom and the long line of her spine was like a sensual caress. She cupped one breast and tweaked her nipple as she raised her knees and spread her legs. "I've got my legs parted and I'm touching my breast, fingering my nipple. It feels so good."

"Say my name as you touch yourself. Please."

"Carson," she moaned as she skimmed her fingers over her sex. "I'm slick and so wet and it's all for you."

"Put your fingers inside yourself."

She slowly slid one finger inside, arching her hips to meet it. "I wish it were your fingers. They're longer."

Carson was panting harder now. "God, Lily. I wish it were my fingers too. I'd push them in one at a time, stretching you, until I could get two or three inside you. Then I'd fuck you with them, brushing my thumb over your clit until you came."

She inserted a second finger, then a third. Shifting her hand from her breast, she spread the folds of her labia wide and brushed her swollen clit with her middle finger. She tilted her head back on the pillow, rocking her hips forward on each thrust. "Three fingers. I'm using three," she gasped. Her hips were pumping hard, her entire being focused on her sensations coursing through her body.

"I'm using both hands now." She could hear his groans getting more frequent. "Harder, Lily. Harder." She wasn't sure if he meant for her to do herself harder or if he was imagining that it was her hands squeezing him harder while pumping faster. It didn't matter. They were both on the edge of oblivion.

The hair on her scalp began to tingle and she pressed down hard on her clit as she pushed her fingers inside one final time. "Carson!" She screamed his name as she came, barely registering when he yelled her name in return. Her hips jerked as spasms rocked her. Heat washed over her, leaving exhaustion in its wake. When she finally came back to her senses, she was sprawled on her bed with her hands still buried between her thighs.

She shivered as the cool air began to dry the light sheen of perspiration that covered her from head to toe. Biting back a groan, she carefully removed her fingers from her core and let her legs fall back flat onto the mattress. Grabbing one end of the comforter, she flung it over herself. It didn't cover her totally, but it was the best she could do at the moment.

She felt totally wrung out and slightly embarrassed now that all her senses were returning. Her cheeks felt warm and she knew if she looked in the mirror they'd be red. Was Carson still on the line? She had no idea how much time had passed. She licked her dry lips as she picked up the phone and held it close to her ear. "Carson?"

"Yeah, I'm still here. That was...that was incredible." He sighed deeply. "The only thing that could be better would be having you right here beside me."

Lily couldn't suppress the thrill his words brought her or the flash of heat it sent spiraling through her. But she wasn't sure what to say. Phone sex was crazy enough without adding real sex to the mix.

"You don't need to say anything." Tears pricked her eyes as he spoke. "I understand if you're not ready for that. But, Lily?" He paused before continuing. "I'm going to do my best to make you ready."

There was no doubting the sincerity in his voice and that made her nervous. "I'm not sure I'll ever be ready."

"If you're not, you're not. I can accept that. In the meantime, you have other things on your list we can explore. I've got an idea or two of my own if you're interested."

She shivered, but this time it wasn't from cold. She'd just had an incredible orgasm and yet her body felt hot and prickly and needy. "We..." She cleared her throat and tried again. "We can talk. In a day or two." Lily figured she'd need that much time to get over tonight so she didn't break out in a blush when she finally saw him.

"A day or two? Are you okay?"

"Yes. No. I don't know." She didn't feel like herself at all. Where was the staid, responsible woman she'd known all her adult life? It was as if Carson brought out a side of herself that she'd ruthlessly suppressed for more than twenty years. That last time she'd allowed her wild side out she'd ended up pregnant and married. The difference now was that she was a woman, not a young girl. She could handle this. At least that's what she told herself.

If she remained in control, then nothing would go wrong. They could both have a few thrills, she'd get her research done and no one would be hurt. Her sensible side told her she was headed for trouble. But the part of her that had been suppressed for so long, the sexual, sensual woman, urged her to step outside her safe box and play.

What could it hurt?

Lily was afraid to answer that question.

"Two days, Lily. Then I want to see you even if it's just for a cup of coffee to talk." She could hear the determination in his voice and knew she wouldn't be able to hold him off for any longer than that.

"Friday. I'll call you on Friday."

"Do you have my number?"

She tried to think, but with all the emotions rushing through her it was impossible. "Yes." She had his business card tucked in her address book.

"If you don't call me, I'll call you. Don't worry so much, Lily. This is between us. The only rule is that you're comfortable with whatever we do. Okay?"

She couldn't figure out why Carson was being so kind and giving, but she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, not until she decided for sure what she wanted to do. "Friday," she reiterated. "Thank you, Carson."

"My pleasure," his deep voice rumbled.

"Good night," she sighed, not wanting to break the contact but knowing she had to.

"Sweet dreams, Lily. Think of me." She heard the click and knew he was gone. Disconnecting, she tossed the phone on her nightstand and curled her legs up to her chest. Her body was still tingling everywhere and she groaned. She really needed to go and clean herself up, and she would, just as soon as her skin wasn't quite so sensitive.

She wanted to think about what she should do and what she should say on Friday, but her mind wouldn't cooperate. Instead, images of Carson filled her brain, each one more erotic than the last.

Sighing, she closed her eyes. She'd rest for a bit longer and then she'd get up. Hugging her arms tight around herself, she gave into the fatigue nipping at her and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Four

Late Friday afternoon, Lily stared at the phone for what seemed like the one-hundredth time. The bell over the shop door rang and she sighed with relief. She knew she had to call Carson, but she still hadn't figured out what to say to him.

True to his word, he'd stayed away yesterday, but she knew that today was his limit. If she didn't call him, she expected to see him outside her door when she closed the store at six o'clock. She glanced at her watch. That gave her less than a half an hour to figure out what to do.

It wasn't like her to be this indecisive. Running a small business and rearing a child on her own, she'd had to be clear-thinking and deliberate. Carson, however, left her feeling shaken, emotionally and physically.

She couldn't even call her two best friends, Annabelle and Emma, to ask their opinions. What exactly would she say to them? *I've had phone sex with Carson Granger and now I want to do even more things with him, and not just for research!* Then she'd have to explain why she needed to research sex. They didn't even know about her secret career. It wasn't something she was comfortable talking about, but she had a feeling that was going to have to change in the near future. She couldn't keep her son and her best friends in the dark forever.

Just thinking about it was giving her a headache. Forcing a smile on her face, she greeted her latest customer, and fifteen minutes later, the gentleman left with a bouquet of wildflowers for his wife.

There was no one else around, so Lily did something that she had never done before — she closed early. Turning the sign over on the door, she locked it and went back to her front cash register and proceeded to tally the day's sales and fill out her deposit slip for the bank.

A sharp rap on the door made her jump, dragging her pen across her deposit book. She swore under her breath. Now she'd have to fill out another slip. Sighing, she raised her head, resigned to dealing with an irate customer.

Instead, pale blue eyes filled with concern met hers. Carson. Her eyes flew to the clock on the wall and back to him. It was five minutes to six. Knowing that she couldn't put off the inevitable, she strode to the door. Ignoring her sweaty palms, she turned the lock and let him in.

"I need to finish closing."

Carson stared at her as if he were trying to see inside her. She could have told him it wouldn't do any good. All he'd see was a jumble of emotions. "Take your time. There's no hurry."

No hurry. Fine for him to say that. Time was running out and she still hadn't decided what she was going to say to him. Putting off that decision for another few minutes, she went back to her desk and filled out a fresh deposit slip. When she was done, she placed her deposit in the night drop bag and carried it back to her small office to tuck it in her purse. She'd drop it off at the bank on her way home.

There were a dozen things that needed her attention at the store. She needed to enter her sales figures in her daily journal. It was the middle of the month and she needed to pay the bills that had come in. She needed to inventory her supply of decorative pots and vases. And she was coming up with a million excuses to avoid Carson. Placing her hands on her small desk, she lowered her head and took a deep breath.

"Lily?" He said her name and nothing more. He didn't have to. She knew what he was asking. She could feel his presence as he moved closer to her. The hair on her nape stood on end and gooseflesh covered her arms and legs.

She raised her head and met his worried gaze. "I'm not sure, Carson."

He nodded. "That's okay." He wrapped his hands over her shoulders, the heat seeping through the thin layer of her dress. "You don't have to decide anything right now. How about we have some dinner and just talk?"

Just like that, he defused her tension. Like a balloon suddenly deflating, she felt empty inside. At the same time, she couldn't discount the sense of relief she felt as well. He began to massage her neck and shoulders, his strong fingers finding the tight muscles and working the stress from them.

Dinner. She tilted her head to one side, barely suppressing a groan of pleasure. He was very good at this. Better than good. What had she been thinking about? Oh, yes. Dinner. She could do dinner.

"Okay. Dinner would be nice." As soon as she agreed, another worry nagged at her. She didn't want to go to a public place. The last thing she wanted was the good folk of Summersville speculating about their relationship — such as it was.

As if he understood her concerns, he leaned down and kissed the curve of her ear. "Your place or mine?"

"Mine." She'd feel more secure in her own home, among her own belongings.

He nodded, his long, silky hair brushing the curve of her neck. She shivered. She didn't have to look down to know that her nipples were visible against the thin fabric of her dress. Her only saving grace was that the patterned material made it harder to see them.

His hands came around her sides, resting on her stomach just below the swell of her breasts. She sucked in a breath, her nipples puckering tighter as his hands hovered there. Finally, he heaved a sigh and took a step away from her. She wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed.

Shaking herself, she grabbed her purse and her sweater. "I need to stop at the bank and the grocery store before I head home." When she turned around, Carson was watching her, the emotion in his eyes unreadable. His body was an entirely different story. Every muscle in his body seemed tense and there was no mistaking the bulge in

the front of his jeans. Lily tried to look away, but found she couldn't. It took away some of her fears and tension to know that she affected him as badly as he did her.

"I'll go to the grocery store." His voice was low and rough. She drew her sweater tighter over her body, wrapping her arms around herself. "Is there anything special you'd like for supper?"

She shook her head. It didn't matter what they had. She doubted she'd be able to eat more than a few bites, her insides were so jumpy. "Whatever you want is fine."

His eyes darkened. "You shouldn't say things like that if you don't mean them, Lily." He came toward her, his face intent. Her toes curled in her shoes as he leaned down and kissed her.

It wasn't a gentle kiss, but one of total possession. His tongue plunged past her parted lips. Caressing. Tasting. Teasing. She groaned and kissed him back, unable to resist his honest passion. He tasted so male, so elemental and she wanted more.

Heat suffused her entire body, starting at her lips and working downward. Her entire body felt heavy and she swayed toward him, leaning her chest against his. The friction against her swollen nipples felt good, yet left her aching for more. She shifted her stance, trying to relieve the unrelenting throbbing between her thighs by pressing against his erection. Her panties were damp and getting wetter by the moment.

When he tore his lips from hers, she was breathless. His hair was free, brushing his shoulders. She realized that she had the thin strip of leather that he used to tie back his hair in her hand. Sometime during their kiss, she must have removed it. She had no memory of it. All she remembered was heat and passion.

Her fingers flew to her lips and she swallowed hard. Carson raked his fingers through his hair and took a step away from her. "Supper. First we'll eat. Then we'll talk." Plucking the leather strip from her nerveless fingers, he turned and stalked from the room. Hitching her purse higher on her shoulder, she followed, trying to ignore the sexually charged state of her body. "Do you want me to wait for you?"

It took a second for her mind to process what he'd asked. "No, I need to do one more thing before I head home."

He nodded and waited as she unlocked the door. When it was once again closed and locked, she leaned against the cool glass and watched him go. "Get a grip, Lily," she admonished herself.

In the few minutes she'd spent in his company, all her sensible reasons for not seeing him anymore were washed away like sand in the tide. Deep inside, she knew she wanted more of Carson, wanted to experience what she felt when they were together.

And not just for research purposes.

It was scary and potentially dangerous to her peace of mind, but she wanted Carson. She'd been sensible her entire life. She'd built a reputable business and reared her son to adulthood. Now it was her turn to do something just for herself.

Common sense warned that she could end up with a broken heart when it was over and he moved on. But better that than living with the regrets of "what-if" for the rest of her life.

She'd go into this relationship with her eyes wide open. It was temporary and she'd guard her emotions and her heart. That didn't mean that she couldn't enjoy herself and explore some of her sexual fantasies. It had been years since she'd had a lover. Not that she'd had that many. Rearing a child and running a business had left her little time and fewer opportunities.

In fact, she'd only made love to two men in her life—her ex-husband and a man she'd had a short affair with over ten years ago. He'd only lived in town for a year and had seemed harmless enough, plus he'd easily accepted the fact that her son had come first in her life. She hadn't realized just why he'd agreed to her terms of discretion so easily until she'd found out he'd lied to her and was actually still a married man. He'd traveled a lot for his job, but he had a wife and child in another town.

Lily had been angry and hurt and had shut herself away from dating and men. But the time had come to reach out and give it a try. She knew all there was to know about

Carson—there were no wives or girlfriends. Plus she genuinely liked and respected him.

Coming to her decision, she headed to the door, but at the last second detoured to one of the coolers. Sliding the door open, she reached in and plucked out a single red rose. *It will look good on the table*, she assured herself as she slid the door shut and headed out the front door. But if Carson decided that he wanted to explore her research list a bit further, she wanted to be ready.

Locking the store, she hurried to her car.

* * * * *

Carson climbed out of his truck and reached in to grab the bags on the passenger seat. He'd finally managed to get his body back under control. It had only taken driving to the grocery store with the air-conditioning on full blast and the vent aimed straight at his crotch.

Damn, but Lily made him lose control. When she'd looked at him, uncertainty and passion warring in her deep blue eyes, he'd had no choice but to touch her. He'd meant to reassure her, to be laid-back and nonthreatening. Instead, he'd ravaged her mouth. And what a sweet mouth it was. He'd had fantasies about that mouth, as well as other parts of her anatomy.

He felt his cock stirring once again. "Down, boy," he muttered as he walked around the house to the back door. Not that it did any good. By the time he knocked on her door, he was already semi-aroused again.

Lily pulled the door open, a tentative smile on her face. Unable to resist, he bent and dropped a quick kiss on her lips as he moved past her and deposited the bags on the kitchen counter. She not only tasted good, she smelled good, like flowers. Maybe roses. He couldn't quite decide.

Speaking of roses, he reached into one of the bags and withdrew the makeshift bouquet with a flourish. The paper crinkled as he held out the half-dozen red roses to

her. "For you." He'd bought them at the grocery store. The selection had been sparse, but he'd managed to find six individually wrapped roses that were perfect. They weren't near as nice as the ones at Lily's flower shop, but damned if he wanted to give her flowers from her own shop. Somehow it didn't seem right to do that.

Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. Slowly, her lips curved into a smile. "Thank you." She took the flowers and his body tightened when their fingers brushed.

"You're welcome."

They stood there for a long time just staring at each other until Lily finally broke the spell. "I need to put these in water."

He turned back to the counter where the bags of groceries waited. "I wasn't sure what you had here and what you didn't so I pretty much bought everything I thought we'd need." He also hadn't wanted to spend a lot of time cooking. There would be time for that in the future.

"I'm sure whatever you got is fine." She opened a cupboard door and reached up to take down a pretty blue vase with purple swirls. The movement pulled her dress tight over her breasts, outlining the small but firm mounds. Carson fought the urge to reach out and cup them. To take his mind off her tantalizing form, he unpacked their supper.

"Baked chicken, coleslaw, potato salad and rolls." He laid each item out on the counter.

"Sounds delicious." Her sudden laughter drew his gaze. She'd finally discovered that the roses were all individually wrapped and held together with an elastic band he'd found in the glove box of his truck.

Their eyes met and he smiled at the humor lighting her face. He shrugged. "They didn't have them in bouquets, just singles."

She pointed at the table and it was only then that he noticed that it had been set with fancy china and real cloth napkins. Sitting in splendor between the two place settings was a single rose in a bud vase. "It seems we had the same idea."

"Yeah, but you stopped at one," he deadpanned. Lily laughed again and leaned down to smell the roses. She closed her eyes and the look of ecstasy on her face had Carson shifting uncomfortably. She had the look of a woman in the throes of sexual passion.

When she opened her eyes they were shining brightly and she sniffed once. "Thank you. I haven't had flowers from a man for too many years to talk about."

He was suddenly extra glad that he'd bought them. "You deserve flowers." His voice was deep and husky and he cleared it as he continued. "I bought dessert as well." Reaching into the final bag, he pulled out fresh strawberries and whipped cream. The cream was the kind in the spray bottle, but it suited his purposes and it was on her list.

