

A romantic photograph of a couple in bed. The woman is in the foreground, wearing a white lace-trimmed nightgown, with her back to the camera. The man is behind her, partially visible. A cup of steamy coffee sits on a bedside table in the background. The overall mood is intimate and sensual.

Jamie
Hill

Having
it All



Unexpected Love Trilogy: Book Three

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offering your shoulders to lean on!

Chapter 1

The outside temperature was brisk and frosty, hovering around twenty degrees. *Not fit weather for man or beast*, Mandy Stevens thought wryly, nor for a woman who'd locked her keys in her car.

She stomped her feet a few times out of frustration and walked around the small hatchback, trying to decide what to do. Mandy carried a cell phone, but whom could she call? Her mom kept an extra set of keys, but lived two hours away. She'd freak out if Mandy phoned her to help. No, Mandy needed to figure this one out herself.

Her roommate back at the dorm would be no help. Dee Anderson had been Mandy's best friend since elementary school. Now they were college roommates, but neither was particularly mechanically-minded. Dee had three brothers who took care of her. Mandy's stepfather was pretty handy, and what he couldn't fix, her uncle could. But neither man was here now.

She needed a locksmith, she finally deduced. She could go back into the post office where she'd just mailed a University of Illinois sweatshirt home for her stepdad's birthday. The postal clerks certainly had a phone book she could use. That's what she'd do.

Mandy blew on her hands to warm them and started toward the building just as a sporty black convertible zipped into the parking space next to hers, causing her to jump. The two guys in the front seat

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watched as one in the back seat climbed out over the top of his door.

"Right back!" he called, trotting into the post office.

"Hurry up!" the other passenger yelled after him.

The driver looked Mandy up and down and gave a small grin. "Hello."

"Hey," she said absently, slightly irritated at his reckless driving.

"Pretty cold to be standing around out here," he noted.

He's one to talk, she thought and responded, "Pretty cold to be driving around in an open convertible."

"No! It's exhilarating!" He grinned again, warming his hands in front of his auto's heating vent.

"Exhilarating?" Mandy snorted. "Try locking your keys in your car. That'll get your blood pumping."

The driver shut off his engine and turned to his passenger. "She locked her keys in her car!"

"We don't have time for this," the second man grumbled.

"We can't just leave her stranded here," the driver insisted. He opened his door and exited his car the usual way.

As he stepped in front of Mandy, she couldn't help but notice how good he smelled. *Calvin Klein's Obsession*, she thought to herself, wondering why she bothered to notice. He was certainly good-looking, with short brown hair and a three-day growth of beard. But his fancy car and expensive leather coat spoke volumes about him—he plainly didn't travel in the same circles Mandy did. She spotted a fraternity sticker on the windshield. Shoot, their circles weren't even in the same hemisphere.

"Let's see what we've got, here." He smiled at Mandy and peered in her car's front window. "Oh, no worries. I just need a coat hanger."

The passenger in his car shook his head. "Coat hangers don't work anymore, the way they design locks on cars now."

Mandy glanced over at him. He was stocky and muscular, with shaggy blonde hair. *Not nearly as attractive as Calvin Klein here.*

"Calvin" looked at his friend and smiled. "It'll work on this car. It was designed a few years ago. *Quite a few years ago.*"

Mandy blushed in embarrassment. "I can handle this, really. I was just going inside to call a locksmith."

"A locksmith?" he hooted. "Do you have any idea how much

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that'll cost you?"

"I have money," she said icily, still embarrassed by his treatment and her whole situation.

"She was going to call a locksmith!" He repeated with obvious amusement to his friend in the car.

"Let her," the other man replied. "Then we can get out of here."

The first guy came back out of the post office, shoved his hands into his pockets and looked at them curiously. "What's going on?"

"We need a coat hanger," the driver said.

"I don't have a frigging coat hanger." He started to hop in the backseat.

Mandy watched him. He had shaggy dark hair but was thin and wiry, a beanpole compared to the man she'd mentally nicknamed Calvin.

The driver glanced around and inclined his head. "Dino, right down there—a dry cleaner's. They'll have a hanger. Go get one."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Dino made a move to climb in the car, then realized his friend apparently wasn't joking. "A coat hanger," he repeated dully.

"A *wire* coat hanger," Calvin nodded. Dino headed to the dry cleaner.

"You don't have to do this," Mandy insisted, slipping her hands in her pockets. Dino didn't look any too happy as he stomped off. She didn't want to be a burden. Freezing all of a sudden, she just wanted to go back into the post office.

"I told you, no worries." The driver smiled. "Once he gets back, it'll only take me a sec."

"Well, all right," she finally said, feeling she had no choice. They stood there awkwardly, staring at each other for a moment.

The man in the car spoke up. "Nick, we're supposed to be someplace *right now*."

"Keep your shorts on," Nick snapped back. He smiled at Mandy. "I guess I should make introductions. I'm Nick Westchester. The impatient one in the car is Karl Browning. The gopher's Dino Manetti."

She studied him for a minute, debating if she wanted to give out her name. For a brief second she contemplated making up a name, maybe something exotic, like "Vivian Wallingford." She finally decided to go with the truth. "Mandy Stevens."

"Hey, Mandy," Nick said with a nod of his head and a bow at the

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waist. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Yeah, you too," she replied, trying not to smile at his goofy behavior. Karl in the car obviously wasn't amused. He scowled at her and kept an irritated look planted firmly on his face.

"Here you go." Dino returned and tossed a metal coat hanger to Nick. "You owe me a buck."

"A buck!" Nick exclaimed. "For this?" He shook the flimsy hanger in the air.

"I'll pay for it." Mandy dug through her purse.

"Absolutely not." Nick touched her arm. "He owes me a lot more than a buck. Don't worry about it." He stood there with the hanger in his hand.

She motioned to her car. "Do you think you could...?"

"Oh! Yeah!" Nick straightened the hanger and walked up to the driver's door. He inserted the wire between the window and the doorframe. He jiggled and the lock popped up. Opening the door, he slid into the seat and started the engine.

Mandy saw him turn the heat and defroster on, then he stepped back out. "Wow, that was fast," she said gratefully. "I really appreciate it."

"Should be warm in just a minute for you," he told her with confidence. "Seems to have a pretty good heater."

"It's a good car," Mandy replied proudly. "Even if it is ancient."

"I never said it was ancient." He smiled at her, waving the wire hanger. "Would you like to keep this?"

"Don't know why." Mandy walked around to the driver's side. "If I need it again, it'll probably be locked inside my car."

"You need to find someplace to stick it," he told her.

"I'm sure you can think of a place to stick it." Mandy smiled at him sweetly, and as she got in her car, she heard Dino and Karl whooping.

Nick held her door so she couldn't close it. An angry expression crossed his face. "I was just trying to be helpful, you know."

Mandy looked at him, noting another expression in his dark eyes. *Embarrassment*. She'd embarrassed him in front of his friends. "I'm sorry," she answered softly. "You *were* helpful, saving me a lot of time and money. I really do appreciate it. I'll have another key

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made and hide it somewhere, so I shouldn't have a need for the hanger, but thanks."

Nick's expression softened. "All right, then. You're welcome."

She reached for the door, which he still held firmly. She smiled again and raised her eyebrows. He let go but seemed almost reluctant to do it, which surprised her. She thought they were late. "Thanks again," she said and backed out slowly.

In her rearview mirror, Mandy saw him standing there, watching her drive away.



Mandy's dorm room was in Ford Hall, smack dab in the middle of the U of I campus. There was a parking lot close by. She secured her car and made certain she'd removed the keys before locking it this time. She rarely drove during the week because all her classes were within walking distance. It was nice to have a car for grocery shopping or errands like today, and it made going home on the weekends that much easier.

She and Dee had plenty of friends at school, but usually once a month they drove back to their small hometown of Perry, Illinois. There wasn't much to do there, but both girls were close to their families and enjoyed going home to visit.

Her dorm room was empty when she got back, so Mandy kicked off her shoes and dropped onto her bed, dialing her cell phone at the same time. The phone rang twice, then a small voice answered.

"Buchanan residence, Tyrone speaking."

Mandy chuckled at her little brother. His greeting came out as: *BuchananresidenceTyronespeaking*. Most people would have no idea what the child just said. But Mandy spoke his lingo and replied happily, "Hey Ty-bo! How's my little buddy?"

"Mandy!" he squealed into the phone. "Are you home?"

"No sweetie, I'm still at college. I just called to talk to Mom. How are you?"

"Hungry! Daddy's making vegetarian 'sagna."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Ask Mom for a peanut butter sandwich."

"Okay!"

Mandy heard the phone hit the table and voices in the

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background. She shouted, "Hey, come back! I didn't mean right now! Ty, this call is costing money, you know!"

There was a scuffling sound, and then a voice on the phone, "What do you mean, peanut butter sandwich? This is a new lasagna recipe, and I think it's going to be fantastic."

"Hey, Sam," Mandy chuckled at her stepfather. "I remember your other attempts at vegetarian cooking. Tofu sucks. I hate to break that to you."

"You won't even be able to taste it," he replied. "Are you coming home this weekend? I'll save you some."

"Gosh, that sounds tempting. I wish I could, really. But my English teacher assigned a big project already. Can you believe it? Only a few weeks into the semester and they're already dumping huge amounts of stuff on us."

"Yeah, they should wait until the semester's almost over and dump it all on you then. Why don't you suggest that?"

"You are, like, no help whatsoever," she teased. Sam was a terrific stepfather, and in the five years he'd been in their lives, Mandy had grown to love him. She knew her mom was over the moon about him, and it was easy to accept him for that reason alone. But she also thought he was a very cool person. "You'll never believe what I did today."

"You made your bed? You're right, I won't believe that."

"Sam," Mandy laughed. "You suck. Where's my mother? She'll take pity that I locked my keys in the car."

"You're kidding me," he replied. "Did you have to call a locksmith?"

"I was going to call *you*," she answered. "I've never done that before in my life. I wasn't exactly sure what to do."

"Hmm, so what happened?"

"Some guys came along. One of them said he could get the car door open with a wire hanger, and there happened to be a dry cleaner nearby, so he took care of it."

"The dry cleaner?"

"No! The guys in the car! One of them was friendly, and he opened my door for me."

"How friendly?" Sam asked suspiciously.

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Mandy laughed again. She didn't have much experience with men, and her family knew it. Her life was pretty much an open book as far as that was concerned. "Just friendly enough," she told him, then added, "There were three of them, so it took me a while to pay them back after they got the door open for me."

"*Amanda Jean!*" he raised his voice in mock horror, and she giggled.

"I'm just kidding, Sam. They were nice enough, opened the door, then I drove away."

"Don't tell your mother that joke, please. I doubt she'd think it was very funny."

"You're right, of course," Mandy agreed. Her mother, Sarah, was a bit on the overprotective side. "I just like yanking your chain."

"Yank away, kiddo. I'll save some of my vegetarian lasagna for you. I'm sure it'll freeze just fine. And the next time you're out, have another car key made and hide it somewhere. They sell these little boxes that can fit inside your tire well, and you can stick the spare key in there."

"Yes, sir, will do. I suppose I should go. This call is costing you your hard-earned cash."

"Yeah, being a librarian is a tough job," Sam joked about his line of work. "We're checking into another cellular plan with more minutes. We'll let you know when we get it."

"Thanks, Sam. Is Mom around?"

"No, she and your Aunt Bailey ran over to visit Mrs. Lewis from church. The old lady broke her leg and they took dinner to her."

"Leaving you at home, making vegetarian lasagna? What, has Mom gone crazy?"

"I'm hanging up now," Sam teased.

"Yeah, yeah. Okay then, give her a kiss for me."

"Count on it."

"No, I said *for me*. Not one of the hundred kisses you were going to give her tonight, anyway."

He chuckled. "All right, kid, I'll give her a hundred and one tonight. And I'll tell her you called. She'll probably call you back."

"Have her make it tomorrow, okay? I really need to study."

"Will do. Night, Mandy."

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"Goodnight, Sam." She smiled as she disconnected and lay back on her bed. Mandy knew her mom hit the jackpot the day Sam Buchanan walked into their lives. It had taken the couple just a few weeks to fall in love. Within a matter of months, they were married and Sam moved in with Sarah and Mandy.

The three of them lived together in the little house where Mandy grew up until Sarah became pregnant. Then they'd gone house hunting for a larger place. Mandy reminded them she was leaving for college and the baby could have her room, but they insisted she would always have a room at their house.

They found just what they were looking for in a five-bedroom ranch-style home just a few blocks away. It was perfect, they'd all agreed, and still close to Sarah's brother's place. Mandy's Uncle Doug and Aunt Bailey lived nearby with their two daughters, five-year-old Lissa and four-year-old Denise.

Mandy smiled, thinking about her pretty little cousins. The dorm room door opened. "Hey, girl," Dee busted into the room with a flurry of energy. "What are you doing?"

"Thinking about home. I just talked to Ty and Sam. It made me kind of wish I was there."

"But it's spaghetti night in the chow hall." Dee grinned. "We never miss spaghetti night."

Mandy sat up. "You're right about that." She wiped away a tiny wistful tear from the corner of her eye and stood up. She screwed up her face. "Sam's making vegetarian lasagna."

"Ooh, poor Ty! I hope your mom has some peanut butter!"

Laughing, Mandy grabbed her keys and student ID, which served as her meal ticket. She shoved them in her pocket. "Okay, let's go."

"It's spaghetti night!" Dee called raucously as they headed down the hall.



When Mandy arrived back at the dorm after classes the next day, the residence hall assistant met her in the hallway. "Hey, Mandy. Delivery for you." The older student handed over a long

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white floral box. Mandy looked down at it blankly.

"For me?"

"Says 'Mandy Stevens,'" the girl told her, and walked off.

"Thanks," Mandy called as an afterthought, and carried the box to her room. She opened it and discovered a dozen red roses. "What the heck?" She smelled one of the fragrant flowers and smiled. Her mother or Sam must be trying to cheer her up after the incident yesterday.

Mandy found a pitcher of water in their little dorm-sized fridge, and removed the lid. It was half-full. Perfect. She pulled out the flowers one at a time and arranged them carefully. "Not the most beautiful vase," she murmured aloud to herself, but it worked in a pinch.

When she got to the bottom of the box Mandy smiled. There was a magnetic key holder like Sam had described. She could put an extra car key in it and hide it under her car somewhere. Smiling as she reached for the card, her mouth dropped open as she read it.

Be sure to have that extra key made. Not that I'd mind helping you again.

Nick Westchester

Mandy looked at the flowers. Nick Westchester? What was *he* doing sending her a dozen roses? She felt her face flush as she held the card in her hands. Surely he was just being friendly, but roses weren't cheap. His gift seemed a little above and beyond the norm.

She set the card down and backed away from the flowers. Just as she was trying to decide what to make of them, a knock sounded at her door. Mandy grabbed the handle and flung it open, her mind too preoccupied to consider security. Everything came into focus as she found Nick himself standing outside her door.

"Hey, you're home!" he said.

"Uh, yeah. Hey." He left her speechless for the second time that day.

Nick grinned, and Mandy thought he looked even more handsome than the day before. His eyes were chocolate brown, and when he smiled the corners got all crinkly. "I was wondering..." He peered over her shoulder into the empty room. "Think I could come in for a minute?"

Mandy stepped back, giving him room to enter. A vague warning thought floated through her mind about allowing a strange

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man into her room while she was there alone, but it was the middle of the day and dozens of girls milled around her floor. Besides, he wasn't a *complete* stranger, was he?

"Oh, you got the flowers! Great!"

"Yes, I did." She finally found her voice. "I just opened the box. And I was standing here trying to figure out why you sent them."

He grinned again and turned toward her. "I guess I was trying to get your attention. I didn't seem to get it yesterday. I hoped this might do it."

Mandy crossed her arms over her chest. "Okay, you've got it. So what are you going to do about it?"

He laughed out loud and leaned in to her. "Now that's a loaded statement. But something tells me you don't even realize it."

Mandy was confused, and apparently it showed on her face. "What?"

Still smiling, Nick took a step closer. "Are you really as innocent as you seem?"

The conversation didn't appear to be headed in a good direction, so Mandy backed up and opened the door. "Thanks for the flowers, Mr. Westchester. It was unnecessary, but a very nice thing to do. I'll have that key made right away."

"Mr. Westchester is my father, and if you met him, I think you'd notice a big difference between us. Call me Nick." She didn't reply. He added, "Please."

Mandy finally nodded. "Okay, Nick. Well, anyway, thanks again for the flowers."

He placed his hand next to hers on the open door and looked in her eyes. "Trying to get rid of me?"

"Pretty much," she admitted, and they both chuckled.

"At least I know where I stand," he acknowledged. "Honestly, I've never had so much trouble getting a date before."

"A date?" Mandy blinked. "Is that what this is all about?"

"What did you think it was about? I haven't stopped brooding since the minute I laid eyes on you yesterday. You're all I can seem to focus on." He reached out and touched a strand of Mandy's chin-length blonde hair.

"You're kidding," she said, looking intently into his eyes. This

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was a joke. A cruel, cruel joke, and somebody, somewhere was about to start laughing hilariously.

"I'll admit I like to have fun, but I do not kid around about some subjects. Beautiful women being one of them." He took another step closer.

Beautiful women? Mandy glanced around for a hidden camera. Someone was playing an awful prank here. "You should go," she whispered. She almost couldn't get the words out.

A disappointed look crossed his face. "I'm sorry if I came on too strong. I stopped by to ask you out and ended up spilling my guts about how I can't stop thinking about you. I probably sound like a stalker or something."

Mandy cocked her head. He appeared sincere, yet she couldn't believe this was happening. "You're not playing a practical joke on me?"

Now Nick appeared confused. "Why would I—oh, the guys I was with yesterday. Karl and Dino are a little rowdy. Hell, I'm a little rowdy when I get going with them. But no, no practical jokes. Not when guys are probably beating down your door to take you out."

She looked down and he touched her arm. "Is that it? Do you have a boyfriend? I'm sorry. I should have known someone as beautiful as you—"

That did it, Mandy thought. He'd just called her beautiful for the second time. If he was joking with her, he was a *really convincing prankster*. She smiled at him hopefully. "Nope, no boyfriend. I'd like to go out with you, if the offer's still open." Mandy held her breath. She'd opened her heart up, and was waiting to see what he would do with it.

The sincere smile that spread from his mouth to his eyes lit up his face. He looked relieved, grinned and nodded. "Excellent. When? Tonight is probably out. Tomorrow night?"

Mandy laughed. "Tomorrow night would be fine."

"Great!" He breathed a sigh, apparently from more relief. "I'll pick you up at six. We'll grab some pizza and take in a movie."

"That sounds good." She looked at him.

Nick clutched the door between them for a moment, then released it and stepped back nervously. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then."

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"Tomorrow," Mandy acknowledged, and watched him walk down the hall. "Thanks again for the flowers!" She called. He grinned and bowed before stepping into the elevator.

She closed her door and leaned against it. *Oh my God*, she thought to herself, she had a date with Nick Westchester!



Dee wasn't back, and Mandy needed to talk to someone. Looking at her watch, she knew her mother wouldn't be home from work yet. Her aunt, Bailey Kenny, hadn't worked since her kids were born. She'd been the local librarian in Perry until she became pregnant with Lissa, and hired Sam to replace her. Perry was a *very* small town.

Mandy picked up her cell phone and dialed her aunt's number.

"Hello?" Bailey answered.

"Don't you have Caller I.D. yet? Tell Uncle Doug to fork out a few bucks and propel you into the twenty-first century."

Bailey laughed. "Hey, I love staying home with the girls, but that also means I have to do my part and live without the small luxuries. How are you?"

"Well," Mandy hesitated. *How was she?* She wanted to say "extremely excited," but she was approaching her date cautiously. "I'm good," she replied, her voice squeaking.

"Something's going on, I can tell. Spill."

"Well, I met this guy."

"A guy?" Bailey squealed. "Was he one of the coat-hanger guys from yesterday?"

Mandy chuckled. "Nothing gets past you folks there in Mayberry. Yeah, he was the one who unlocked my car door."

"Cool! You know, Doug says you need to get one of those magnetic things that holds keys, and then—"

"I know, I know," Mandy interrupted. "Actually, I've got one. Nick sent it to me today, in a bouquet of roses."

"Roses?" her aunt snickered. "Who is this guy, Donald Trump Junior?"

"Nick Westchester. I don't know much about him, other than the fact he drives a sporty convertible and wears an expensive leather coat. Oh, and he's in a fraternity. I don't know which one. I

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can't tell those symbols apart."

"When he tells you which fraternity, try to remember it. That kind of stuff is important to those guys."

"I will," Mandy agreed. "And he smells really good."

"Always a plus," Bailey added. "So, is he cute?"

Mandy wasn't sure why she blushed, sitting here alone speaking into the phone. But something about Nick Westchester did that to her. "Really cute. He's got short dark hair, and he looks like he hasn't shaved in a few days."

