



Seduction's Spell

LYNN
LAFLEUR



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HarperCollins e-books

To the Book Babes:
Char, Dorothy, Eloise, Linda, and Micqui.
Thank you for your critiques and your support.
Most of all, thank you for your friendship.



Contents

Prologue

The large antebellum mansion sits on
a bend of the... 1

Maggie and Isaac 5

One

Isabella Patricelli stood inside the
entrance to Belle On The... 7

Two

Isaac locked gazes with the man standing
by the bed. 16

Three

Maggie opened the door and stepped
into the suite. Despite... 25

Four

Maggie slipped her hands into the
front pockets of her... 32

Five

Maggie sat on the blanket while Isaac
unpacked the picnic... 42

Six

A gentle breeze touched her face.
Maggie sighed softly and... 52

Yvonne and Dolan 59

One

“Oh, yeah,” he said, his voice raspy.
“Oh, yeah. You... 61

Two

Dolan peeked over Belle's shoulder
at the piece of paper... 67

Three

Tall, at least six two. Dark brown
hair pulled back... 75

Four

Yvonne adjusted the rolled-up towel
beneath her neck and shifted... 83

Five

Dolan started after Yvonne, but a
hand on his arm... 90

Six

Yvonne stepped out the back door
and took a deep... 101

Seven

His T-shirt hit her at mid-thigh.
He'd given her one... 113

Eight

The guilty look on her face proved
what he'd suspected—she'd... 121

Nine

Dolan opened his front door to find
Belle standing beneath... 131

Ten

Yvonne lay on her side, her hands
beneath her pillow,... 140

Eleven

Dolan stared at Yvonne. He couldn't
possibly have heard what... 149

Twelve

Opening his nightstand drawer,
Dolan took out a bottle of... 158

Sara and Vince

167

One

Sara Fletcher stared at the thick
envelope in her hands. 169

Two

The resort was as beautiful as
Sara had imagined. No,... 178

Three

Vince slammed the car door.
Hands on hips, he stared... 185

Four

The White Rose was nothing like
what Sara expected. Being... 194

Five

Yvonne folded the paper and
handed it back to Sara... 205

Six

Sara slowly opened her eyes. She
blinked, then frowned when... 216

Seven

It wasn't easy to make it to
the mansion when... 227

Belle and Mitch

235

One

Belle looked up from her paperwork
when Lottie set a... 237

[Two](#)

Mitch had died and gone to football
lovers' heaven. Not... 246

[Three](#)

Her chin came up and she uncrossed
her legs. "Nothing's... 256

[Four](#)

Belle had enjoyed sex with dozens
of lovers in her... 265

[Five](#)

The sight of Belle propped up
on several pillows made... 272

[Six](#)

Mitch found Belle in her office,
the phone next to... 280

[Seven](#)

What did you expect? Belle asked
herself as she poured... 290

[Eight](#)

"How about there?" Belle asked,
pointing toward a stand of... 300

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Lynn LaFleur](#)

[Credits](#)

[Cover](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Prologue

The large antebellum mansion sits on a bend of the Rose River in North Texas. Belle On The Bend, built in 1844, has survived war, storms, drought, and other natural disasters to stand proudly among tall oak and willow trees. The current owner has remodeled the mansion to its original glory.

Now a successful resort surrounded by three-hundred manicured acres, visitors must make reservations months in advance to stay in one of the six luxurious suites or separate cabins. Isabella Patricelli—otherwise known as Belle—personally greets each of her guests when they arrive.

Belle is young and gorgeous. Her shoulder-length curly blond hair and voluptuous body would make any man long to run his hands along her generous curves—

LYNN LAFLEUR

“You can’t write about generous curves in a travel article, Mitch.”

Mitchell Cavanaugh jerked at the sound of his editor’s voice. Turning in his chair, he looked into John Brady’s eyes. Warmth crept up the back of Mitch’s neck when he saw the amusement in John’s gaze.

“Hey, John,” he said, quickly shutting his notebook.

“Hey, Mitch.” He gestured toward the closed computer. “Whatcha’ doing?”

“Working on an article.”

“Hmm.” John perched on the edge of Mitch’s desk. “I don’t recall you ever writing about a gorgeous woman in any of your travel articles.”

Damn. What a time for John to show up. “I was just . . . fooling around.”

The amusement lingered in John’s eyes. “Fooling around. Okay.” He tapped the top of the notebook with one long forefinger. “How about being serious and getting your article on Belle On The Bend to me?”

“I’m working on it. I’ve never missed a deadline, you know that.”

“Yeah, I know that. I also know you had to leave the mansion before you wanted to. Did you get enough information about the area to write your article?”

Mitch shook his head. “No. I need to go back as soon as things . . . calm down.”

A look of sympathy crossed John’s face. “How’s your dad doing?”

“The same.” Leaning back in his chair, Mitch ran a hand over his face. “He’s stubborn. Being in the hospital is hard on

Seduction's Spell

him. He can't tell the nurses what to do and that eats on him." He chuckled. "He told me last night since only the good die young, he'll be around until he's at least eighty."

"If he can joke with you, then he really will be all right."

"I hope so." Mitch had to swallow the lump that suddenly formed in his throat. "I can't lose my dad."

"You won't," John said firmly. "Your dad isn't going to let a little thing like a stroke get the best of him."

"He's lucky it only affected his left side and not his speech. His doctor says with physical therapy, he'll be able to walk again as well as before he had the stroke."

"So you're staying around to make sure he does what he's supposed to do?"

Mitch nodded. "Mom's tough, but he won't mind her. If I have to physically carry him to his therapy, I'll do it."

"Take as much time as you need. You're my best writer, but I have other writers on staff who can cover for you while you take care of your father."

Knowing he was lucky to have such an understanding editor, Mitch smiled at John. "Thanks, man."