Lily stared at the can and licked her lips. Carson had to look away. It was either that or tackle her to the kitchen floor and make love to her there. He carried the strawberries and cream to the refrigerator and took much longer than necessary to store them. The cool air helped, but not much.

He heard Lily bustling around behind him. The swish of fabric, the sound of her shoes on the floor. Who would have thought that the sound of shoes would be erotic? But they were.

All Carson could think about was slipping those shoes off her feet and peeling off her pantyhose or stockings, or whatever it was she was wearing beneath her dress. That sent his brain off on another tangent altogether. What was Lily wearing under her dress?

"Carson?" He had no idea how long he'd been standing in front of the open refrigerator, but obviously it had been way too long.

He shut the door and headed to the table where Lily had laid out their supper. "Sorry about that. I got lost in thought."

"No harm done."

He held her chair and then took his own seat, grateful that the table helped hide his arousal. Both he and Lily served themselves and began to eat. Carson started to relax

and focus on the woman sitting across from him. She seemed...not tense, but uncomfortable. The quiet between them was unsettling rather than soothing.

Lily had opened a bottle of white wine but hadn't poured any. He picked up the bottle. "Would you like some?" When she nodded, he poured some into her glass before half filling his own. Setting the bottle aside, he picked up his glass. "Thank you for having supper with me."

She laid her fork aside and wiped her mouth with her napkin before picking up her glass. "It's my pleasure." Their glasses clinked and they both drank.

Just like that, the tension in the room eased and he asked Lily about her day at work. Before long they were chatting about work, the community and friends they both had in common. Lily was intelligent and insightful. That was part of the reason he'd always been drawn to her. She was animated as she talked, waving her fork in the air to make a point, laughing over an anecdote he told about one of the jobs he'd done this week and smiling as she listened to him talk.

Lily was a great listener. Since the first day he'd met her, he found himself telling her things that he normally wouldn't share with other people. There was a solid core of honesty in her, as well as a calmness that soothed him. Just being around her made him feel better.

Even aroused as he was, there was something about Lily that made him feel as if everything was right in the world. She completed him in ways he hadn't even thought about until he'd met her. At first, he'd tried to stay away from her. Deep inside, he'd known that she could be extremely important to him, could tie his insides up in knots. But he hadn't been able to stay away from her for very long. Time and again, he was drawn to her. She, however, hadn't been anywhere near ready for a relationship.

He'd bided his time, taking any opportunity that arose to put him in Lily's company. The years that he'd known her had only solidified his belief that she was the woman for him. Now all he had to do was convince her.

Stumbling onto her secret writing career and the list had been a stroke of luck. It had given him a way to approach Lily that she would understand and hopefully accept. Once he had her, he was going to find a way to keep her. Permanently.

They both finished eating and pushed their plates away. "That was wonderful," Lily sighed as she leaned back in her chair. "I haven't cooked much since Ethan left. I mostly have a sandwich or something quick. This is quite a treat."

"My pleasure." If he had it his way, Lily wouldn't have to worry about eating alone again anytime soon.

Rising from the table, he took her plate and his, carrying them to the counter. On his way back, he detoured by the refrigerator and removed only the can of whipped cream. He set the can on the table between them, right next to the vase of roses.

"Now we talk."

Chapter Five

All during the meal, Lily's thoughts had been drawn to the whipped cream in the refrigerator and the roses on the table. Her body had all but melted when he'd produced both items from his grocery bags. Her panties were damp and her body sensitized so that every single thing felt like it was sensory overload. A simple meal of chicken and potato salad had never tasted so good. All the while she'd been eating, she'd been very aware of the man seated across from her.

Now the time had come. The meal was done and decisions had to be made.

Carson removed both their plates and when he returned to the table, he plunked the can of whipped cream next to the roses. His question was clear, but she knew it was her choice to make.

She licked her lips and tried to order her thoughts. "I..." she began, breaking off when she didn't quite know what to say. Shaking her head, she managed to get a grip on her nerves. "I want to explore things with you."

"The list?" Carson placed his hands on the table and leaned forward, his face intent.

She nodded decisively. "The list. I'm not quite sure how far I want to take things. Not yet." God, could she sound any more juvenile? It was hard to think with Carson hovering over her.

"I've told you before, Lily." He shifted closer, so close that their noses were almost touching. She could see his incredible pale blue eyes fringed with thick brown lashes. His nostrils flared, his lips parted. "Whatever you want, however you want it. It's all up to you."

Her throat felt dry and parched, but she couldn't even try to swallow. His words mesmerized her even as his gaze held her pinned in her chair. This situation was crazy, but she didn't care.

“Let’s go to your bedroom.” His lips brushed hers.

Her heart was pounding and her palms were sweaty, but she was determined. She wanted this, wanted to explore different aspects of her sexuality. And she wanted to do it with Carson.

Pushing away from the table, she stood and gathered her vase of roses. Then she held out her hand. Carson plucked the can of whipped cream off the table with his free hand as he wrapped his fingers around hers. His hand was strong and warm and he twined his fingers through hers so that their palms were touching. Lily had forgotten what a lovely feeling it was to hold hands with a man. It was intimate and quiet as she led him up the stairs of her small home.

She was extra glad she’d taken the time to change the sheets and put fresh candles in the pretty glass holders on her dresser. The room felt inviting and cozy. Lily went straight to the nightstand by her bed and placed the vase on it. The aromatic scent of the roses filled the air around her as she turned on the small brass lamp that sat on the nightstand.

Carson’s arms came around her as he set the can on the table beside the flowers. Closing her eyes, she leaned back into his embrace, resting her head on his shoulder. He was strong and warm and she found herself relaxing, yet getting more aroused. She loved the feel of his hard, muscled body pressed against hers.

He wrapped his arms around her midsection and slowly rocked them back and forth. The action soothed her and she found the last of her nervousness dropping away. Whatever came, she was ready for it—more than ready. In fact, she found herself anticipating it.

She had no idea how long their association would last—she couldn’t quite bring herself to call it a relationship—but that no longer mattered. She trusted Carson and she didn’t trust many men. There was certainly no doubt that she wanted him. Her body hadn’t felt so alive in years.

She was a divorcée with a grown child and he was a man in his early thirties who'd never been married. But it no longer mattered that he was younger than she and at a much different place in his life. At this time and in this place, being together felt right.

"You okay?"

She could feel the deep rumble in his chest and savored the feeling. She could also feel the hard ridge of his erection digging into her behind. "Yes. I am."

"Good." Releasing her, he turned her so that she was facing him. "Why don't you sit on the edge of the bed?"

She sat, willing to follow his lead. For now.

Carson went to the dresser and lit the two candles. The light flickered and then settled into a steady flame, casting a soft glow on the room. Returning to her, he flicked off the bedside lamp before going down on one knee in front of her. He lifted her right foot, sliding off her sensible beige flat and laying it aside. Wrapping his fingers around her foot, he began to massage it, the heat from his hand seeping into her sole.

She braced her hands on the edge of the mattress to keep from melting back onto the bed. "That feels wonderful." She groaned as his fingers found a particularly tight spot in her arch.

"Glad you're enjoying it." He left off his massage on her right foot and proceeded to remove her left shoe. "I'm just getting started."

Lily thought she'd died and gone to heaven by the time he released her left foot. She felt wonderfully relaxed and mellow. That feeling fled as his hand slid up under the skirt of her dress. She stiffened and his hands stopped just above her knees.

"I want to remove your pantyhose." She was very aware of the heat of his hands against her skin. The silk of her stockings were no protection against it. He was only inches away from touching her in her most intimate spot. Her sex throbbed in anticipation.

"Thigh-highs, not pantyhose." Why she felt the need to tell him that she wasn't sure. He'd discover it soon enough if he kept going.

Carson lowered his head, resting it against her knee. "I've been wondering that for the past hour."

"Really?" Unable to resist, Lily sank her fingers into his thick hair, loving the sensual slide of it against her skin. She tugged at the leather thong keeping it captive, pulling it free.

Carson sat back and shot her a wicked grin. "Oh yeah." Taking her lack of denial as permission to continue, he slid his hands higher until they touched the band of her stocking. Ever-so slowly, he began to roll her right stocking down her leg.

The slide of the stocking against her leg and the brush of his calloused fingers sent shivers coursing through her body. Her nipples were puckered so tight and her breasts ached so badly that she wanted to cup them in her hands to try to ease them. Her feminine muscles pulsed in a primal rhythm, demanding that she do something to end their torment. She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out as he slid the stocking off her foot and tossed it aside.

Then he did the same with the other one.

Lily had never realized that the simple act of removing one's clothing could be such a sensual experience. With Carson it was foreplay. She was still decently covered in her dress, yet she felt as if he'd stripped her bare.

When her stockings were gone, he ran his fingers up and down her legs from her ankles to her thighs. She could feel the heat of his hands as he moved agonizingly close to her pussy but never quite touching it.

"What about your dress?"

Once again, he reminded her that she was in charge. The thought of his hands roaming over her stomach and breasts sent a fresh trickle of cream seeping from her core. "Yes." She reached for the buttons in the front, but he stayed her hands.

"Let me."

She let her hands drop back to her sides and allowed him to do what he would. The backs of his hands brushed against her swollen nipples as he reached for the buttons. Accident or on purpose, she couldn't be sure, but it sent bolts of heat flashing through her.

By the time he had the buttons undone, her breathing was harsh. Her body was wound so incredibly tight that it wouldn't take much to make her come undone. Carson slid his hands under the fabric and slowly slid it down her arms. The material pooled at her waist, leaving her clad in only her white cotton bra.

"Beautiful." She'd long since passed the stage in her life when she was concerned about her less than ample breasts. Still it was gratifying that Carson seemed so enthralled with them.

He traced the edge of her bra with his fingers and she felt her breasts swell. They ached for his touch. She wanted to touch him in return. "Take off your shirt." Her voice no longer sounded like it belonged to her. Husky and deep, she sounded seductive.

Carson reared back and yanked his shirt over his head, tossing it aside. Lily reached out and sank her fingers into his firm, muscular shoulders before letting them skim down his chest. His torso was all sculpted power and sinew, a testament to his years of hard, physical labor. The muscles rippled beneath her palm as she stroked him.

Carson shifted closer, making a place for himself between her spread thighs as he cupped her breasts in his hands. Lily's toes curled as he traced her nipples through the thin fabric of her bra.

"I want to stroke your body from head to toe with rose petals." He lifted his hands from her body and slowly stood, letting her hands slide down his torso. "Let's get this dress off and settle you on the bed."

Lily stood, allowing her dress to slide down her hips to pool around her ankles. Clad only in her bra and panties, she should have felt self-conscious, but didn't. Carson watched her every move. Lily felt voluptuous and ripe, which was strange considering

she was slender and not well-endowed. It had to do with the way he looked at her, his eyes almost feverish with need.

Lowering herself back to the mattress, she scooted to the center of the bed and reclined against her pillows. The warm air brushed her skin and the comforter beneath her felt soft and inviting.

Carson bent over and tugged at the laces of his boots. Lily watched the ripple and play of muscles as he removed his footwear and socks. Clad only in faded blue jeans, he sat on the edge of the bed next to her.

"What about your jeans?" It certainly couldn't be comfortable for him with his erection pressing hard against the zipper.

"Later," he promised as he plucked a rose from the vase. "Close your eyes."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"Close your eyes," he repeated. "It will heighten all your senses."

She thought about it. She'd wanted to do a scene with a blindfold and this was pretty much the same thing. She gazed at him, soaking in every hard inch of him before letting her lids close. Darkness surrounded her.

Immediately, she heard the rustle of fabric and felt the bed dip as Carson shifted closer to her. The heavy perfume of the rose filled her nostrils as she felt the slightest brush of softness against her lips. They parted in reflex.

Her eyelids fluttered.

"Keep them closed." She could feel the warmth of his breath against her cheek and then the slightest touch of his lips. Her legs moved restlessly against the comforter as heat suffused her.

He stroked the rose down her cheek and across her jaw. She found herself tilting her head back in anticipation as he let it flow down the curve of her neck and across her collarbone. Her eyes parted slightly. He seemed intent on her every reaction.

"You can't keep them closed, can you?"

Realizing she'd been caught, she shrugged. "I can't seem to help it."

"I can help you with that." Carson laid the rose on her stomach and reached into his back pocket. The item he withdrew was made of black silk and when he unfolded it, she realized it was a mask, the kind that people sometimes wore to shut out the sunlight when they wanted to sleep in the daytime. "Lift your head."

Lily stared at the mask and then at Carson. He'd certainly come prepared. She was frightened, not by the mask, but by the fact that she trusted him enough to wear it. It wasn't even a question for her, not really.

She was also incredibly excited by the idea of wearing a mask, unable to see as he pleased her with the rose. Lily raised her head.

She could see the satisfaction in his eyes as he slipped the mask over her head, making sure the elastic didn't pull her hair. When she lay back against the pillows, he adjusted the fabric so that her vision was truly blocked.

"Comfortable?"

She rolled her head from side to side. "Yes."

Carson's hands shook with desire as he placed his palm against the center of Lily's stomach. Her felt the muscles jump and then he felt her relax. The trust she was giving him was such an incredible turn-on. His cock was as hard as steel and he flicked open his snap and carefully lowered the zipper to give himself some relief. He had no intention of making love to Lily tonight. It was too soon. Tonight was all about Lily.

Picking up the rose, he feathered it between her breasts and down her stomach. She sucked in her stomach, her lips parting on a soft gasp. The bikini underwear she wore matched her bra—both of them plain white cotton. He ran the flower along the band of her panties, unable to suppress a smile when her legs shifted and parted.

Letting the rose flow over her hipbone, he teased the crease at the top of her thigh. She moaned and her legs shifted farther apart. He'd taken a chance with the blindfold.

He hadn't been sure that she would be ready for it yet, but he'd brought it in anticipation.

He'd taken a half-hour run to the next town over and purchased it at a large chain store. The last thing he'd wanted was someone local asking him why he needed a satin sleep mask. He grinned at the thought of Mrs. Collins, the pastor's wife who worked part-time at the Summersville pharmacy, scanning it in for him.

Personally, he didn't care who knew about him and Lily. But he knew that she would be embarrassed. For that reason alone, he'd taken the time to protect her privacy. Whatever went on between them would stay that way unless Lily decided differently.

She looked beautiful with her pale, slender legs spread on top of the comforter, which was covered in yellow roses and greenery. It was as if she were lying in the center of a rose garden. Damn, he had it bad. He almost sounded poetic.

The bra and panties she wore were plain, ordinary white, but there was nothing ordinary about the way he felt seeing her in them. He was beginning to sweat, but he ignored it, focusing all his attention on Lily. He wanted to know everything about her – what turned her on, what made her moan and what made her scream with pleasure.

Leaning down, he nipped at her hipbones as he let the rose slip between her legs to tickle the soft skin of her inner thighs. Lily arched her back, sucking in a breath. He drew the rose down the inside of her leg, letting the petals skim over her. Her fingers were digging into the mattress, clenching at the comforter.

"Do you like this?" He reversed the direction of the flower, pulling it back up her leg.

"Yesss," she moaned, drawing her knees upward.

Carson lifted the rose away and brought it back to the edge of her bra, letting it trail along the contours of her breasts. "Do you want to feel it against you here?" He let the bud touch one of her nipples.

She swallowed hard, her throat moving as he watched. He could almost hear her thinking.

"It's not that hard a decision, Lily. Yes or no, it's up to you."

"Yes." He was surprised and pleased by the conviction in her voice. There was no doubt that she wanted this and was embracing the situation between them.

Carson dropped the rose onto the comforter and covered her breasts with his hands. Even through the confines of her bra, he could feel her nipples poking at his palms. Practically humming with pleasure, he slid his hands down her sides and slipped them under her back. He made quick work of the hooks and he peeled the straps down her arms, pulling the garment from her body.

He stilled as he stared down at her. Her breasts weren't large, but they were perfectly formed mounds. Her nipples were puckered into tight, rosy buds. He had to taste one.

Laying a hand on her belly, he lowered his head and nuzzled between her breasts, breathing in the perfume of her skin, a combination of rose and warm, feminine flesh. His cock flexed, reminding him of its plight. The sac between his thighs was heavy and tight. He ignored them both. He had Lily half naked in front of him and he intended to savor every minute of it.

He cupped her breast with his hand. Her skin was soft, while his hand was rough, reminding him of the very basic differences between a man and a woman. Carson was a thoroughly modern man, but there was something about Lily that made him feel totally primitive. He wanted to mark her, claim her as his.