"Hmmm, sounds like just my type."

Laughing, Mandy realized that she'd just described her uncle. But Nick was nothing like Doug. Nick was...Nick. "He's a little young for you, I think," Mandy cautioned.

"Are you kidding? The women in Hollywood do it all the time. Thirty-something woman with a twenty-something man. Lucky for you, I'm quite happy with the man I have, thank you very much."

"No, Aunt Bailey, thank *you*. If you went after this guy, I'd never stand a chance." Mandy thought her aunt was the most beautiful, self-confident woman she'd ever met. Her mom was great, too, but Bailey was one of a kind.

"Get out of that cookie jar!" Bailey hollered away from the phone, and then spoke into the receiver again. "Sorry, kiddo, I need to run. I think there's a raid going on in the kitchen while my back is turned."

"One cookie won't hurt them," Mandy protested in defense of her cousins.

Bailey chuckled. "One? One in the past half-hour, maybe. They've been in that damned cookie jar all day. Okay, so have I," she sighed. "I've got P.M.S. big time, and can't get enough chocolate."

"Go have another cookie. You'll feel better."

"Until I see the reflection of my big old butt in the mirror. I haven't been running as much with this cold weather. I've got to find another form of exercise."

Mandy snickered. "I thought you and Uncle Doug had no problems in the exercise department."

"I told you, I've got P.M.S. Nothing romantic about that, as

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you'll find out, my dear. Anyway, good luck with the guy."

"Thank you. We're going out tomorrow night."

"Ooh, be sure to call and let us know how it went!"

"I will. I'll call one of you, and see how fast it spreads from there. You know: telephone, telegraph, tell someone in Perry."

"Hey, you've got an exciting college life going on. We're stuck here, living vicariously through you."

"Yeah," Mandy sighed wistfully. "May I lead such a boring life when I get older."

Bailey chuckled. "Take care, kiddo. Talk to you soon."

"Bye," Mandy replied, and disconnected the call.



Dee was skeptical about Mandy's date, much like Mandy was when Nick first broached the subject. "What do you really know about the guy?" Dee insisted. "The fact he smells good doesn't guarantee he isn't a serial killer."

Mandy chuckled, brushing her hair and looking into the mirror on the wall. "I'll have my cell phone. You can call me during dinner, and if anything is wrong I'll let you know."

"We need a code word," Dee said, thinking aloud. "Like 'breadsticks'. If you say 'breadsticks' I'll know something is not right."

"I hope I remember that," Mandy chuckled. "So I better not say 'yeah, we're eating pizza and breadsticks' innocently..."

"Mandy, I'm serious!" Dee snapped. "You're going out with a strange man that neither of us knows. I don't think your mother would approve."

Rolling her eyes at Dee in the mirror, Mandy replied, "My mother, the same woman I caught giving a Sam a blow-job in the backyard, barely a week after she'd met him?"

Dee cringed. "Don't talk like that. Your mom explained it to you...she and Sam getting carried away, and all. They're so much in love. Anyone can see that."

"They are *now*. They had to have that first date, though. Every relationship has to start somewhere."

Dee's eyes widened. "Now you're talking about *a relationship* with this guy? You just met him!"

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"Dee, stop it!" Mandy spun to face her friend. "I'm talking about pizza and a movie. We did that with guys back home, if you remember."

"Not very often."

Dee was correct about that, Mandy realized. Neither girl had dated much during high school. They hung out together, or in a group of kids. Part of the reason was their fairly strict religious upbringing. The other part was sheer nerves. Mandy didn't have much self-confidence. Dee had even less.

Her friend's uncertainty had something to do with the twenty extra pounds she carried around. Although Mandy reassured her that she was beautiful, Dee had a hard time seeing it.

Mandy didn't have that problem, but losing her father to leukemia at age seven made her a little nervous about men. Her uncle was there for her growing up, and then Sam, but it was never quite the same. Mandy was uncomfortable around strangers...*male strangers*, she amended.

"Nick's different." She asserted aloud, studying herself in the mirror. *He said I was beautiful*. She ran her hands over her hips and up to her breasts. Her figure wasn't bad, Mandy decided, but she didn't always dress in the most flattering manner. She'd have to ponder very carefully what to wear on her date.

"Well," Dee huffed, "just don't do anything foolish."

Mandy smiled.

Chapter Two

Nick knocked on her door at precisely six o'clock. Mandy checked her outfit in the mirror quickly one last time—pink striped blouse and blue jeans, pink earrings and just a hint of make-up. She fluffed her bangs, smoothed her straight, silky hair and opened the door.

"Good evening," Nick said and smiled at her. "Wow, you look great."

"Thanks." Mandy returned the smile, thinking he looked pretty great himself. The brown leather jacket over his jeans gave him a classy, casual appearance. "I'm ready," she told him, reaching for her jacket. Nick took it, holding it out for her to slip her arms in. "Oh, thanks." She smiled to herself. *He was a gentleman, too.*

Mandy grabbed her purse and let Nick lead her out. They took the elevator to the first floor and walked out to his car in the visitor's parking lot. She was relieved to see he'd put the top up on his convertible, because it was a brisk, cold night.

"A little too exhilarating out here tonight for you?" she teased.

"Not for me, but I assumed it would be for you." He opened the door for her, grinning, and Mandy could see he was teasing right back.

She slid into the seat and nodded. "You're probably right." The seats were smooth, supple leather and Mandy sank back into hers. "This is really comfortable."

"Good." Nick smiled over at her as he started the car. "I mentioned pizza last night. Does that work for you?"

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"Pizza is great. I like Joe's, over on 25th Street." She had told Dee that was probably where they'd go, assuming he liked it as much as most of the college crowd did.

"You read my mind." Nick nodded, and drove. "It might be a little noisy, but I figured you'd want our first date to be somewhere public."

"Why would I want that?" Mandy asked coolly, trying to pull off an air of sophistication.

"Just a guess," he replied, and smiled sideways at her.

To Mandy's relief, he let the subject drop. He asked her about her classes and they discussed school until they got to Joe's Pizza.

As usual, the restaurant was crowded and bustling. Nick took her hand and led her to a booth in back. "This okay?" he asked as he removed his jacket.

"Fine," she agreed, and pushed her coat into the booth before her.

"What do you like on your pizza?" He scooted into the booth.

"I'm partial to Canadian bacon, but I'll eat just about anything." She looked at the menu.

"Good to know," Nick teased again.

Mandy felt her face flush at the double entendre. She was going to have to stay on her toes with this guy. He seemed to have quite a sense of humor. "No *Fear Factor* stuff, now," she said. "We're talking about pizza toppings."

"Yeah, sure." He grinned over the top of his menu. "Are mushrooms too *Fear Factor*-ish for you?"

Mandy smiled. "I can do mushrooms."

"Excellent." Nick closed his menu and took hers, laying them both on the table. "Would you like anything else? How about breadsticks?"

"No." Mandy smiled again, looking into his warm eyes. "I don't think we'll need any breadsticks tonight." She thought of the cell phone in her purse and offered, "Let me go wash up while you order. I'll be right back."

"Promise?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Absolutely." She waved a hand in the air. "I haven't snuck out a bathroom window in years."

"All right, then." He settled back into his seat. "I'll be waiting."

Mandy crinkled her nose at him and slipped off to call Dee. Then she

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would shut her phone off, because she didn't want any interruptions.



Nick was funny and charming and very intelligent, Mandy discovered. He was a junior in Business Management, with a 3.95 grade point average. She was impressed, thinking her own G.P.A. of 3.87 had been tough enough to achieve.

"So, you want to be a teacher?" He asked as he pushed his plate away.

Mandy shrugged, nibbling the last of her pizza before doing the same. "I guess. I've always liked working with children."

"Children." Nick feigned a shiver. "Never had much use for them myself."

"Really?" Mandy's eyes widened. "I love kids. My mom remarried a few years ago and I have a three-year-old brother."

He flashed a sarcastic grin. "Delightful. You're happy about that?"

She laughed. "Yep. Ty is great, so sweet and innocent. I hope he grows up just like my step-dad, because Sam is really cool."

"That's nice to hear. Usually step-parents aren't so wonderful."

"Sam has long hair that he wears in a ponytail, and a pierced ear. He's different from anyone I thought my mom might end up with, but they're very happy together."

"What about your dad?" Nick stirred the straw around in his drink.

"Well," she hesitated, not sure she wanted to go into detail. But Nick was being so open and friendly, she decided to open up a little, too. "My dad died when I was seven. He had Leukemia."

Nick winced. "Wow, sorry to hear that. I can't imagine losing my father. I can't stand to be around the guy most of the time, but I wouldn't want anything to happen to him."

"It was rough," Mandy agreed, and used his comment to change the subject. "So, you and your dad don't get along?"

He grinned. "No, we get along fine. He just drives me up the wall. Sure he knows what's best for me, and all that."

Mandy laughed again. "Well, that's every parent, isn't it?"

"I suppose so." He looked at his watch. "Are you still up for a movie?"

"Sure. I don't have any idea what's playing."

"Me, either." He slid out of the booth and extended a hand to her. "Whatever you want to see is fine with me. Let's go to the

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Cineplex and check it out."

Mandy took his hand and grabbed her jacket on the way out of the booth. Nick helped her into her coat and then took her hand again. She thought it felt pretty comfortable, holding hands, and left it in his warm grasp.

They agreed on a newly released romantic comedy, but Mandy couldn't focus on the screen. When Nick slipped one arm around her shoulder and began kissing behind her ear, she froze in nervous terror.

"You okay?" he whispered.

She nodded stiffly.

"You want me to stop?"

Mandy thought about it for a moment before shaking her head 'no'. She really *did not* want him to stop.

"Good." He sighed into her ear and nibbled on her lobe. "You're so beautiful."

"Thanks," she replied, squirming in her seat. Her whole body tingled and although the sensation was new to her, she found it rather pleasant.

Nick tugged her head back gently and pressed his lips on hers. Mandy tried to breathe normally as her heart pounded loudly in her chest. *Holy cow!* She thought. When his tongue nudged her lips apart, Mandy opened them and let him in willingly. He pressed into her harder and used his tongue to explore every inch of her mouth.

She'd never been kissed in such a manner, and her head felt like it was spinning. It was a glorious feeling, though, and she leaned in to prolong the kiss. When she felt his hand cup her breast, her eyes popped open and she pulled away.

"I'm sorry," Nick pulled his hand back quickly. "I didn't mean to do that, but you felt so good..." He gave her a hopeful smile. "I guess I wanted to feel more of you."

Mandy straightened her blouse and looked forward at the screen. "Maybe we should watch the movie."

"Yeah, sure." He turned to the screen, but left his arm around her shoulder. "This okay?" Nick asked quietly.

"Just fine," Mandy replied, and smiled to herself.

Back in his car in her dorm parking lot, Nick took Mandy's hands

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in his and apologized again. "I didn't mean to be so forward. I hope you'll give me another chance to prove I'm not a complete leech."

She grinned. "Maybe. But I have to say something first." She took a breath, not sure exactly how to phrase her thoughts yet feeling she needed to try. "I'm not sure what kind of girls you're used to dating, and I really don't know what kind of girl you think I am. But I don't do... *that*...and I thought you should know."

"Oh," he nodded, looking at her seriously. "You don't do *that*, huh?"

Mandy felt herself blush. "No, I don't. So if that's what you were expecting, then you'd—"

He pressed a finger to her lips. "Hey, I wasn't expecting anything...except pizza, a decent movie and some good company." He smiled. "Two out of three ain't bad."

Mandy raised her eyebrows at him.

Nick laughed. "The movie sucked. Maybe it was because I couldn't concentrate. All I could think about was you sitting so close to me."

His eyes twinkled and he gave her a smile so sweet, Mandy couldn't resist slipping her arms around his neck and kissing him. Nick groaned and held her tightly. When he opened his mouth to her kiss, she let her tongue be the first to go exploring.

He gave another small moan and Mandy swallowed it, wanting to discover and taste as much of his mouth as possible. She couldn't believe after just announcing that she was a good girl, she was attacking him in the front seat of his car. He wasn't complaining.



Nick walked Mandy to her dorm-room door. As she paused before opening it, he leaned in. He couldn't leave without one more kiss...or maybe ten. Cupping her chin gently, he smiled at her before covering her mouth with his.

She kissed him back with enthusiasm, and he groaned inwardly. It would be so easy to push her up against the wall and press his aching erection against her thigh. But she'd nearly jumped out of her skin when he touched her tit. He couldn't imagine what she's do with his rock-hard cock. Finding out would have to wait.

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Her arms slipped around his neck willingly, and he dared to press his body against hers lightly. She didn't back away, so he caressed her neck and back with his hands. Their kiss was lingering and sweet, and it was driving him crazy. The longer he stood here with his tongue in her mouth, the more he wanted her.

He pulled away regretfully. "I should go."

"Yeah," Mandy agreed, breathless, her face flushed pink. "I had a really nice time tonight."

"I did too." He reached for her hand and kissed the back of it. "I don't suppose you're free tomorrow night?"

"I might be." She smiled at him, and his insides melted. *She better be*, he thought. He needed to see her again. Not really wanting to leave her now, though Nick knew he must.

"There's a party at the frat house. Would you like to go with me?"

A look of uncertainty crossed her face. "I don't know."

He added quickly, "It's non-alcoholic, if that's what's bothering you."

She looked up into his eyes. "You really want me to go?"

"Absolutely." He couldn't figure out where her insecurity came from. She was the most stunning girl he'd met on campus this year—hell, in the two and a half years he'd been at the U of I. "How about I pick you up at seven? There'll be tons of food there, so don't eat first."

"Seven," Mandy agreed. A questioning look crossed her face and she asked "Jeans?"

Nick smiled. "You could wear sweats and still be the hottest chick there. But jeans will be fine."

She blushed, something he noticed she did quite often. He found it a cute habit. "Just no togas, right?" Mandy asked with a shy smile.

Nick laughed. "No togas. This time, anyway." He leaned in and kissed her cheek lightly. "See you at seven."

Mandy touched her face and leaned against her door as Nick walked away. "Thanks for tonight," she called after him.

He smiled back at her and winked. "Thank you." He almost ran over two girls getting off the elevator as he stepped on. "Sorry," he stammered. They giggled as they passed him.

He didn't want to look back and see if Mandy noticed his blunder. But as the elevator door closed, he caught a glimpse of her

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down the hallway, still smiling at him with the sweetest look on her face. Then the doors closed.

Nick shifted his jeans on his hips, trying to adjust for the throbbing erection that pressed against his leg. Every time he thought it was simmering down, a thought of Mandy went through his mind and his cock twitched to life again. It was hopeless.

From his first glimpse of her a few days ago, standing in the street next to her car, Nick had been lost. He'd seen plenty of blue-eyed blondes before, and even slept with a number of them. But something was different about Mandy Stevens. She carried an air of innocence about her, and the more he got to know her, the more he realized it wasn't just an act. She seemed naïve and somewhat unsophisticated. Nick was pretty sure she'd never been with a guy before.

That fact made his cock jump again. *They had something in common*, he thought, smiling. Nick had never been with a virgin. He walked out to his car, shivering against the cold wind, and got in quickly. Starting the engine, he let the air warm up before rubbing his hands in front of the heater. He hadn't been with a virgin *yet*. He intended to rectify that situation very soon.



Nick's frat house was usually well-lit at night. The Greek Council cracked down on fraternities and sororities, so there were strict rules in place regarding members of the opposite sex and alcohol in the house. Since he liked living there, Nick followed the rules. He shared a room with Karl Browning, a childhood friend he'd grown up with in Chicago. Karl was a jock and sometimes his priorities irritated Nick, but usually the two got along well.

There was a Playstation contest going on when he got to his room. "Hey," Nick said to Karl and their buddy Dino, tossing his coat on a chair. He dropped onto his bed and kicked his shoes off.

"How was the date?" Karl asked, grasping his game controller and grimacing at the television screen.

"Good. How were things here?"

"Manetti is dead meat," Karl growled, punched his controller aggressively and yelled, "Yes!"

"Fuck!" Dino slapped his hand down on the bed. "You suck, Browning."

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"Want to?" Karl grabbed his crotch.

Dino waved his friend off and stood up. "You wish, asshole. I'm hitting the sack."

"Next time, the loser sucks my dick!" Karl called after him.

Dino extended his middle finger in a gesture of irritation as he walked out, and Karl chuckled. "Pussy." He flopped on his bed and looked over at Nick. "So, speaking of which...you get any tonight?"

Nick made a face. "It was our first date, for crissakes."

"Struck out, huh?"

"Fuck you," Nick replied jovially.

"Hey, I invited the Diago sisters to the party tomorrow night. I thought we might take them out first and have a few drinks before we come back here."

"You're on your own, man. I invited Mandy."

"What?" Karl sat up. "You asked Little Merry Sunshine to the frat party? Are you crazy?"

"Why do you say that?" Nick shifted uncomfortably. He knew Mandy traveled in a different circle than most of his fraternity brothers, but he didn't think it was such a big deal. He hoped it wouldn't be, anyway.

"She's just so...so..."

Nick flashed Karl a look, and could tell his friend chose his next words carefully.

"...So *Little House on the Prairie*."

"Bullshit," Nick replied. "Once you meet her, you won't feel that way. Mandy is cool."

"Yeah, well, is Mandy a sure thing for tomorrow night? Because I can promise you, my friend, the Diago twins are definite home runs. They'll leave us well-satisfied by the time we drop them off."

Sitting up to yank off his socks, Nick made another face at his roommate. "I told you, you're on your own. Take Dino with you."

Karl rubbed his hands over his face. "Manetti is a pussy." He slowly grinned at Nick. "I'll escort them both to the party. That should pay off big time for me at the end of the night."

Nick shook his head, trying not to smile at his friend's warped sense of humor.

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"We'll compare notes tomorrow night," Karl taunted. "See who had a better time at the party...and after."

"Fuck you," Nick tossed out their standard retort again and stood up. He grabbed a towel and his bathing kit. "I'm hitting the shower."

Karl laughed as Nick left the room and headed across the hall to the bathroom. Nick hoped no one needed to use the john, because he wanted to stand under the hot water spray for as long as it took to make the throbbing in his cock go away. He needed to get his mind off Mandy Stevens, but the pressure in his jeans wasn't helping. Maybe if he released a little tension, he'd sleep better.



Mandy was ready when he knocked on her door a few minutes before seven the next evening. "Hey." She smiled as she opened the door.

Nick grinned and shook his head. "Somehow, you manage to look prettier each time I see you."

She blushed and touched his arm gently, stepping aside so he could see the other girl in the room. "Nick, I'd like you to meet my roommate and best friend, Dee Anderson. Dee, this is Nick Westchester."

"Pleasure to meet you, Dee," he said politely.

She looked him over and responded, "Yeah, you too," without smiling.

Friendly, he thought sarcastically. What was up with these girls and their suspicious natures? It was like they'd never met a guy before. He returned his gaze to Mandy and noticed she looked especially great tonight, with a red blouse tucked into her blue jeans. The bright color flattered her, and her blonde hair seemed to almost shimmer. She didn't wear much make-up, if any, and Nick liked that. Her lips appeared full and naturally pink without cosmetic enhancement...quite kissable. He cleared his throat. "So, you ready to go?"

"Sure. Let me get my coat." She grabbed her jacket and he took it from her, helping her into it.

Nick caught the look that passed between Mandy and her roommate. Mandy raised her eyebrows as if to say, "See?" and Dee made a face that replied, "So what does that prove?" He bit back a chuckle and put his hand on the small of Mandy's back. "Shall we?"

"Yes." She smiled at him and glanced over her shoulder. "Goodnight, Dee."

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"Be careful," Dee called.

Nick smiled and answered in a pleasant tone, "We will be. Nice to meet you."

"Yeah," she said as he closed the door between them. Nick looked at Mandy. "Your roommate doesn't approve of men. Or is it just me?"

"A little of both, I'm afraid." Mandy made a face. "You'd have to understand how we were raised. Our church was a big aspect of our lives, and we didn't have a lot of opportunity to date."

"You described your mom as a pretty cool person. The church thing doesn't seem to fit." He led her out to his car, and drove to his fraternity house.

"She is cool. Mom turned to religion when dad got sick, and leaned on it for a long time. She didn't allow cussing or stuff like that. But when she met Sam, he teased her into relaxing her standards just a bit."

"I think I'd like Sam," Nick decided, and parked in front of his house. "Well, this is it."

"Sigma Chi. Wow." She looked over the huge residence.

"I imagine you've never been in a fraternity house before." He opened her door and offered his hand.

Mandy stepped out, admitting, "You're right, of course."

"When you get in the foyer, you must strip off your clothes and offer a sacrifice to the gods of the Greek Council."

Mandy glanced at him sharply, and Nick laughed. "Sorry, I couldn't help myself."