"No problem." John stood and looked down at Mitch. "But as soon as your dad is better, I expect your article on Belle On The Bend."

"Will do, boss."

Once John left, Mitch opened his notebook again. The last sentence he'd typed jumped out at him.

Her shoulder-length curly blond hair and voluptuous body would make any man long to run his hands along her generous curves.

LYNN LAFLEUR

He'd barely started his tour of Belle On The Bend when he'd received the phone call about his father. He'd only been blessed with a glimpse of Isabella Patricelli while snapping pictures of the grounds. That glimpse wasn't nearly enough. He had a job to finish first, then he had every intention of getting to know the beautiful blonde better . . . *much* better.

Maggie and Isaac



One

Isabella Patricelli stood inside the entrance to Belle On The Bend and watched the couple emerge from a silver BMW. They were in their early- to mid-thirties and quite attractive. Their luxury car along with their designer clothes shouted that they were well-to-do if not wealthy.

She watched the man straighten the cuffs of his gray jacket. She guessed Armani. Why he would be wearing a suit on a vacation, she couldn't imagine.

She sighed. They didn't look happy. Even from fifty feet away, she could feel the sadness seeping from their souls.

She had her work cut out for her with this couple.

Summoning a bright smile, Belle stepped out on the wide veranda. "Good morning. Welcome to Belle On The Bend."

The couple climbed the five steps toward Belle. She couldn't help but notice the man didn't take the woman's hand or arm to help her up the steps. Simple common courtesy dictated that he at least offer to assist her.

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Good morning,” he said, still unsmiling. “I’m Isaac Oliveira. This is my wife Maggie.”

Belle turned toward Maggie. Petite, short red hair, huge green eyes, ivory skin. She was the perfect companion to her husband’s dark hair and olive coloring. “I’m so pleased to meet you. Please come in.”

“Our bags?” Maggie asked.

“Dolan will get them for you,” Belle said as she led the way inside the mansion. “He’s officially my maintenance man, but he does a little of everything around here. Sometimes I wonder how I ever got along without him.”

Belle stopped and faced her guests when she heard Maggie’s soft gasp. Eyes wide and lips parted, the lovely redhead turned in a slow circle. Belle smiled to herself. Visitors to the mansion often stared at the antique furnishings. Stepping into Belle On The Bend was like stepping back in time one hundred and fifty years.

“It’s incredible,” Maggie whispered. She clasped her husband’s arm. “Oh, Isaac, isn’t it beautiful?”

“Yeah.”

Belle’s eyes narrowed at Isaac’s bored tone. This one would definitely take a lot of work. She looked at Maggie in time to see the hurt in her guest’s eyes before Maggie released her husband’s arm and lowered her gaze.

A chirping sound from Isaac’s pocket produced the most response Belle had seen from him since he arrived. He slipped his hand into his slacks pocket and drew out a thin wireless phone.

Maggie frowned. “Isaac, you promised no business.”

“This won’t take long.” He turned and headed toward the

Seduction's Spell

entrance, opening the flip-phone as he walked. "Yeah . . . No problem. I wanted you to call . . . Did you get . . ."

The rest of his words were lost when he stepped outside. Sympathy welled up inside Belle. Maggie looked so lost and alone.

Isaac wasn't the first husband who'd brought his wife here, then put business first.

"Why don't we go into the parlor for something to drink while your husband finishes his call?"

Maggie gave her a weak smile. "Thank you."

Belle led the way through the foyer and into the parlor. "I have regular or raspberry iced tea, soft drinks, or I can serve you lemonade if you'd prefer it."

"The raspberry tea sounds wonderful."

"Please sit down and make yourself comfortable while I prepare your drink. Sugar or lemon?"

"Just lemon."

"I have to drink my tea sweetened. I'm definitely a sugar-holic. I detest any artificial sweetener."

Her teasing earned Belle another small smile from her guest. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Maggie perch on the edge of a pale blue wingback chair in one of the sitting areas. The redhead continued to study her surroundings, as if trying to absorb the different colors, textures, and styles of the furniture and furnishings.

"The mansion is beautiful, Belle."

"Thank you." Belle added a plate of her cook Lottie's Snickerdoodles to the tray. "I enjoy living here very much. And I enjoy sharing it with others." She joined Maggie in the sitting area, placing the tray on the small round table between the two chairs.

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“How long have you lived here?”

Taking the second chair, Belle crossed her legs before handing Maggie her tea. “Longer than I want to admit.”

Maggie sipped her drink. “Mmm, very good. I don’t think I’ve ever drunk raspberry tea.”

“Try the Snickerdoodles. My cook is incredible. No one goes hungry around here.”

Biting her bottom lip, Maggie eyed the cinnamon-topped cookies on the tray with longing. “I shouldn’t. I’ve put on some weight and I’m trying to lose it.”

Belle saw a lovely woman with shapely curves, not someone overweight. Maggie didn’t say it, but Belle sensed it was Isaac who wanted his wife to lose weight.

The jerk.

“You’re on vacation. You have to eat things you wouldn’t normally eat. It’s a law.”

Maggie giggled. The sound made her appear much younger than thirty-something. “Well, I wouldn’t want to break any laws.” She chose a small cookie from the tray and bit into it. A look of bliss crossed her face. “Oh, my.”

Belle smiled. “Lottie’s desserts are legendary. Wait until you taste her peach cobbler.”

“You’re determined to make me gain back the seven pounds I’ve lost.”

With a shrug, Belle picked up a cookie. “I have almost three hundred acres of gardens and walking trails if you want to exercise.”

“I’d rather exercise another way,” Maggie muttered, looking into her glass of tea.

Belle heard her, but pretended she didn’t. “Excuse me?”

Seduction's Spell

A lovely blush bloomed in Maggie's cheeks. "Nothing." She raised her gaze back to Belle's face. "Tell me more about the mansion. Is all the furniture Rococo Revival?"