For now, he had to taste her. He skimmed his tongue over her tight nipple. Her hands groped wildly, claspings his shoulders, fingers digging in. Murmuring with pleasure, he closed his mouth over the tight bud and sucked. Lily's hands traveled over his neck to tunnel through his hair, clutching him tight to her breast.

Pleasure swamped him, filling his body and his soul. There was no doubt in his mind that Lily wanted him as much as he wanted her. He could smell the heat and perfume of her arousal. It tickled his nose and made his cock throb even harder.

While he suckled one breast, he teased the other with his fingers, tugging gently on the distended tip. He could feel Lily's heart pounding, her breathing was getting quicker and harsher and her legs were pumping restlessly.

It took an amazing amount of willpower, but Carson forced himself away from her. His lungs were working hard at sucking in breath. Lily's fingers were still tangled in his hair, so he didn't get far. Resting his head against her belly, he struggled for control.

"Carson?"

"Everything is okay, Lily." He wasn't sure if he was telling her the truth or lying to both of them. He was so close to losing control.

"Are you sure?" He could sense her becoming more self-conscious by the second.

"I'm sure." He sat up, reveling in the slide of her fingers against his scalp as she released him. His hands went to the waistband of her panties and paused. "Lily?"

Lily's body was a mass of rioting sensations. With her vision obscured, her other senses were heightened. She could smell the lush perfume of the rose, the heated musk of Carson's body mixed with his spicy soap, as well as the unique scent of arousal that she knew was coming mostly from her. She inhaled deeply, drawing all of them into her lungs.

Her hearing was more acute. She could hear Carson's deep breathing and the rustle of the bedclothes as he shifted on the bed. Even her own breathing sounded different. She could hear the anticipation in it, the slight hitch just before his fingers moved on her skin.

But it was her sense of touch that was most affected. Touching Carson was a lesson in sensual delight. She could feel the heat from his skin and the shape of the muscles as she stroked him. The glide of his hair through her fingers had made her core spasm with delight. She wanted to touch all of him.

Every hard, hot inch.

The stroke of the rose over her skin was a sensual delight. The light, barely there touches made her skin tingle, made it even more sensitive. When he'd touched her, she thought she might explode. The rough rasp of his tongue over her distended nipple and the warm clasp of his mouth around it had almost made her come. She was wet between her thighs, her body more than ready to accept his.

She'd never been so primed for sex in her entire life.

Now his fingers were tucked just inside the elastic band of her panties. Waiting. For Lily there was no decision to make. "Yes." She raised her hips from the bed, leaving him no doubt of what she wanted him to do.

The tug of material against her skin as he pulled it over her hips and down her legs sent goose bumps racing across her thighs. She knew she was totally exposed to Carson now. She wanted to see him, but she didn't want to leave the cocoon of sensation that wrapped around her.

She jumped when she felt the soft brush of rose petals against her most sensitive flesh. "Carson," she groaned, not quite knowing what she wanted. This was exquisite torment. He dragged the flower over the tight bud of nerves at the apex of her thighs and she gasped. Cream flowed from her core in a gush. Her thighs quivered with anticipation.

"Do you like that?" She could feel his breath, hot and moist against her pussy.

"God, yes." Reaching out blindly, she found him. She sighed with relief as her fingers sank into his hair. There was no way she wanted him to leave her.

Carson laughed as he shifted closer. Lily's entire body tightened in anticipation. She lay there suspended. Waiting. Wanting.

She cried out when his tongue traced the slick folds of her sex. Up one side and then down the other. He purposely avoided her swollen clitoris and that only heightened the sensations coursing through her body. She felt totally alive and on fire with need.

"More," she demanded and he gave it.

His clever tongue traced the edges of her opening and then she felt the press of something against her. She gasped when he slowly pushed one finger inside her. Her inner muscles sucked at it greedily, pulling it deeper.

"No," she cried when he dragged his finger back to the edge of her opening. She arched her hips upward, blindly searching for his touch. Her heart pounded in her ears. Her entire being focused on one thing now – orgasm.

Carson thrust deep into her body, this time with two fingers, stretching her sensitive flesh. Lily could feel the ripple of muscles as she accommodated him eagerly, easily.

"I'm going to fuck you with my fingers until you come." Carson's voice was rough with desire.

"Yes," she moaned. That's what she wanted. "Fuck me." She'd never said those two words aloud in her entire life, but somehow here with Carson, locked in her dark prison of passion, it was easy.

He pulled his fingers out until only the tips were inside, then he thrust them deep. She felt his breath and then his mouth was on her, his tongue lapping at her clitoris. The heavy glide of his fingers and the touch of his mouth was all it took.

Lily's world splintered.

Her body shook. A low, keening sound broke from her lips. Spasms rocked her as her entire body convulsed. She felt Carson's fingers deep within her body and his tongue on her clit, driving her higher and harder than she'd ever gone before.

It was frightening. It was exhilarating. It was impossible to stop.

Lily rode out the orgasm, soaking in every sound, every sensation until she could bear no more. Groaning, she closed her thighs around Carson's head. It was only then that she realized she was still tugging on his hair. Carefully, she unwound her fingers and let her hands fall back to the side of the bed. She couldn't stop the moan breaking from her lips when he sat up and slid his fingers free of her.

She felt the shift on the bed and then she was being lifted, but she was too exhausted to care. She trusted Carson to keep her safe. She heard the rustle of covers being turned back and felt the press of cool, crisp sheets against her back and the warmth of her comforter being drawn over her. Her ears caught a groan, a smothered curse and the sound of a zipper being closed.

Then two strong hands cupped her head and Carson's mouth was warm and firm against hers. She murmured her thanks as she parted her lips. His tongue dipped inside for a brief second and then it was gone. Strong fingers removed the mask and Lily had to blink against the brightness even though the room was lit only by candlelight.

He sat beside her, his face solemn, his eyes unreadable in the dim light. Reaching out, she placed her hand on his jaw. He turned his face inward, placing a kiss on her palm. "Thank you." It was inadequate considering the pleasure he'd just given her, but she didn't know what else to say.

"My pleasure, darlin'." He placed his hand over hers and glanced toward the window. "I've got to go or your neighbors are going to start to wonder about me being here so long. My truck's been parked in your driveway for a couple of hours now."

Lily bit her bottom lip. She wanted Carson to stay, but she didn't want anyone gossiping about her. She glanced over at the huge bulge in the front of his jeans. That couldn't be comfortable at all. She felt selfish and started to reach for him.

He caught her, wrapping his fingers around her slender wrist. "That's okay." He reached down with his free hand and used his thumb to soothe her abused mouth. "There'll be other times."

It wasn't a question but she answered him anyway. "Yes, there'll be other times."

He gave her a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "We haven't tried the whipped cream yet."

Her eyes shot over to the nightstand. She'd forgotten all about that. The white-and-red spray bottle sat patiently waiting. Before she could stop herself, Lily yawned. Not a small, ladylike yawn, but a huge, jaw-cracking one.

Carson chuckled. "I think I wore you out."

Embarrassment flooded her. "I'm sorry." He must think she was totally selfish to let him pleasure her and then yawn in his face. "I haven't slept well the past few nights and..." She broke off. There was no excuse that would make up for this.

He released her wrist and brushed his thumb over her cheek. "It's okay, Lily. We're not keeping score here. As long as you enjoyed yourself, that's all that matters."

"I've never felt this way in my life." She owed him her honesty if nothing else.

She felt him relax slightly and it was only then that she realized just how tightly he was wound. "We've only just begun." On that promise, he stood, grabbed the can of whipped cream, strolled to the dresser and blew out the candles. "I'll put this back in the refrigerator and lock up behind myself."

Lily squinted to try to see his expression better, but it was no use.

"Sleep well and dream of me." He was gone before she could think to reply.

Sounds floated upstairs. Content, she drifted in a state somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. She didn't know how long it was before he left, but she wasn't the least bit concerned about him being in her house. The noises were almost comforting. She knew the moment he left. The door banged and the house suddenly felt emptier. His truck started and the lights briefly shone through her window as he backed out of the driveway. She strained her ears, listening until she could no longer hear the engine's rumble.

Hugging her pillow tight, she heaved a sigh and snuggled beneath the covers.

Chapter Six

“Dream of me,” Lily muttered as she jammed a daisy into a floral arrangement. The fragile stem snapped and she gritted her teeth as she removed it. She hadn’t slept well for the past four nights. She’d awakened Saturday morning after a restless night of tossing and turning, only to come face-to-face with the silk mask that was perched on the nightstand.

Her face heated at the memory.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, when she’d gone to the refrigerator to get cream for her coffee, the can of whipped cream had been sitting right in the center of the top shelf, reminding her that they hadn’t used it—yet. Still, she hadn’t had to face a dirty kitchen. Carson had taken the time to load the dishwasher and clean down the table and the counter. That had left her with a smile on her face.

It had been hard enough to get through Saturday at work, but as it was her busiest day of the week, she’d eventually gotten into the rhythm of it. Delia, her assistant, had asked her several times if she was okay. She’d been a lot more distracted than usual.

Lily loved her store and took pride in her work, but she’d been more than ready to leave work when the clock hit six. Her body had been humming with anticipation and low-level arousal when she’d closed the doors for the day and headed home. They hadn’t made plans, but she’d hoped to see Carson.

He’d called her instead.

They’d talked on the phone for over an hour. No phone sex, not this time. Instead, they’d shared their days with one another, chatting and laughing. In some ways it was even more intimate and made her feel warm and tingly all over. She’d been ready to reach for her vibrator when she finally went to bed that night, but something had

stayed her hand. She didn't think that anything short of having Carson inside her was going to satisfy her.

On the other hand, her writing certainly wasn't suffering. Carson had already told her that he had to work on Sunday. It was a special project a man wanted done for his wife and that was the only day that she would be away. While she appreciated Carson's willingness to go the extra yard for his client, she wished he'd been able to spend the day with her. Still, she'd written almost twenty pages on her manuscript before calling it a day.

Monday passed with another long phone call in the evening. It was now late Tuesday afternoon and they still hadn't made any definite plans to get together. In a fit of frustration this morning, she'd shoved the can of whipped cream to the back of the refrigerator.

Picking up another daisy, she carefully added it to the arrangement in front of her. She stood back and looked at it with a critical eye. Perfect. It was just what Mr. Fitzgerald had ordered for his wife's birthday. Picking up the crystal vase he'd chosen for the special occasion, Lily carried it to the cooler and popped it inside. Mr. Fitzgerald had promised to pick it up before closing today.

Walking briskly back to her work counter, she began to clean it. There were no other orders she had to fill today and tomorrow was her day off. Thursday and Friday would be busy as Lily's Blossoms was doing the bouquets and all the floral arrangements for two weddings this weekend. She, Delia and both her part-timers would be here early Thursday morning to start work.

But tomorrow was hers to do with as she chose. The only problem was that she wasn't quite sure what she was doing yet. The bell over the door tinkled merrily and she automatically turned, a welcoming smile on her face. Carson stood just inside the door wearing his usual uniform of scuffed boots, jeans and a plain T-shirt. Today the shirt was a chocolate brown that made him look positively yummy.

Lily didn't move as he sauntered toward her, a familiar gleam in his eyes. "Hello, Carson." She was proud of the fact that her voice sounded calm and totally natural.

"Lily." His deep baritone sent a shiver down her spine. It wasn't what he'd said, but rather the way he said it—low and intimate.

She locked her knees and tilted her head to one side. "What can I do for you today?"

The corners of his mouth twitched. "That's a loaded question."

Lily scowled. Truthfully, she was slightly irritated with him. He obviously found it easy to stay away from her for four days and now he waltzed right into her store at closing time and expected... She hesitated. She wasn't quite sure what he expected.

The bell over the door chimed again, saving Lily from having to come up with a witty reply. Mr. Fitzgerald rushed in, obviously in a hurry. "Afternoon, Lily," he said as he puffed for breath.

She skirted around the edge of her worktable and headed straight for the cooler. "I've got the arrangement you wanted all done."

"Good. Good. I've got to get to the jewelry store before it closes." He glanced at his watch. "That gives me fifteen minutes. I would have been here sooner, but I stopped to pick up the cake first." While Mr. Fitzgerald prattled on, Lily retrieved the flowers and carried them to the counter. He stopped talking when he saw them and nodded. "Perfect."

Lily quickly ran his charge card through the machine and, less than two minutes later, Mr. Fitzgerald was out the door, carefully cradling the large arrangement in his arms.

Throughout it all, Lily was very aware of Carson watching her every move. Now they were alone again. She rubbed her hands up and down her forearms, feeling slightly chilled.

She heard the low clomp of his boots against the floor as he came up behind her. He didn't touch her, but she could feel the heat of his body. "Lily?"

She knew she was acting strange, but she couldn't seem to help herself. She shook her head and sighed. "I'm fine."

His lips grazed the sensitive skin just below her ear. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Her head fell forward. She was tired because she hadn't been sleeping well. In all fairness, it wasn't his fault. She was an adult in charge of her own life and feelings. "You didn't. I'm just tired."

"I haven't been sleeping well either." His teeth tugged at the gold hoop hanging from her ear. Lily shivered. "I keep dreaming about you." He stepped away suddenly, leaving her feeling slightly bereft. She turned to him just as the front door pushed open and two customers walked in.

Lily was glad that one of them had their wits about them. When Carson was near hers seemed to disappear. "Good afternoon," she greeted the two women. They smiled and headed toward the ready-made bouquets in one of the front coolers.

When she glanced back at Carson, he was standing off to one side, hands in his pockets, watching her intently. "We need to make plans." His voice was low enough for only her to hear, for which she was grateful, but his words made her entire body clench with need. The man was making her crazy.

"Okay, but not now." She glanced at the clock. "I close up in a half-hour."

Carson rocked back on his heels. "I can call you later." She was partly relieved, partly disappointed. "Or..." Her heart began to pound. "I can pick up something for us to eat and bring it to your place."

Lily nodded. "That would be good."

The smile he gave her was oddly gentle. He raised his hand as if he might touch her, but quickly dropped it back to his side. "Which one?"

It took her a minute to realize what he was asking her. She quickly replayed their conversation in her head and groaned. She hadn't given him an answer at all. "The second one. Supper."

His smile deepened. "I'll leave you to your work."

Turning, he headed for the entrance. When the door closed behind him, she heard a feminine sigh. Whirling, Lily came face-to-face with her two customers, both young women in their mid-twenties. The woman who'd sighed shrugged at Lily. "I couldn't help but admire the view. That's one good-looking man."

Lily searched their faces but found no sign that they'd overheard any of her and Carson's conversation. She nodded at the women, not quite sure what to say. Her stomach felt queasy and she was irritated by their obvious interest in Carson. She felt possessive and territorial. He belonged to her. At least for now.

"What can I help you with today?" She forced herself to smile, but it wasn't easy. Her anger faded as she assisted the women in choosing flowers for a supper party. By the time they left, she was feeling slightly deflated.

Truthfully, she had no hold on Carson. It had been her idea to keep their association a secret. That was probably for the best. There were a lot more younger and prettier women in this town with their eye on Carson. Plus, he was a young man who would want a family. Her son was grown and in college. They were at two completely different places in their lives. It was only a matter of time until he decided he wanted to move on.

She absently rubbed her breastbone. Her heart ached at the thought of the day that would happen. Perhaps it would be best to break things off now before she got in too deep. A voice in the back of her head informed her, sadly, that it was already too late. She was half in love with the man.

Lily dropped her hand and meandered to the door to lock it for the night. Breaking things off now might save her some heartache, but if she did, she knew she'd be

plagued by the “what-ifs” for the rest of her days. She’d always be left wondering what memories they might have made together and where it might have led.

Straightening her shoulders, she strode back to her cash register. She was in this for as long as it lasted. Yes, she was older than Carson, but seven years wasn’t really that much when you thought about it. She might not be quite a shapely as all those younger women, but she was intelligent and, well, a good person. That had to count for something. Furthermore, Carson seemed to enjoy her company. After all, it was him who asked to spend time with her in the first place.

Slightly buoyed, for now anyway, she rushed through her closing tasks, grabbed her sweater and purse and headed out the door.

* * * * *

Carson idly tapped his fingers against the steering wheel of his truck as he stared out into the gathering dusk. He’d obviously made an error in giving Lily too much time alone. After the intensity of Friday night, he’d stepped away, not wanting to crowd her. It hadn’t been easy to stay away from her, but he’d thought that she would appreciate the time to regroup. Instead, it seemed she was rethinking their relationship.