She stopped and pouted. "You suck. Don't tease me."

Still laughing, Nick grabbed Mandy and reeled her in for a kiss. "Yeah, I'd like to suck on these pretty pink lips, that's for sure." As the words left his mouth he realized what he'd said and what more he'd been thinking. He looked at her quickly.

Mandy smiled at him sweetly and Nick kissed her, knowing he'd dodged a bullet. She didn't need to know he was thinking about kissing her *other* set of lips...which he imagined were also pretty and pink.

He kissed her one more time and then pulled her toward the

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door. "Let's go in. I'm freezing and hungry."

"Me too," Mandy agreed, and he smiled.

The main floor of the house was already full of party-goers milling around. Nick hung up their coats and led Mandy to the food table, where they got some snacks and sodas. They found a quiet corner of a sofa to sit and eat.

"Hey, Westchester," a guy said as he approached. "Well, who do we have here?" He looked at Mandy with approval.

"Stan, this is Mandy Stevens. Mandy, Stan Carter. Stan's the president of the fraternity."

"Pleasure to meet you," she replied and Stan took her hand.

"The pleasure is all mine. If your dance card's not full, I'll have to look you up later." He kissed the back of her hand gently.

Nick reached for Mandy's hand and snatched it back. "Her dance card *is* full, Stan. Sorry."

Stan shrugged and smiled at Mandy. He made a telephone gesture with his hand and mouthed, "Call me."

She chuckled and looked at Nick with wide eyes as Stan walked away.

"What a putz," Nick muttered. "Call me," he mimicked. "Jerk."

Mandy put her hand on his arm. "You sound jealous," she teased.

He reined in his irritation and blew out a breath. "Sorry. I just hate it when guys do that."

"I found it rather flattering."

Nick snorted.

"But I find your reaction even *more* flattering," she said. "Like you might care what people say to me."

He looked into her eyes. "Of course I care. I hate to admit how much I care."

Mandy set her plate on the coffee table in front of them. "Did what's-his-name mention dancing?"

"Yeah." Nick chuckled, shoving his plate next to hers. "There's an area set up in the other room."

She took his hand. "Want to show me?"

He looked at her again and she smiled, adding, "I thought it might be nice to be in your arms."

Nick coughed. "Sounds damn nice. Come on." He led her to the

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make-shift dance floor. A slow song was playing and a few other couples were already dancing. He pulled Mandy into his arms and she slid up next to him seductively. She wrapped her arms around his neck and Nick held her close. "This *is* nice," he murmured into her ear.

"I think so, too," she replied softly, and they danced.

They separated when a fast song played, and came back together for the slow tunes. Each time Nick held her a little tighter, a bit more closely, until he was finally pressing his solid erection into her belly. Mandy didn't pull away or make any movement like she noticed, but he knew she had to. It burned between them like a hot flame.

He kissed her neck and she bent it to allow him more access. Nick almost groaned at her receptiveness, and allowed himself to wonder how far things might progress tonight.

"Hey buddy!" Karl's loud, jovial greeting separated Nick and Mandy. "How's the party?"

Looking at Karl and the dark-haired Hispanic girl on his arm, Nick replied, "It's great. Where have you been?"

"We just went out for a bite," Karl answered, still talking a bit too loudly. "You remember Lola."

Lola smiled at Nick and he glanced at her revealing halter top and low-cut jeans. He knew her from the crowd they ran with, but they weren't close.

"Yeah." Nick tried to keep the conversation level down. "And you remember Mandy. Mandy...Karl."

"Yes," she said.

"Hello Mandy!" Karl blurted out.

"Have you been drinking?" Nick asked in a hushed voice.

"Um, just a little!" Karl bellowed.

"Shhh! We don't want any trouble here. You need to settle down or leave."

"Well...I don't want to do either!" Karl laughed uproariously.

"Shit," Nick muttered and looked at Mandy. "He's going to get in a boat-load of trouble if he gets caught with booze on his breath. Would you mind if I took him upstairs and tried to sober him up a little? I'll hurry back, I promise..."

"Of course," Mandy agreed. "Go ahead. I'll be fine."

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"Um, maybe you and Lola can get some drinks. She has a twin sister, did you know that?" Nick felt horrible leaving Mandy, but he didn't want Karl to get caught. He needed a few minutes to straighten out the guy. Hopefully Mandy and Lola could talk while he was gone.

"Oh, a twin sister?" Nick heard Mandy ask Lola as he led Karl off. They went up to their bathroom and Nick shoved Karl under a cold shower.

"Son-of-a bitch!" his friend yelled as the water hit him. "Damn it, Westchester, I'm not that drunk!"

"You were acting like it," Nick replied, and turned the water spray colder.

"Shit!" Karl complained, and slapped at the faucet handle until it shut off. "Okay, okay, I'm fine. Lola had this hard lemonade that was kick ass! I couldn't even taste the alcohol in it."

Nick smiled and handed Karl a towel. "So where's Lola's sister tonight?"

"She couldn't make it. I guess it's a good thing you got your own date."

"Speaking of which, I want to get back to her."

"Hang on, buddy. I'm soaked here, and my head's still a little fuzzy. Help me find some dry clothes, will ya?"

Nick made a face, but knew he was the one who got Karl wet and should probably help him change. "Come on, jackass," he muttered, and they went to their room.

A short while later Nick found Mandy and Lola laughing on the sofa. "What's going on?" He smiled at them.

"She's so funny!" Mandy giggled, and took a drink from her cup.

Lola pointed at Mandy. "This chick is cool, Nicky. You should hang on to her."

"I intend to, thanks." He looked at both women and thought something wasn't right. "What are you drinking, babe?" Nick took Mandy's cup and sipped from it.

"Lemonade," she replied, and Nick sputtered when he tasted the strong drink.

"This is *hard* lemonade, Mandy."

"Tastes pretty soft to me," she replied, and both women erupted

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into laughter.

"Mother fucker," Nick muttered under his breath. While he'd sobered up Karl, Lola was getting Mandy drunk.

"Hey, sorry to be gone so long." Karl stepped up behind them.

Nick gave him a dirty look. "You, take care of this one." He pointed to Lola. "I'll take care of this one." He reached for Mandy and she wobbled up into his arms.

"Um, hello." She smiled, looking into his eyes.

"Uh-oh," Karl commented.

"Yeah, uh oh," Nick growled. "This is fucking terrific, Browning. Thanks so much for bringing alcohol to a non-alcoholic party."

"Sorry, man," Karl chuckled.

Nick gave him another irritated glance and led Mandy away. "We need to get you home."

"I don't wanna go home." She slid her arms around his neck. "I wanna dance some more." Mandy pressed her body against his. "Dance with me."

Nick's erection sprang back to life. "We should go," he murmured without conviction.

"Dance," she whispered, kissing his neck.

He held her up and they danced slowly to the music. *He* danced, Nick thought wryly, while Mandy climbed all over him. Nick almost swooned at her ministrations.

She finally made her way to his mouth and kissed him deeply. "Can we go to your room?" she asked.

"What?"

"Don't you have a room here?" She kissed him again. "I'd like to see it. I'd also like to see what's pressing so hard against my tummy. Show me, Nick. Come on."

Mandy's hand dropped between his legs and she cupped his crotch. "Oh yeah. This I have to see...and taste. I want to taste it, too."

Nick's cock jumped at her words. He couldn't believe this was happening.

She squeezed him through his jeans until he thought he might burst. "Let's go to your room...unless you want to show me here." She reached for his zipper.

Chapter Three

Nick savored the feel of her hand on his groin for a moment before pushing Mandy away. "It's time to go, sweetheart," he said, not believing the words that came from his mouth. "I need to get you home."

"No," Mandy whined again, but when she collapsed against him he knew she didn't have much struggle left in her.

"Let's go." He led her to the door, somehow managed to get both their coats on, and slid her into his car.

Mandy seemed to doze on the ride back to her dorm, and Nick mulled over in his mind what he would tell her roommate. The girl barely tolerated him. She might really have a heyday with Mandy in a state like this.

He was grateful to find the dorm lobby empty as he half-dragged Mandy inside and inside the elevator. This did not look good on so many levels, yet he really hated the idea of explaining to anyone.

He rapped loudly at her room door, and Dee answered in her pajamas, scrutinizing him warily. "What happened?"

He glanced around the hallway quickly and asked, "Can you help get her inside, please? I'll explain the whole thing."

"Is she hurt?" Dee slid an arm around Mandy and they carried her in.

Nick settled Mandy gently on the bed and replied, "No, she's drunk. I—"

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"*Drunk?*" Dee screeched. "Do you have a death wish? Are you out of your mind?"

"If you would let me explain—" he attempted, but she cut him off again.

"Her step-dad is going to throttle you! He looks like this laid back hippie type, you know? But when someone threatens a member of his family, he goes berserk."

"I didn't do anything to her!" Nick exclaimed. "I was..."

"And her uncle," Dee stormed across the room. "He's wildly overprotective of sweet little Mandy. He's this big guy who's probably beat the crap out of people for less reason than this."

"Will you calm down and let me explain, please?" Nick got in Dee's face. "Nothing happened to Mandy. I had to go help a friend, and while I was gone, someone else gave her a drink. Maybe two. She didn't know what it was. But as soon as I realized what happened, I brought her back here." He glanced at Mandy, asleep on her bed, and back at Dee. "I swear to you, nothing else happened. I would never do anything to intentionally hurt her."

"You were supposed to stay with her!" Dee snapped. "How could you leave her alone in a place like that? She's never been to a frat party before. What if someone..." Dee peered at her friend and took a step closer, as if to inspect her clothing.

"Nothing happened," Nick repeated insistently. "I was only gone a few minutes, and I was right upstairs. I promise you, as soon as I realized what was going on, I brought her home."

"Your promises mean nothing to me," Dee snarled. "I don't know you. Mandy barely even knows you..."

"Look, Gloria Steinem, I don't know what's got you so riled up about the opposite sex, but you're right about one thing: you *don't* know me. You're going to get the opportunity to change that, because I like Mandy. I intend to be around, whether you like it or not."

"I don't like it a bit," Dee hissed. "And I don't think her family will, either, once I've called them."

Nick's stomach lurched. "Don't do that! Please, Mandy is fine. Let her sleep it off. Talk to her tomorrow, and she'll confirm that nothing happened. If she wants to tell her folks, that's up to her. But

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please let *her* decide."

Dee seemed to think it over for a minute, and finally relented. "I guess we can wait until tomorrow. They don't need to be driving up here tonight all upset."

Exhaling with relief, Nick nodded. "Exactly. Mandy will be fine. She might have a headache, or she might throw up. But she'll be okay."

"You need to leave." Dee backed him to the door.

"I'm going. I'll call her tomorrow."

"She won't want to talk to you," Dee pronounced.

"We'll see about that," Nick replied angrily. They glared at each other for a moment before he left, slamming the door behind him. He hoped Dee was wrong. *He prayed she was wrong.*



Mandy awoke with a killer headache. Her mouth felt like it was full of cotton. She started to roll over but the room seemed to spin, so she lay very still...trying to remember. They went to the Sigma Chi house. Mandy remembered eating and dancing with Nick, but after that her recollections turned fuzzy. She vaguely remembered groping his crotch...but that couldn't have happened.

She bolted upright. *Could it?*

Making a mad dash for the door, Mandy ran down the hall to the bathroom. Thankfully it was empty. She dropped in front of a toilet and threw up.

She didn't know for sure what had happened the previous night, but some images in her mind frightened her. When her stomach was empty, Mandy peeled out of her clothes and stood under the shower. As she soaped her skin, she took a mental inventory of how she felt. *Did anything feel different?*

No. She felt the same as always. Mandy skimmed the soap over her breasts and between her legs, noting that there were no changes whatsoever. If anything sexual had happened, she felt sure she'd notice something.

Stepping out of the shower, she grabbed a towel and dried off. She'd forgotten to bring clean clothes, so she put on the clothes she slept in, and hurried back to her dorm room.

When she returned, Dee sat up and speared her with a look.

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"How do you feel?" she asked with suspicion in her voice.

"Lousy." Mandy grabbed some clean clothes and began to change. "What happened to me?"

"According to your date," Dee said with thick sarcasm, "he left you alone in the frat house and someone gave you alcohol."

"Oh, yeah," Mandy said, suddenly remembering that line of events. "I thought it was lemonade! It tasted really good, and I drank two glasses before I realized something was up."

"I can't believe he left you alone at a frat party!" Dee huffed. "What a jerk!"

"It wasn't Nick's fault," Mandy replied. "He went to help a friend, and I made a stupid mistake." She glanced around their room. "How did I get back here?"

"He said that as soon as he realized what happened, he brought you back." Dee didn't sound convinced it had been a chivalrous gesture.

"Wow." Mandy nodded, finally remembering that she hadn't wanted Nick to bring her home. She *did* grope him, and he'd pushed her away. Mandy thought she just might be sick again at the memory.

"I wanted to call your folks, but he told me not to," Dee said.

"Are you serious?" Mandy scowled at her friend. "I would have killed you."

Dee crossed her arms over her chest. "You could have been badly hurt! He put you in a dangerous situation."

"He did not," Mandy scoffed. "I went there of my own free will. Lots of nice people were there, Dee. You need to lighten up a little."

"Oh yeah? So why don't you tell your folks what happened, then? If the people there were so nice."

"Of course I'll tell them." Mandy made the decision right then. "But you don't have to make it sound like such a big deal. I'm fine."

"That's what *he* said," Dee muttered.

"Quit talking about him like that!" Mandy dropped onto her bed. Dee was being totally obstinate about Nick. Mandy wondered if it mattered anymore, after last night.

"You're not thinking clearly," Dee snapped.

"You're right about that." Mandy sighed and tossed the covers over her head.

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She felt better at noon, but didn't go out for lunch with Dee and some other girls. Mandy was lying on her bed staring at the ceiling when someone knocked at her door.

Surprised to see Nick standing there, she opened the door and said softly, "Hey."

"Hi," he replied and gave her an apologetic smile. "How are you feeling?"

She shrugged. "I'm okay. That was some stunt, huh?"

Nick glanced over her shoulder. "Is your friendly roommate here?"

Chuckling, she stepped aside. "Nope. Come in."

He entered and gazed at her with obvious concern. "I would have called first, but I don't have your cell number. I'm so sorry, Mandy. I had no idea Karl brought any of that hard lemonade to the party. I really wasn't pulling some stunt..."

Mandy smiled. "I was the one who pulled the dumb stunt. I'm twenty-one years old. You'd think I could tell when there was alcohol in a beverage."

Nick crossed his arms. "How could you tell, when you've never had alcohol?"

"What makes you think I've never had it?"

He laughed. "You couldn't have had much before. Those two drinks knocked you on your ass. Pardon my French."

She looked at him nervously. "I wasn't exactly on my ass. I seem to recall being on yours, though. Gosh, I'm embarrassed."

Nick took a step closer. "Don't be. I was extremely flattered, and seriously tempted. You don't know how tempted I was." He brushed a lock of hair off her face.

"Then why'd you bring me home?" she asked quietly. "Why didn't you take me to your room? I asked you to."

He pulled her body next to his. "You asked me when you were drunk. Ask me again when you're sober, and you'll get a different answer."

Mandy was amazed at his integrity. She was sure plenty of guys would have pounced on her, given the brazen way she'd acted. Apparently, she'd stumbled upon one of the few good ones.

Sliding her arms around his neck, Mandy kissed Nick firmly. He pressed into her, holding the small of her back with one hand

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and caressing her neck with the other. She felt warm and comfortable in his arms.

"I've never kissed anyone like this before," she murmured when they came up for air. "I didn't know it could be this way."

"This is just the beginning, beautiful girl," he replied, kissing her cheek and neck. "There's so much more I want to show you...want to experience with you."

Mandy shivered as his tongue circled her inner ear. "Oh Nick," she sighed. "When you hold me like this, I want that too. I really do." She was amazed at how much she wanted it, considering a few days ago she told him she didn't do that kind of thing. All of a sudden, she wished she did. "When I stop to think about it, that's when I realize I can't." Reconsidering her choice of words, Mandy added, "or shouldn't."

"It has to be your decision," he replied. "I'm not going to pressure you." His hips ground against hers and Mandy felt a different kind of pressure. He rubbed his solid erection against her body, and she groaned. Dampness seeped from between her legs and she pressed them shut tightly to stop it.

"You make me feel things I've never felt," she said quietly as his mouth continued its delicious assault on her neck.

Nick paused. "Are you speaking figuratively or literally?"

Mandy burst into laughter and they stepped apart. "You're horrible."

"You love it."

She grinned at him. "Maybe." Mandy looked at him longingly. "I just don't know what I'm going to do about it."

"Don't do anything." Nick squeezed her hands. "We'll let it go for now. I think we'll know when the time is right."

Blinking, she glanced up at him in surprise. "You'd do that?"

"I insist upon that." He leaned in and kissed her cheek one last time, and whispered, "I want to make love to you, Mandy Stevens. But in the last twenty-four hours I've realized the timing has to be right for both of us. I want our first time to be perfect."

She pulled away and looked into his eyes. "I just want to make sure our first time isn't our *only* time."

He shrugged. "So we'll wait until you're sure. But I promise you

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don't have to worry about that." He gazed up and down her body. "Once isn't going to be enough for me. I know that for a fact."

Mandy giggled and he grinned. "So, you hungry?" Nick asked.

"No way," she held her stomach.

"Okay, I'll leave you to rest. Think you might be hungry by tomorrow night? We could get some dinner."

"It'll have to be quick. I have a test Tuesday and I need to study most of tomorrow evening."

"I can do quick." He touched her face and grinned again. "I can also do torturously slow."

"Leave!" She shoved him gently toward the door and opened it. "Before I throw you down and make you prove it!"

"What kind of a threat is that?" He made a move to come back in.

"Bye, Nick." Mandy grabbed the door and held it between them.

"Bye gorgeous." He winked, and she closed the door.

She'd only been half-joking with him. Her lower half was tingling like crazy and she wanted desperately to see what he could do to relieve her discomfort. Every time she saw him, the feelings became more intense.

Mandy dropped onto her bed and resumed staring at the ceiling. She wished she could be sure Nick had serious feelings for her. The idea of giving him her virginity was appealing. But if he disappeared afterward, marking her down as just another notch on his bedpost, she'd be devastated. She realized she needed to know him better, but the more time they spent together, the harder it was to wait.

She loved the way he casually reached out to touch her face and hands. The familiarity excited her. Kissing Nick was the most wonderful thing she'd experienced so far, but she suspected there were more pleasures to unfold. Just feeling his solid erection pressed against her sent thrills down Mandy's spine and all points south. Merely thinking about it now caused renewed dampness between her legs.

The dorm door opened and Dee strolled in. Mandy closed her eyes, feigning sleep. Dee moved around the room quietly until Mandy heard her leave again.

Sighing, Mandy thought about her friend. She and Dee shared everything growing up. There was nothing they couldn't discuss. But

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suddenly, there was a wedge between them, and his name was Nick Westchester. Dee would never understand Mandy's burgeoning feelings for Nick. Mandy knew she had to keep them to herself, for now. She rolled on to her side, thinking about Nick, and smiled.



After convincing Dee there was no reason to tell anyone else that she got drunk Saturday night, Mandy decided to wait to explain it to her folks in person. She didn't want them getting the wrong idea about Nick before they ever met him. Allowing some time to pass seemed like a good idea.

Mandy studied for her English test until Nick arrived Monday evening. "Hello." She answered his knock and grabbed her jacket.

"Ready to go?"

"Yep." She pulled the door closed behind her.

Nick slipped his arm around her waist and kissed Mandy's temple. "How was your day?"

"Busy," she admitted. "I tried to study between classes so we could spend a little more time together tonight."

"Perfect." He squeezed her waist, and they entered the elevator.

The doors closed. Mandy smiled up at him and Nick gave her a quick kiss during their descent to the ground floor. The elevator doors opened and a crowd of girls stood watching. "Excuse us," he said and led Mandy out.

The group erupted in giggles and Nick smiled at Mandy. "Jealous," he whispered.

"Definitely," she agreed, and they got into his car.

"Still up for something fast, or did you want to go in somewhere?" he asked.

"Fast is good." Mandy saw him smile, and realized they both had the same thought on their mind. The less time they spent eating, the more time they'd have for other things.

He went through a drive-in restaurant and ordered burgers and fries to go. Pulling into a parking space, he looked at her. "This okay?"

Mandy glanced around. There was an older man in a beat-up white car watching them. She nodded in his direction. "Is he staring at us?"

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"Who?" Nick looked around. "Grandpa over there? I don't think so. But we can find a different spot."

"Someplace with more privacy?" she asked, and Nick grinned.

"You bet." Driving a few blocks away to the top of an overlook, Nick parked in a secluded area so they could eat and talk. "So...you plan to go back to Perry and teach when you graduate?"