Recognizing the obvious change of subject, Belle sat back in her chair. "You know antiques."

Maggie shrugged. "I work part-time in an antique store in Dallas."

"Do you enjoy it?"

An excited light filled her eyes. "Very much. I love antiques. All the incredible curves and carvings, the wood, the simple beauty of the pieces. Isaac . . ." The mention of her husband made the light disappear. "He doesn't care for antiques. He's more into modern things."

"There's no reason why you can't have a mixture of both. I do. Yes, most of the furniture is Rococo Revival, but I also have pieces from different eras, including modern." She grinned. "I like to be different."

Maggie returned her grin. "I think that's called 'eclectic.'"

"Or 'wishy-washy.'"

Maggie's laughter delighted Belle. She sensed there was entirely too little laughter in the lovely redhead's life.

Belle planned to do everything in her power to change that.

After setting down her glass of tea, Maggie looked at her watch. "I wonder what's taking Isaac so long."

"Business sometimes takes longer than one expects."

"That's true." She sighed deeply. "Business *always* takes longer than I expect." An anguished look crossed Maggie's face, as if she knew she'd said something she shouldn't have.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say something so personal."

"Sometimes it helps to talk."

LYNN LAFLEUR

Maggie shook her head. "Thank you, but I'd rather not."

"Then I won't push. But please know I'm here if you need me for anything. I'm a very good listener."

"I appreciate your offer."

Knowing she'd get nothing further from her guest now, Belle set her glass on the table. "Would you like me to show you to your suite? I'm sure your husband will be back shortly."

"Yes, please. I'd like to get settled."

Belle led the way out of the parlor and up the wide, curved staircase. "I've put you and your husband in the General Suite. It's my largest room. The view of the gardens is breathtaking."

At the end of the hall, Belle opened the double doors to the suite and stepped aside so Maggie could enter the room first. Her guest's "Oh, my!" made Belle smile.

"Do you approve?"

"What's not to approve?" As she had done in the foyer, Maggie turned in a slow circle. "It's simply beautiful."

"I'll give you the chance to look around. Please let me know if you need anything."

"I will. Thank you."

"I'll bring your husband up when he comes back in the house."

Maggie dipped her head and smiled. Belle left the room, closing the doors behind her.

Maggie's smile disappeared as soon as Belle closed the doors. She sighed heavily. She'd managed to get her husband to Belle On The Bend, but she'd lost him to his business within two minutes of getting here.

She hated that damn business a bit more each day.

She couldn't help but be proud of Isaac for turning a failing

Seduction's Spell

advertising firm into the third most successful agency in Texas. As CEO, he overlooked every detail of his company, often working up to eighteen hours in a day.

If only he showed that much concern for her.

Crossing the spacious room, Maggie opened the French doors and stepped out onto the small balcony. Acres of oak trees and various types of flowers spread out before her. The majestic sight barely registered in her brain. She'd insisted on this vacation, insisted she and Isaac needed time alone without his business and without their two sons. At eight and six, her sons had been perfectly happy to stay with her parents for a week. Their grandparents thoroughly spoiled Taylor and Mason, which was perfectly fine with the boys.

She missed them already.

But this time was for her and her husband, for the two of them to rediscover the love that existed when they married each other ten years ago.

And hopefully, they'd rediscover the passion, too.

Closing her eyes, Maggie tilted her head back and released a deep breath. It had been so long since she and Isaac had made love. She honestly couldn't remember the last time they'd had sex. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd seen Isaac naked. They used to shower together every day. Seeing his lean body with soapy water flowing over it had always made her want him. It hadn't been unusual for him to take her against the slippery wall, or for her to drop to her knees and suck his hard cock into her mouth. She'd always loved bringing him to orgasm orally.

He used to love doing the same thing to her.

A thirty-two-year-old man shouldn't have lost complete interest in his wife. Yes, she'd gained a few pounds, but she

LYNN LAFLEUR

wasn't morbidly obese. In fact, she liked her new curves. Her weight had settled in her breasts and buttocks, giving her a rounded, womanly shape that turned men's heads. Several men had given her a second look when she walked by them.

Why didn't her husband find her desirable anymore?

Maggie stepped back into the room and closed the French doors. She stood with her back to the doors and studied the beautiful room. The sight of all the antiques made her breath catch. The tall, four-poster bed made of rosewood. The golden silk canopy over the bed. The thick, diamond-patterned rug beneath her feet. The fringed lamps on either side of the bed. The seating area with table and two curved-back chairs. The large fireplace. The landscape oil paintings. Everything pleased her. Everything made her long to have a touch of old in her modern home instead of the contemporary glass and chrome Isaac preferred.

Maggie knew she'd done it to herself. She'd always been meek, had always left it up to Isaac to make the important decisions. After ten years of marriage, she didn't know how to change that.

She didn't know if he'd accept it if she *did* try to change anything.

Maggie loved her husband. She remembered the loving, tender man she'd married. The CEO was a stranger.

A soft knock on the door surprised her. Maggie crossed the floor and opened the door to see a handsome, dark-haired man on the other side.

He smiled. "Hi, Mrs. Olvera. I have your luggage."

Maggie couldn't remember his name, but she returned his smile. "Please come in."

Seduction's Spell

He rolled in a large cart bearing her and Isaac's four pieces of luggage. "Where would you like it?"

"On the bed will be fine."

Maggie watched him effortlessly lift each piece of luggage and place it on the bed. She couldn't help but notice the shift of muscles in his arms beneath his blue T-shirt, or the way his faded jeans fit so nicely over his firm buttocks.

She sighed. She really missed sex with her husband.

Muted voices made Maggie turn toward the open door. She saw Belle and Isaac walking down the hall toward her. Seeing her husband made her heart flutter and her womb clench. He was even more handsome now than when she'd married him ten years ago. The tiny laugh lines beside his eyes gave him character, depth. The few silver strands mixed in with his black hair at his temples made him look incredibly sexy.