The smell of ribs and home fries seeping from the large bag next to him made his stomach growl. He’d put in a busy few days at work, but it was worth every extra hour he’d clocked. Tomorrow was Wednesday, Lily’s day off, and he’d managed to clear his schedule as well. His crew could handle the jobs on tap for tomorrow. He had plans for Lily. That is, if she didn’t boot his ass out the door tonight.

His gut clenched at the thought. He’d waited a long time for her to notice him as more than her son’s employer, and now that he had her attention, he wasn’t about to lose it.

Her blue compact car whizzed down the road in front of him. He grabbed the bag with the food and slid out of the driver’s seat, locking the door behind him. He’d parked one street over in the far corner of the convenience store parking lot. If his truck

was spotted in her driveway a second time in one week, her neighbors would certainly comment. Personally, he didn't care, but he knew Lily did.

Grinding his teeth together to keep from swearing, he cut through a back alley, keeping to the shadows until he finally came out at Lily's back door. He hated sneaking around, but if that's what it took to get Lily's trust, so be it. From there it would be a short step to taking their relationship public. She might not know it now, but he wasn't going to settle for anything less than a ring on her finger. He wanted the entire world to know that she was his.

He rapped on the back door and it was opened immediately. The fact that she was waiting for him made him feel slightly better. She was still wearing the long, loose denim skirt and sweater that she'd had on earlier, but she seemed different. He stared at her, trying to figure out what it was.

She smiled at him and held the door wide. "That smells wonderful."

Unable to resist, Carson dropped a quick kiss on her delectable mouth as he passed. That was it! It was her attitude that seemed different. She seemed happy to see him and not as tense as she had been at the store.

His heart soared and then sank again. Maybe it was because they were in private now where no one could see them. That situation was about to change if he had his way. He planned to start out slowly, to get her used to them being together in public, and the infamous list would help him.

Feeling better, he set the bag on the table and opened it. "I've got ribs, coleslaw and home fries." The vase of roses sat in the center of the table. They were faded and wilting, but the fact that she hadn't tossed them yet lightened his mood.

Lily groaned. "I don't even want to think about the amount of fat in all of it."

He ran his eye up and down her trim form. "That's not something you have to worry about."

When she laughed her entire face lit up and her eyes twinkled. "That's true. Lucky genetics."

They didn't bother with "real" plates and cutlery, instead using their plastic utensils and eating directly from the foam containers. As if by mutual consent, they both kept the conversation light until they'd finished eating. But once the food was consumed and the table cleared, everything changed.

"You're off tomorrow," he began.

"Yes." He could sense Lily's tension rising again.

"So am I, and I think that we should tick another thing or two off your list."

"The list," she parroted.

He nodded. "I want you to go shopping with me tomorrow." He hurried on before she could say no. "I know you won't want to do it here in Summersville, but we can just get in my truck and drive." There were several large towns within an hour's drive.

The pulse in her throat jumped and her eyes widened. "What do you want to shop for?"

"Lingerie." He said the word with a certain amount of satisfaction. "You'll need some items if you want to attempt a striptease." He didn't tell her that he was also thinking of ways to satisfy the "sex in a public place" item on her list as well. He'd play that one by ear.

He could tell he'd shocked her with this one. Her face was pale and he couldn't quite tell what she was thinking. He'd laid his cards on the table and it was time to make a strategic escape. Standing, he reached down and lifted her from her chair. Her hands grabbed his shoulders for support.

Capturing her mouth with his, he kissed her with all the suppressed passion burning within him. He reached down and cupped her ass in his palms, angling her hips so that her mound pressed against his erection. Lily made a sound of desire that fired his blood. Grabbing her thigh in his hand, he lifted it, wrapping it around his hip. The motion brought her so close he could feel her heat through their clothing.

She squirmed, trying to get closer. Carson plunged his tongue in and out of her mouth, taking as much as she would give him. His body was howling for release, but that wasn't on tonight's schedule. When he finally took Lily, he wanted to know that she was truly his. He didn't quite know when that would be, but it wasn't tonight. She was still too confused about what she wanted from him, from them.

Breaking the kiss almost killed him, but he did it. Panting heavily, he slowly unhooked her leg from around his hip and removed her hands from his shoulders. "The decision is yours." He spun around and left her standing there. He didn't look back, because he knew if he did, he'd never leave her.

Lily's legs shook and she slowly lowered herself back down onto her chair. Her mouth felt swollen and damp and she pressed her fingers against it. Her breasts ached and her panties were damp.

What the heck had just happened?

Carson wanted to go lingerie shopping with her. That was a total shocker. The thought of wearing sexy undergarments and doing a striptease for him had her squirming in her chair. Even the thought of trying on skimpy underwear while he waited outside the dressing room was a huge turn-on.

Did she want to take the next step in their relationship? She knew that the chances of someone seeing them together were slim, but it was there. How did she feel about that?

Surprisingly, the embarrassment she thought she might feel was missing. She was a sensible adult. If she wanted to indulge in a relationship with a gorgeous man then that was her business.

God, she wanted to pick up the phone, call Annabelle and Emma and talk to them, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. As silly as it sounded, this thing between her and Carson was special, almost magical, and she was afraid of doing something to jinx it.

Oh, she knew that they'd tell her to go for it. They were both after her to start dating again. They were always telling her she needed to let go and enjoy life.

A secret smile tilted the corners of her lips. That was exactly what she planned to do. Rising from the table, she walked to the phone, dialed a familiar number and waited for it to be picked up on the other end. When she heard his voice, she said one word. "Yes."

Chapter Seven

By ten o'clock the next morning Lily and Carson were pulling into the parking lot of a large mall. They'd left Summersville an hour ago and Lily had just sat back and enjoyed the ride. They took the back roads, meandering along, in no rush to get to their destination.

She glanced over at Carson, admiring the view. His dark blond hair was pulled back in a leather thong at his nape, emphasizing the planes and angles of his face. This morning, he was wearing jeans and a white cotton shirt, which looked even brighter against his tanned skin.

As if sensing her scrutiny, he shot her a quick look and smiled. She felt that smile all the way to her toes. He was certainly easy to look at, but she enjoyed being with him. They chatted easily and about a variety of topics. And when there was silence between them, it was a comfortable one—neither of them feeling the need to fill it with meaningless chatter.

He pulled the truck into a parking space near the entrance and shut off the engine. "Wait for me," he said before getting out and coming around to open her door. His grip was strong and firm as he took her hand and helped her out of the truck.

He locked her door and then slung his arm around her shoulders. Lily hitched her purse higher onto her shoulder and took a deep breath, trying to quell the sudden attack of nerves.

"There should be a store in here where we can find what we're looking for." He pulled open the large glass door and waited as she entered the air-conditioned atmosphere of the mall. The stores had just opened, but there were already quite a few people in the building.

Lily half expected him to head straight for the lingerie shop. Instead, they took their time, stopping into a music store and a bookstore. To her surprise, she discovered that they both enjoyed classic rock and the blues.

While browsing the bookstore, they'd discovered two of her books sitting on the shelf. Carson had picked both of them up, staring at them with awe. She was excited and thrilled and proud. It was a wonderful feeling to be able to share it with someone for the first time.

He'd run his finger tenderly over her name on the spine. "Well, Ms. Lillian," he said in a husky voice. "I think we should go shopping."

Her inner core clenched tight. Shopping wasn't exactly what she had in mind at the moment, but she nodded. Carson carefully replaced both books and then reached out and took her hand. Fingers entwined, they made their way back out into the corridor, strolling until they found what they were searching for.

Lingerie.

Determined to be an adult about this, Lily strode confidently into the store with Carson right behind her. She'd bought tons of bras and panties in her lifetime. She'd just never had an audience before.

Carson paused by a rack of lace teddies. He plucked one in a lovely shade of lavender off the metal arm and held it up. "This color suits you."

Lily could feel her cheeks getting warm, but she went to his side and examined the garment. It looked fragile and very sexy being held up by his strong, calloused hand. Fighting off a shiver of desire, she glanced at the size, somehow not surprised that he'd gotten the right one. "I'll try it."

That set the mood for their shopping. The saleslady, as if sensing an easy sale, swooped down on them, a huge smile on her face. She pointed out some items on sale as well as others in the latest styles. Before long, she was ferrying hangers filled with bras and skimpy nightgowns to the dressing room. Panties and garter belts followed.

Finally Lily held her hands up in exasperation. "Enough." Carson cocked an eyebrow in question, but she shook her head and laughed. "You pick out much more and I'll be here until closing tonight trying on everything."

The saleslady showed them to the dressing rooms. Lily was impressed with how large they were. The walls were a deep cream color, but a wingback chair in a vibrant red added a touch of color and a large gilded mirror completed the décor. It was classy and sensual at the same time. Best of all, there was a large, comfortable chair just outside the door.

Carson dropped a quick kiss on her lips before ushering her into the room. It felt strange to strip off her slacks and blouse knowing that only a thin wall separated her from Carson. Her nipples were already tight and puckered when she removed her plain cotton bra and reached for one made from red satin. There were matching panties and a garter belt as well. Sitting on the edge of the chair, Lily smoothed a silky stocking up her leg. She was glad now that the saleslady had suggested them. Since she planned to buy them, she thought she'd wear them while trying on the lingerie to get the full effect.

When she was done, she stared at herself in the mirror. She didn't even look like herself. The sensible, staid Lily Summers was gone. Her nondescript medium-brown hair was still cut in a no-nonsense style, her face was still slightly rounded, her chin was still stubborn, but somehow she looked different.

Her hair seemed more tousled, her eyes brighter and her lips curved naturally into a secret smile. Perhaps having a lover was good for her. Her smile widened as she turned right and then left, checking the outfit. Her B-cup looked fuller somehow in this bra. Or maybe it was just her perception of herself that had changed.

She glanced at the door, knowing she had to open it. Carson was waiting. Oh, she knew he wouldn't knock, but would let it be her decision, but she knew he would be disappointed if she didn't.

The doorknob was in her hand before she had a chance to talk herself out of it. She turned it slowly and pulled the door open. Carson sat directly across from it, slouched

against the cushions, his long legs sprawled in front of him. He looked totally relaxed and at ease. That is until he saw her.

Slowly, he straightened in his chair. He blinked several times, the blue of his eyes darkening the longer he stared. Lily cast her gaze down to the front of his jeans and was gratified by the bulge she saw there. Cocking out one hip, she placed a hand on her waist and the other on the doorjamb. "What do you think?"

He sat forward, reaching out and running a finger over the naked expanse of flesh at the top of her stocking. Her toes curled into the carpet. "I think you're beautiful."

Lily shifted her stance, feeling her body heating under his intense scrutiny. "There's more." She indicated the dressing room.

Carson eased back into the chair and nodded. "I'm not going anywhere."

So it went for the next forty minutes. Lily had no idea that shopping could be a form of foreplay, but she was quickly learning. She modeled sleek teddies, tempting nightgowns, pushup bras and skimpy thongs. She tried on items she never would have picked for herself, but she was caught up in the thrill and the excitement of it all. Some of it, she had to admit, even looked good on her.

By the time she pulled on the last item – the lavender teddy that Carson had picked out – she felt ready to explode. Her skin felt flushed and tight. She wanted to squirm as Carson ran his eye over her. Her inner muscles clenched tight and her nipples were outlined against the lacy material. The garment was made from a stretchy lace that hugged her breasts, waist and hips. It covered her as well as any one-piece bathing suit. The only difference was that the material was practically see-through.

"Perfect." He stood for the first time and took the one step necessary to bring him right in front of her. "You have to have this one." One long finger traced the edge of the lace between her breasts. "Wear it home."

"What?"

"I'll get the saleslady to come and cut off the tags." His finger trailed across her collarbone and up the side of her neck. "I'll go out of my mind imagining you wearing that under your clothes."

Suddenly she felt like laughing. "If it will drive you out of your mind, then by all means." She gestured to the door.

Carson shot her a wicked smile filled with promise. "I'll get the salesclerk." She watched him saunter away and then turned back to the mound of clothing in the dressing room. She was definitely going to blow the budget here today. It took a few minutes for the saleslady to appear, but when she did she was all smiles and business.

The tags were quickly removed and Lily pulled on her slacks and blouse. It was the same clothing she wore this morning, but somehow she felt sensual wearing them. Sexy underwear certainly did make a difference. Or maybe it was knowing that Carson was aware of what she was wearing under her clothing that made the difference. Either way, she felt totally different walking out of the dressing room than she had going in.

Carson was nowhere in sight as she followed the saleslady to the checkout area. The woman smiled knowingly. "He told me to tell you that he would meet you outside the store. He had another errand to run."

Lily thanked the woman and then began the task of picking and choosing what she was buying and what she was leaving behind. In the end, she picked the red set, including the stockings, a pale blue nightgown that barely covered the tops of her thighs, two more panty and bra sets, two thongs, a camisole and, of course, the lavender teddy.

She chatted with the other woman as she efficiently wrapped and checked the items, quickly bagging the works. Lily thought the price was a bit low and said so. The saleslady shook her head. "The gentleman already paid for the teddy that you're wearing and the red set."

"What?" Lily wasn't sure how she felt about that.

The other woman looked concerned. "He said it was a present and if you didn't buy the set to wrap it up anyway."

"No, that's fine." She didn't want to cause a scene, but they were definitely going to discuss this. The woman looked relieved and quickly put the remaining amount on Lily's charge card. She signed the slip, tucked her card back in her purse and grabbed her shopping bag. With a nod of thanks to the woman, she hurried out to find Carson.

He was waiting just beyond the entrance for her, a bag tucked under his arm. "I can't let you pay for this." She held up the bag in her hand.

Carson calmly took the bag from her and captured her hand. "Why not?"

"Why not?" she sputtered. "It's not right."

"Sure it is." He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "I like knowing that you're wearing something I bought for you. Makes me hot."

Lily swallowed hard. She hadn't thought about it from that perspective before. Now that she had, she was very afraid that she wouldn't get the image out of her head. Her new teddy was getting damp very quickly. She felt...horny. There was no other way to put it. Her breasts ached, her core throbbed and she couldn't think about anything else but hot, sweaty sex with Carson. And the sooner the better.

"Hungry?" His low murmur caught her off guard.

"What?" Her face heated as she jerked her head up to look at him. She saw the teasing glint in his eyes. The devil meant food, not sex. She was making an idiot of herself. She glanced at her watch and realized that it was almost noon. "I could go for something."

He chuckled as they strolled toward the food court. Two could play that game, she thought as she glanced around and found what she was looking for. Stalking up to a counter, she ordered a jumbo hotdog and a soda. She heard Carson groan, but she ignored him as she paid for her order and thanked the young attendant at the counter before scooping up her tray. "You not eating?" she asked innocently.

“Witch,” he whispered as he settled her at a table and left to get something to eat.

Lily contented herself with just sipping her drink until Carson returned with several slices of pizza. As soon as he sat, she picked up the long dog and slid it past her lips. She didn’t chew, but instead pulled it slowly out of her mouth. “I should add ketchup.”

Taking her time, she opened several packages of ketchup and smeared it up and down the length of the wiener. Carson groaned. “You’re killing me, woman.”

“Fair is fair.” Picking up the hotdog, she brought it to her mouth. “After all, you get to know that you bought the clothes that are touching me in all the right places.” Stuffing the dog into her mouth, she bit.

Carson winced and then chuckled. “Remind me never to cross you.” Grabbing a slice of pizza, he began to eat.

Satisfied, Lily enjoyed the rest of her lunch. She’d made her point, but it had backfired to a certain extent. She was even more turned-on than she had been already. She was very aware of the lacy garment cupping her breasts and her mound. The fact that Carson had bought it for her made her feel sexy and naughty. They had a secret between them that no one else around them was aware of.

They didn’t linger over lunch, but finished quickly and headed for the truck. By mutual agreement, they decided to head home. Lily was looking forward to modeling her new clothes at home and she was certainly keen to be able to cross “striptease” from her list.

Carson concentrated on the road ahead of him. Once again, they’d taken the back roads, avoiding the faster highway. Normally, he enjoyed the scenery and the more leisurely pace. Today, he noticed none of it. It was taking all his focus just to stay on the road. He couldn’t think about the woman next to him or he might put them off the road. He hadn’t been this primed and ready to pounce since he was a teenager.

Lily had an unconscious sensuality about her that drove him wild. Watching her model lingerie this morning had been a fantasy come true. Her legs were long and supple, her arms slender but strong. Breasts, small but firm, had peeked out at him from beneath slinky nightgowns and he caught a fleeting glimpse of her pussy. He'd been hard as a rock for hours with no end in sight. He'd hoped that lunch would cool things down, but no go.