"Yeah. The principal of the elementary school used to be one of my teachers. She told me I'll have a job when I graduate."

"But Perry is so small!" He made a face. "You really want to go back to that Tinysville?"

She smiled. "It's a nice little town. The people watch out for one another. Plus, my family's there. I want to be close to them. I hate being so far away. I'm missing all the changes as my little brother grows up."

"Oh, yes." He nodded. "The little guy. What did you say his name was?"

"Tyron. We call him Ty. He's so sweet. He's got short blonde hair that stands straight up with a little gel. It's really cute."

Nick chuckled. "Evidently. So you have just the one brother?"

"Yeah. So far. But who knows with my mother and Sam? They are, shall we say, quite affectionate. My aunt and uncle said right from the beginning they wanted two kids, and got two girls—Lissa and Denise. It's funny because my uncle is this big, strapping construction supervisor, and he's surrounded by females."

Smiling, Nick cocked his brows. "I can think of worse things."

Mandy laughed and they wadded up their wrappers and bagged up the trash.

"Allow me." Nick took the sack and dropped it into the backseat. "Okay, we made dinner and did the dishes. Now what?"

They both grinned as he pulled her into his arms. "Ah, I see we're thinking along the same lines."

"Yes, we are," Mandy replied, wrapping her arms around his neck. "So are you going to kiss me, or—"

Her question was cut off as Nick pressed his lips into hers. She opened her mouth willingly and his tongue began to explore. Her tongue tangled with his, becoming increasingly familiar with

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this new activity.

"I love kissing you," Mandy whispered as Nick's mouth trailed down her neck.

"We do seem to be rather good at it," he agreed, nibbling her collarbone.

Mandy's nipples tingled as her breasts pressed into his chest. She wanted more...wanted to feel more. She wanted him to touch her. Reaching down, Mandy unfastened the top two buttons on her blouse.

Nick glanced up at her, and she smiled to reassure him.

He almost growled as he continued his assault on her neck, allowing one hand to slip inside her opened blouse.

She felt his hand cup her breast gently, then more forcefully. She moaned with pleasure and arched her back.

"Are you sure about this?" Nick asked quietly as his thumb brought her nipple to a stiff peak.

"Oh, yes." She fumbled with her blouse and released the remaining buttons. It fell completely open, exposing her lacy white bra.

He nuzzled his face in the cleft between her breasts as his hands reached around. With one flick, the lace bra fell away and Mandy's breasts were revealed to him.

She inhaled quickly as the cool air hit her nipples. The temperature had them puckering into tight little nubs.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered. She felt his warm breath.

Mandy arched her back again and gasped as Nick pulled one nipple into his mouth. He circled it with his tongue before sucking on it gently. She couldn't contain her groan of pleasure, and felt his lips curving upward in a smile. "Like that?" he murmured.

"Y-yes," she stammered, embarrassed to admit it.

"Excellent." He moved to her other breast. "Because I like it, too." As he sucked the other nipple into his mouth, Nick rolled the first between his thumb and forefinger.

Mandy squirmed in her seat. This new sensation was driving her wild. *Nick's mouth* was driving her wild. The delicious feelings he evoked as he touched and suckled her were almost more than she could stand. She wasn't sure what was supposed to happen next, but she wanted *something*. "More," she moaned.

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Nick grinned, cupping both her breasts with his hands. "Ah, my beautiful little minx. What more could you possibly want?"

"Kiss me," she demanded, and he obliged. They clung to each other and kissed fervently until both had to stop, panting for air. "Make love to me," Mandy said, gazing into Nick's eyes.

He brushed her hair off her face tenderly. "Mandy, I—"

"You said if I asked when I was sober," she reminded sharply, interrupting whatever he was about to say. "Well, I'm stone-cold sober."

Nick smiled. "You have to realize, there's nothing I'd rather do." He glanced down and Mandy saw his erection bulging through the denim of his jeans.

She reached for it boldly, squeezing his length with a light touch.

"Sweet Jesus!" Nick grabbed her hand. "You need to stop that! I'm trying to be decent here. I want to make sure you're absolutely certain about what you're doing."

"I want you." She eyed his twitching groin.

He touched her chin and brought her gaze back to his face. "I want you, too, baby. But I don't think this is the right place for your first time."

"Ooh!" Mandy pouted, expressing air that riffled her bangs. "I can't believe you're doing this!"

"Listen." He grasped her shoulders. "Why don't you think about this for a few more days? If you're sure it's really what you want, Friday night I'll rent us a motel room." He leaned in to kiss her earlobe. "I don't want your first time to be in a car. You deserve better than that."

"I can't believe we're even discussing this." She reached for her bra and struggled to put it back on.

Nick smiled as he helped adjust her blouse and fasten its buttons. "That's what you need work out in your mind," he told her. "It's fine while we're doing it, but afterward you get all huffy like you regret it. Kissing and making out is one thing, Mandy. But having sex is a whole other issue. There's no taking it back after the deed is done. If you're not sure you want to..." He trailed off and looked at her.

"I think I'm sure."

"Let me know when you're *sure* you're sure." He smiled

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indulgently.

Mandy frowned. "I don't want to talk about it. I just want to do it."

"Sorry." Nick moved away. "We have to talk about it first. And we have to talk about birth control. I'll use condoms, but you should probably use something, too."

She waved a hand and looked out the window. "Now you've really killed the mood."

He chuckled and grabbed her, causing Mandy to squeal. Nick whispered in her ear as he kissed it "I can get the mood back anytime we want. But we're going to be responsible, and you'll thank me for it somewhere down the road."

He was right. When she was caught up in the moment, she just wanted to feel and not think. How many other people in that situation went ahead and did it, and wound up regretting it for whatever reason? Nick was right, though she hated to admit it. "Stop kissing me, then," she muttered. "Take me home."

"I'll never stop kissing you," he teased. "It's my new favorite thing to do in the whole wide world."

Mandy couldn't resist his charm, and sank back into him. "Mine too," she sighed, and parted her lips.

When he drove her back to the dorm, they kissed a while longer in the parking lot. Finally Mandy knew she needed to go, and pulled away. "I've got to study."

"What subject?" He leaned in for another kiss. "I can help you."

"Tolstoy," she replied though their lips were pressed together.

"Forget it." Nick pulled back. "I hated Tolstoy."

She sighed and grinned. "I'm not very happy with him myself right now." She glanced around and was startled to see the old white car from the drive-in parked nearby. "Nick, look!"

"What?" He reached across her to wipe the fog off the inside of the window. "You've got me all steamed up."

Mandy snickered, thinking she knew the feeling. "That car there. Isn't that the same man from the restaurant, the one who was watching us?"

"Was he?" Nick questioned, trying to see out. "What's he doing now?"

"The same thing! Watching us."

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Nick made a face at Mandy and focused on the stranger. "It *is* the same guy."

"He's still watching us."

"Seems to be."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"Well." He turned to her. "If you go inside and I leave, he won't be able to watch us anymore."

Mandy rubbed her arms briskly, trying to ward off a mental chill. "I don't like it, Nick. Why's he following us?"

Glancing out the window again, Nick shrugged. "I don't know, but he looks harmless enough. Forget about it."

"We're supposed to talk about things, remember?" She gave him a pointed look. "Not talking about him won't make him go away."

Nick sighed. "What do you want me to do, Mandy?"

"Confront him. Ask if he followed us."

"And if he pulls out a gun and sticks it in my face?"

Mandy shrugged this time. "Then we'll know...and we'll run!"

He laughed and kissed her quickly one last time. "Okay, we have to walk past him to get inside anyway. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to check him out."

"Thank you." Mandy agreed, and they got out. She wrapped her jacket around herself tightly as they approached the man seated in the white car.

Nick motioned for the man to roll down his window, and he obliged.

"Hello," Nick said calmly.

"Hello."

Mandy stared at the stranger. His hair was mostly gray, but looked as though it had once been dark. His face was lined but handsome. His deep brown eyes reminded her of someone familiar. "Do I know you?"

"Don't believe so," he replied.

"We saw you earlier at the restaurant, and now you're here," Nick said. "You're making my girl a little nervous, friend."

"Didn't mean to do that," the man replied matter-of-factly. "Trying to decide if I was going to approach you or not. You two have been sort of occupied."

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Mandy blushed and heard Nick's voice rise a notch in anger. "Why would you approach us? Tell us what you're doing here, or I may have to phone the campus police."

The man held his hands up. "No need for that. I come in peace." He looked into Mandy's eyes. "My name is Jake Kenny."

The name startled her. "No way." But just as she said the words, she realized he spoke the truth. Mandy recognized where she'd seen those eyes before. He was an older version of her Uncle Doug.

Pulling out a Kansas driver's license, he held it up for her inspection: *Jake Kenny*. She'd heard stories about him from the time she was a child. Some were funny, some sad. But the story she heard most often was how he'd walked out on his wife and their two children, Sarah and Doug.

"You know this guy?" Nick looked at her.

Mandy gulped and glanced from Nick back to the older man's face. "I think so," she replied. "I think he's my grandfather."

Chapter Four

"You *think* he's your grandfather?" Nick looked at Mandy. "Sweetheart, I've got three grandfathers and I guarantee you, I know what each of them looks like."

"Mandy's never seen me before," Jake said, looking into her eyes. "Rather a long story."

"What are you doing here?" she inquired. "How'd you find me?"

"I've always known where you were. I've kept tabs on your mother and your uncle all these years."

"But you never tried to contact them."

"That's where we get into the long story. I tried for a while, but your grandmother kept me away."

"Grandma wouldn't do that! She was a wonderful person!"

Jake nodded. "That she was. You'll get no argument from me there."

"Then why—" Mandy began, but Jake shook his head.

"Now's not the time to get into all that."

Nick spoke up. "But why are you *here*? It seems like you should be looking up your daughter or son, rather than your granddaughter."

"I approached them a few years ago. Sarah was willing to meet with me, but Doug was angry—very angry. He wouldn't consider it. So Sarah backed out."

"I don't remember that," Mandy said.

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Jake shrugged. "They probably didn't tell you. You were young."

"I can't believe they never told me," she said softly, then looked at Jake. "Lots of things have changed since then."

His face softened into a smile. "Oh my, I know. There are tricycles and toys all over both of their yards now. You have a little half-brother."

"A *brother*," she corrected. They never used the term 'half' to describe family ties. Blood was thick in Perry. "And two cousins."

"Doug must be very proud."

"He is. I'm guessing he's still angry, though."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about." He coughed loudly and clutched his chest for a moment. "Perhaps we could get a cup of coffee and discuss it."

"I can't," Mandy insisted. She felt disloyal talking to him, and wanted to get her mother's take on things.

He raised a hand. "I understand this comes as a shock to you. If you could meet with me tomorrow, that would be soon enough. All I ask is that you don't phone Sarah before you and I have a chance to speak. It's really important. I wouldn't ask if it weren't."

"I don't know," Mandy hemmed.

"Please." The older man reached out through his open car window and touched her hand.

Mandy drew back and glanced at Nick. "Will you come with me?"

"Of course. What time?"

She turned back to her grandfather. "I'm out of class by four." Nick nodded, so she continued, "There's a coffee shop a block over on Tenth Avenue. It's called Shorty's."

"I've seen it. I'll meet you both there tomorrow at four."

"Okay," Mandy agreed, and tugged Nick's hand toward the dorm. Once in the elevator, she slipped into his arms. "I can't believe this!"

"It's pretty wild," he agreed. "Are you sure you want me there?"

She looked up fearfully. "I wouldn't meet him without you! I don't know that man."

"You don't think you should call your mom tonight?"

"I'd like to, but I told him I'd wait until we'd talked. I can do that much. If need be, I'll call her tomorrow night." They strolled

down the hall to her room.

Nick pressed Mandy up against the wall next to her room, shoving his knee between her thighs. "So, are you going to be able to concentrate on Tolstoy?"

"Probably not." She slipped her arms around his neck.

"Want me to stay so we can make out some more?" He kissed her lightly.

"Oh, yeah." She deepened the kiss, and it lingered. She finally pulled away and murmured, "But you've gotta go."

"I know." Another kiss. "Don't want to, though."

"I know," she repeated, and gave him a long kiss good bye. "I'll wait for you out front tomorrow."

"I'll be here about ten to four," he agreed, and left with a wistful smile.

Mandy hugged herself and watched him go. Even now, with thoughts of her family and grandfather running through her mind, her body still tingled for Nick. She'd already made her decision. Tomorrow she'd visit the campus clinic and ask about birth control. As soon as they could arrange it, she wanted to have sex with Nick.



The nurse practitioner at the clinic was very helpful, and Mandy left laden with pamphlets and a birth control patch. Once they determined that she had no problems with it, there was a shot she could take which would be even simpler.

It was nearly four when she arrived back at her dorm. Spotting Nick's car, she hurried over and opened the door. "I'm sorry. I got held up."

He smiled at her and reached for her backpack, shoving it into the back seat. "Did they get anything valuable?"

"What?" Mandy settled into the front passenger seat and fastened her seat belt.

Nick leaned over for a kiss. "Whoever held you up. Hope they didn't get anything valuable."

She grinned and shoved his arm. "You're a real comedian, aren't you? Let's go. I want to get this over with."

He pulled out of the parking lot. "Ready to meet with your grandpa?"

"Not so sure about that. I can't imagine what he wants with me."

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"I hate to ask this, but could he want money? He didn't appear that well off."

She snorted. "Oh, and I *do*? He's barking up the wrong tree there. My folks have enough to get by, but not much more. Especially now with Ty."

Nick cleared his throat. "You know, if you need money, I could always—"

"I don't think it's money," she interrupted. "But thank you."

Shrugging, he added, "Just wanted to make the offer."

"Thanks." She looked around the parking lot of Shorty's Coffee Shop as they pulled in. "I hope he's here."

"I'm sure he will be." Nick got out and went around the car, opening her door.

"Thank you." Mandy smiled as she got out.

"Don't look at me that way," he grumbled. "You look so damn cute, I want to shove you back in the car and climb in on top of you."

She glanced over her shoulder as she headed for the coffee shop entrance. "You had your chance last night."

"Don't remind me!" He whacked the side of his head with his hand and opened the front door of the coffee shop for her.

Mandy chuckled as she stepped inside, glancing around for Jake Kenny. She spotted him in a corner booth and said to Nick, "There he is." She motioned to the booth.

Nick nodded and placed one hand on the small of her back. "Let's go."

They approached and Mandy looked at her grandfather hesitantly.

"Hello." He smiled at her and then Nick, and waved a hand. "Have a seat."

"Thanks." Mandy slid in and Nick followed.

A waitress appeared and asked, "What can I get for you?"

"Coffee with sugar," Nick said, glancing at Mandy. She nodded and he turned to the waitress. "Make that two, please."

"That it?"

"For now," Nick replied, looking back at Jake. "You need anything? Food, more coffee?"

Jake covered his cup with his hand. "Nothing, thanks."

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The waitress nodded and stepped away. Jake smiled sheepishly. "I've been here awhile. Had plenty of coffee."

Mandy regarded him with a steely gaze. "Well, I don't have that much time. So perhaps we should get to the point."

Jake returned her even stare with one of his own. "Straightforward, eh? I like that. Okay, Amanda, I can be straightforward too." He continued to look at her. "I'm dying. Lung cancer. The doctor says I may have six months to a year. I feel pretty good right now, and was hoping to tie up some loose ends before I'm not mobile anymore."

Her jaw dropped. Mandy looked from Jake to Nick and back. The waitress brought their coffee. No one spoke as she set everything on the table. "Thanks," Mandy told her, and began stirring sweetener into her cup. She couldn't look at her grandfather yet. She was quite prepared to hate him. She wasn't prepared for this.

"When did you find out?" Nick asked quietly.

"Couple months ago. Been going through a lot of introspection since they told me about the location of the tumor, how they can't operate on it. Brings a man's life into perspective, I can tell you that."

"It would," Nick agreed, nodding.

Mandy finally raised her head and looked at Jake. "So, what do you want? Forgiveness on your deathbed? I'm not sure I'm prepared to give you that, and I guarantee Uncle Doug won't be either. I can't speak for Mom—"

"Mandy!" Nick said sharply. He reached over and squeezed her hand.

Jake stared into his coffee cup. Mandy continued hotly, "Well, it's true! He left my mother and uncle when they were young, and both of their lives were damaged because of it."

"They don't seem to have *damaged* lives now," Jake said wearily.

Tears flooded Mandy's eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks. "Sure, they've done all right in later years. You know my mom got pregnant with me while she was in high school, don't you? She's lucky she graduated. She was also lucky my father stood by her, rather than taking the easy road and walking out."

"If you think that was the easy road, you're sadly mistaken," Jake interjected.

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"It was a lot easier than what my mother went through all those years! My father got sick and she cared for him until he died. Then grandma got sick and we took care of her until she died. Then we befriended a lady from church, Melissa Montgomery, and ended up taking care of her until *she* died. It was a tragic few years, I can tell you that. Mom was alone for a long time, and Uncle Doug lived in the loft above our garage until he was almost thirty. No relationship issues, there, for sure..."

Jake raised his hands. "I know, and I'm sorry. If I could change the past, I would. Unfortunately, all I can do is try to make amends."

"What kind of amends do you propose?" Mandy asked angrily. "You disappear for...what? Twenty-five years or so? Now you're dying and hoping to clear your guilty conscience. Well, you can give it a shot, I guess. But don't say I didn't warn you. Uncle Doug is not going to be happy to see you, and Mom bows to him about stuff like this."

"Oh, I know it," Jake agreed. "I just thought that if you paved the way for me a little, maybe I could see Sarah and talk to her. Even get to know my grandson."

"You never bothered to get to know your granddaughter!" Mandy sobbed, tears flowing freely now.

Nick put his arm around her shoulder but Mandy remained sitting upright.

"I tried, Mandy," Jake replied. "I mentioned yesterday that I tried a couple different times. It just didn't work out. I don't have many opportunities left. This may be my last shot at making things right."

She shoved her coffee away, no longer interested. Looking at her grandfather she said sadly, "You may have blown your last opportunity, Mr. Kenny. I'm not sure you have any shots left."

"That sounds harsh."

She merely stared at him.

"*Mr. Kenny*," he emphasized. "Sounds horrible coming from my granddaughter."

Mandy inhaled and exhaled slowly, but didn't speak.

He thrust a piece of paper across the table at her. "Here's my phone number. Think it over. If you decide to talk to your mom for me, I can be reached here."

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She looked at the paper but didn't pick it up. Finally she asked, "Why should I? What have you ever done for me?"

He stared at her. "I never took you for a selfish person, Amanda. I thought you had a giving nature, like your mother. Willing to help out a person in need."

Nudging Nick out of the booth, they stood and Mandy said, "Where were *you* when we needed you? We've helped out plenty of people in need. Deserving people. I'm sorry if we don't help people who hurt us." She glanced down at Nick. "Let's go."

He reached across the table, tossed a five-dollar bill down, and picked up the phone number. "I'll hang on to this, in case she changes her mind," he told Jake.

"Thank you, son."

"He's not your son!" Mandy snapped. "You had a wonderful son, and you abandoned him!"

"Come on." Nick led her to the door. "Let's just go."

Mandy stomped out, not bothering to look back at her grandfather. He had some nerve coming here, asking her to smooth things over with her mother. Some damn nerve! She was furious and upset, yet somehow saddened and heartsick as well. *He was dying*. Her grandfather reached out to her, just before his death. *What kind of man was he?*

She thought about that as Nick settled her in the car and went around to his side. Mandy glanced at him, wishing she could forget her family troubles and concentrate on the gorgeous man beside her. She wanted to go somewhere—Nick mentioned renting a motel room. Maybe if they went there, she could forget about everything for one night. One glorious night. But then she wondered: *What kind of a person would that make her?*



It was a two hour drive from Urbana to Perry, Illinois. Mandy skipped her last class Friday to get an earlier start, because she didn't intend to spend all weekend in Perry. She'd get home in time for dinner Friday night and spend twenty-four hours with the family. That would be time enough to discuss the grandfather situation with her mother.

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Mandy wasn't sure if she was ready to discuss the boyfriend situation or not. She *was* sure about being ready to take the next step with him, though, and when she returned to Urbana Saturday night, she planned to meet Nick at a motel. Dee didn't expect Mandy back until Sunday afternoon, so she and Nick could spend the whole night together. The idea sent thrills down her spine.

Nosing her car into the driveway of her parent's house, Mandy felt another shiver of excitement. *She was home!* That thought always made her happy. She loved her family and enjoyed spending time with them.

"Hey, you!" Sarah stepped out onto the front porch. "Get in here!"

Mandy grinned. Her mother was so pretty, with her long, wavy blonde hair and bright blue eyes. She'd kept her figure shapely and attractive, even after delivering two children eighteen years apart. "Hi!" she called as she opened her door.

"Need a hand?" Sarah called, shivering without a coat.