Somehow, she had to get her husband back. She couldn't keep living in limbo.

She *refused* to keep living in limbo.

Two

Isaac locked gazes with the man standing by the bed. He knew the guy worked here, but he didn't like the fact that he'd been alone with Maggie.

"Dolan," Belle said, "would you bring in some wood for the fireplace? It'll be chilly tonight and the Olveras might enjoy a fire."

"Sure." Dolan's gaze shifted to Belle for a moment before he looked back at Isaac. "Be happy to."

Isaac wondered if he'd just been challenged.

No way. I'm not letting that guy near my wife.

"Do you have any questions?" Belle asked. "The amenities of the mansion are listed in the information packet in the top drawer of the desk. It's a bit more detailed than what's listed on our website."

"No questions," Isaac said. He jerked his attention from Dolan to his hostess. "We'll be fine."

"Wonderful." Belle smiled, but Isaac thought it looked

Seduction's Spell

forced. "Well, we'll leave you two to get settled. Dinner will be served at six-thirty. Until then, enjoy, and please call me if you need anything. Just press 'zero' on the phone."

"Thank you, Belle," Maggie said softly.

"You're very welcome." She headed for the door, Dolan right behind her. Before she left, she turned and looked at Isaac. "I suggest trying the hot tub. It's a wonderful way to relax."

Isaac nodded once. "Thanks."

The hair rose on the back of Isaac's neck when Dolan looked at Maggie and gave her a gentle smile. Isaac took a step forward, intending to tell the maintenance man where he could stick that smile, when Dolan and Belle left the room, closing the door behind them.

Isaac looked at his wife. "What the hell was *that*?"

Maggie's eyebrows drew together. "What was what?"

"That smile."

"*What* smile?"

Isaac pointed toward the door. "The smile that guy gave you. What the hell went on between you two in here?"

"He brought in our luggage. That's all."

"Then why did he smile at you?"

"He was simply being polite."

"That looked like a lot more than 'polite.'"

"You're being ridiculous," she said as she walked to the bed and opened the largest suitcase. "Do you want to change clothes?"

It was hard to think about changing clothes when he still saw red. Isaac didn't understand that. He'd never been jealous. Maggie had never given him any reason to be jealous. She was the perfect wife, the perfect mother.

The perfect woman.

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Isaac chugged down the rest of his iced water. He hadn't realized how thirsty he was until Belle offered him something to drink after he'd finished his phone call. He glanced around the room, spotting a pitcher of water and glasses on a small table by the window. Crossing the floor, he refilled his glass and emptied it in one gulp.

"Are you all right?" Maggie asked.

"Just thirsty." He paused while refilling his glass again and glanced at her over his shoulder. "Do you want some?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

She was more than fine. She looked luscious.

Isaac leaned against the table and watched his wife unpack. She wore a short-sleeved dress made out of a soft fabric that hugged her curves. The green splashes in the cream dress matched her eyes.

He'd always loved her eyes.

Isaac sipped his water. "New dress?"

Maggie looked at him after she placed a handful of underwear in the chest of drawers. "Yes."

"It's very pretty."

Surprise filled her eyes. "Thank you."

Isaac frowned. "Don't look so shocked at me giving you a compliment."

"You don't give me compliments, Isaac. Not anymore."

His frown deepened. That wasn't true. He gave her compliments all the time.

Didn't he?

"What do you mean, I don't give you compliments?"

Maggie blew out a breath. "Isaac, you . . ." She stopped.

"I what?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

Seduction's Spell

She continued unpacking as if they hadn't been talking. Anger boiled up inside him. He set down his glass with a loud *thump*. "Go ahead. Finish what you were going to say."

"We're on vacation. I don't want to argue with you."

"Why would it be arguing? What were you going to say?"

"I don't . . ." Maggie dropped the clothes she'd just picked up back into the suitcase. "Isaac, you barely talk to me at all, much less give me a compliment. That's why I wanted us to take this trip. I wanted us to . . . find each other again."

"*Find* each other? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I want my husband back!"

Her outburst shocked Isaac. Mouth slack, he stared at his wife. Maggie never raised her voice, never lost her temper. She never let anything bother her.

He didn't know what to say. That made him even angrier.

"I'm gonna take a shower."

Maggie clutched the top of the suitcase and watched Isaac go into the bathroom. He didn't slam the door, but shut it firmly. A moment later, she heard the lock click.

He still didn't want her with him.

Tears filled her eyes. Lowering her head, she gave in to her grief and let the tears fall.

"I don't like him," Dolan said with a frown.

Belle reached across the table and squeezed Dolan's hand. "It isn't up to you to like or dislike a guest. We're here to serve them."

"Yeah, well." Blowing out a breath, he leaned back in his chair. "Sometimes it's hard to 'serve' some of the guests."

"I know."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“She’s a beautiful woman and he treats her like shit.”

“That isn’t our business, Dolan. And you really don’t know how he treats her.”

“Yeah, I do. He brought her here and left her alone while he took care of business. I heard him talking on his cell.” Leaning forward again, he rested his forearms on the table. “You’re gonna pull your hocus-pocus stuff and take care of him, right?”

“I do *not* pull hocus-pocus stuff.”

Dolan’s eyes twinkled with laughter. “Okay, no hocus-pocus. You’re gonna drown him in the well, right?”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I don’t think it would be in good taste to drown a guest.”

“Damn it.” He grinned. “But you *will* do something, right?”

Belle returned his grin. “I’ve already started.”

Isaac stood beneath the hot spray and let it pound the back of his head. His wife wanted them to “find” each other again. He had no idea what she meant by that. Maybe they didn’t spend a lot of time alone together anymore, but that didn’t mean he didn’t care about her. Taylor and Mason adored her. His sons were the most important thing in the world to him. He couldn’t help caring about someone who loved his sons so much.