He shook his head at the memory of Lily opening her mouth and taking the jumbo dog deep. Barely suppressing a groan, he desperately tried not to think about it. But the memory wouldn't stop tormenting him. He could easily imagine her lips parting to take his cock into her mouth.

His hands tightened on the wheel as he drove. He didn't dare even glance her way. She looked ripe and ready for the taking, and he was walking a jagged edge. Something about her made him feel primitive and desperate. He didn't feel as if she were his yet and knew he wouldn't until he'd had her. Lily wasn't the type of woman to sleep around. If she made love with him it would mean something, it would be a commitment of sorts. Maybe not the kind he wanted, but it was a start.

"You okay?" He felt her hand on his arm and braced himself against the onslaught of emotions battering him.

"Yeah. No." He swiped his hand through his hair, dislodging the thong that held it back. Swearing, he grabbed at the tie, but it was too late. He could feel Lily's concern and felt like an idiot. "Really, I'm fine." Yeah, if fine meant he was going to come in his pants any second.

"I could make you feel better." Her husky promise was punctuated with a caress as she stroked his arm, letting her hand slide onto his lap.

Carson's mind went blank and his hands automatically turned the wheel of the truck, sending it off the main road and down a small dirt one. Blindly he searched for what he was looking for and almost gave a shout of celebration when he found it. Turning the wheel again, he took the truck through a small opening in a copse of trees.

When he was sure it was fairly well hidden, he stopped and turned off the ignition. The vehicle had barely stopped rocking when he shoved back the seat as far as it would go, unlatched his seat belt and reached for Lily, who was already moving toward him.

"Come here." He pulled her onto his lap so that her legs were on either side of his hips. Placing a hand on her back, he arched his hips, grinding his pelvis against hers. Their heavy panting filled the truck as he struggled to pull off her blouse. Their hands got tangled as she tugged at his shirt. "Damn," he swore as he practically ripped his shirt over his head. By the time he had that done, Lily had disposed of her blouse.

His hands went straight to her pants. He needed her naked. The button popped and pinged off the floor as he tore at her zipper. He pushed and she lifted herself and between the two of them they got her pants off, removing her shoes in the process.

He stopped and stared at the vision she made perched on his lap. Lavender lace cupped her breasts and cinched her waist. His cock throbbed and his balls pulled up tight against his body. He was out of time.

Ripping open the button on his jeans, he shoved the zipper down. "Condom," he gasped as her nimble hands reached beneath his boxers to caress his hard length. "God, Lily." He wasn't sure if he wanted her to stop or to continue. Fumbling, he managed to get a condom from his back pocket and tear open the package.

"Let me." Lily took the condom from him and rolled the latex over his cock. Carson closed his eyes and tried to breathe. When she leaned forward and nipped at his chest, he lost it.

His hand dove between her thighs, pushing away the thin fabric strip. He said a prayer of thanks as he touched her wet heat. She was as ready as he was.

"Carson!" He loved the sound of his name on her lips, especially when it was tinged with desperation and desire.

"What do you want?" He pressed a finger into her pussy, shuddering when her inner muscles grabbed it tight. "Tell me." When he pulled his finger out, he curled it upward and stroked the sensitive tissue on the top.

“Fuck me.” Her fingers dug into his shoulders as she arched toward him.

Shoving her legs wider, he positioned himself against her opening. “Lily.” He wanted to say more but couldn’t manage any more than her name as he surged into her. He felt her tense, her body stretching to accommodate him. Sucking in a breath, he tried to get some control, slowing his penetration, giving her time to get used to him.

Every ripple of her inner muscles around his cock was torture. He was surprised he hadn’t already come. His body demanded he move. Wrapping his hands around her waist, he lifted her an inch and then pulled her down. He sank deeper into her, groaning with undisguised pleasure. He wasn’t all the way in, not yet. But he was close.

“Take all of me.” He wanted her to want him, all of him.

“Yes,” she hissed. Bracing herself against his shoulders, she began to lever herself up and then lower herself. Carson pumped his hips upward on her downstroke, pushing hard until she was taking all of him with every thrust.

Leaning forward, he captured her mouth, thrusting his tongue deep. He wanted to consume her. Their mouths mated as their bodies slid together in a desperate dance, both reaching for completion. Carson felt the explosion start at the root of his cock and rocket up the shaft and out the top.

Tipping his head back, he yelled her name as he pumped his hips hard. Lily’s fingernails dug into his upper arms and she screamed. Her inner muscles spasmed hard, trapping his cock in a silken vise, prolonging his orgasm.

Lily shuddered and fell forward. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her tight as aftershocks went through them both. He’d never had this kind of release before. For a second, he’d thought the top of his head would come off.

As sanity returned, he realized that he hadn’t shown very much finesse. He’d all but ripped her clothing off her and fucked her, and in the front seat of his truck, no less. So much for waiting until the time was right and setting the stage with silk sheets and flowers.

A bead of sweat rolled down his temple and he heaved a sigh. Not exactly the romantic interlude he'd promised her, but he couldn't regret it. Making love to Lily was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Their connection was more than just physical. It went much deeper than that.

Lily stirred in his arms and he nudged her chin up so that she was looking at him. She shot him a sleepy, satisfied smile. "Hey, beautiful lady." He brushed a lock of her brown hair off her forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel wonderful." Her inner muscles tightened around him and he groaned and laughed at the same time.

As much as he wanted to stay like this, he knew they had to move. Someone could come along at any time. For all he knew they were on private property. "We've got to move, sweetheart."

She mumbled something he couldn't make out, but began to shift. Carson helped her sit up and held the condom tight as he slipped out of her. He immediately missed the warmth of her body against his. Grabbing a tissue from a box on the console, he removed the condom and cleaned himself up. He pulled up his boxers and zipped his jeans.

As he rummaged around the truck for his shirt, he noticed that Lily had been busy as well. She had her slacks on and was shaking out her blouse. Reaching out, he took it from her and helped her put it on. Then he buttoned it. When he was done, he looked at her.

Her skin was flushed, her hair tousled and her eyes bright. "I didn't plan for our first time to be in my truck, but I'm not sorry it happened."

She stared into his eyes for the longest time and he began to wonder if maybe she did regret it. That notion made his gut clench. Finally, she smiled at him. "I'm not sorry either."

He leaned over and kissed her swollen lips. This time it was gentle, with none of the earlier desperation. Releasing her, he tugged on his shirt, buttoned it and tucked it in.

When he was done, he started the truck, backed out of the sheltered woods and got them back on the main road, headed for home.

Chapter Eight

Lily couldn't believe how much her life had changed. Two weeks ago, she was living her calm, normal life working at the store and writing in her spare time. Now a lot of her time was taken up with Carson—either thinking about him or actually being with him.

A week had passed since their shopping trip and it was Wednesday once again. They'd spent the rest of the day together last week. As if their frantic lovemaking in the truck had released all the pent-up sexual tension between them, the rest of the day had been almost low-key.

They'd made love again, but this time in her bed and very slowly. Carson had lingered over every square inch of her body, touching and tasting her everywhere. And she'd gotten to do the same in return. Her favorite moment had been when she'd taken him into her mouth, showing him that her talent didn't just extend to hotdogs.

They'd had supper several more times and talked daily. They hadn't made love again, but Lily had plans to change that. She smiled as she carried her empty coffee cup to the sink. It was already lunchtime and she'd written the morning away. Unfortunately, Carson hadn't been able to get today off, but she was hoping to see him later tonight. She had her outfit all picked out and laid on her bed. It was time to try her hand at a striptease and finally use that can of whipped cream that was languishing in the back of the refrigerator.

In the meantime, she had a half-hour to change and meet her friends at their favorite restaurant downtown. Both Emma and Annabelle had been insistent. They'd barely talked in the past two weeks, which was unusual for them.

Her plans for later tonight dominated her imagination as she changed her clothing, pulling on a pair of brown corduroys and a cream-colored pullover. It was early

October and the air had a slight nip to it. Not that Lily minded. She loved this time of year.

Grabbing her purse and her car keys, she hurried out of the house. Luck was with her when she reached the downtown and she found a parking spot just down from the restaurant. She could see Annabelle and Emma coming toward her as she got out of her car.

Hitching her purse strap over her shoulder, she smiled as she walked toward her friends. They'd met several years ago at a business function and had quickly found that they enjoyed each other's company. From there, friendship had blossomed.

"Hi." They waited for her on the sidewalk as she fed the parking meter money.

Annabelle stared at her and Emma tilted her head, peering at her quizzically. "What?" she asked. Was her makeup smudged?

"I'm not sure." Annabelle continued to stare.

"You look different somehow." Emma shook her head. "I can't quite pinpoint what it is."

Lily shrugged even as she felt her cheeks heating. "I haven't done anything different." Now that was a fib. The last two weeks of her life had been very different.

"You look happier, better rested. You're even carrying yourself differently when you walk."

"That's it," Emma agreed with Annabelle's assessment. "You're giving off more of a sensual vibe."

"It's a man, isn't it?" Annabelle was the quietest of the three of them, but she was a very astute woman.

Lily inwardly cursed her friends. "Yes. No." She felt flustered now. "I don't know."

Emma laughed and hooked her arm through Lily's. "It's a man, all right. Come and tell us all about it."

As they started walking toward the restaurant, Lily found herself wishing that her cell phone would ring and she'd have to run to the store to handle some problem. But a floral emergency wasn't likely, at least not one her staff couldn't handle.

Annabelle must have sensed her unease because she stopped as she held the door of the restaurant open. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. No pressure."

The knot in Lily's stomach began to relax. "Okay."

Emma squeezed her arm in understanding and the three of them went inside and settled at a table in the corner. The restaurant was called Rosa's and they served breakfast and lunch, closing at four in the afternoon. Their soups were incredible, their home-baked breads and rolls to die for. Lily ordered the vegetable soup and a turkey sandwich on rye bread. She tugged at her sweater and stared out the window as her friends ordered their lunch.

She saw Carson immediately. With his broad shoulders and blond hair, he stood out easily on the sidewalk. He was with two other men, both tall and good-looking, and they were walking this way. The bottom dropped out of Lily's stomach.

"Lily?" She swiveled back around to face Annabelle, praying the men would keep walking by the restaurant but somehow knowing they wouldn't. "Are you okay?"

Grabbing the glass of water the waitress had placed on the table in front of her, Lily gulped too fast and then started to choke and sputter. Emma thumped her on the back and Annabelle just looked concerned. Lily felt like a total idiot when she placed her glass back on the table. "I'm fine." She cleared her throat. "Just went down the wrong way."

"You sure?"

"Yes." The words came out a bit harsher than she intended and both women just stared at her. Sighing, she rubbed her forehead. She could definitely feel a tension headache brewing. "I'm sorry. I'm just not myself today."

"No problem." Emma patted her arm. "We all have days like that. It's allowed."

Before Lily could think of what to say to ease the tension, the front door opened. She didn't even need to look over to know that Carson had just entered with the two other men. They were also going to come over to their table. There was no hope for it. The two men he was with were Mike Sloan and Tucker Martin, Annabelle's and Emma's husbands.

What should she say? How should she act? She wasn't exactly ready for the world to know they were seeing each other. Her fingers curled into tight fists and she forced herself to relax. She didn't need to say anything really. Just be polite and keep things simple. A sense of calm descended upon her.

Mike saw his wife immediately and started toward the table. Tucker was only a step behind him, his eyes on Emma. Lily glanced at Carson, not quite able to read his expression. She glanced away and took a slow breath, trying to calm the pounding of her heart.

"Hey, honey." Mike leaned down to kiss Annabelle before addressing the rest of them. "Ladies."

"What are you doing here?" Annabelle's cheeks were flushed with pleasure.

"We're just picking up some lunch to take back to the jobsite. Tucker's almost finished with the electrical work and Carson is checking out the place so he can give me a quote on the landscaping." Lily knew that Mike's company had recently begun renovating an apartment building in the downtown area. She'd known he would be working with Tucker because Emma had told her. It should have occurred to her that Carson would have a hand in the landscaping. After all, the three men had done business before.

"Lily." Her gaze flew to Carson. Was it just her imagination or was there an edge of anger to his voice?

"Hi, Carson." She smiled at him and then greeted Mike and Tucker as well. She was glad when Tucker asked Emma a question because she couldn't think of anything else to say. She didn't even hear the question, she was so caught up in her own worries.

"You ladies enjoy lunch." She jerked her head up just in time to see Mike turning away. Tucker was already on his way to the lunch counter to pick up their order, but Carson was still standing beside the table, watching her.

She thought he might say something and she tensed. Instead, he just nodded curtly to them and followed Mike. He didn't even turn back to look at her. She knew because she watched him.

Feeling her friends' eyes on her, she plastered a smile on her face. "Our order is here." Saved by the waitress. She took a bite of the sandwich, but it tasted like sawdust in her mouth. Forcing herself to chew, she swallowed and picked up her spoon to try her soup. She could tell that both women wanted to question her, but they held their peace. Gradually, the conversation moved to safe topics.

Lily was never so glad to see a lunch end. The food was as good as always. It must have been. Her friends had raved about it. To her, it had all been bland and tasteless and now was sitting like lead in the pit of her stomach.

Usually she cherished the time with her friends, but today she felt raw and emotional. She sensed that her actions had hurt Carson and that hadn't been her intent at all. She'd just been caught off guard and hadn't known how to react. She'd make it up to him later, she promised herself.

After her friends had both extracted her promise to meet them again next week for lunch and that she'd call them if she wanted to talk, she hugged them both and headed back to her car. She might take them up on their offer soon if she couldn't figure things out on her own.

She knew she was acting irrational. On one hand, she knew she had fallen in love with Carson. On the other, she wasn't sure their relationship would last. She did know that they couldn't go on this way much longer. Soon, she'd have to lay her cards on the table and see if Carson would ante up or fold.

But not tonight.

Tonight, she just wanted to relax and enjoy her time with him. A little voice in the back of her head told her that it might not be as easy as that. "Of course it will be," she answered herself aloud as she drove home. "What man doesn't want sex with no strings attached?"

The little voice whispered that Carson wasn't like most men.

Putting aside her doubt, she hurried home and tried to bury herself in work for the remainder of the afternoon.

* * * * *

Carson was in a foul mood by the time he knocked on Lily's back door at seven o'clock. He'd gone home after work to shower and change, but it hadn't improved his temperament. Truth to tell, he'd been in a nasty mood all afternoon—ever since he'd met Lily at the restaurant and she'd acted as if she barely knew him. He knew it shouldn't hurt. Knew he should have expected it. But that didn't change the way it made him feel.

For a brief moment, he'd been tempted to drag her out of her chair and kiss her senseless in front of everyone there. He'd refrained. Barely. The only thing holding him back was the thought that he might lose her if he did.

He snorted. He didn't have her now. Not really. Sure they were sleeping together, but he wanted more than just sex. A lot more. Determined, he pounded on her door again. He heard the sound of her footsteps hurrying toward the door and then it was tugged open.

Lily appeared flustered, her hair was tousled, her cheeks pink and she was wearing a pale blue bathrobe that covered her from her neck to her feet. The silky material was belted tight around her waist, and she clutched at the lapels with one hand.

Carson almost forgot that he was angry with her, she looked so delectable. He wanted to strip off her robe and see what, if anything, she was wearing beneath it. As

she stepped away from the door to let him in, the material parted. She twitched it back into place, but not before he'd had a glimpse of a long, shapely leg.

The door closed behind him and he could hear the clock on the wall ticking in the silence that lay between them. The sound of their breathing was unusually loud. His boots thumped heavily on the floor as he strode to the table and pulled out a chair. "We have to talk." He motioned to the chair and she stared at him quizzically before padding to the table. As she sat, he caught a whiff of fresh flowers and soap and knew she wasn't long out of the shower.

Pulling out the chair across from her, he lowered himself into it. Lily didn't look at him right away, so he took a moment to soak in her presence. When she raised her head, cocking her stubborn chin at an angle, he was struck once again by her sheer loveliness.

Slowly, Lily released her death grasp on her robe and laid her hands flat on the table. "I'm sorry about what happened at lunch today. I know I hurt you and that wasn't my intention." She stared at him, her eyes sad. "I just didn't know what to say or do. It caught me off guard."

Well, hell. Carson raked his hand through his hair and sighed. It was impossible for him to be mad at Lily. He was the one who'd started this game, but he'd been playing by her rules. It was time for them to change. "I know." And he did understand. He didn't like it, but he understood. "Look, Lily. This isn't working out like I'd planned."