"No, stay there. I don't have much." Retrieving one bag from the back seat, Mandy headed up the sidewalk. "Jeez, it's just as cold here! It's been freezing in Urbana."

"Yep, here too." Sarah reached for the bag and took it from Mandy. "This all you brought? Where's all the laundry you usually cart home?"

They hugged and Mandy said, "I need to talk to you about that. I won't be able to stay all weekend. There's a study group Saturday night I need to attend."

"A study group on a Saturday night?" Sarah asked suspiciously, and headed inside.

"Yeah," Mandy lied, hoping they'd buy it. She hadn't lied to them much over the years and she was lousy at it.

"Well, rats." Sarah set the suitcase down. "At least you're here now. I'm so happy to see you."

"Me too, Mom." Mandy hugged her again. "I missed you."

"I always miss you," her mother said softly into her ear, and Mandy squeezed a little tighter.

"Hey, look who's here!" Sam stepped into the living room and called back over his shoulder, "Ty-bo! Mandy's home!" He reached

out and enveloped her in his arms. "Come here and give me a hug."

"Hey, Sam." Mandy wiped a tear from her eyes and slid into her step-father's embrace. Sam was well-built and muscular, not much bigger than Nick, but with more of a solidness that came with age. His arms felt comforting and reassuring, and Mandy sighed happily. She was going to need all the support she could get this weekend.

"Mandy!" Her little brother flew into the room. "Mandy!"

She pulled back from Sam, smiling as she turned to Tyrone. "Ty-bo! How's the cutest little brother in the whole wide world?"

He catapulted into her arms and she lifted him up, squeezing tightly. "I missed you!"

"I missed you, too," he replied solemnly. "Dad said to tell you he saved some 'sagna for you."

She grinned and flashed a look at Sam. "I hope that's not what's for dinner. Because if it is, I still remember the number for the Pizza Shack."

Sam reached out and chucked her under the chin. "Lucky for you, so do I. Doug and Bailey are picking up pizza on their way over."

"Yes!" Mandy pumped her arm in the air and set Ty down. "We lucked out tonight, kiddo."

"Yay, pizza!" Ty agreed.

Sarah shook her head. "Like you don't get enough pizza at college. I thought we should have cooked something."

Sam grabbed his wife from behind and drew her back against him. "Except we both worked all day, and who wants to cook all night? We can cook tomorrow night." He kissed Sarah on the cheek.

She smiled over her shoulder at him. "Mandy's not going to be here tomorrow night. She has some study group thing."

"Really?" Sam raised his eyebrows. "On a Saturday night? Interesting."

Mandy shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. "It was the only time everybody could get together." She glanced around the living room and attempted to change the subject. "The house looks great. I can't wait to see my room. I've missed it, too." She hefted up her bag and headed down the hallway.

"It hasn't changed any in the month since you've been here," her mother called after her teasingly. Mandy knew they weren't buying her story, but also knew they weren't going to give her any trouble.

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Her folks knew she was a responsible young woman. That wasn't about to change. Her hand went instinctively to the birth control patch under her clothes. *Was it?*

"Can I come with you?" Ty hopped up and down behind her.

"Sure, buddy, come on."

He darted down the hall, zipped past her legs and wound up in front of her. Mandy chuckled at his enthusiasm, and sighed. It felt good to be home.

She'd stretched out on the sofa and was catching up on all the local news when the front door opened and two little girls rushed in. "Mandy! Mandy!"

"Hey, you guys!" She opened her arms and her cousins fell into them. "Wow, I think you've grown!"

"I'm the tallest girl in my preschool class," Lissa told her, nodding.

Mandy grinned and touched the pretty little face. Both girls had thick, dark brown hair like their parents. Lissa wore hers long in a ponytail, and she sported pink plastic-framed glasses. Denise's hair was cut into a chin-length bob very similar to Mandy's own style. "And how are you?" she asked the younger girl.

"Good! We might get a dog!"

"A dog? You're kidding me! What kind?"

Her Uncle Doug stepped into the front room, laden with pizza boxes and twelve- packs of beer and soda. "Don't ask them. They want some ten-cent dog. If we're getting one, it's going to be a lab or a shepherd—something decent." He stopped to lean over the back of the sofa and kiss Mandy's cheek.

She patted his face, then grabbed his ball cap and plopped it on her own head.

He winked as he headed into the kitchen, calling back, "That's my lucky Cubbies cap. Don't mess it up."

"Smear pizza all over it." His wife, Mandy's aunt Bailey, entered the room. She reached over her daughters to hug Mandy and whispered, "The Cubs suck, anyway. The White Sox are the only team Chicago needs."

"This is the Cubbies' year," Sam chimed in, and pointed to his U of I sweatshirt. "I only took off my favorite Cubbies shirt because

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you sent me this one. Which I *love*, by the way."

"Great!" Mandy grinned, and watched the activity around her as the children clamored for pizza and soda.

Sarah got the little ones settled in the kitchen and sat near the doorway so she could keep an eye on them while the adults ate in the living room. "Good pizza, guys. Thanks for bringing it."

"You bet." Bailey handed a plate to Mandy.

"Thanks." She smiled at her aunt. "You look great." For a woman with two small children, Mandy thought she looked *damn* great. Of course, she thought her aunt was beautiful the first time she'd ever laid eyes on her. Obviously her uncle had the same impression. But Bailey wasn't an easy person to get to know, having just lost her mother to cancer, and coming to Perry to sell the woman's house.

Melissa Montgomery's death hit her family hard, as well, Mandy recalled. They'd befriended the sweet woman from church and ended up caring for her until her death. When Bailey showed up, she managed to rub each of them the wrong way until they all got to know one another. Now, she was a fully-embedded member of their family.

Just like Sam, Mandy thought, watching her step-father and uncle engage in a heated discussion about something that was probably sports-related. Sam, with his earring and ponytail, was animated and funny and serious all at the same time. Mandy loved him.

However, her initial reaction hadn't been as friendly, especially when she caught him and her mother making out in the back yard. *That* was a horrible night. Mandy overreacted wildly in the way teenagers tended to do. Her uncle Doug yelled, and everyone got upset. Once Mandy realized how much happier her mother was *with* Sam than without him, she accepted him.

Thinking back, she was sorry for the time it took her to come around. She could see now how easy it was to become attached to someone. If she got involved with Nick, she wondered how her family would react.

"You're lost in thought." Bailey nudged Mandy's toe. "Got something on your mind? Or *someone*?" Her eyes twinkled.

Mandy felt her face heat up in a blush. "No! Of course not."

"Who would she have on her mind?" Doug shoved the last of his

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pizza in his mouth, assessing his niece. "You have something you want to tell us?"

"No!" she said vehemently. She absolutely did not want to tell them anything. She *had* to tell them about Jake, but that didn't mean she wanted to. "Of course not." She flashed her aunt a dirty look. Bailey smiled serenely.

Mandy added, "I was just thinking about Easter. It'll be here before we know it. Grandma always loved the holiday so much."

"She did," Sarah agreed. "Mom went all out at Easter time."

"She told me once that Grandpa used to like coloring eggs with you and Doug." Mandy watched her mother's reaction closely.

Sarah shrugged and sipped at her can of soda. "I barely remember."

Doug snorted and stood up. "I have plenty of memories, but a happy family coloring eggs isn't one of them. She probably told you that just to make the old son-of-a-bitch seem human."

"Doug!" Sarah glanced into the kitchen at the children.

"They didn't hear me. And he *was* a son-of-a-bitching bastard. You can't argue that fact with me." He raised his eyebrows, as if daring her to try.

She shook her head. "I won't argue with you. But you didn't used to swear in front of Mandy."

He laughed and finished his beer. "Mandy's been at college for almost three years. You think no one cusses there?"

"I'm sure of it," Sarah replied, closing her eyes and nodding.

They all laughed and Sam raised his beer to his lips. "Fucking-A," he murmured, and the room erupted again.

Mandy curled up on the sofa after dinner, reading to the children until they were ready for sleep. Denise dozed off. Bailey knelt in front of Mandy to slip her daughter's shoes back on.

"So, you haven't told anyone about the boyfriend yet?" Bailey asked softly.

"There's nothing to tell."

"She said, unconvincingly..." Bailey teased. "Okay, I'll wait until you're ready to talk. But you know you can call me anytime, about anything."

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"I know."

Bailey looked into her eyes. "Really, Mandy. If you ever want to talk, just between you and me, call me. You know I can keep a secret if you ask me to."

"I don't have any secrets," Mandy objected, but even she wasn't convinced by her tone.

"All right. We need to get the girls home. We'll probably see you tomorrow for a bit." Bailey hefted Denise on her shoulder. "Doug, you want to get Lissa please?"

"You bet." He leaned down and snatched his cap from Mandy. "See you tomorrow, Squirt." He lifted Lissa and patted her back when she stirred. "It's okay, Baby. Daddy's got you. We're going home now."

"Bye, you guys." Mandy watched them go. Their family made a beautiful picture. She squinted, imagining herself and Nick in Bailey and Doug's place. Nick carrying one child out to the car while she brought the other—It was a beautiful picture of its own, and a very pleasant thought.

Sam leaned a drowsy Tyrone down in front of her for a good night kiss, and Mandy smiled. "Night, Buddy." She ruffled her brother's hair and kissed his cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Night, Mandy," he murmured, and Sam carried him off to bed.

Sarah returned to the living room, settling into the sofa opposite her daughter. "So, how's school?" She tucked her feet underneath her.

"Fine." Mandy nodded. "I like my art class. We're going to a bunch of different museums."

"Sounds pretty easy. How about that math class?"

Mandy shrugged. "I'm doing okay. I got a 'B' on my last test."

"That's good." Her mother looked down the hallway and then back at her. "Is there anything you'd like to talk about before Sam gets back? I get the feeling there's a reason you're here."

Shifting nervously, Mandy nodded. "I guess there were a couple of things."

They heard the hallway light snap off. "Goodnight, Buddy," Sam told his son affectionately, and headed back into the living room.

"Honey," Sarah glanced at him. "Mandy and I might need

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another minute."

"No!" Mandy declared. "He can stay. I should probably talk to you both."

Sam curled up on the floor at his wife's feet. "What's up, Kiddo?"

"A couple things," she repeated, trying to decide where to start. "I wanted to tell you that I've met a guy."

"A guy?" Sam raised his eyebrows.

"I knew it!" Sarah nudged his shoulder before smiling at her daughter. "So, who is he?"

"Well, he's the coat hanger guy. Remember I told you I locked my keys in my car? He's the one who got it open for me."

"The coat hanger guy," Sam repeated conspiratorially. "I vaguely remember mention of him. Does he have another name?"

Mandy giggled. "Of course. Nick Westchester. He's from Chicago."

"Chicago guys are good." Sarah nudged her husband and smiled. Mandy knew Sam grew up there as well.

He raised a finger. "Depends. Cubs or White Sox?"

Mandy shook her head, trying not to laugh. "I don't know. I haven't gotten around to asking."

"You need to find out," Sam suggested.

"Shut up," Mandy teased. "I can tell you what I *do* know. He's a junior, majoring in business management. He has a very high GPA. His father owns an advertising agency, and Nick plans to go back and work for him after college."

"Sounds interesting," Sarah agreed. "Is he cute?"

Mandy felt the blush spread through her cheeks. "Yeah, really cute. He's in a fraternity, Sigma Chi. He already took me to a party there."

Sarah's brow wrinkled. "I'm not sure I like the sound of fraternity parties."

"I hear they're cracking down on them more these days," Sam told her. "The Greek Council keeps pretty close tabs on what goes on."

"They do." Mandy nodded. "The party was non-alcoholic. That's why it was so funny when someone snuck in some spiked lemonade, and I drank two glasses of it before I knew what was going on. Nick was so mad at the guy who brought it—"

"You *drank* it?" Her mother almost screeched.

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"It was no big deal, Mom," Mandy insisted. "Nick took me home right away. He made sure nothing bad happened to me."

"You're sure about that?" Sam questioned.

"Absolutely. You can ask Dee. She was there. Nick was the perfect gentleman."

"Dee went to the party, too?" Sarah asked, a little more calmly.

"Well, no, but she was there when Nick brought me home. Really, it was fine, Mom. I just wanted to let you know what happened because I don't want to keep secrets from you." *If I can help it*, she thought to herself.

"We appreciate that," Sam told her with a smile. "So you were okay, then?"

"I was fine. Nick stopped by to check up on me the next day, and we've been out a couple times since. I really like him."

"Out where?" Sarah asked suspiciously.

"For hamburgers one night and coffee one afternoon. We, uh, met someone at the coffee shop. It was quite a surprise, actually. That's the other thing I needed to talk to you about."

"We're listening." Her expression was wary.

Mandy offered a tentative smile. "Hang on to your hat. It was Grandpa. He found me there."

"Grandpa Buchanan?" Sarah asked slowly, speaking of Sam's father.

"Nope." Mandy looked from her mother to Sam and back again. "Jake Kenny. He showed me his driver's license, not that I really needed it. He looks like an older version of Uncle Doug. They have the same eyes."

"Oh, Lord." Sarah swooned and Sam hopped up beside her, slipping an arm around her shoulder.

"It's okay, Babe," he murmured, stroking her hair. When she had calmed somewhat he asked, "When's the last time you talked to him?"

Sarah shook her head. "It's been years. I don't know. He came around now and then for a while, but not for a long time." She looked at Mandy angrily. "I can't believe he tracked you down. What in the world is he thinking?"

Mandy took a breath and chose her words carefully. "He knows about Ty and the girls, so apparently he's been keeping tabs on us all

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along. I guess the last time he tried to contact you, Uncle Doug was pretty adamant about not wanting anything to do with him."

"Judging from his comments tonight, he still is," Sam said.

"That man needs to go away and leave us alone," Sarah fumed.

"He's going to, Mom. Jake told me he has lung cancer. The doctor gave him six months to live."

"Oh, no!" Sarah wailed, and buried her face in Sam's chest.

He cradled her and glanced over her head at Mandy. They exchanged a sad smile.

Mandy leaned over and squeezed her mother's shoulder. Sarah was crying awfully hard for someone who didn't want to see her father.

"What does he want?" she mumbled through her tears.

Mandy shrugged. "Forgiveness, I suppose. He wants to make amends while he still can. I told him it might already be too late."

"I'm not sure it is," Sam said quietly, and held his wife as she cried.

When she was more composed, Sarah commented, "Doug's not going to like this."

"Don't worry about Doug," Sam told her gently, brushing the hair back from her face. "You need to do what's right for *you*. If you'd like to see him, maybe make peace with the man before he dies, that's up to you. Your brother is a big boy. He can make his own decisions."

"I don't want to bring this up to him," Sarah chuckled grimly.

They looked at Mandy. She made a face and said, "You'll notice I waited until he left to mention it."

"Chicken," Sam teased, and reached out to pull Mandy into his group hug. "It's going to be fine. Your mom and I will talk to Doug and Bailey. We'll call and let you know what they want to do...what we all want to do. I assume you have the man's phone number?"

"Yeah." Mandy nodded, and snuggled into her step-father's free shoulder. "Thanks, Sam."

He planted a small kiss on her forehead, and settled back into the sofa cradling both women in his arms.



Mandy hated to leave Perry the next day, but when she remembered what was waiting for her, she couldn't get out of town

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quickly enough. She bathed and dressed carefully before she left, filled with excitement about the night ahead of her.

After packing her car and sharing hugs with the family, she was finally on the highway back to Urbana. *Back to Nick*. She tingled as she thought of what awaited her, and asked herself several times if she was making the right decision.

Each mile that brought her closer to Nick made her more positive that she knew what she was doing. She was ready, *more than ready*, to make love with Nick Westchester.

Chapter Five

Nick turned back the bed covers in the motel room, then decided that looked too forward, so he remade the bed. Condoms were tucked away in the nightstand drawer, within easy reach but not obvious. He was ready.

There wasn't much to do in the small room. He'd tried watching TV, but couldn't concentrate. Pacing, he wished Mandy would call and was apprehensive that she wouldn't. When his cell rang, he nearly jumped out of his skin. "Hello."

"Hi, it's me," Mandy said softly. "I'm just pulling on to Tenth Avenue. What room are you in?"

They'd agreed on the motel, but weren't sure which room he'd be assigned. "Number Seven. Drive around back and take a right. You'll see my car."

"I'm pulling in to the parking lot now."

"How was your trip?"

"It was good. They wanted to know all about you."

"You told them about me?" He was surprised. He opened the door to the room and watched her park in the space next to his car.

"Of course. I tell them everything." She was smiling at him as she stepped from her car.

"Everything?" He looked into her eyes.

Mandy approached, still speaking into her cell phone. "Well,

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almost everything. Everything up to now, that is."

Nick smiled. "I need to get off the phone now. A beautiful woman just arrived and I have a strong urge to pull her into my arms and kiss her."

Without another word, Mandy snapped her phone shut and sank into his arms. Nick groaned with desire as their lips met. He closed his phone and slipped it into his pocket before wrapping his arms around her tightly.

A car drove through the parking lot and brought his attention back in focus. He pulled away from Mandy slowly and smiled. "Shall we continue this inside?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Don't you have a suitcase you'd like to bring in?"

"We can get it later."

"Let's get it now. I don't want to be disturbed later." He squeezed her ass and Mandy jumped.

"Um, you're right." Holding up her keys, she said, "Back seat."

"Right back, beautiful." He kissed her quickly before smiling and hurrying out to her car. It was cold, but he dashed without his coat. Removing the suitcase, Nick locked the car and headed back into the room.

"This is nice." Mandy looked around, dropping her jacket on a chair. "Ooh, you brought pizza!"

"Yeah," he closed the door behind him and locked it. Tossing her car keys on the table, he set her suitcase off to the side. He rubbed his hands together quickly to warm them, and said, "I figured we be hungry at some point. I brought a bottle of wine, too. Didn't know if you'd like a glass to take the edge off..."

"Let's have some wine." She nodded a bit too swiftly.

Nick chuckled and popped the top off the bottle, pouring it into the two glasses on the table. He lifted them, handing one to her. "Are you hungry?"

"Not really." She took the glass and faced him. "Are you?"

"Not for food." He held his glass out for a toast. "What shall we drink to?"

"How about new beginnings?" She held her glass out.

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Nick smiled. "Apropos. To new beginnings, then." They clinked their glasses gently and sipped the wine.

"This is good," Mandy told him.

"Glad you like it. I was actually thinking that *you* look good." He downed his glass and set it on the table. "Very good."

Mandy followed his lead, emptying her glass quickly and setting it down. "Good enough to—"

"Absolutely!" He pulled her into his arms and whispered in her ear, "Good enough to eat."

He felt her shiver, and ran his hands over her back down to her butt. When she tensed, he stopped. "You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

"Not at all!" she insisted. "I'm just a little nervous."

He understood. It wasn't even his first time and he was nervous as hell. Nick cupped her chin and looked in her eyes. "We're going to take this as slowly as you need. If I do anything you don't like, tell me. I want to make you happy."

Mandy slipped her arms around his neck. "I can't imagine you doing anything I won't like. I want you, Nick. I want to be with you."

He groaned his desire again as he kissed her. She parted her lips and he let his tongue go exploring. He knew every inch of her mouth by now. It was the rest of her body he was aching to discover.

Dropping his hands to her blouse, he made short work of the buttons and slid it off her shoulders. He fumbled for a second with her bra fastener, but popped it open and removed that as well.

Mandy moaned when his hands came around to cup her breasts. Nick ended their kiss and pulled back enough to look at her. "You are so beautiful." He held her fullness in his hands, squeezing her tits gently and making the crimson nipples pucker.

"I want to see you," she replied breathily. "I've never seen a naked man before."

"Never?" He grinned, reaching for the snap on his jeans.

She shook her head, watching with amazement as he tossed his shirt aside and kicked out of his shoes. Nick tugged off his socks and stepped out of his jeans and briefs. He had one moment of self-consciousness, when his rigid cock sprang free. But the look on

Mandy's face—a mix of wonder and pure lust—reassured him. She wasn't judging or comparing him to anyone else. *She wanted him.*

"You're huge!" she murmured, allowing one of her fingers to trace around the tip of his cock. "And so soft!"

Nick closed his eyes a moment to regain control. That would be the next issue: holding out long enough to pleasure her before he exploded. When he felt her hand grip his shaft, he knew there couldn't be much more of that or he'd lose it. He opened his eyes, removed her hand and smiled. "Let's get you out of these jeans. I've got a couple more things to see, myself."

Mandy grinned as she slipped off her shoes and socks. When she tossed her jeans and panties aside and faced him, Nick inhaled. "Jesus, Mandy. I think I've died and gone to heaven."

"Take me with you." She reached for his hand and they walked to the bed. "I want to know what heaven is like."

Nick threw the covers back and settled Mandy gently on the bed. "Not sure I can offer you heaven, but with you in my arms, it'll be pretty close." He nestled next to her, pressing his erection into her thigh.