Isaac tilted back his head so the spray could hit his chest. Every spare moment he could find, he spent with his sons. The lack of a father when he was young made Isaac determined to be the best father he could be. He went to the boys’ soccer and baseball games. He’d taught both of them to ride a bicycle. He took them fishing. He took them to movies and watched their favorite DVDs on television. He played games with them. He did everything he could for and with his boys.

Seduction's Spell

There was no way he'd let his sons grow up the way he did, not knowing if his father loved him.

Maybe his and Maggie's sex life wasn't what it used to be, but there were more important things in life than sex. He had a business to run, a business that took up any time he didn't spend with his sons. That business gave him a very nice income, one that enabled Maggie to buy anything she wanted. Plus, she had that job now at the antique place. Between her job, the house, and their sons, she kept busy. She didn't have time to think about sex either.

Picking up the bar of soap he'd found on the counter, Isaac rubbed it between his palms and worked up a thick lather. He and Maggie would be here a week without their sons. He'd brought work with him that he had to finish. That would keep him busy for several hours, perhaps even a couple of days. Still, he'd have time alone with his wife . . . a *lot* of time.

Isaac rubbed his soapy hands over his chest. He thought about the way Maggie looked in that new dress. She'd gained a lot of weight when she'd carried Mason and hadn't been able to lose all of it. He knew it bothered her. Not him. He thought she looked even sexier with her larger breasts and plumper ass.

Sliding one hand down his body, he palmed his soft cock. It'd been weeks since he and Maggie had made love. Hell, he wasn't sure it hadn't been *months*. Things had been so crazy at work. By the time he got home, he barely had time to be with his sons for an hour or so before their bedtime. Once he said goodnight to them, he fell into bed exhausted.

It hadn't always been that way. Isaac slowly stroked his hardening cock as he thought of making love to Maggie . . . touching her soft skin, sucking her big nipples, hearing her breath catch when he entered her, thrusting into that sweet pussy.

LYNN LAFLEUR

Isaac took a step back so the shower spray hit directly on his shaft. He hissed at the pleasure grabbing his balls. An early-morning erection wasn't unusual, but he ignored it so he could get ready for work. He couldn't ignore this one. It'd been too long since he'd had an orgasm. His soapy hand slid easily up and down his penis. His breath became choppy as his arousal grew. Just a bit more and he'd come.

"Yeah," he moaned. "Oh, yeah."

Suddenly, Isaac stilled his hand. He didn't want to come this way. He wanted to be inside his wife when he had a climax.

Isaac rinsed off the remaining soap suds, turned off the water, and stepped from the shower. He wiped off his body with a thick gold towel and dropped the towel on the floor. Opening the bathroom door, he stepped into the bedroom, determined to ravish his wife.

The bedroom was empty.

Isaac's erection fizzled. "Maggie?"

A search of the room and balcony showed him Maggie was gone. Isaac released an aggravated sigh and wiped one hand over his face. She could have at least stayed in the room until he finished his shower.

No longer interested in sex, Isaac rummaged through the chest of drawers for briefs and socks. Donning jeans, a soft white T-shirt, and running shoes, he left the room and headed for his car. He'd left his briefcase and notebook in the trunk. If his wife didn't want to be with him, he'd get some work done.

Maggie entered her suite shortly before six. It didn't surprise her to find Isaac at the desk, papers and notebook at hand, cell phone to his ear. She was disappointed because he'd promised her no work on this trip, but she wasn't surprised.

Seduction's Spell

“Put Ron on that one,” he said into the phone. “He’s worked with Morrison on other projects.” He pressed a few keys on his computer and brought up a different screen. “Yeah, that looks good. Run it by Tony and see what he thinks.”

Maggie slipped her hands into the pockets of her dress and watched her husband working. An ache formed in her stomach. She wished he showed her a tenth of the attention he did his business, or their sons. She would never take anything away from the time he spent with Taylor and Mason, but he could spend a little less time as a CEO and more time as a husband. A companion.

A lover.

She walked closer to the desk. Isaac looked at her over his shoulder. His eyes narrowed slightly.

“Let me know what Ron comes up with,” Isaac said, still looking at her. He closed his cell phone and laid it on the desk. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Where have you been?”

“I went for a walk. The grounds are beautiful.”

“You’ve been gone a long time.”

She clenched her fists inside her pockets. It surprised her that he even noticed she was gone. “It looks like you stayed busy.”

Isaac nodded. “We’re putting together a presentation for FanFare. It’s a five million dollar account.”

Of course. Isaac always thought of his clients in terms of money. “Do you think they’ll accept your presentation?”

“Yeah, I think so. Their president likes our style.”

“Good. I hope it works for you.” Drawing her hands from her pockets, she clasped her fingers together. She couldn’t

LYNN LAFLEUR

change his habits, not in one day. For now, she would ignore his broken promise. "Dinner will be served soon."

"Sounds good. I'm hungry." He glanced down at his T-shirt. "Guess I'd better change."

"You look good the way you are."

He smiled. Her heart lurched. He hadn't blessed her with many of his smiles lately. "I can't sit next to you in a lousy T-shirt with you looking so pretty."

Heat bloomed in her cheeks. How sad that praise from her husband was so unusual, it could make her blush. "Two compliments in one day. I'm flattered."

Isaac's smile disappeared. Before he said anything else, his phone rang. He huffed out a breath as he glanced at it. It rang three times before Maggie sighed softly.

"You'd better get it."

Isaac snatched up the phone and flipped it open. "Olvera . . . No, that's not what I want. Didn't you get my e-mail? . . . Wait a sec, I'll send it again."

He faced the desk and began punching keys on his notebook. Tuning out his conversation, Maggie turned and slowly walked out of the suite.