"Oh." Just one word was all she said, but he could hear the hurt in her voice.

"I know that this was supposed to be all about helping you with the list." He grappled with the right words to tell her how much she meant to him. How much more he wanted from her.

"Yes, it is, and I'm going to hold you to your promise."

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes steady. What the heck did she mean by that? He sat back and waited for her to continue.

"There are still several items left on the list."

Carson racked his brain, running through what they'd done versus what was on her list. "We've had phone sex and I blindfolded you as I stroked you with a rose." Those reminders were having a definite effect on his body. His cock was stirring to life. "We shopped for sexy lingerie and had sex in a public place." Granted, it had been a secluded spot, but he felt it still qualified.

"We have." Her voice, low and husky, made his balls tighten. "But there were several more items on the list."

Those particular items were burned into his brain. He'd dreamed about them both. "A striptease and the whipped cream," he all but growled. He stared hard at her collarbone, left bare by the open neck of the robe. He allowed his gaze to wander lower, all the while wondering just what the heck she had on beneath it. Was she naked or wearing some of her sexy new lingerie?

She nodded.

He shook his head. "Lily." They had to talk first.

"No." She jumped to her feet. "Don't say no yet. Just come with me." She held out her hand and he found it impossible not to take it. Maybe this was better. She was obviously wound up too tight to talk and he was as horny as hell. He'd make love to her so hard and long she wouldn't be able to say no to him when he told her that he wanted more from their relationship.

Determined, he got to his feet. He could sense her nervousness, but for the first time since this had started, he did nothing to alleviate it. He wanted her totally aware of him as a man. He wanted her to be cognizant of what she was doing, what she was offering him. This was no longer a game, but a fight for his life. He had a feeling in the pit of his gut that it all came down to what happened tonight.

Licking her lips nervously, she looked down at where their hands were clasped. "Come with me."

Walking slowly behind her, all his senses were heightened. He could smell her skin, feel the smoothness of her hand against his and sense her arousal. Her nipples were

hard nubs, poking against the front of her robe. Soon, he promised himself. Soon, he'd know what she was wearing beneath the silky garment. His cock lengthened and hardened as he walked up the stairs, admiring the sway of her heart-shaped ass. Soon, he'd have her naked and spread beneath him, fucking her senseless until she screamed his name in release.

Chapter Nine

Lily didn't dare look behind her as she marched up the stairs to her bedroom. She could feel Carson's gaze on her like a physical caress. Her stomach was jumping and she could feel a cold sweat on her skin. For a moment, down in the kitchen, she'd thought he was going to leave.

She'd talked fast to keep him here. Her plan was to do her striptease for him and end it with them making love. When he was relaxed and sated, she planned to tell him how much he meant to her. She wanted their relationship to last as long as possible. She swallowed her trepidation. She'd even go public with it if that was what he wanted. People might talk about them—the younger man and the older woman—but she no longer cared. She was proud that Carson wanted her.

A sense of rightness settled over her. She loved Carson and no matter what happened, she'd never regret that. Reaching her bedroom door, she turned to him. "Make yourself comfortable, I'll be out in a minute." Leaving him there, she hurried into the bathroom and closed the door.

Leaning against the wooden panel, she took a deep, calming breath. She'd been in the midst of getting dressed when she'd heard him knocking downstairs. Her fingers shook as she tugged at the knot in her belt. When it gave, she pushed away from the door and shrugged out of her robe, hanging it on a hook. She'd need it again when she was finished dressing.

After she'd arrived home from lunch with her friends, she'd spent several hours thinking about the situation between her and Carson before finally coming to her decision to embrace their relationship. Mind made up, she'd taken a long, hot shower, washing her hair and shaving her legs. She'd just finished smoothing lotion all over her body and putting on her makeup when Carson had arrived.

Plucking the silk stockings she'd purchased last week from the top of the pile, she carefully smoothed them up her legs. Then she tugged on a red, silky thong, fitting the string between the cheeks of her behind. This was the first time she'd ever worn one and it felt strange. Not bad, but it just made her feel more exposed, more sensual.

The garter belt was next and she clasped the thin red band around her waist before hooking the tops of the stockings to it. This was another first for her. She'd worn thigh-high stockings before, but never a garter belt.

The matching bra was next. The minuscule cups thrust her breasts upward, exposing more than they covered. It took her a little pushing and prodding before she was satisfied with how it looked.

She'd gone shopping a few days after she'd bought her lingerie, thinking she might need a little something to go with it. The choker-style necklace sparkled with rhinestones as she clasped it around her neck. Suspended from the front was a long chain of rhinestones with a fake ruby that nestled into her cleavage. Earrings were next. The large red stone with strands of rhinestones hung from each ear, the sparkly strands almost reaching her shoulders. She shook her head, pleased with the way they danced in the light. She finished her ensemble with two cuff-style bracelets. She clasped on one and then the other. They fitted tight at her wrists, emphasizing their slenderness.

Stepping into the pair of high-heeled red fuck-me shoes that she'd purchased, she appraised herself in the mirror. She could hardly believe the woman in the mirror was her. The high heels made her legs appear longer and they changed her posture, pushing her hips forward in a very inviting and provocative manner. The thin triangle of material masquerading as panties barely covered her pubic hair.

She turned and glanced over her shoulder. Her ass was bare except for the thin strand of red tucked between the twin mounds. Not bad for a woman with a grown son, if she did say so herself. Facing back toward the mirror, she checked out the bra. It was amazing how the man-made device could make her appear much more voluptuous

than she actually was. The choker, earrings and bracelets gave her the appearance of an exotic harem girl on the way to pleasure her sultan. The image made her shiver.

Grabbing her robe, she pulled it on and tied the belt. Taking one last breath to calm her nerves, she tugged the door open and strode boldly into the bedroom. Carson had been busy while she'd been dressing. His boots and socks sat neatly by the side of the bed. His shirt was tossed over the back of her chair, along with his jeans and boxers. The room was lit by candles, which she'd placed on the dresser and bedside tables earlier today.

Totally naked, he sat back against her headboard, pillows stacked behind him. His long legs were crossed at the ankles and his hands were folded behind his head. He appeared totally relaxed, a man at ease with himself and his nudity. He was also incredibly aroused. His cock was hard and thick, stretching up toward his navel. He didn't say a word, but she was very aware of him watching her.

Lily swallowed hard as arousal washed over her. Her new bra suddenly felt too tight, the fabric abrading her sensitive nipples. The string of her thong was already damp. She shivered in spite of her internal heat, goose bumps racing down her arms.

She was thankful that she'd set up her stereo earlier, loading in the new CD that she'd purchased for this occasion. The past few nights, she'd practiced dancing. Partly for the sake of research and partly in anticipation of tonight's performance. Pressing the play button, she closed her eyes and let the exotic Mediterranean music wash over her. She was a dancing girl, here to entertain, she reminded herself. Once she'd captured the mood, she slowly turned to face Carson, her hands going to the tie at her waist.

Carson's hands dug into the pillows behind his head. If he didn't hold on to something he was going to charge Lily, fling her onto the bed, strip off that flimsy robe and fuck her senseless.

He watched as she listened to the music, her body beginning to sway. There was something different about her, but he couldn't quite place his finger on it. Confidence, maybe, but it was more than that.

She turned to face him, her fingers tugging at her belt. The sleeves from her robe slipped up and he noticed the glittering cuffs around her wrists. His cock twitched in approval. There was no doubt about it, Lily was definitely in a daring mood tonight. This was her show, so he'd let her do it her way. Up to a point. There was no way he was leaving here tonight before he'd had his say. After that, it was all up to Lily.

Her hips began to swing to the heavy beat of the drums as the tie at her waist finally gave way. He had a glimpse of her bare stomach before she twirled away, making the hem of the robe swirl.

His breathing deepened, his heart beat faster.

She shrugged, exposing one creamy shoulder to his view. She continued to move sinuously as she did the same on the opposite side, letting the silky robe slither down her body and pile at her feet.

Carson released his hands from behind his head and slowly sat forward. Lily was standing with her back to him, her feet apart, her knees bent as her hips made a slow circle. His mouth was suddenly dry, his eyes on her bare ass as she continued to move to the music.

She pivoted and he almost swallowed his tongue as he caught his first glimpse of her entire outfit. The red fabric made her skin appear even paler as it cupped her breasts and barely covered her mound. The heavy necklace and earrings made him even harder, which he'd thought impossible. She was every man's fantasy come to life—his very own harem girl. Ready and willing to pleasure him.

Carson couldn't take his eyes from her even if he'd wanted to. She continued to sway to the hypnotic beat of the drums, moving ever closer to the bed. In the flickering candlelight, she was an exotic vision, tempting him, taunting him.

The red bra pushed her breasts high and tight. As she dipped forward, coming within reach, he couldn't resist tweaking one taut nipple. She moaned and leaned back, thrusting her pelvis toward him. He let his hand trail down her belly, but before he could touch her panties, she twisted away with a breathy laugh.

He almost growled in frustration. His balls were tight and he wanted Lily with an ache that went beyond the physical. With one hand against the footboard to steady herself, she lifted her right leg, placing her foot on the edge of the bed. For the first time, he got a good look at her high-heeled shoes. He whistled under his breath. Lily didn't wear heels like this, so he knew that she'd bought them just for this occasion. For the first time since the altercation at lunch, he felt himself relaxing.

Her fingers went to her garter straps and she flicked them open one at a time. "Let me," he murmured, shifting his position so he could reach her stocking. His fingers brushed her soft inner thigh and she sucked in a breath as he rolled the silk down her leg. Then he lifted her foot, removing her shoe and stocking.

Lily immediately switched legs, propping the left foot on the bed. Carson growled his approval as he got rid of her other shoe and stocking. Just as he was reaching for her, she whirled away again, never losing time with the music. She pulled off her garter belt, tossing it aside. Then came her bra. He watched entranced as her small breasts swayed and jiggled as she continued to dance. Wearing a red thong and the jewelry, she made his entire body throb and his heart ache. It almost stopped altogether when her fingers slid beneath the tiny strings of her panties.

"Come here." He held out his hand. She danced toward him, but she remained just out of reach as she shimmied out of her underwear, letting the flimsy garment drop to her ankles. Naked, she undulated her hips, letting her hands slide up to cup her breasts.

Out of patience, Carson lunged, catching her around the waist and tossing her onto the bed. He was on her before she had a chance to stop him, his mouth swallowing any protest she might have made. He plunged his tongue past her lips, needing to taste her.

Mine!

The word beat in his head like the primal rhythm of the drums driving the music.

Mine!

He covered her body with his, pushing his hand beneath her ass to tilt her mound more firmly against his erection.

Mine!

There was no time for foreplay. Not this time. The need to claim her in the most basic way was riding him hard. He grabbed a condom from the bedside table and quickly sheathed himself. Insinuating his hand between them, he positioned his cock at her opening. Her dampness coated him as he pushed forward, stretching her pussy to accommodate him.

She moaned into his mouth and arched her hips upward, her fingers digging into his butt. Groaning, he tore his mouth from hers and buried his face in the curve of her neck as he flexed his hips, driving himself deeper into her heat.

"Carson!" She cried his name as he buried himself to the hilt. He wanted to say her name, but speaking was beyond him. He was hanging on to his control by a thin thread. He wanted to make this good for Lily, but he wasn't sure he was going to be able to.

As if sensing his straining control, she brought her legs up around his thighs and wrapped them around his flanks, locking her heels together at the small of his back. "Fuck me!" she commanded, arching into him.

He lost it. Pulling his hips back, he slammed them forward. The friction, the heat, the sheer excitement was overwhelming. He did it again. And again. His thrusts getting deeper and harder.

Her legs fell away from him and he hooked his arms under her thighs, pushing them up and open. The position left her vulnerable to him as he had total control of how hard or fast he fucked her.

Concern flitted through his brain and he paused in spite of the commands of his body. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt Lily in any way. Her hands clutched at his back, her short nails digging into his skin. "Don't stop," she moaned.

That was all he needed. Letting go, he fucked her hard, driving both of them higher than they'd ever been before. He could feel the explosion gathering at the base of his cock, but he gritted his teeth, trying to hold on for a few more thrusts. He could feel Lily's inner muscles clutching at him harder with each stroke.

She tilted her head back, pressing her hips toward him as she cried out his name. He could feel the delicate spasms gripping her and they drove him right over the edge. Yelling her name, he gave two more thrusts and came. His semen filled the condom as her inner muscles milked him dry. Nothing had ever felt this good in his life. Nothing.

When it was over, he fell face-first onto the bed, managing at the last minute to shift his bulk to one side so he didn't crush Lily beneath him. He'd move just as soon as he got enough energy to do so. That might be in about two days' time, he figured. Content, he lay there gasping for breath, feeling the heavy beat of Lily's heart against his chest.

Lily was still seeing stars behind her closed eyes. She'd thought she'd known all about sex and orgasms, but she'd been wrong. This went beyond anything she'd ever experienced.

Maybe it had something to do with the dance she'd done for Carson. She'd been filled with a freedom the likes of which she'd never known. It was as if she'd discovered a woman's power for the very first time in her life. She'd felt sexy and sensual, unlike her usual self. Wearing the revealing clothing and swaying to the heavy, exotic rhythm of the music, she'd become someone else, someone wild and free.

Carson did that for her, she realized. She felt safe enough around him to expose that part of herself. It had felt incredible to dance for him. His eyes had followed her every move as she'd danced closer. She could still feel the heat of his fingers on her skin as he'd smoothed the silky hose down her legs.

There had been no foreplay, yet the entire dance had been foreplay. The teasing, the touching, the glances had all fired her blood to boiling. She'd known he was reaching the end of his rope when she'd removed her bra and finally her panties. Still, she'd been

taken off guard by how quickly he'd moved, dragging her onto the bed and beneath his much larger body.

Yet at no point had she been concerned or worried. There was nothing but arousal and need beating at her. A need to join with this man. She'd reveled in his primal actions and the fact that she'd driven him to them. There was something elemental and powerful about that. It had driven her own desire higher.

Still, he'd stopped. He'd held himself back until he was sure that she was with him. If she hadn't already loved him, that one action would have done it for her right then and there. Not only that, but he'd remembered to use a condom. Once he'd tossed her to the bed, she hadn't even given a single thought to protection.

God, what if she'd gotten pregnant? What a dilemma for a woman of her age. She paused when the idea didn't bother her near as much as it should have. She bit her lip in consternation. She was way past baby-rearing days, wasn't she?

Carson stirred and she couldn't suppress a moan as he slowly pulled his semi-erect cock from her body. The differences in their ages and the fact that they were both at different places in their lives – neither mattered at this moment. What mattered was that they were together now.

As she watched, he rolled to his feet and strode to the bathroom. Lily shivered as the cool air touched her skin now that he was no longer covering her. She shifted and swore softly when her earring caught in the comforter. Untangling it, she sat up and removed them both, tossing them on the bedside table. The necklace and bracelets followed.

"I liked those on you."

She smiled ruefully at him. "They look great, but they were getting a bit uncomfortable."

He flicked off the stereo as he passed, plunging the room into silence. "Let me see," he said as he knelt on the bed beside her. Lifting her wrists one at a time, he kissed the indentations left by the bracelets. Then he nuzzled her neck, licking the abraded skin

there. Her body stirred to life again as he caught the lobe of her ear in his teeth and sucked.

"Carson," she gasped as he moved to her other ear.

"Hmm," he replied as he nibbled her earlobe.

"Nothing." She forgot what she'd wanted to say. Shivers of pleasure were skating up and down her spine. Threading her fingers through his hair, she held him to her.

He'd felt her shiver and lifted his head away from her. "Let's get you tucked into bed." He pulled back the covers and scooted her beneath the sheets before joining her there.

Lily settled into the curve of his body, nestling her head against his chest. It was a position she loved and one she'd become accustomed to in the past few weeks. She fit against him perfectly. Sighing, she relaxed. Her body was humming with a low-level arousal, but she felt totally sated and at ease. Then Carson spoke.

"Now we talk."

Chapter Ten

Lily tensed, her relaxed mood evaporating in a split second. She'd known that this moment was coming, but she'd hoped to put it off a bit longer. Sighing, she sat up. Leaning against the headboard, she tugged the covers tight around her.

She started to speak, but he held up his hand to stop her. "Let me have my say first. Please," he added. She nodded, tucking her knees closer to her chest.

The covers were bunched around his waist as he sat alongside her. He shoved his hair out of his face and sighed. "I know this started with me telling you I'd help you with your research." His mouth firmed, his lips pressing together. "The infamous list."