She wiggled her leg. "You're going to have to teach me what to do with this."

The thought sent chills down his spine. He'd been with lots of girls before, but never an empty canvas like Mandy. *She wanted him to show her what to do.* The thought was heady, extremely arousing. "I'll teach you everything you need to know," he murmured. "But right now, I want you to lie back and relax. Enjoy."

His mouth trailed from her earlobe down her jaw line, stopping to nuzzle her neck. His hands cupped her breasts and squeezed them together gently, so when his tongue arrived he was able to lick both nipples at the same time.

Mandy squirmed beneath him, and Nick wedged her legs open with his thigh. He pressed his cock against her leg and rubbed a few times, causing her to moan. Her nipples were engorged and rosy. He knew it was time to move on. He couldn't resist biting the swollen nubs lightly before continuing the downward path with his tongue.

"Ouch!" she responded to the bite.

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"Sorry." His tongue circled her belly button.

"You don't sound a bit sorry." Mandy ran one hand through his spiked hair. "Just remember, payback's a bitch."

Nick smiled. "Uh-oh. I'll remember that." The thought of Mandy biting him almost made him come right there on her leg. *Focus*, he told himself as he crawled lower, settling his body between her legs.

There was a small patch of blonde hair, which he parted with his fingers. He felt her jump when his fingers slid through her slick folds, seeking out the pearly nub of her clit. Her scent was musky. Nick was dying for a taste. Flicking his tongue over her pink clit, he groaned with satisfaction. "Just as wonderful as I knew it would be," he murmured, his face diving deeper and deeper into her core.

"Oh, Nick!" Mandy gasped, her legs twitching where his hands held her firmly.

"Feel good?" he asked, letting his tongue travel the length of her folds from front to back.

"Oh, Jesus!" she replied.

He chuckled. He knew it felt good. Nick was going to bring her to an explosive climax before he penetrated her with his stiff and ready cock. She'd experience some discomfort, he knew that. He just hoped the pleasure he gave her would override the pain. "Do you like me here?" He flicked her clit rapidly.

"Y-yes," she stammered.

Smiling, Nick lowered his face and circled her nubile pink pussy with the tip of his tongue. "How about here? Do you like my tongue here?" He let it dart into her pussy and out again quickly.

"Oh, yes!" Her voice was husky and low.

Nick felt her legs tensing up and suspected she was on the verge of an orgasm. He didn't know if it was her first, but he felt sure it was her first with a man. He wanted it to be spectacular.

Running a finger around the edge of her wet opening, he slowly pushed the digit inside while tugging her clit with his teeth.

"Nick!" she gasped, and he felt a shudder begin deep within her.

"Come on, pretty baby. Come for me."

He felt her body tense, then release with spasms so violent he had to grasp her legs firmly to keep his mouth in place. Sticky fluids

gushed from her pussy and Nick lapped at them like a kitten with a bowl of milk. *Sweet*, he thought, and sighed with deep satisfaction.



Mandy had experienced her first orgasm quite by accident in the bathtub when she was a teenager. Once she discovered how to bring the feelings on intentionally, she did on several occasions. Lying in her bed with her hand between her legs, she envisioned a dream lover who would pleasure her whenever she desired.

Her fantasies were always rushed, so she wouldn't be caught by her mother. Sarah had a habit of walking into Mandy's room without knocking. *Why should she knock?* It was just Sarah and Mandy alone for over eight years, and Mandy had nothing to hide.

Until now.

Wave after wave of a glorious climax rippled through her while Nick continued teasing her with his tongue. Mandy's body shook forcefully as she felt his finger pumping in and out of her. The sensations were exquisite. She couldn't imagine anything better.

She saw him lean over to the nightstand and pull something from the drawer. She watched with interest as Nick ripped into the small foil packet and pulled out a latex condom. Kneeling above her, he rolled the rubber on his stiff erection and secured it with a tug of his hand.

She licked her lips, equally nervous and excited about what would happen next. Their eyes caught and held.

"Are you ready for me?" he asked, his voice thick with something she could only think was desire.

"I've never been more ready for anything in my life." She spread her legs fully as he settled his weight between them.

"I wish I could tell you this wasn't going to hurt, but I think it will. At first, anyway. I promise you it'll get better, though." He dropped on top of her, holding himself up by his forearms. "Much, much better."

Mandy smiled up at him. "Let's get the hurtful part over with, then. I'm ready for the much, much better part."

Nick wedged his cock between her legs and felt for her opening with

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his hand. Guiding it in gently, he pressed into Mandy and she groaned.

He stopped. "We'll take it slow. A little at a time." Leaning over to kiss her, he smiled as Mandy wrapped her arms around his neck.

Nudging forward another inch, Nick slowed again as Mandy winced.

"This might take all night," he commented.

Mandy felt tears leaking from her eyes. She wanted this in the worst way, but wasn't prepared for how much it was going to hurt.

"Hey, don't cry!" Nick brushed her tears away. "I was only teasing. Besides, we have all night. Who cares how long it takes?"

"I care." She shifted under him. "This feels like torture. Can't you just do it and get it over with?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "That could hurt one hell of a lot."

Mandy gripped his shoulders. "You promised pleasure after the pain, didn't you?"

Nick leaned in and kissed her lightly. "More pleasure than you ever imagined."

"Then do it!" She grasped his shoulders and pressed her body up around him. "Fuck me, Nick. I want to come again."

"Oh, Jesus." He closed his eyes, obviously aroused by her words and movements. "Hang on, Baby. You asked for it..."

Mandy dug her fingernails into his shoulders as his cock stabbed her. For a moment she thought she was being torn apart, and the pain caused her to cry out. She almost screamed *NO*, to stop him, but before the word could cross her lips a warm sensation spread through her loins. There was still pain, but another feeling mixed in. Pleasure. Pleasure in its rawest form seeped into her body, charging her nerve endings with electric energy. She felt everything intensely, with a strong, almost magical feeling.

"Oh, wow." Mandy gasped for breath, as the air around her head grew thick. She felt him propelling his cock into her and she rose to meet each thrust. All of a sudden she wanted more. It seemed as if she couldn't get enough. "Yes!" she cried in a strangled voice.

"Oh yeah." He nuzzled her neck and found one earlobe. "I think we got past the worst of it."

"We did," she agreed, wrapping her legs around his ass. She was caught up in frenzy and blurted, "I've never felt anything so fucking

incredible in my fucking life. Fuck me, Nick! Fuck me hard and make me come!"

"Yeah, Baby!" he whooped, leaning up to grasp her hips and ride her vigorously. "Hot damn, you're beautiful! Come on, pretty girl. Let me feel you come. Take me with you."

His pounding cock and ebullient words sent Mandy over the edge. As she began to tremble, she heard him mutter, "Oh, yeah. I'm coming too."

"Come on," she encouraged. The bright lights behind her eyelids and shuddering she experienced were made even better knowing he shared the experience with her. Mandy felt his heat pulsing into her in waves, and she clung to him tightly. Even as the quivering subsided, she wasn't ready to let him go. It felt as if they were one being, heart and soul. When they both caught their breaths, she kissed him as deeply as she could manage.

"Oh, baby!" he murmured between kisses. "That was fan-fucking-tastic."

Mandy knew her tears were falling again but couldn't stop them.

"What's wrong?" He asked, rubbing one hand over her cheek. "Are you okay?"

"I'm very okay," she replied, nodding and smiling through her tears. "I just never imagined how intense it would be. It was beautiful, Nick."

"You're the best." He kissed the tip of her nose. "Hang on now, I need to move."

She felt him pull out and watched as he removed the condom and chucked it in a nearby trash can. "You're bleeding a little bit, babe. Maybe you should take care of that."

"Oh!" Mandy sat up, quickly moving off the bed to the bathroom. The bleeding was spotty. It didn't last long. She returned to the bedroom and Nick smiled. He settled back on the bed and drew her into the circle of his arms.

"So that takes care of *that*," she commented. She was no longer a virgin.

"Pretty much." He kissed the top of her forehead and let one hand run over her hip, stopping to feel the birth control patch

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there. "Any regrets?"

Mandy nuzzled her face in the soft hair on his chest. "Nope."

"None?" he repeated.

"None at all," she reassured. It wasn't like she was a kid. She was almost twenty-two years old, for crissakes. She felt wonderful, but something was niggling at her. "Nick?"

"Hmmm?" His voice sounded drowsy now.

"Thanks for saying it, but how can I be 'the best' when I've never done this before? I had no idea what I was doing. I still barely know."

"Oh, baby." He chuckled. "You did everything just fine. Caught on real quick. There are a few more tricks I want to show you, in time."

"I hope you don't mind teaching me all this stuff."

Nick laughed loudly at that. "Are you kidding? Most guys would give their left nut for a chance to be with a hot little number like you. Sweet, innocent..." He nuzzled her cheek and whispered in her ear, "and a pussy so tight it wraps around my cock like a glove. You're perfect. Hot and tight. The rest comes naturally."

Snuggling up to him, Mandy closed her eyes and smiled with satisfaction. *Nick thought she was perfect.* What an amazing feeling. Another thought occurred and her eyes popped open. "Nick?"

"Hmmm?"

"How soon can we do it again?"

Laughing, he wrapped his arms around her and dragged her body on top of his. His knee wedged her legs apart and she straddled him. "Well, you see, guys need a bit more recuperation time than chicks do." He grasped her hips and rubbed her pussy over his flaccid cock. "There are a couple things we can do. We can go eat some pizza, and by the time we're done I should be ready to go again."

Mandy ground her center into his and felt his erection beginning to harden. "What's Plan B?"

"Mmm," Nick thrust his hips up into her a few times. "You could keep doing that and I'll be hard as a rock again before long."

Smiling, Mandy pushed herself backward and settled between his legs. "Um, how about Plan C? Because I have another idea."

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She brought her face over his cock and blew on it. It twitched and slowly came to life.

"Uh, Plan C is good," he muttered. "But you don't have to do that, babe, if you don't want to."

She watched the skin on his cock tighten as it grew larger. "I want to," she declared. Never before having the opportunity to study this particular piece of anatomy, she found it fascinating. Mandy dipped her tongue into the slit in the tip and Nick groaned.

"Is that okay?" she asked.

"Whatever you want to do is okay." He ran a hand through her hair. "Lick it, suck it, sit on it...you name it, I'll think it's okay."

"Well, then..." She circled the rim with her tongue and licked the sides like she might an ice cream cone. In a matter of minutes Nick's cock was rigid and standing straight up. "I like that."

"Oh, I like it too," he groaned in a deep voice.

Mandy chuckled and decided to see how much she could get into her mouth. She sucked his length in slowly until her face was nestled in his soft pubic hair.

"Jesus Mandy," he moaned again, thrusting his hips so his cock bobbed in and out of her mouth.

She watched his face, delighted that she could bring this much pleasure to him. Remembering what it felt like to be on the receiving end of such an act, she put all her energy into making him feel good.

"Oh yeah, suck it," Nick moaned, and Mandy did with all her might.

Suddenly he froze and leaned up, reaching under her arms and dragging her body up to him.

"Why'd you stop?" she asked, surprised.

He cupped her breasts and squeezed them, kissing and licking each of her nipples. "Because," he answered slowly in between kisses, "I was very close to coming."

"And that's a bad thing?" She arched her back to him, enjoying his mouth on her body.

"Not at all. Guys love to shoot their wad down a pretty girl's throat. If you decide not to swallow, that's okay too. Just pull back and jerk me off 'till I come."

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"Okay," Mandy agreed, "but I'm still not sure why you stopped." Right now, with his mouth working over her nipples deliciously, she was in no position to argue.

Nick buried his face in her cleavage and inhaled. He looked up at her and smiled. "Mainly because I've only got one more burst of energy left in me for a while. And when I go, I want to take you with me."

"Mmm." She squirmed in his arms. "I like the sound of that. Let's go, shall we? I want you badly."

Reaching over to the nightstand, Nick retrieved a condom and handed it to her. "Would you like to do the honors?"

"Sure." She felt excitement as she tore into the packet.

He showed her how to roll it on his accommodating member, and then grasped her hips. "Stay up there, baby. Ride me."

"But how—" she started to ask, when he found her wet opening with his hand and guided his cock to it.

"Just like that, beautiful. You control the tempo. I'm just along for the ride."

"Oh, wow," she gasped, working her pussy up and down on his throbbing cock. "This is fantastic!"

Nick grinned and leaned forward, capturing one nipple between his teeth. "And look what I get to do from this position. I get to play with your gorgeous tits."

"Oh, yeah!" Mandy threw her head back as he suckled her. This new position offered several benefits as far as she could tell, deeper penetration and his mouth on her breasts, which she now realized she loved. "Suck me!" she cried out, grabbing his head and holding him against her.

Nick growled with pleasure and sucked her nipple enthusiastically. He switched breasts, rolling the first nipple between his thumb and forefinger until he plucked it into an elongated cone.

"Oh god, I'm coming!" Mandy moaned, the strong sensations on her various pleasure points finally pushing her over the edge. A tumultuous shudder enveloped her and she cried out as she came, scratching her nails across his shoulders.

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"Yeah, baby!" Nick squeezed her tits together and bit both nipples at once. "God, this is fantastic!"

She leaned into him as the tremors settled, and regained her bearings.

Nick rubbed her back gently and murmured in her ear, "You're a wildcat in bed, Miss Mild-Mannered Mandy Stevens."

"Sorry if I hurt you."

He laughed out loud. "Baby, there's no way you hurt me! I loved it!" Kissing her mouth deeply then moving his lips to her ear he said, "I love it when you make noise. Scream, cry out, whatever you gotta do. It turns me on big time. And damn if I don't love feeling those nails digging into me. I'm so close to shooting my load into your hot pussy."

Mandy groaned, his talk heating her right to the core, making her ache for more. She rose on her knees and slammed down onto him.

"That's it, milk me," he groaned as her body sucked him in tight. "Make me spill my juice."

"Come on, spill it," Mandy urged, getting into the dirty talk. It was amazing how much it turned her on. It was fun. She never got to talk that way in ordinary life. "I want you to shoot your wad in my cunt—this time, anyway. Next time I want you to shoot it down my throat, so I can taste every drop."

She felt his shuddering begin. "Jesus, I'm coming," he groaned, and released her breasts so he could steady himself as he gasped for breath.

Mandy wrapped her arms around his neck and plunged down on his cock one last time. The room exploded around her, and they clung to each other for support as they both spiraled out of control.

Several minutes later she opened her eyes and saw him watching her. She smiled and kissed his neck, the nearest thing she could reach.

"That was amazing, Mandy. Truly amazing."

"I thought so, too." She inhaled deeply, trying to calm her breathing.

"How you'd know I'd like it when you talked dirty to me? When you mentioned shooting my wad into your cunt, I was done for." He poked her in the ribs from either side.

She laughed and squirmed from his tickling. "I just figured, you know."

"Really, where'd a nice girl like you learn language like that?"

"We have TV in Perry. We're not Amish."

"Thank God!" Nick kissed her cheek, then held her face in his

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hands. "Thank *you*, Mandy. That was the best sex I've ever had."

"You're just saying that." She grinned, blushing. "If you're buttering me up for more, don't bother. I'm ready to go again when you are."

He laughed, working her hips backward while he held the rubber in place. "I'm not just saying it. That was fucking fantastic. I'm blown away by the passion in that little body of yours."

He tossed the condom away and they lay side by side on the bed, not touching. "I'm beat," he admitted.

"We should probably eat."

"I'm a little hungry. Want some lukewarm pizza?"

She grinned at him. "For starters."

Nick looked at her with a wary expression. "Sweet Mother Mary, why do I think I'm not getting much sleep tonight?"

Mandy ran one hand down his thigh and circled his limp dick. "You can sleep anytime. I've got a lot of lost time to make up for, and a few more things I want you to teach me."

"Ah, yes," he murmured as his cock twitched. "You're right. I can sleep anytime. Let's refuel with pizza and wine, and then we can get into our next lesson."

Mandy stood up, now unashamed to walk around naked in front of him. She brought the pizza box over to the bed. He followed with the wine and glasses. They sat across from each other eating, drinking and talking. "What's sixty-nine?" she asked innocently.

Nick choked on his bite of pizza and grabbed his wine to wash it down. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah." She shrugged, picking the cheese off her slice of pizza. "I asked my mom most questions I had about sex, but I wasn't sure I should ask that one, because I have no idea what it means."

He smiled and tossed his pizza crust into the box. "Sixty-nine describes a position our bodies get into, all curled up like sixes and nines, for oral sex. I eat your pussy at the same time you're sucking my dick."

Mandy grinned. "That sounds great!"

Laughing, Nick stood to move the pizza box from the bed. He downed the last of his wine and moved both their glasses aside. "It would be so much easier to show you, rather than just tell you about it. You game?"

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Mandy stepped close to him and wiggled her breasts in his face. "I'm game for whatever you have in mind, big boy. You turned me on to this sex thing. Now you're going to have to stay and take care of me until I'm fully satisfied."

He shoved her lightly back onto the bed and stood above her. "Sounds like a big job."

She licked her lips, eyeing his cock, which now jutted out between them. "I believe you're up to the task," she replied, and they both grinned.



Mandy never slept better in her life. After making love well into the night with Nick, she dozed off in his arms. When she opened her eyes again it was daylight, and he was kissing her.

"Mmm," she purred. "Good morning."

"Good morning, beautiful," he murmured, nipping at the hollow in her neck. "How'd you sleep?"

"Wonderful. I was exhausted!"

"You should have been." He chuckled. "You wore me out, too. But I do believe I've got my second wind."

"Excellent," she sighed as he nuzzled her. "But I really have to pee first."

Nick flopped back on to the bed, closing his eyes and throwing his arms out to the sides. "Go ahead, leave me stranded here all alone, desperate and lonely..."

Mandy sat up and ran one finger over his bulging cock. "I'll be right back. I'm not going overseas."

Nick laughed and bucked his hips at her. She planted kisses along his thigh and around the base of his shaft. "I'll be right back, I promise," she finally murmured. She really needed to pee.

"I'll be waiting."

Mandy scurried into the bathroom and after using the toilet, took a moment to brush her teeth and hair. As she stepped back out into the bedroom, Nick was on her in a flash, throwing her up against the wall. "Oh!" she uttered, startled at the sudden movement.

He pressed his body into hers forcefully and asked, "Everything come out all right?"

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Giggling, she responded, "Gee. I haven't heard that one since grammar school."

Nick shoved his thigh between her legs roughly and parted them. "Does this feel like you're in grammar school?"

"Uh, no. It feels naughty, though, you pressing me up against the wall like this. What do you think you're doing?" She was only partly teasing. It did feel naughty but it was also very arousing.

"Why, I'm going to put you between a rock and a hard place. Tell me if you like it. If you don't, we can go back to bed." Nick forced her legs open and lifted Mandy up a little.

She glanced down and saw his solid erection, already sheathed in latex, pressing up and into her. "Oh, yeah!" She clutched the wall with one hand and his neck with the other. She felt his cock spear her against the flat, cool wall. The sensation was exhilarating. Nick thrust upward. She was plastered to the wall, able to do little but accept and enjoy it.

He was forced to do most of the work in this position, but Mandy had no complaints being wedged against the wall as he pummeled her. "Yeah, baby," she panted, feeling very close to another earth-shattering orgasm. *How many would this make in the last twenty-four hours?* She'd lost count.

"Wrap your leg around my ass," he instructed. She did and he sank deeper into her swelling pussy. "That's it," Nick groaned. "God, I'm coming. Are you close?"

"Right there with you, baby." Mandy felt the electricity jolt her at the same time his body shuddered his release. Already loving the feel of his hot stream pulsing into her, she wished they didn't need rubbers so she could trace the warmth as it spread through her.

Nick collapsed against her, gasping for breath. She ran her hands through his hair and over his cheeks, pulling his face close for a tongue-wrenching kiss.

"Mmm. Minty fresh," he mumbled. "God, Mandy, that was fantastic! I love what a fucking sexy lay you are!"

She continued to caress his cheek as she gazed into his eyes. "*I love you.*"

Nick's eyes widened in shock before he regained his composure.

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He touched her lips and smiled lazily. "Nah, you just love the wild, hot sex. You didn't know what you were missing all these years."

Mandy smiled, knowing enough not to press the issue. Her declaration had scared the crap out of him, and he was desperately trying to downplay it. But she also knew how she felt. What she and Nick shared the last few hours was something special, something she wouldn't—couldn't—share with just anyone.

She was in love with Nick Westchester. Now she had to see about making him feel the same way.

Chapter Six

Nick followed Mandy back to her dorm late Sunday afternoon, wanting to make sure she made it there safely. He pulled up next to her parked car. She got out and leaned into his open passenger window.

"Thanks for the lovely weekend," she told him, smiling before she kissed him gently.