Three

Maggie opened the door and stepped into the suite. Despite more than an hour passing while she ate dinner with Belle and Dolan, Isaac still sat at the desk, punching keys on his notebook as he spoke on his cell phone.

“I like that better,” Isaac said. “What did Tony think? . . . No, I want Ron to work on it with Clarice as his backup. She’s worked with Morrison in the past, too, so she knows what he likes.” More clicks on the keyboard. “Great. Yeah, I’m happy with that. Okay, what about . . .”

He stopped talking when Maggie shut the door. Hard. She saw him jerk as if the sound had startled him before he turned his head and looked at her.

“Uh, Jules, I’d better go. I’ll get back to you later.” He closed his phone and laid it on the desk. “Hi.”

“You missed dinner.”

“I did?” Isaac glanced at his watch. “Damn. I didn’t realize how much time passed.”

LYNN LAFLEUR

“You never do.”

His eyebrows drew together in a frown. “What?”

“You heard me.” Maggie never talked like this to her husband, but she’d had enough of him putting his business first. It was long past the time she told him exactly how she felt. “You’re always too busy with your precious business to see what goes on around you.”

Slowly, he stood and faced her. She could see the developing anger in his eyes. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the way you completely ignore me. I feel like the only reason you keep me around is to do your laundry and babysit your sons. You certainly don’t spend any time with me.”

“That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it? When’s the last time we went to a movie or out to dinner, just the two of us?”

“We went to that new restaurant in Dallas two weeks ago.”

“That was a *business* dinner, Isaac. You introduced me to your prospective clients, then ignored me for the rest of the evening while you catered to them.”

He took a step toward her. “Maggie—”

“You’re wonderful with the boys. They couldn’t possibly have a better father. But you’re my husband and I need you, too. We haven’t made love in months.” She clasped her hands together. “I know you think I’m too fat—”

“Stop it right there. I’ve never said you’re too fat.”

“So why haven’t you touched me?”

“As a matter of fact, I thought about making love while I was in the shower. But when I came out of the bathroom, you were gone.”

Seduction's Spell

"I was gone because you *locked the door*. What man locks the door against his wife when he's taking a shower?"

"You're making a big deal out of nothing. So I locked the door. It was habit. We have two little boys at home, you know."

"You never lock the door against the boys. They love to be in the bathroom while you shower and shave. Part of that 'male bonding' thing, I assume. Most of the time, they shower with you."

Isaac looked away from her and ran his fingers through his hair. Maggie recognized that gesture as something he did when he didn't have a fast comeback. Her throat tightened. She had to ask him. She didn't want to for she was afraid of the answer, but she had to know. "Do you still love me, Isaac?"

His gaze whipped back to her. "Of course I do."

"You don't show me. You don't *tell* me. I can't remember the last time you told me you love me. You don't even *kiss* me."

"Oh, come on! I kiss you every day."

"You give me a peck on the cheek on your way out the door in the morning. That isn't a kiss, Isaac."

He blew out a hard breath. "Maggie, this whole conversation is ridiculous. I'm busy at work right now. That won't last. Things will calm down."

"When? They haven't calmed down in five years. If anything, things are getting worse. You spend more and more time away from home."

A thought occurred to her, something she hadn't considered until this moment. It made her stomach churn and her heart clutch with pain. "Is there someone else? Are you having an affair?"

LYNN LAFLEUR

“No! I *swear* to you, there’s no woman in my life but you.”

“Then why—”

“Damn it, Maggie, I don’t need this shit! Will you just drop it?”

His tone and attitude chased away any fear and brought back her anger full force. She straightened her spine and clenched her hands into fists. “You don’t need this shit? Fine. I don’t need it either, Isaac. I happen to know Belle isn’t expecting any other guests for two days. I suggest you find another room.”

Isaac released a bark of laughter. “You aren’t chasing me out of our room.”

“Watch me.”

He stared at her. She returned his stare without flinching. She’d lived in limbo long enough. If he didn’t want her, that was fine with her.

All traces of laughter disappeared from Isaac’s eyes, to be replaced with disbelief. “You’re serious.”

“Totally.”

“You really want me to find another room?”

“I do.”

His eyes narrowed into slits and his mouth tightened. “You want me out of here? No problem.”

Maggie stood, her heart pounding in her ears, as Isaac gathered up his notebook, phone, and papers from the desk. He tossed them in his briefcase, then stomped to the chest of drawers and added underwear. Walking past her, he went into the bathroom. She could hear him throwing items into the case. A moment later, he walked past her again to the door. With his hand on the knob, he threw a parting remark over his shoulder.

Seduction's Spell

“Enjoy your night alone, Maggie.”

He left the door wide open. Her knees trembling, she slowly strode to the door and closed it softly. Releasing a deep breath, she closed her eyes and leaned her forehead on the door. She'd actually done it. She'd thrown her husband out of their room.

Part of her—the old, meek, spineless part—wanted to run after him and beg his forgiveness. The other part—the new, strong, stand-up-for-herself part—was proud of what she'd done. No man had the right to completely ignore his wife and expect her to accept that forever.

She needed a drink.

Belle had offered her wine with dinner, but Maggie had refused, drinking Belle's special Southern Mint iced tea instead. A glass of wine would certainly help take away the shakes right now. A snifter of brandy would be even better.

A soft knock on the door made Maggie raise her head. Assuming it was Isaac, she quickly opened the door. She fought to keep the disappointment off her face when she saw Dolan instead of her husband.

“Hi, Dolan.”

He smiled. “Belle thought you might enjoy some after-dinner brandy.”

Maggie couldn't help chuckling. “I was just thinking a glass of wine or brandy would be nice. It's as if Belle read my mind.”

“Belle is very intuitive.” He held up the bottle of brandy. “May I come in?”

“Please.”