Her stomach muscles tightened. He didn't sound happy—not at all like a man who'd just made love.

"The list was just an excuse, the moment I'd been waiting for."

She sat up straighter. What did he mean by that?

He twisted around so that he was facing her. "Lily." He reached out his hand and cupped the side of her face. "I've spent years wanting you."

She could feel her jaw dropping. He must have seen the amazement in her eyes because he gave her a rueful smile and shrugged. "It's true. I've wanted you for years, but you wear a 'keep-away' sign around you that's hard to miss. I understood that you had a bad marriage and that you had a kid to raise, but I still wanted you. I told myself that I had to respect the fact that you weren't ready to date." He shook his head. "I went out with other women, but..." He sighed and gently rubbed his thumb over her cheek before dropping it. "None of them were you."

"I don't know what to say." Lily was shocked. He'd been interested in her for years! That was almost too much to take in.

"There's nothing to say." Carson rolled out of bed and grabbed his underwear, tugging them on. "I used the list as an excuse to finally get close to you. I knew I'd never get another chance like it." He pulled on his jeans and zipped them before reaching for his shirt. "I shouldn't have done it."

Her heart almost stopped and then began to pound heavily. "Shouldn't have done what?" She wanted him to spell it all out for her, needed to know exactly what he was thinking, for better or worse.

He sat on the side of the bed and put on his socks and boots. She was afraid that he was going to leave without answering her. When he'd tied his last lace, he looked at her and she was shocked by the sadness in his eyes. "I shouldn't have taken advantage of you like that." His lips firmed again. "But I'm not sorry about what happened between us. You're an amazing woman, Lily. Being with you these past two weeks has only solidified everything I already knew about you."

This was beginning to sound like goodbye to Lily and she didn't like it. It was time for her to take a stand. She opened her mouth to speak, but he forestalled her by kissing her. His mouth was warm and firm against hers and by the time he pulled away she was breathless.

"I want more from you, Lily. I want more than you can probably even imagine." He stood, looming over the bed. "I want the right to claim you in public. I want to sleep alongside you every night. I want the world to know that you belong to me." He paused and Lily stared up at him, rendered momentarily speechless by what he was saying.

"I know you're probably still not ready for a relationship and that I shouldn't be demanding things from you, but I don't care. I've waited long enough. I've wanted you long enough." His appearance was fierce in the flickering candlelight, highlighting his square jaw and the determination etched on his face.

"The past two weeks have been the best and the worst of my life. Being with you has been incredible, but not being acknowledged by you in public and not being able to

acknowledge you back has been hell." He raked his fingers through his hair. "I can't live like this, Lily. It's wrong and it's killing me."

She reached out to him, wanting to ease his pain, but he backed away from her until he was standing in the doorway. His voice was low and filled with pain. "This relationship has been wrong from the start. I should never have pushed you to let me help you with your research or the list. That's not what I want."

"What do you want?" Her mind was spinning with what he was saying.

"What do I want?" He wrapped his hand around the doorjamb and from the bed she could see that his knuckles were white. "I want what I probably can't have. I want a relationship with you that's based on love and mutual respect, one that we acknowledge in public. I want to go on normal dates and spend holidays together. I want you to walk beside me for the rest of my life. I want you to marry me, Lily."

His words stunned her.

He stared at her, his expression getting more closed by the second. "Say something."

She opened her mouth and closed it again, too much in shock to say anything. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Her brain was scrambled as his words started to sink in.

"That's what I thought." He gave her a sad smile. "It's up to you now. You know how to find me." He left quickly, his boots pounding heavily on the stairs.

Lily shook herself. Had he just proposed to her? Scrambling out of bed, she hurried after him. "Carson!" She scooped up her robe, dragging it on as she hurried after him. The back door slammed and she quickened her pace. She reached the kitchen door and flung it open, but it was too late. He was long gone.

She stared out into the darkness as her temper flared. "How dare he say something like that and just walk away?" She slammed the door but it didn't make her feel any better. What the heck had just happened?

Slumping down into a chair at the table, she belted her robe. Her mind was still reeling with the fact that he'd wanted her for several years. The things he'd said to her had made her heart ache. She'd never had a man want her so much or be willing to lay his soul bare in front of her and that's what he'd done.

Could she do any less?

It was up to her what happened next. He'd said so and she knew that if she didn't approach him, they'd revert back to the relationship they'd had before, seeing one another in public at city functions, nothing more than pleasant acquaintances.

That would probably be the smart thing to do, the sensible thing. But Lily no longer felt sensible. She'd had a taste of something more and she liked it. She'd lived the better part of her life without taking risks in her personal life. She'd justified it because she'd just come out of a bad divorce and she had a child to rear.

Well, her divorce was over years ago and she was a grown woman, not a girl any longer. And as for her child, he was a man now with a life of his own. If she didn't reach out for what she wanted she would regret it for the rest of her life. Sure, they would have problems, but any couple, any life had problems. Keeping herself aloof all these years hadn't meant she was without her fair share of problems. They'd just been different ones is all.

It was time to take what she wanted and live with the consequences. No one was ever guaranteed a happily-ever-after, but if she didn't try, she certainly wouldn't have one. She realized that being with Carson the past two weeks had changed her irreparably. Two weeks ago, she would have hesitated and probably talked herself out of going for it. Now she could no longer bury her head in the sand and pretend that she was happy with her life the way it was. Not when she had a chance at having so much more.

Determination fired her thoughts and her stomach chose that moment to growl. She was suddenly starving. Rising from the table, she strode to the refrigerator. Opening the door, she stared inside.

A familiar white-and-red can stared back at her.

Lily smiled.

* * * * *

Carson wanted to be swinging a pick, breaking up rock and sweating out his anger and frustration. Instead, he was standing outside Mike Sloan's latest project, the downtown condominium, with landscaping quotes in his hand. Sometimes it sucked to be the boss.

What had possessed him to give Lily an ultimatum last night? He'd clearly lost his mind. He could have kept things low-key and coaxed her into a relationship over the next few months. That's what he would have done if he were smart. But he couldn't go on any longer with things the way they'd been. It had felt like a lie to be sneaking around so other people wouldn't see them together.

"Everything okay?"

He hadn't heard anyone coming up behind him and turned to face Mike. "Yeah. I'm fine." He handed the sheaf of papers to his friend. "This is the quote for the job. I've broken it down into the outside landscaping, the indoor plants, the rooftop garden and the project as a whole, including cost and timelines. If you have any questions about any of it, just give me a call and we can discuss it."

Mike took the papers, scanning them briefly before tucking them under his arm. "I'm sure they're fine. You knew what I wanted. I'll go over them and get back to you in a couple of days."

Carson nodded and squinted into the afternoon sun, wishing he hadn't left his sunglasses in the truck. The trees were changing their colors and the air was cool, but the sun was still bright in the sky. It was a beautiful day and he couldn't bring himself to care. What was Lily doing now? Was she thinking about him or had she already relegated their relationship to the back of her mind?

A heavy hand descended onto his shoulder. "You sure you're okay? You haven't been yourself for a couple of weeks now."

He appreciated Mike's concern, but he just wasn't ready to talk about things, and he couldn't even if he was. He had promised to protect Lily's anonymity and he wouldn't go back on his word. "I'm sure. Just some stuff going on that I have to work through."

Mike nodded and dropped his hand back to his side. "Good enough. If you want to grab a beer some time and talk..." He let his offer hang.

"Thanks, man. I appreciate it." Not that he had any intention of taking him up on it, but it was good to be asked.

A delivery truck rolled up the road, stopping at the curb. The driver got out and went around the side of the van and pulled the door open. Reaching in, he lifted out what looked like some kind of elaborate floral arrangement. The man glanced at the apartment building, which was obviously in the throes of major construction, and back at the sheet on his clipboard.

Mike ambled over to the man. "Can I help you?"

Curious, Carson was close behind him.

"Yeah, I'm looking for Carson Granger."

Carson's eyes narrowed as he moved toward the man. "I'm Granger."

The man looked relieved. "Great. Just sign here." He thrust the clipboard toward him and Carson signed. The man tucked his paperwork away and handed Carson the large floral arrangement. "There you go, buddy. Enjoy."

The driver got back into the van, pulling away quickly. Mike studied the arrangement. "The last time one of the guys got a floral arrangement at the worksite it was from a woman."

"Who was it?" Carson asked absently as he carried it over to the cab of his truck and laid it carefully on the metal bed.

"Tucker. He and Emma had some kind of falling-out and she sent him flowers."

Carson knew that this had to be from Lily. There was no one else. Carefully, he tugged away the paper wrapped protectively around the arrangement. A huge spray of flowers came into view, their delicate perfume wafting around him. They reminded him of her – beautiful, slightly exotic, yet amazingly resilient.

“Those are lilies, aren’t they?” Mike hovered next to him, craning his neck for a better view.

“Yeah, they are.” Carson pulled the remaining paper away and was rendered speechless.

Mike whistled under his breath. “Whoever she is, you’re one lucky man.”

Carson stared at the lacy red thong, silky black mask, the rhinestone-studded cuffs and the single rose that all lay in a satin-lined box at the base of the lilies. There was a card, so he plucked it up and opened it. A part of him was hopeful. The other part was afraid that this was a goodbye.

I send you my namesake and these tokens because you already have my heart.

He stared at the card, tracing the words with his finger.

“What’s this?” Mike rooted around the base of the lilies and pulled out a can of some sort. He held it up and Carson began to laugh.

“That, my friend, is none of your business.” He plucked the can of whipped cream out of Mike’s hand and tucked it safely with the other items.

Mike laughed good-naturedly. “I guess this means we won’t be going out for a beer?”

Carson picked up the flowers and gifts and carried them around to the driver’s side of his truck. He juggled them as he tugged the door open and then laid them carefully inside. “You guess right. I’m going to be busy tonight.” He climbed into his truck and pulled the door closed.

“Good luck. Not that I think you’ll need it.” Mike stood next to the open window.

“Thanks.” Carson closed his eyes for a minute, almost overcome with emotion.

"Go and get your lady." His friend's voice was low and filled with understanding. Carson knew that Mike and Annabelle's relationship had been rocky in the beginning. If anyone would understand what he was going through, it was Mike.

He opened his eyes and turned the key in the ignition. "I plan to." Mike gave him a quick salute and then Carson was driving away. He had one quick stop to make and then it was time to claim Lily.

* * * * *

Lily paced back and forth in her kitchen. Had he gotten her gift yet? Did he understand the significance? Sighing, she glanced at the clock. One minute later than the last time she'd looked. Maybe sending the can of whipped cream and all the other tokens hadn't been such a great idea. Maybe she should have just gone and talked to him in person. It had seemed so romantic that she hadn't thought it through. She'd just done it. A romantic impulse.

Now she was left wondering and waiting. Surely he'd understand that by sending him all those things at his jobsite she was expressing her willingness to go public with their relationship. God, she hoped she hadn't made a complete fool of herself.

So what if she had? She had made up her mind, hadn't she? She was going to grab her chance for happiness and see where the chips fell. A heavy knock came on her back door and she hurried over to open it.

Carson stood on her back step looking as big, blond and handsome as always. The satin-lined box in his hands was very familiar. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. "I got your flowers."

"That's good." She'd had everything she wanted to say planned out in her head, but now that he was here, she couldn't remember any of it. She wished she'd taken the time to change her clothing from work, but she hadn't. She'd been too nervous to do anything but pace and worry. Her slacks and sweater, which were fine for work, now seemed too ordinary, too plain. Well, it was too late now. She was stuck with it.

Realizing that she'd left him standing on her porch, she pulled the door wide and stepped back. "Come in."

He strode into the room and carried the box over to the table. He was wearing his work clothes, so he must have come straight from whatever jobsite he was on. She'd given the delivery driver several possibilities, but she'd had no idea if the man had managed to track Carson down or not. Obviously, he had.

His back was to her, so she studied him. His hair was loose and brushed the tops of his broad shoulders. His back narrowed to his waist and his legs were long and sturdy. Physically, he appealed to her like no other man ever had. Intellectually she enjoyed talking to him. He was amazingly well-read on many subjects and always thought about what he wanted to say before speaking. But it was emotionally where he touched her the deepest. He hadn't been afraid to put himself on the line for her and she could do no less.

"I love you," she blurted out. His shoulders tensed.

"Are you sure?" His voice was low and hard.

She wished she could see his face. She had no idea what he was thinking at this moment. Still she plunged onward. There was no going back for her. Not now. "Yes, I'm sure."

"Where do you want our relationship to go from here?"

She wrapped her arms around her torso, feeling cold and alone. Had he changed his mind? "I..." she began and stopped. Screwing up her courage, she started again. "I want us to be together."

"Publicly?"

"Yes," she nodded even though he couldn't see her. "I wouldn't have sent you the flowers and gifts if I didn't."

He swiveled around to face her. "Thank God." She could see the relief and the remnants of pain in his face as he tugged her into his arms. She went easily, loving the warmth that emanated from him. "I thought so, but I wanted to be sure."

His heart was thudding heavily against her cheek. Resting one hand over it, she raised her head. "I was afraid at first, but you're worth the risk." She hesitated, but then pushed forward, wanting no more misunderstandings or secrets between them. "What about children?" His muscles tensed beneath her hand. "You're young and my son is grown."

"Lily." His voice was tender and deep as he tilted her chin up until she could see his eyes. "I want you. I'll admit that I'd love to have a child with you, but if it doesn't happen that's okay too. I already think a lot of Ethan. He's more than enough son for any man."

Relief filled her as she sensed he was being totally sincere. "Okay. That's good. I'm not saying I'm opposed to children or anything. But Carson, I'm going to be forty in a month's time."

He pushed a lock of hair from her forehead before leaning down to drop a kiss there. "I don't want to risk your health. It's your decision and not one we have to make today."

She nodded. "So where do we go from here?"

Reaching behind him, he took something from the box. "I didn't know how long the other one was in the truck, so I stopped and bought a fresh can." Her breath caught in her throat as he brought his hand around to the front.

Her eyes widened and she started to laugh. Clutched tight in his grip was the familiar can of whipped cream.

Chapter Eleven

Carson scooped a laughing Lily into his arms and carried her up the stairs. The ring he'd bought her was practically burning a hole in his pocket, but it wasn't time to give it to her yet. He wanted her naked and sated, lying in his arms when he offered it to her.

Striding into her bedroom, he tossed her lightly down on the bed before placing the can of cream on the bedside table. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out a condom and laid it alongside the can. Lily stretched out on the bed, watching him, a smile on her face.

He practically ripped his shirt in his haste to be rid of it and then he tackled his boots. Lily kicked off her shoes and then sat up, tugging her sweater over her head. He stopped, hands on the button of his jeans, to watch her as she stripped off her top. Her slacks came next, along with her socks. Clad only in a beige panty and bra set, she reclined back against the pillows.

Carson made quick work of his jeans, shoving his boxers off with them. His cock was hard and ready, but she wasn't. Not yet. When he was naked, he knelt on the bed between her thighs. His hands were tanned, much darker than her pale skin. She was so soft and feminine. She took his breath away. He stroked his fingers up her legs, skimming her inner thighs. She sucked in a breath and parted her legs.

Satisfaction filled him as he touched the crotch of her panties. "You're already wet for me." He could hear the wonder in his voice. It was true. Whenever he touched Lily, she was more than ready for him.

She licked her full pink lips. "Yes."

He loved the fact that she didn't play games. She gave herself openly, generously and wholeheartedly, holding back nothing. He wondered if she had any idea what a

turn-on that was. Slipping his fingers beneath the band of her panties, he tugged them down. She bent her legs and helped him remove them.

A rumble of pleasure came from deep in his chest. She was so beautiful. All pink and lush and wet. Parting her folds with his thumbs, he leaned down and kissed her. Her hips rose to meet his lips. He stroked his tongue up one side and then down the other, tasting her. She moaned and he laughed. He could easily get addicted to her unique flavor.

Carefully, he inserted one finger into her. Her inner muscles contracted around it as he pushed deeper. Her breathing was choppy and harsh, her fingers tangled in his hair, holding him to her. He loved the bite of her nails against his scalp, her desperation to have him closer.

His cock flexed and his balls tightened. He wanted to bury himself in her warmth. But not yet. First, he wanted her to come for him. Redoubling his efforts, he began to suck gently on her swollen clit as he pushed a second finger inside her.

“Carson.” His name was little more than a gasp, a whisper. She tugged harder on his hair and her thighs tightened around his head.