"Thank *you*, babe. It was the best." He caressed her cheek lightly. "Are you sure there are no regrets?"

Mandy laughed loudly. "Well, maybe one. That it's over!"

He smiled and kissed her again. "Yes, but tomorrow is another day. What say tomorrow night I introduce you to the back seat of my car? It's not big, but then we won't need much room, stacked on top of one another."

She glanced into the back seat of his car longingly. "Tomorrow night, huh?"

Chuckling, Nick shook his head. "I wonder if Dr. Frankenstein felt this way after he created *his* monster."

Mandy slapped his arm and stood up. "Prick. Most guys would love a horny girlfriend."

"Not saying I don't love it, sweet thing. Give me a few hours to rest and I'll be on you like a fat kid on a cookie."

"You're horrible!" She laughed again. Giving him one last kiss, Mandy picked up her suitcase and headed toward her dorm. "See

you tomorrow!"

"I'll be here!" He replied, smiling at his good fortune as he watched her shapely ass walk away. As an afterthought he called, "Hate to see you go, but love to watch you leave!"

Mandy smiled over her shoulder and he noticed she threw a little extra wiggle into her strut. Once she was safely inside, he rolled up his window and headed back to the frat house. He was truly beat and planned to sleep right through to the following morning.

His political science professor had other ideas, though. Due to scheduling conflicts, he was moving a big midterm up a week and a half to Wednesday morning, bright and early. Nick groaned as he read the email, for the first time wishing he'd spent a little less time thinking about Mandy and a little more time reading his textbook. He hadn't cracked the book yet this term. Now that little faux pas prepared to bite him in the ass.

"Mother fucker!" he swore to Karl, who was lacing his tennis shoes.

"What's up?" Karl read over his shoulder. "A midterm? No biggie. You're a smart son-of-a-bitch."

Nick flopped back onto his bed. "Uh, when I study, sure. I haven't even opened the damn poly-sci book this year. Shit!"

"So, start reading now and you'll be caught up by Wednesday."

"If I haven't died of boredom, first. Have you ever read that textbook?"

Karl chuckled. "No, and apparently neither have you. It might not be so bad."

"Fuck!" Nick swore, wondering which classes he could skip between now and Wednesday with no harm done. He thought of Mandy and his heart sank. He'd have to call her—there was no way he could see her before this test. He'd need all the energy he could muster, and last night proved to him what she did to his energy level. *Drained it.* "Shit!" He pounded his fist on the bed.

"What now?" Karl was still laughing.

"I'll have to call Mandy. We were going out tomorrow night."

Waving a hand in the air, Karl said, "Aw, what's the dif? The Virgin Mandy won't mind. Whatever you want, you got."

Lying on his bed, Nick raised an eyebrow at his friend and then grinned. "You got that half right. Whatever I want, I get. But you

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can't call her the Virgin Mandy anymore."

"No shit?" Karl whooped, jumping on Nick and shaking him. "You popped her cherry? You son-of-a-bitch! So do tell! How was it?"

Nick pushed Karl back on to his own bed, still grinning. "I'm not going to kiss and tell."

"I don't want to hear about the kissing, man, I want to hear about the fucking. How was she?"

Nick hesitated, not really wanting to go into details. But he had to offer a little something. "Hot. Really fucking hot."

"You do it more than once?" Karl was almost salivating.

Feeling like a shit for talking about her, Nick tried not to offer much information, but it was hard not to brag. "Um, yeah. Like, all night and most of the next day."

"No fucking way!" Karl hollered.

"Yes fucking way." Nick nodded.

"So tell me, did she—"

Karl's cell phone rang and he slapped at it. "Damn it!" He pointed at Nick. "Don't go away! I want details. Every cock-sucking little detail you got." He flipped his phone open and barked "Speak!"

Nick closed his computer and grabbed his shower stuff. He'd said too much already. Mandy deserved better than that. He wasn't going to share another detail with Karl or anyone else.

That doesn't mean I can't relive the details in my head. Heading into the shower, he thought about how Mandy had bloomed like a flower for him. In a matter of hours she went from a nervous, repressed schoolgirl to a sexy, hot woman under his tutelage. Just thinking about her had him grinning like a fool, and stroking his cock under the warm shower spray.



She seemed to understand when he phoned her later that night. "I thought I'd have more time to study for this test," he explained.

"I know how it is." She chuckled into the phone. "That doesn't mean I like it. But I understand."

"I hoped you would. You're the best, you know it?"

"So I've been told," she teased.

"Wednesday night—no, Wednesday about four o'clock, I'll be

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free for the day. What time can I pick you up?"

"Four-oh-one work for you?"

Nick laughed. "I suppose I can wait that long. Okay, beautiful, I'll meet you in the parking lot at four-oh-one. Looking forward to it."

"Good luck with the studying, and on the test. Call me tomorrow night if you need a break."

"I'll try. Night, Mandy. Thanks again for the weekend."

"You too. Good night, Nick." She disconnected the call.

He held the phone in his hands for a minute, thinking about her, and the fact she'd told him she loved him. She was caught up in the throes of passion, he felt sure of it. It was too soon for them to be in love. He had feelings for her, no doubt about it. *But love?*



Nick studied nonstop and managed to do reasonably well on his poly sci test. He was digging around for his cell phone as he headed back to the frat house, eager to call Mandy. He felt bad about not phoning her the past couple days, but he'd kept his head buried in the text and let everything else fall by the wayside.

He also felt guilty because he'd intended to send her flowers on Monday, and somehow spaced out and forgotten. He'd make it all up to her tonight, he decided. Whatever she wanted, she'd have.

He was suddenly very anxious to talk to her. She was the only thing on his mind as he dug through his backpack searching for his damned phone. It was nowhere to be found.

Entering the fraternity, he tried to remember where he'd used the phone last.

"Nick!" Stan Carter was behind the desk in the front room. "Message for you, man. Sounds important."

"What?" Nick strolled over to the desk.

"Your mom called, said she couldn't reach you on your cell. She sounded upset. Wants you to call her immediately."

"Damn." Nick wondered what could be wrong. He looked around and then glanced at Stan. "I can't find my cell. Can I use the house phone?"

Stan reached in his pocket and handed a phone to Nick. "Sure, but you'd have to reverse the charges. Just use my cell. I've got a

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zillion minutes."

"Thanks." Nick flipped open the phone and punched the number to his home in Chicago. The phone rang but no one answered. He swore, ending the call and dialing his mother's cell phone number. She answered on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Mom, it's me," he said quickly.

"I've been trying to call you all morning. Where's your phone?"

"I don't know," Nick muttered. "I'll find it. What's up?"

Her voice wavered. "It's your father, Nick. He's had a heart attack. He's in very serious condition."

"Oh, Jesus." His heart skipped a beat. He argued nonstop with the man, but he wasn't ready to lose him.

"You need to get here."

"I'll leave now."

"No, Nick. I mean you really need to get here. Your sister already called the airlines. There's a flight leaving in about an hour. If you think you can make it, we'll call back and reserve your ticket."

His mind raced. He could throw a few things in a bag and make it to the airport in time. "I'll take a cab. They can drop me off at the counter so I don't have to mess with parking," he spoke his thoughts out loud. "Yeah, I can make it."

"Good. Check in at the Midwest Airline counter. I'll have Stacy call and get your ticket."

"Thanks Mom. I love you." He hesitated. "Tell Dad—"

"You can tell him yourself. Just get here, Nick."

"On my way."

"We love you, too," his mother's voice cracked.

"See you soon." Nick disconnected and returned the phone to Stan. "Thanks, man. I've got an hour to catch a flight to Chicago. My dad had a heart attack."

"Wow, sorry to hear that. Anything I can do?"

"No, but thanks. Is Browning here?" Nick headed for the stairs.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Good." Nick took the steps two at a time, racing to his room. He grabbed an overnight bag from his closet and began shoving

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clothes into it.

"What's going on?" Karl entered their room.

"My old man had a heart attack." Nick kept packing. "I've got an hour to get to the airport."

"Shit! No way!"

"Yeah." Nick frowned. *What was he forgetting?*

"Can I do anything?" Karl asked.

"Yeah. I lost my fucking phone. Call a cab and get me a ride to the airport, will ya?"

"I can take you."

"You have a class in twenty minutes. Thanks, but if you get a cab, that'll be fine."

"I'll do it." Karl made the cab arrangements while Nick looked around the room. He'd gotten everything he could think of for now.

Something niggled at him. *Mandy!* He had to call Mandy. Automatically reaching for his phone, Nick swore when he realized he didn't have her number without his phone. He hadn't memorized it, just put it into his phone's memory. "Son-of-a-bitch!"

He grabbed a pen and paper and wrote a note to her. Folding it, he put her dorm and room number on the outside. "Browning, man, I need a huge favor. I don't have Mandy's number without my phone. I need you to get her this note. Her address is on it."

"Sure, no problem." Karl took the note and tossed it on his desk.

"Don't forget!" Nick pointed at his friend.

"I won't! Trust me. Go. Good luck!"

"Thanks buddy." Nick gave his roommate a quick hug, grabbed his bag and headed for the door.

The cab dropped him at the airport, and he claimed his ticket with twenty minutes to spare. Nick scanned the walls, spotted a pay phone, and went to it. He got the number to Mandy's dorm from campus information, and the girl on the other end of the phone said she'd have to look for Mandy.

Ten minutes later, Nick was about to hang up when someone came on the line. "Hello?"

"Who is this?"

"Dee Anderson. Who is this?"

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"Dee, great." Nick breathed a sigh of relief. "This is Nick Westchester. I need you to get a message to Mandy for me, please. My father had a heart attack and I'm catching the next flight out to Chicago. We had a date tonight. I don't want her waiting for me."

"Okay." She sounded hesitant.

Her tone pissed him off. Even if she didn't like him, he wasn't asking a huge favor, just making a simple enough request. "Please, just make sure Mandy gets the message, will you?"

"I will." Not a hint of friendliness.

Nick didn't have time for her shit. "Fine. Thank you." He slammed the phone down, grabbed his bag and ran for the gate.



Mandy waited outside her dorm until four-twenty, when it got too cold. She stepped into the lobby to watch for him. By five, she was dialing Nick's number, but his cell phone only rang and rang.

At six she reluctantly returned to her dorm room, deciding if he showed up he could track her down there. Dee had gone to dinner with some other girls, but Mandy wasn't hungry. Her stomach was too upset. *Where* was Nick?

Something had to be wrong, or he would have called. He wouldn't leave her standing outside waiting for him. She thought about driving over to the frat house, but decided to call first.

"Hang on," the fellow on the other end of the line told her. "I think he's around here somewhere." He set the phone down and no one ever came back.

Mandy finally hung up. She knew reaching someone on the frat house phone was as difficult as the dorm phone. Most people had cell phones. The house phones were basically used for emergencies or a last resort. *Which was this?* she wondered. *An emergency or a last resort? Neither. Both?*

Mandy crawled into bed at nine, thinking if Nick showed up, he'd see that she hadn't been waiting all evening for him. The opposite of the truth, of course, because she'd done nothing *except* wait for him.

When his cell phone rang and rang the next morning, Mandy

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began to really worry about Nick. She made it through her morning classes and the first chance she got in the afternoon, headed to the frat house.

She spotted Nick's car in the parking lot, and entered the house. The man at the desk said she could go on up. They were more casual about girls in the rooms during the day, Nick had told her once.

Mandy climbed the stairs and found Nick's room. The door was closed. She raised her hand to knock when she heard giggling from inside. *Female giggling*. Mandy knocked loudly.

The door opened and Nick's roommate Karl looked at her. "Hey, it's Little Mandy Sunshine."

"Hello, Karl." She glanced at his rumpled appearance. At least he was dressed. "Is Nick around?"

"Where is Nick?" a woman's voice called from inside the room. "Where did that boy get off to? He's such a naughty, naughty boy."

Mandy stuck her head inside and looked around. Lola, the lemonade pusher from the frat party, sat on Nick's unmade bed. Mandy could see a bra sticking out from under the covers. Lola had the sheet pulled up around her, trying unsuccessfully to cover her nudity.

"Yeah," Mandy repeated. "Where is Nick? I saw his car outside."

Karl smiled. "He had to run out. Not exactly sure who he's riding—" he smiled at Mandy "—with." His eyes wandered up and down Mandy's body lasciviously. "Ummm. So, I hear you two had a great weekend. Didn't get much sleep, though."

Mandy felt her face flush. She glared at Karl. "Nick would never tell you that."

He laughed wickedly. "No? I believe his exact words were something about fucking 'all night long and most of the next day'. I assumed he was with you. Course, I don't know *who* he's with right now. Nick's never been much for being monogamous."

Tears welled behind her eyes as Mandy fumed at Karl, "You're a liar! Why would you say such a horrible thing?"

Chuckling, he stepped back into his room. He reached across Nick's bed and picked up the bra Mandy spotted earlier. Swinging it on his finger, he asked Lola, "This yours?"

"That tiny thing? Are you kidding?" Lola dropped the sheet from

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her front and Mandy saw her abundant breasts were several sizes too big for the bra Karl held out.

"That's yours!" Mandy told Karl.

He laughed and stretched the bra across his chest. "Not my size, either."

"From another one of your girlfriends, I mean!" Mandy snapped.

"Then why is it on Nick's bed?" he taunted her, swinging the bra in her face.

She slapped his hand away. "Why is *she* on Nick's bed?" Mandy motioned to Lola. "She'd obviously be here with you."

Karl shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. She might be here to see me *and* Nick. She likes her cocks two at a time, don't ya, baby?"

"Ooh, yeah!" Lola threw the sheet back and spread her legs.

Mandy watched in disbelief as the other woman began rubbing her clit with one hand and her tits with the other.

"Oh, my God," Mandy muttered, heading for the door. "You people are sick."

Karl grabbed her arm and said, "No, just horny. And you're the horniest of all, aren't you, smartass little bitch? Why don't you join us? We could see how many people it takes to satisfy you. There's a few more guys down the hall—"

"Get your fucking hands off me!" Mandy jerked her arm free. "You're crazy!"

She heard Karl's laughter as she ran from the room and down the stairs. Her heart racing, face burning, Mandy welcomed the brisk outside air with relief. She hurried to her car and drove as fast as she could back to her dorm. Nick was going to call any minute, and she wanted to wait for him.



It took another twelve hours of phone silence for the truth to sink in. Nick wasn't going to call. Mandy didn't know if he was at the frat house having group sex like Karl suggested, but she did know he wasn't with *her*.

Various thoughts raced through her mind, but it all boiled down to the one fact: Nick hadn't called since they had sex. Sure, there was the one call Sunday night, but nothing since. Secretly she'd been

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hoping for flowers on Monday. He sent flowers the day after they met, so she really expected him to send them the day after they made love for the first time.

Mandy thought about that. *The first time*. Was it going to be their only time? She told Nick early on that had been her fear, and he'd shushed her. Not going to happen, he replied. He wasn't going anywhere. Maybe he hadn't been totally honest with her.

When they met, she thought him out of her league. He'd convinced her otherwise, and they started dating. What if it was all some big prank? What if, on a dare, he had to win the virginity of some stupid, lovestruck girl, and then dump her just as quickly?

Surely not. Not possible! Or was it? Mandy wavered back and forth, and by sunrise had made herself sick.

"You okay?" Dee asked as Mandy returned from throwing up.

"No, I feel like shit."

"Your language has gotten worse since you've been seeing that guy," Dee muttered.

"I don't want to talk about it," Mandy snapped at her. "I've got one class this morning, then I'm going home for the weekend. You're welcome to come along if you like."

"Yeah, I'll go with you," Dee said meekly, and they packed up their things.

Mandy's phone rang before she finished packing and she grabbed it. Looking quickly at the number, she answered dejectedly, "Hi, Mom."

"Wow, that's quite a greeting. Good morning to you, too."

"Sorry. I had a crappy night. A crappy couple of days, actually."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Why don't you rearrange your schedule and come home for the weekend? We'll get some rocky road ice cream and veg out together."

"I'll be there by three."

Sarah chuckled. "Hmm. I expected more arm twisting. Things must be bad."

Mandy didn't want to get into it on the phone in front of Dee, but she admitted, "Yeah, pretty bad."

"I'm sorry, honey. I do have some good news. We got a new cell

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phone plan, with lots of minutes. You have to get a new number, but I think it'll be worth it. Sam got you a fancy new camera phone."

"Great, Mom. Thanks," Mandy said dully. Somehow, it didn't feel like such good news.

"I talked to Dee's mom, and they're going to take over your old plan. You can give your phone to Dee whenever you're done with it."

"She'll be happy. She's wanted a phone forever."

"I know. So far the good news hasn't cheered you up."

"Mom, please." Mandy bit back tears. She wasn't in the mood to joke yet.

"Well, how about this for some good news? I've spoken with your grandfather on the phone a couple times, and he's going to be here this weekend, too."

"Really?" That piqued Mandy's interest. "What about Uncle Doug?"

"Um, we haven't gotten quite that far, yet. Doug blew a gasket when he found out Jake contacted you. But Sam and I are willing to give him a chance, and Jake knows what he's up against. I'm hoping it'll be a nice weekend. We'd like you to be here."

"I wouldn't miss it!" Mandy replied truthfully. At least she had something to look forward to. Something to take her mind off the fact that her heart was breaking.



She dropped Dee off at her house as usual when they drove home together on the weekends. "Here, you might as well take this." Mandy shoved her cell phone at Dee. "I'll get my new one when I get home. I can call you with the number."

"Great!" Dee clutched the phone, but got a funny look on her face. "You sure there are no numbers you want off of here?"

"Nope." Mandy shook her head. "Take it."

"Okay, thanks. I'll see you Sunday."

"Yeah, I'll call you to arrange the time. Have fun."

"You, too." Dee hesitated once more, then got out and grabbed her suitcase. "See you."

Mandy drove to her parents' house, feeling a little excitement about her grandfather. Mainly she felt like the weight of the world was on her shoulders, or more precisely, like a bowling ball sat in

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the pit of her stomach. *She felt like crap.* She wanted her mom.

She tried to keep herself together while she parked and dragged her suitcase up to the house. She really hoped Jake wasn't here yet. She needed a little time with her mom before she could face him.

"There's my girl!" Sarah opened the front door.

"Hi, Mom," Mandy sputtered, and fell into her mother's arms.

"Oh, baby!" Sarah hugged her. "What is it? Shush, now." She tried to calm Mandy's tears. "It's all right. Whatever it is, it's going to be fine."

Mandy let her mother lead her in the house with an arm around her.

"Hey!" Bailey greeted them in the foyer. "Uh-oh, what's up?"

"Can you grab her suitcase, please?" Sarah nodded to the porch.

"Sure." Bailey brought the bag in the house and closed the door.

Mandy stood sobbing into her mother's shoulder.

"Want me to leave you guys alone for a while?" her aunt asked.

"No." Mandy shook her head, reaching out a hand to grab Bailey's arm. "Will you stay?"

"Of course. Why don't I put a movie on for the kids in the other room? Then we can talk before anyone else gets home."

Meaning the men, Mandy realized. She nodded and let her mother lead her to the sofa. Bailey returned with a box a tissue and placed it in front of Mandy. She took a seat on the coffee table and waited.

Mandy wiped her eyes and nose, then looked up sheepishly. "I think I was dumped."

"Aw, sweetie." Sarah rubbed her arm. "I'm so sorry. The coat hanger guy?"

"Yeah." Mandy sniffled. *He was so much more than that, but how could they know?* "Nick."

"What do you mean, you 'think' you were dumped?" Bailey asked with a frown.

"He hasn't called all week. We were supposed to go out Wednesday night and he never showed up."

"Did you try to call him? Maybe something came up," her mother suggested.

"Yeah." Mandy nodded. "Something came up Monday night when we were supposed to go out, so he pushed it back to

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Wednesday. Then he didn't show. I went to the frat house and his car was there, but his roommate said he was out. He also said Nick was not a particularly monogamous guy."

"Well, that sucks," Bailey commented. "Do you believe the roommate?"

"I don't know. He's a jerk, but I have no reason *not* to believe him, I guess."

Bailey continued, "Since you've been dating Nick, do you think he's been seeing other people? You can usually tell, by the frequency of your dates, phone calls and such."

"No, I really don't. I trusted him completely. I just wonder now if I made a mistake."

Sarah looked at her and asked slowly, "A mistake trusting him?"

Mandy glanced from her mother to Bailey and back. "No, a bigger mistake than that."

"Lord, have mercy." Sarah closed her eyes.

Mandy began crying again and Bailey reached for her hand. "Okay, sweetie. Straight talk, now. You had sex with him?"

Nodding, Mandy replied, "I got a birth control patch from the campus clinic, and he used condoms."

"Condoms...*plural*?" Bailey winced.

"Bailey!" Sarah snapped. "I'm having a hard enough time with this. I don't need to hear specifics."