She stepped to the side so Dolan could enter the room. Crossing to the desk, he placed the bottle and two snifters on it. When he faced her again, he smiled once more. “Enjoy

LYNN LAFLEUR

your evening.” He took a step toward the door, then glanced at the fireplace. “Would you like me to build a fire for you?”

It would be nice to sit before the fire with her husband. Since she didn’t have a husband right now . . . “No, thanks. Maybe tomorrow evening.”

He tipped his head. “If you change your mind, press ‘seven’ on the phone. I’ll come running.”

“Thank you, Dolan.”

Alone again, Maggie leaned against the door and stared at the bottle of brandy. She’d never been much of a drinker. A glass of wine now and then, or what Isaac called a “girly” drink, was all she drank. The way she felt right now, with her heart crumbling down into her stomach, she was afraid she’d drain the whole bottle.

Maggie straightened her spine. Ridiculous! She would *not* feel sorry for herself. It wasn’t her fault that her husband was acting like an ass. Tonight, she’d indulge herself. She’d have a glass of brandy while she soaked in the hot tub. After that, she’d sit before the fireplace and start reading the book she’d brought with her.

Walking over to the nightstand, she picked up the telephone receiver and pressed “seven.”

“Yes, Maggie,” Dolan said.

“I’ve changed my mind. I’d like a fire after all.”

Isaac stood on the balcony, water glass in hand, and watched the sun disappear behind the trees. The beauty of the sunset didn’t register to him. Instead, he saw the anger in Maggie’s eyes.

He chugged down most of his glass of water and ran his hand through his hair. He didn’t understand why she was so

Seduction's Spell

angry at him. Maggie *never* talked to him the way she had a few minutes ago. And to throw him out of their suite? His wife wouldn't do something like that. Yet she had. She'd told him to leave their room and find one of his own.

The cool breeze touched him. Isaac shivered. He stepped inside the room and closed the French doors behind him. Maggie was always so calm, so controlled. She didn't lose her temper, she didn't talk back to him. It was almost as if she'd turned into a different person when they got to Belle On The Bend.

He didn't know what to think of the new Maggie.

Isaac refilled his water glass and sipped from it as he sat on the bed, his back against the headboard. Asking Belle for a room hadn't been easy. He didn't want everyone here to know he and Maggie were having problems. Especially that maintenance guy. He didn't want Dolan "comforting" Maggie in any way. Belle hadn't asked any questions. She'd smiled and told him another room would be no problem. Then she'd offered to send a sandwich up to his room since he'd missed dinner. His grumbling stomach made it easy for him to accept her generous offer.

His cell phone rang. Isaac set his glass on the nightstand and picked up his phone. A quick glance at the display showed him it was his vice president, Jules. He could ignore the call, or he could take it and get back to work. Working would keep his mind occupied so he didn't think about spending the night without Maggie by his side.

The phone rang for the third time. Isaac flipped it open. "Yeah, Jules. What's up?"

Four

Maggie slipped her hands into the front pockets of her jeans. “You don’t seriously expect me to get on that thing?”

Dolan chuckled and patted the brown horse’s nose. “Maggie, I promise you, Cindy is the gentlest horse Belle owns. She won’t hurt you.”

“Cindy. Who names a horse Cindy?”

“Actually, one of our guests named her, eight-year-old Abby. She loved the horses and stayed in the stables as often as her parents would let her. When Cindy was born, I asked Abby what her name should be. She picked Cindy. I couldn’t disappoint her by naming the colt something else.”

Touched by his story, Maggie smiled. “You’re a nice man, Dolan.”

He shrugged. “Abby was a sweet little girl. It was easy to be nice to her.” He shook his finger at Maggie. “Don’t try to distract me. You said at breakfast you’d never ridden a horse. I’m giving you the opportunity.”

Seduction's Spell

"I said I'd never ridden one. I didn't say I'm not scared out of my mind to get on top of something that big."

"I wouldn't let you do anything that would hurt you."

Maggie bit her bottom lip. She wanted to ride. She'd always wanted to ride a horse. But . . . "You'll go with me?"

"Absolutely."

"How about if I go with you instead?"

The sound of Isaac's voice startled Maggie. She whirled around to see her husband standing five feet behind her, wearing jeans, a black T-shirt, and navy baseball cap with the Dallas Cowboys star logo on it. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you." He took a step closer to her. "How about it, Maggie? Ride with me?"

"I didn't know you could ride a horse."

"It's been a while, but I doubt if it's changed much over the years. Kinda like a bicycle, you know?"

He grinned crookedly, and Maggie's heart melted. She was still angry at him, but ignoring him wouldn't solve their problems. She so wanted everything to be right between them again.

Isaac switched his attention to Dolan. His grin faded. "Do you have a problem with me accompanying my wife?"

"Only if Maggie has a problem."

"That's *Mrs. Olvera* to you."

His hateful tone to Dolan made Maggie's face flame. "Isaac, stop it," she hissed.

Isaac's eyes flashed with anger when he looked at Maggie again. "Are you taking his side?"

"There's no side to take! Dolan is simply being nice to me."

"Then maybe you'd prefer his company over mine."

Her chin rose a notch. "Maybe I would."

LYNN LAFLEUR

Isaac stared at her a moment, then turned and strode toward the house. Maggie's throat tightened more with each step he took away from her. She thought he was ready to apologize, to try and work things out between them. Instead, he'd acted like a jealous fool and embarrassed her in front of Belle's employee.

Maggie faced Dolan. "I'm sorry for what Isaac said to you."

"You don't have to apologize to me, Maggie. You aren't responsible for your husband's actions." He handed the mare's reins to her. "Here. You get acquainted with Cindy while I saddle my horse."

He turned and went inside the stables. Maggie bit her bottom lip again. Perhaps she shouldn't go with Dolan. Maybe she should find Isaac and talk to him.

No. The old Maggie would do exactly that. She'd crawl after Isaac and apologize to keep the peace, even though their fight wasn't her fault.