He spread his fingers, widening them as he slowly pulled them to the edge of her opening. Her thin cry of pleasure washed over him as her body contracted, spilling her essence onto his hands. He soaked in every sound, every scent and every nuance as she orgasmed. When it was over, her legs dropped back to the bed and her fingers slipped from his head.

Sitting back on his heels, he admired the erotic picture she made, sprawled across the comforter. Her chest rose and fell as she pulled air into her lungs, her skin had a fine sheen of sweat coating it, her eyes were closed and her lips parted.

Reaching over to the bedside table, he grabbed the condom. He quickly opened it and sheathed himself. Lily barely moved when he undid her bra and tugged it off, tossing it onto the floor behind him. Smiling, he reached for the can of whipped cream.

Her eyes flew open and her entire body jerked when the first dollop of cream landed on her belly. Carson smiled and continued to spray, piling mounds of the sweet stuff over her breasts until just her nipples peeked through. Satisfied, he tossed the can aside. "Now I get to taste you." Leaning forward, he licked the line of cream on her stomach, taking special care to dip into her bellybutton.

Lily groaned and laughed. "How can you make me so hot again so fast?"

"Don't bother me, I'm busy," he teased.

She laughed again and then groaned as he licked upward, swiping at the bottom curve of her breast. "Carson."

"Hmmm," he answered as his tongue traced the outside of the plump mound, licking off cream as he went. The flavor of Lily mingled with the sweetness of the cream in his mouth. He had to share it with her.

Lifting his head, he leaned forward, tracing his tongue over her top lip and then her bottom. Her mouth parted eagerly and he slipped inside. She sucked on his tongue immediately, drawing him deeper. His cock jerked, reminding him of just how close he was to the edge.

Burying his fingers in her hair to hold her steady, he continued to kiss her until they were both gasping for air. Breaking away, he left a trail of biting kisses down the curve of her neck, ending up at her cream-covered breast. He licked and sucked her sensitive flesh until all the cream was gone, tugging her turgid nipple into his mouth and rolling it around. It tasted as sweet as a cherry.

Shifting himself, he stretched out on the bed beside her, tugging her into his arms so that she was on top of him. She spread her legs so that they were on either side of him, the motion pushing her damp mound against his straining erection.

"Take me inside you." He stroked the long, lithe line of her back. "Ride me, Lily."

Lily levered herself upright with her hands. Her entire body was on fire with need for the man lying beneath her. She'd already come once, but was ready again. Her skin felt sensitized and alive. She groaned when her puckered nipples scraped across the hard planes of his chest. The press of his shaft against her sex taunted her. It wasn't enough. She needed him inside her.

Coming up on her knees, she gripped his cock in her hands. Even through the latex barrier she could feel the heat of the blood pumping through him. She squeezed him tight and he closed his eyes, tilting his head back. The muscles in his neck tightened as she brought the tip of his erection to her opening and began to lower herself.

One slow inch at a time, she sank onto his shaft, taking him inside her until he was buried as deep as he could go. Reaching behind, she cupped his sac in her hands, squeezing gently. He gasped, his eyes two blue lasers as he pinned her with his stare.

"Move," he commanded.

Slowly, she raised herself until only the bulbous head remained inside. She sat down hard, driving him deep.

"Fuck. Lily," Carson gasped, his hands tightening on her hips as he raised her upward again.

She began to move faster, finding a rhythm she liked. She felt wild and free and wanton. Tucking her hands behind her head, she swayed over him. Her breasts jiggled with each thrust. Carson reared up, his mouth clamping over one nipple as he sucked hard. Lily's head fell back as her blood turned to liquid fire.

She shifted her legs, locking them around his waist. The motion pushed him even deeper than he'd been before, making them both moan. Carson lifted her, coming up onto his knees and lowering her onto her back. She tightened her legs around him as he began to thrust—short, hard jabs that drove her wild.

He hammered his hips against her, the slap of their damp skin music to her ears. Her inner muscles clamped down hard and her ankles dug into his butt. Her hands slid off his slick shoulders so she dug her nails in, needing something to hold on to.

She cried out as her orgasm broke. Pleasure suffused her entire being, body and soul. She shuddered and shook as she came, vaguely aware of Carson crying out, his hips jerking against her. His arms tightened around her and then he was covering her, his body heavy and warm. She tucked her arms around his waist and held on tight.

Time ceased to matter as she floated in a world of pleasure. Finally it began to fade and she became aware of her surroundings again. She felt sticky and sweaty and when she opened her eyes, she realized that her head was at the foot of the bed and her feet were resting on her pillow.

Carson's hair tickled her chin and a long strand of it was plastered against her cheek. She smiled and brushed it aside. He stirred beside her, lifting his head and planting a firm kiss on her lips before levering himself off her. Their bodies were stuck together and they parted with a sucking sound that made her laugh.

Rolling to his feet, Carson scratched his stomach and smiled at her, shaking his head before heading to the bathroom. Lily lay on the bed, completely and utterly content. She could hear Carson rummaging around in the bathroom and the sounds felt natural and right as if he belonged here with her.

He returned quickly, bringing a damp cloth with him. It was a measure of how much she trusted him and how comfortable she was with him that she allowed him to wash her breasts and stomach and between her thighs. Not once did she stop and think about how she must look.

"Let's get you settled." He lifted her and turned her around. Yanking back the covers, he settled her beneath them. She snuggled her pillow and closed her eyes. "Hey." She managed to open her eyes when she felt his gentle tug on her hair. "Thank you for the flowers and the gifts."

Lily smiled at him, loving him more in this moment than she ever thought it possible to love a man. "You're welcome." She shifted her legs, stretching them slightly. Physically, she felt marvelous, if a bit tired.

"I've got something for you." Reaching over the side of the bed, he snagged his jeans and dug into the front pocket. When he sat back, his fingers were closed in a tight fist.

Curiosity aroused, she sat up. Her heart was pounding hard and the butterflies had returned to her tummy.

He took her left hand in his and brought it to his lips. He kissed each knuckle, allowing his tongue to slide between her fingers. She made a low sound of desire in her throat. Carson's blue eyes sparkled as he looked at her. The devil knew he was arousing her again.

Holding up his other hand, he slowly opened it. Sitting in the center of his palm was an amazing diamond solitaire. Her gaze flew back to his face. All signs of laughter were gone. His jaw was set, his lips in a firm line, his eyes serious. "Lily, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

She stared at Carson. How quickly he'd gone from acquaintance and friend to lover and beloved. Some people might think she was crazy for loving a man so much younger than herself. This whole thing had happened so fast, it was dizzying. But when it was right, it was right, and Lily trusted herself. More than that, she trusted Carson.

Reaching out, she cupped his jaw, feeling the prickle of five o'clock shadow against her palm. "You've fulfilled your promise. The research is done and all the items have been ticked off the list."

His eyes narrowed. "Damn the list. I want more."

"Me too," she whispered, leaning forward to press a kiss to his lips. "Yes, I'll marry you." Lily could feel the happiness blossoming to life within her.

Carson's fingers tightened around hers. His entire body relaxed and it was only then she realized just how tense he'd been. His eyes never left hers as he slid the ring on her finger and raised her hand to his mouth. "Mine," he uttered as he kissed her knuckle just above the ring.

"And you're mine." Lily nuzzled her nose against his.

He pounced suddenly, rolling her beneath him. Once again, she could feel the heavy press of his erection against her belly. She parted her legs to accommodate him. "Did I mention that I read two of your books?"

Lily froze beneath him, suddenly remembering the package from the bookstore that he'd had tucked under his arm that day at the mall. "You have?" No one that she knew had ever read them and she found herself curiously nervous.

"I certainly have." He nuzzled the side of her neck, working his way to the curve of her ear. "You are one talented lady."

Pleasure filled her. "You think so?"

"Oh yeah." He nipped at her lobe, tugging on the small gold hoop she had hooked there. "You gave me all kinds of ideas."

Lily laughed as he growled and nibbled on her neck again. "Then maybe you won't mind helping me with research," she teased. "We could make a new list."

Carson raised his head, his face relaxed, his eyes twinkling. "Did I mention that I'm very good with research?"

She tugged his head closer, her lips skimming his. "I believe I knew that." Then he was kissing her and everything else was forgotten.

* * * * *

Lily watched Carson as she handed him a copy of her latest book, *Hidden Desires*. They'd made their way down to the kitchen, but she'd made a quick stop to her downstairs office first to get the paperback. She was still incredibly touched that he'd bought and read the first two. He'd teased her as they'd showered that he wanted to read her newest one as well. After all, as he'd pointed out, how could he know what areas needed research if he hadn't already read them?

His large hands handled the book with care as he traced his finger over the writing on the cover. A shiver ran down her spine almost as if he were touching her instead of an inanimate object.

"Thank you." His voice was husky, filled with emotion. "It means a lot that you're willing to share your work with me."

"You're welcome." She leaned down and planted a kiss on his very kissable lips. He took the opportunity to slip his hand beneath the T-shirt she was wearing and fondle her butt. She was wearing underwear, but he pushed his hand beneath it, caressing her bare skin.

She sucked in a breath and stepped away. "None of that or we'll both starve." After making love again, they'd showered and Lily had pulled on Carson's T-shirt, loving the fact that it smelled so much like him. The light brown shirt covered her to mid-thigh, much like her own nightshirts did, but she felt sexy wearing it because it was his. He'd pulled on his jeans and they'd both padded downstairs to forage for food. Neither of them had eaten well today and they were both famished.

Carson withdrew his hand slowly, dragging his finger along her butt crease. She gave a shriek and danced out of his reach, shaking her finger at him. "Food first."

He came to his feet, every move deliberate. She recognized the gleam in his eye. "I'm hungry." Her gaze went to the front of his jeans. Yup, he was aroused again. Lily was secretly thrilled by how much he wanted her. "For you," he added in his low, sexy voice that made her cream her panties as he stalked toward her.

She backed up, but came up solid against the refrigerator. Placing his two hands on the refrigerator door, he effectively boxed her in. Not that she'd been trying very hard to elude him.

Lowering his head, he captured her lips. Her hands clutched at his shoulders as she lost herself in his kiss. When he broke away, she was breathless. Leaning down, he rested his forehead against hers. "We could always eat...later." Before his lips could touch hers again, she heard the sound of a key turning in a lock. "What the hell?" He turned his head toward the door, which opened as if in slow motion.

Lily froze as Ethan strode into the room. He stopped in his tracks, his duffel bag hitting the floor with a thud. Carson stiffened and she knew he was wondering how she was going to handle this.

Suddenly, all her fears and reservations evaporated and everything inside her settled. Patting Carson on the chest, she stepped aside and opened her arms as she strode toward her son. "What are you doing here? It's so good to see you."

Ethan reached down to hug her, but his eyes never left Carson. "Friday's classes were canceled and you haven't sounded like yourself when we've talked the past few times. I thought I should come home and check up on you."

Lily squeezed him tight before releasing him. "That's so sweet of you, but everything is fine, honey."

"Is it?"

She stared at him, not surprised by the disbelief in his voice. He'd never seen a half-naked man in her kitchen before. Before she could begin to reassure him, Carson stepped forward and held out his hand. "Good to see you, Ethan."

Lily knew that it was good manners more than anything else that made Ethan take Carson's hand. She could easily sense her son's confusion. "Why don't we all sit down? I was just about to make something to eat. Are you hungry?" She resisted the urge to tug at the hem of the T-shirt.

Ethan shook his head and stuffed his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. "What's going on, Mom?" He rocked back on his heels as he waited for a reply.

She looked at the man before her, because that's what he was. She tilted her head to one side, really looking at him. At six-foot-one, he was tall but still lanky, but she knew he'd fill out as he got older. He got his height and build from his father, but his eyes he'd gotten from her. She could see the concern in them now and marveled at what a wonderful son she'd been blessed with.

Carson stirred beside her, but she put her hand on his arm, restraining him. Ethan noted the move and he did a double take when he saw the ring on her finger. Lily held her left hand up. "Carson asked me to marry him and I said yes."

Ethan's gaze went from her to Carson and back to her again. She held her breath, not quite sure how he was going to react. On the one hand, he was a mature man with a life of his own now. On the other, she was his mother and he'd never seen her with a man before. "Really?"

"Really." She glanced up at Carson and smiled as he slipped his arm around her shoulders for support. "We started seeing one another and..." She shrugged.

"That's awful fast." This was directed at Carson.

Carson nodded. "For your mother maybe, but not for me. I've known what I've wanted for the past several years now."

Ethan shook his head. "So it wasn't all in my mind."

"Excuse me?" She searched her son's face for answers.

He reached out and took her hand, bringing it closer so he could examine the ring. "I thought that Carson had the hots for you, but he never asked you out or anything, so I figured I must be imagining it."

"I was biding my time," Carson drawled.

Lily didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Her own son had seen what she hadn't. "Well, I may be slow on the uptake, but I certainly know now." She could feel the heat on her cheeks as both men stared at her.

Ethan chuckled as he tugged her into his arms for a hug. "Does he make you happy?" he whispered in her ear.

"Very," she replied.

He gave her an extra squeeze. "As long as he keeps on doing that. If he ever makes you unhappy, you tell me and I'll kick his butt."

Lily felt as if her heart would explode with love for her son. "I promise."

As soon as they separated, he offered his hand to Carson, who took it and then pulled Ethan toward him. The two men hugged and pounded each other on the back in the way that men do. "I love your mother and I promise to take good care of her."

Lily swiped at her damp eyes and sniffed.

"No crying." Carson released Ethan and reached out to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear.

"Okay," she agreed as another tear slid down her cheek.

Ethan was no longer paying her any mind – his attention was riveted on the kitchen table. Uh-oh, she'd forgotten all about her book. Wiping away the last of her tears, she went to his side. "There's something else you need to know."

"That you're Ms. Lillian?"

Lily felt her jaw drop. "You knew," she sputtered when she managed to get her mouth working.

Ethan gave her a look that was way too adult for her peace of mind. "I've known since the beginning." He shrugged, totally unrepentant. "You left the laptop on one night when you went to bed, so I figured I'd just shut it down for you." He grinned. "Boy, did I get an education that night."

Lily felt her face burning. "Oh my God."

"Hey, it's okay." He paused as he picked up the book. "It was really good, even if it wasn't finished at the time."

Reaching over, she plucked the book from his hands and laid it back on the table. "I'm really glad that you like it, but I don't want to even think about you reading it." Really it was too much to envision her son, whom she'd bathed and changed, reading her erotic romance. A woman had to draw a line somewhere.

Carson laughed and wrapped his arms around her waist, hugging her tight. "I told you that Ethan was man enough to understand."

"Enough." Lily scrubbed her hands over her face.

Her son grinned at her. "Don't worry, Mom. It didn't warp me. At least not too much," he teased.

Lily moaned and then groaned when her stomach growled. "I'm hungry."

Ethan laughed at her obvious ploy to change the subject. He grabbed his duffel bag and headed for the stairs. "I could eat. How about some eggs and bacon?" he called over his shoulder as he took the stairs two at a time.

"I can't believe he took everything so well."

"I can." Carson rubbed his chin on the top of her head as she leaned into him. "He's a good boy, a man really, and he was raised by one hell of a woman."

Lily felt pure happiness blossoming within her.

"I'm just happy that you're mine." His voice was rough with emotion.

Lifting her hand, she caressed his cheek. He turned his face into her palm and kissed it. He'd stormed into her life and changed it so much in the past few weeks, enriching it in so many ways. "Me too."

The sound of footsteps pounding on the stairs galvanized her into action. She gave Carson a quick kiss and headed for the refrigerator. Opening the door, she smiled when she saw the can of whipped cream on the first shelf. There wasn't much left, but she had plans for it.

Calmly, she pushed it aside and reached for the eggs and bacon. Life was good.

About the Author

N.J. Walters worked at a bookstore for several years and one day had the idea that she would like to quit her job, sell everything she owned, leave her hometown and write romance novels in a place where no one knew her. And she did. Two years later, she went back to the same bookstore and settled in for another seven years.

Although she was still fairly young, that was when the mid-life crisis set in. Happily married to the love of her life, with his encouragement (more like, "For God's sake, quit the job and just write!") she gave notice at her job on a Friday morning. On Sunday afternoon, she received a tentative acceptance for her first erotic romance novel, *Annabelle Lee*, and life would never be the same.

N.J. has always been a voracious reader of romance novels, and now she spends her days writing novels of her own. Vampires, dragons, time-travelers, seductive handymen and next-door neighbors with smoldering good looks all vie for her attention. And she doesn't mind a bit. It's a tough life, but someone's got to live it.

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

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

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