"Oh, for God's sake, Sarah," Bailey replied. "The kids were responsible enough to go to the clinic. Mandy's twenty-one years old. How old were you when you and Ron started doing it? High school, wasn't it?"

Sarah's eyes flashed. "Ron and I got married."

"Because you had to!" Bailey hollered back. "Six months later, along came little Amanda Jean!"

"Can I help it if I want my daughter to be smarter than I was?" Sarah looked to the ceiling.

Bailey put her other hand on Sarah's shoulder and spoke calmly. "She *was*. She waited a lot longer than you—or me, for that matter. She was very responsible."

"I was a fool!" Mandy cried. "The night he took me home after it

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happened, he said he'd see me Monday. That's when the excuses started. I haven't seen him since we did it."

"That *really* sucks." Bailey stood and paced the room.

"The thing is," Mandy sniffed, "when we first met, I thought he was way out of my league. Expensive clothing, nice car, fraternity...the whole deal. He convinced me to go out with him. Before we had sex, I told him I needed to make sure it wasn't going to be a one-time deal. He assured me it wasn't. Now I wonder if he was lying the whole time. I can't shake the feeling this was some big prank he played on me—snatch the virginity from the stupid little college girl."

"Oh surely not!" Sarah appeared horrified.

Bailey grimaced. "Frat boys have been known to play such pranks. This one is going to rue the day he made that decision. I won't even sic Doug on him. I'll cut his nuts off myself."

"Now, we don't know that's what happened," Sarah raised her hands.

"It sure smells fishy," Bailey muttered, still pacing.

"Yeah," Mandy moaned. "And it hurts *so badly*!" She broke down in tears again, and Sarah cradled her gently.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I wish this hadn't happened to you. I'd give anything to fix it and make it better."

The front door opened as Sam arrived home from work. "Whose car is parked in my spot?" he growled jovially, but stopped when he saw the scene in front of him. "What's wrong?"

"Boy trouble," Bailey whispered to him. "I'm going to go check on the kids." She left the front room.

Sam slid onto the sofa beside Mandy and she curled up in his arms. "Hey, sugar," he crooned, running a hand through her hair. "What did the big dummy do? Just say the word, and I'll go throttle him for you."

"He dumped me!" Mandy sobbed.

"Aw, baby, I'm sorry. But there'll be another guy along before you know it. You're too pretty to be tied down to one fella..." he trailed off, and Mandy could see her mother shaking her head at Sam. She knew her mom would tell him anyway, so she decided to get it all out in the open.

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"I slept with him, Sam. We dated a few times. We had sex, and he never called me again."

"I'm going to kill the little bastard," Sam stated simply.

Mandy chuckled into his chest. Her emotions were raw and spread out for all to see, so she told him, "Then you might as well kill me, too, because I wanted to do it. It's not like he forced me."

"Whoa, there," Sarah added. "Pull back on the description meter, girl. Too much information."

Sam chuckled and rubbed Mandy's hair. "Of course you wanted to do it. You're a healthy young woman and it's perfectly natural. Your mother may not want to recognize it, but the fact is, you're grown up."

"You're okay with this?" Sarah looked at him with disbelief.

He smiled at his wife. "Honey, if we could lock her in her room with her stuffed animal collection, then we might not have to face this. But I don't think you really want that, and neither do I. I'm stoked seeing what kind of people our kids turn out to be. So far, Amanda has done just fine."

"But what about this Nick Winchester boy?" Sarah asked angrily.

"Westchester," Mandy corrected.

"Whatever!" She snapped and looked at Sam. "Mandy thinks he may have been involved in some kind of fraternity prank—taking her to bed, then dumping her."

Sam's face hardened. "Then the little prick must die. Doug and I will pay him a visit, and the boy will simply disappear."

Mandy chuckled and pushed him away. "You're so full of shit."

Grinning, Sam ruffled her hair. "I may be, but heaven help the guy if Doug ever finds out. He'd be on the road to Urbana with a gun under the seat of his truck."

Bailey leaned against the doorframe and crossed her arms. "He just left for there."

Mandy and her parents looked at Bailey with surprise, and she chuckled. "Just kidding. But you're right, he doesn't need to know this." She shook a finger at Mandy. "He'll be mad at you for breaking your promise not to have sex until age thirty-two."

Mandy giggled and leaned back into the sofa. A little of the

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weight had lifted by sharing her burden with the people she loved. People she *knew* she could trust and count on. She still felt like there was a bowling ball in the pit of her stomach, but she figured that would be there for a long, long time.

Chapter Seven

It helped to be home. Mandy didn't have as much time to wallow in self-pity when there were other people around, especially a lively three-year-old who demanded much of her attention.

Jake showed up for dinner Saturday evening. Sarah was cool but civil to him. Sam made the man feel welcome and Ty was in his lap by the end of the evening. Mandy felt good about the situation, and hugged Jake as he prepared to leave.

"Thank you, Mandy, for helping me," he told her.

"Of course. It was the right thing to do. I feel sure of that now."

He smiled and squeezed her arm.

"So, Jake," Sarah leaned against Sam at the door. "You're coming back for lunch tomorrow? I've invited Doug and his family. I can't promise they'll show up, but it's the best I can do."

"I'll be here. Thank you for giving me a second chance."

She nodded and didn't say anything else.

"We'll see you tomorrow," Sam told the older man, and Jake smiled before he left. Sam closed the door and faced the two women.

"That went well. He seems nice enough."

"Yeah." Sarah rubbed her hands over her folded arms. "I'm just worried what Doug might do. He's still so angry."

"You may be surprised," Sam told her. "Seeing the man, talking

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with him...it could make a difference."

The phone rang. Sam frowned, glancing at the clock. "Ten p.m. Who the hell is that?"

Sarah and Mandy shrugged and watched him answer the phone. "Hello? Who? Winchester? Oh, *Westchester*. Okay." He smiled and held the phone out, saying loudly, "Mandy, there's another boy calling for you! I wish you'd give them your cell number. I'm tired of answering all these calls."

Sarah chuckled, but Mandy shook her head, terrified. She didn't want to talk to Nick.

Sam raised his eyebrows. "You sure?"

She nodded, and he spoke into the phone. "Sorry, Mr. Westchester. Mandy's not taking calls this evening." He listened for a moment and then said, "Hey—don't try to explain anything to me. I'm the girl's father and probably the last person you want to piss off right now. Not that you haven't already pissed me off."

Mandy and Sarah exchanged wide-eyed expressions.

"Right. Bye." Sam hung up and looked at Mandy. "Man, he was anxious to tell his side of the story. Are you sure you have all your facts?"

"What did he say?"

"Hell, I don't know! I cut him off. But he seemed really upset that you wouldn't talk to him."

"Good." Mandy nodded, satisfied. "Let *him* be upset for awhile. Serves him right." She slipped her arms around Sam's neck and hugged him. "Thanks, *Dad*. I love you."

Sam coughed and accepted her hug, muttering in a shaky voice, "Love you too, kid."

She hugged her mother tightly and said, "I love you, too, Mom. Good night."

"We love you so much, baby. Sleep well." Sarah replied.

Mandy smiled as her mother and stepfather slid their arms around each other. She went to her room, thinking once again how very happy she was that they found each other.

Now that she'd had a small taste of grown-up love, she ached for it again. Maybe someday she'd find a special guy that looked at her the way Sam looked at her mother. She thought of Nick and tears

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bubbled forth as she dropped onto her bed. *Who was she trying to kid?* She *had* found him. But now he was gone.



They went to church the next morning. By noon, the sun was shining and the weather was mild. Mandy and Ty helped Sam clean off the picnic table in the backyard, while Sarah prepared fried chicken and potato salad.

Jake arrived, but there was no sign of Doug and Bailey. "Sorry," Sarah told her father as she set their meal on the picnic table.

"It's all right," he said softly. "Being here with you is a good start."

"Sit by me, Grandpa!" Ty tugged at Jake's hand.

"I'd love to," the older man replied. "As long as I can sit by your sister, too. She and I have some catching up to do."

"Sure, Jake." Mandy smiled at him. "Grandpa."

They settled on the bench when the back gate opened and Dee came through.

"Deandra!" Sam called to Mandy's friend. "Welcome! You're just in time for lunch. Are you hungry?"

Dee smiled nervously at Sam and said, "Not really, but thanks, Sam. I need to talk to Mandy." The girls looked at each other. "It's pretty important."

"Go ahead," Mandy told her. Something was up, and she had an uneasy feeling.

"Can we go inside?"

"I'd rather not. You can talk in front of my family. This is my grandfather." She motioned to Jake.

Dee nodded toward him and cleared her throat. "I did something I feel badly about, and I need to explain. It's about Nick."

Mandy's heart leaped into her throat at the mere mention of his name. "What about him?"

"He called the dorm last Wednesday. His father had a heart attack, and he was rushing to catch a flight to Chicago."

Mandy flew to her feet. "*What?* Why didn't you tell me?"

Tears streamed down Dee's cheeks. "I was worried about you. I found some—pamphlets—in your stuff, and I thought you were getting a little too serious about him."

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Mandy snapped, "You found my birth control pamphlets and you thought I was doing something stupid, *like being prepared?*"

Dee's eyes widened and she glanced at the others.

"Oh, they know," Mandy muttered, waving her hand in the air. "I told them everything. Jesus, Dee, how could you do that to me?"

"Amanda, watch the language," Sarah said softly.

"See, she's cussing now!" Dee cried. "She's changing right before my eyes!"

Sam offered, "It's hard when one person grows away from the other, but it happens to all best friends."

"But Dee," Sarah murmured. "That was a cruel thing you did. Mandy's been very upset."

"So have I," a voice spoke up from over by the gate.

Mandy's head flew up and she couldn't believe her eyes. Nick was standing in her backyard, wearing the same brown leather jacket and looking as wonderful as he did the first time they met. His eyes looked tired, though, and his beard a bit scruffier than usual. "Nick!"

He spoke as he strolled slowly toward her. "It seems we've had a series of unfortunate events. Starting with the midterm that got bumped up to Wednesday. I really *did* have to study. I skipped all my classes Monday and Tuesday. Did nothing but crack the book. I think I did pretty well on the test." He offered a small smile, but Mandy just stared.

He went on, "Then I lost my cell phone. My mom reached me at the frat house Wednesday afternoon and said I needed to get home quickly. Dad had a major heart attack, and was in bad shape."

"How is your father?" Sarah asked.

"Surprisingly enough, he's doing much better. Thanks for asking." He smiled at Sarah and looked back at Mandy. "Anyway, I didn't have your number. It was stored in my phone, but not my brain. So I wrote a note and asked Browning to deliver it to you. That was apparently my first mistake."

"I never got a note," Mandy said, breathlessly.

Nick nodded. "I found that out. I haven't punched my best friend since seventh grade, when he stole my girl, Susan Nelson, from me."

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I'll be damned if I was gonna let him get away with it again."

"You *punched* him?" Mandy almost smiled, but held back.

"Damn right. He told me what he said to you. I was livid."

"Why'd he do it?" She asked, forgetting anyone was there but Nick and her.

He looked down, visibly upset for the first time. "Karl had some bullshit notion that you weren't good enough for me." He glanced at Ty and then Sarah, adding, "Sorry, ma'am."

"You're forgiven...for the language, that is," Sarah replied.

He looked back at Mandy. "It totally ticked me off. I've never, *ever* felt that way, and you know it." Nick glanced at Dee, then back at Mandy. "Mistake number two was assuming *your* best friend would get a message to you. She's lucky she's female. I don't hit women."

"But I might." Mandy looked into his eyes.

Nick went on, "My father's been critical for days. As soon as I knew he was out of the woods, I flew back to school. My phone showed up at the frat house, in the laundry, of all places. I tried calling you *first thing* and reached Dee." He smiled at Mandy ruefully. "Giving away your phone was a pretty drastic step to avoid my calls."

Mandy finally smiled back at him. "You're pretty high on yourself if you think that's why I gave away my phone."

"Actually, I'm pretty low on myself right now. My lack of consideration and just plain ignorance almost cost me the best thing in my life. I hope there's still time to turn things around," he glanced at Sam. "Unless you're busy with all those other guys who've been calling."

She stepped away from the picnic table and toward him. "I have been pretty busy. Conjuring up wild scenarios takes a lot of time and energy. I've been thinking the very worst of you."

Sam stood. "Maybe we should give you two some privacy."

"No, sir." Nick held one hand up. "I understand Mandy's been open and honest about our relationship with you. What I have to say needs to be said in front of everyone. I want you all to know exactly how I feel."

"Okay, then." Sam sat back down next to Sarah.

Mandy glanced nervously at her parents, then back at Nick.

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He met her gaze head on. "I sort of freaked out when you told me you loved me. I thought it was too soon. That you couldn't possibly feel that way yet. But this weekend, when I thought I might have lost you, I realized I feel the same way. I love you, Mandy." He gave her a hopeful smile.

She gasped slightly, still staring at him.

"I know how your mind works," Nick continued, "and I can imagine what you were thinking of me. I fully intended to send you flowers this week, but that damn midterm caught me by surprise. It threw off my whole focus. See, my father is a stickler for grades. I make 'em, all right, but I have to study. The A's don't come easily."

"I should have realized you'd never do what I suspected." She sniffed back tears. "When you didn't call after Sunday, I thought you'd probably gotten what you wanted and were through with me."

"Jesus Christ, Mandy! Are you kidding me?"

She heard a clucking noise behind her and knew the language wasn't sitting well with either Dee or her mother. Right now, Mandy didn't care. "Chill out!" she snapped over her shoulder.

Nick's face turned red, and Mandy wasn't sure if it was from anger or embarrassment. *Probably a mixture of both.* "Did you really think I'd do that to you?" he asked. "Really?"

"I'm sorry." She shook her head, willing the tears to stop but having no control at this point. "I didn't know what to think when you didn't call. Then I went to the frat house and saw your car. Lola was in your bed, and Karl said those nasty things."

Nick laughed out loud and reached for her, pulling Mandy into his arms. "Lola was in my bed? That's just disgusting! To think I slept there last night."

Mandy buried her face in his chest and inhaled deeply. He was back. She didn't know for how long. Maybe she'd always have nervous feelings where Nick was concerned. But for right now, she held on to him.

"I missed you so much," he whispered in her ear. "I never want to be separated from you like that again."

She pulled back to look at him. "That seems unlikely. Perry and Chicago are three hours apart."

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"I've been thinking about that." He took a step back and reached in his pocket, pulling out a small box. Looking askance at Dee then back at Mandy, he continued, "I think we're both going to want new roommates next year. What if it were you and me?"

Nick pulled a diamond and pearl ring from the box and held it up. "This was my grandmother's. If you don't like it, I'll get you another one. But wear it for now as a symbol of how much I love you."

Mandy vaguely heard gasps behind her, but she couldn't think about that. The beat of her heart was pounding loudly in her ears.

He dropped to one knee and clasped her hand. "I know it's soon. We need to spend some time getting to know each other. But I want you wearing this while we do, so you'll understand how much I really care for you. I *never* want you to doubt me again, the way you did this week." He slipped the ring on the tip of her left ring finger and paused.

"Mandy Stevens, will you marry me?"

She glanced down at the beautiful ring. If she were to choose one, she couldn't have found anything lovelier. Looking into Nick's face she saw hope, fear, love, and a healthy dose of lust. *Yep, that about covered it.* She felt the same way. "Yes!" She wiggled her finger. "I would love to marry you!"

He grinned and slid the ring on. It was a perfect fit. With a big sigh of relief, Nick rose to his feet and swept Mandy into his arms. "I love you," he murmured softly.

"I love you too!" She squealed as he squeezed her waist, and then brought his lips to hers for a soft, sweet kiss.

Mandy heard her family applauding, but she could only smile into the face of the man she loved. He looked so sweet, so sincere. She would never doubt his affection again. Pressing her body against his, she felt his erection stir as they kissed again, deeper this time.

When he pulled away, he smiled and whispered, "Don't do this to me in front of your family."

She grinned back, and said in a low voice, "If you can stick around, maybe we can go somewhere and be alone. I've missed you, too."

He wiggled his hips against hers one last time. "Oh, I'm sticking around. We've got a lot of making up to do. And I need to get to know

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your family. They don't exactly have the best first impression of me."

"They're going to love you, because I do," she told him. They kissed once again, and Mandy heard Sam clear his throat.

"Well, the chicken's gotten cold, and the potato salad warm. I think we should eat. Dee, Nick, will you join us?"

Nick wrapped an arm around Mandy's shoulder and led her to the table. "Thank you, sir. I'd love to."

Dee had a funny look on her face, so Mandy spoke up. "Stay, Dee. I think you and Nick will like each other if you give him a chance."

The girl nodded appreciatively, and replied, "Thanks."

Jake spoke up, smiling at Nick. "Welcome back, son."

"Hey, Jake," Nick replied. "Good to see you here."

"It's good to be here."

"I feel the same way," Nick squeezed Mandy's waist, and she looked at him lovingly.

"When can we eat?" Ty hollered, and everyone laughed.

"There a party going on back here?" Bailey spoke as she walked through the gate.

"Hey!" Sarah said, and they all watched Bailey, Lissa and Denise walk in, followed by a grumpy-looking Doug. "You're here!"

"Everybody's here," Bailey said slowly, looking around. "What's going on?"

"Aunt Bailey." Mandy smiled, her arm firmly ensconced around Nick's waist. "This is my fiancé, Nick Westchester. Nick, this is my wonderful aunt Bailey Kenny. My cousins, Lissa and Denise." Mandy reached out to ruffle their hair. "And my favorite uncle in the whole wide world, Doug."

"Pleased to meet you all," Nick replied with a nod and a smile.

Bailey and Doug exchanged shocked glances. "*Fiance?*" Bailey whooped. "Oh, my God! We have some catching up to do!"

"Oh, yeah," Mandy squeezed Nick tighter.

Sarah stepped up. "We have *a lot* of catching up to do. Maybe if I can get my daughter to release her death grip on this young man, we can get started. Nick, I'm Sarah Buchanan, Mandy's mother."

He smiled and shook her hand.

Mandy covered her mouth with her hand. "I'm sorry, Mom! I

Having it All

guess my mind was someplace else."

"I still don't want to know about it," Sarah whispered, and took Nick by the arm. "This is my husband, Sam, and Mandy's brother, Tyrone."

"Hey, Ty, I've heard great things about you." Nick offered his hand to Sam and they shook. "Glad to finally meet you, sir,"

"Please! It's Sam. We're happy to meet you, too."

"I'm a little confused." Doug scratched his head, stepping forward. "First there was a boyfriend, then no boyfriend. Now there's a fiancé?"

Mandy and Nick smiled at each other, and she nodded at her uncle. "That's right."

"You're the kid from Chicago?"

"Yes. It's nice to meet you, Doug."

"You can call me sir," he said with a half-scowl.

Sam stepped forward. "Say, Nick, you grew up in Chicago, didn't you?"

"Yep. Born and raised there."

"So...Cubbies or White Sox?"

Mandy held her breath.

"Oh, definitely the Cubbies, sir. My family has season tickets. Maybe we can all take in a game sometime."

An audible sigh of relief spread through the yard, and Mandy smiled.

Sam gave a 'thumbs up' sign. "Good man. And it's Sam, not sir."

Doug cleared his throat. "I guess you can call me Doug, kid. Anyone with season tickets can't be all bad."

Bailey rolled her eyes. "There's no accounting for taste."

He grabbed her from behind and planted a noisy kiss on her cheek. "Yeah, I think you taste pretty good, and you're a stinky Sox fan."

"Stop it!" Bailey pushed her husband away. "Not in front of—" She nodded toward Jake.

"Oh, yeah." Doug straightened up. "Hello, Jake," he said sourly.

"Hi, Doug. You look good. You have a beautiful family."

"Yeah. Well, thanks." His tone softened.

Mandy and Sarah exchanged hopeful glances, and smiled.

Jake turned to Nick. "So what are you going to do in Chicago, young man? Do you have a job lined up when you get out of school?"

"I've got one more year of college, like Mandy. I was going to

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work for my father at his advertising agency. But maybe they need advertising agents here in Perry?"

Mandy exchanged skeptical glances with her family and looked at Nick. "Not very likely. But I'll bet they need teachers in Chicago."

"I couldn't ask you to do that."

"Why not? You need to be with your father. And I need to be with you."

Nick stared at her in wonder, then swept her into an embrace and they kissed.

"Besides," Doug commented with a sly smirk, "we're going to want someplace to stay when we come up for ballgames."

Mandy and Nick grinned at each other. "We'll have a large house, full of spare rooms," he announced.

"And full of love," she countered.

"That, too. We'll have it all." He pulled her into the circle of his arms and held her tightly.

"*When are we going to eat?*" Ty called out, and everyone laughed.

"Right now, baby," Sarah told him. "Sam, can you bring some more plates, please? Our family is expanding by leaps and bounds."

"Yeah," Sam glanced around his full backyard. "Isn't it great?"