Maggie patted Cindy's velvety nose. "I don't want to lose my husband, but I don't know what to do to stop it."

Cindy snorted and bent her head to munch on a small patch of grass. Maggie chuckled. "I can see I'm not going to get any advice from you. You don't have to worry about anything but something to eat and a place to sleep. You're lucky."

Footsteps crunching on gravel made Maggie turn. Dolan walked toward her, leading a huge black horse. "Ready for your first ride?" he asked.

The new, braver Maggie smiled. "Yes."

"I need to send a fax," Isaac said to Belle.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Olvera. My fax machine needs a new cartridge. I didn't realize I'd run out."

Seduction's Spell

"It needs a cartridge to *send* a fax?"

Belle shrugged. "I know that makes no sense, but it won't do anything without a cartridge. Lottie is going into town this afternoon. She'll pick one up then."

Everything else in his life was shitty right now. Why not add one more thing to the list? He'd love to punch a hole in a wall and try to release some of his frustration. Instead, he nodded at Belle. "I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know when I can send the fax."

"Of course."

Isaac turned to walk away, but stopped when Belle spoke again. "Mr. Olvera?"

He faced her again.

"Are you all right? I'm not prying. I'm . . . concerned."

Isaac said nothing. He couldn't confide in a stranger. Besides, he didn't know what to say, other than he was a complete and total ass.

"Come with me." Belle rounded the counter, took Isaac's upper arm, and led him toward a padded bench in the foyer. She sat and tugged him down next to her. "It's obvious you're upset. I know something is wrong between you and Maggie or you wouldn't have spent the night in a different room. I'd like to help."

Isaac slouched on the bench. "There's nothing you can do."

"Tell me what's wrong. You might be surprised what I can do."

He ran one hand through his hair and blew out a breath. "I think I've lost Maggie."

"No, you haven't."

"She'd rather be with your maintenance man than me."

"That isn't true. Maggie loves you."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“She used to. I think she’s fallen for that Dolan guy, and he feels the same way about her.”

Belle squeezed his forearm. “Dolan isn’t interested in your wife, Mr. Olvera.”

“Then why does he spend so much time with her?”

“It’s his job. He caters to all my guests. Dolan is a very nice man. He likes being with people.”

“He likes being with Maggie a bit too much.”

“Mr. Olvera—Isaac—I have other guests due soon. When they get here, Dolan will spend time with them. I promise you, he isn’t trying to take your wife away from you.”

Leaning forward, Isaac clasped his hands together between his knees. “He can’t take something that doesn’t want to be taken.”

Belle sighed softly. “Would you like some advice?”

He nodded. “I’m not doing too well on my own.”

“Go out to the stables and have Braden saddle a horse for you. He’s the young man in charge of the horses. While you’re doing that, I’ll have Lottie prepare a picnic lunch for you and Maggie.”

“Just like that.”

“Just like that. Ride out to your wife and tell her how you feel about her. Women need the words, Isaac. Sometimes men have a hard time saying them, but women really need to hear them.”

Isaac sat up and looked at Belle. “I don’t know where they went.”

“I do. There’s a small creek about a mile from here. That’s where Dolan likes to take my guests because it’s such a beautiful spot.” She smiled softly. “It’s the perfect place for a picnic.”

“I don’t know, Belle—”

Seduction's Spell

"Go talk to Braden while I tell Lottie to fix the picnic basket for you."

Belle stood and left the room. Isaac remained sitting for several moments before he rose and headed toward the stables. He wished he was as sure as Belle that Maggie would want to talk to him. This jealousy thing was eating him up. He didn't even know why he felt jealous. Maggie had never given him any reason to mistrust her.

She'd never given him anything but love and devotion. It was way past the time he showed her how much that meant to him.

Belle watched Lottie add six of her freshly baked chocolate chip cookies to the picnic basket. "I thought I was doing the right thing, Lottie. I really messed up this time."

"You didn't mess up, Belle. You know you don't have any control over how the water affects people."

"If I'd have known Isaac would react so strongly, I wouldn't have given him so much."

Lottie placed two red napkins on top of the food. "Maybe his jealousy is a good thing."

"How can you say that? They slept apart last night."

"Maybe that's what he needed to do to realize how much he loves his wife." Closing the basket, Lottie turned to face Belle. "You've been in this house for well over one hundred years. You know the water affects people the way they need to be affected. There isn't a thing you can do about it."

Belle sighed. "I just want to help everyone."

Lottie smiled tenderly. "I know that, sweetie." She lifted the basket and held it out to Belle. "You can help by taking this to Isaac. He needs to get to his wife."

LYNN LAFLEUR

She took the basket from Lottie. "Why is it I'm three times your age, yet always come to you for advice?"

"You recognize genius when you see it," Lottie said, grinning.

Belle laughed. "True."

Picnic basket in hand, Belle left the house and walked toward the stables. She arrived there as Isaac came out, mounted on a golden Appaloosa.

"I see Braden gave you Sunny to ride."

"Yeah." Isaac patted the horse's neck. "It's been a long time since I've ridden, but Braden assured me Sunny and I will get along fine."

"You will. Sunny is the perfect horse for someone who hasn't ridden for a while." She lifted the basket so Isaac could take it. "Here's your lunch. Lottie packed all kinds of goodies, so you and Maggie can stay out as long as you want."

He set the basket in front of him, balancing it on the saddle horn. "You're sure this is a good idea?"

"Absolutely. Just stay on this trail and you'll come to the creek." She stepped back to give Isaac room to turn Sunny. "Go. Maggie's waiting for you."

Maggie placed her hands on Dolan's shoulders and let him help her from the saddle. She was thankful for his support for her knees buckled when her feet touched the ground.

"Hey, easy there. It doesn't take much time on a horse for your legs to get weak, especially if you aren't used to riding." His grip tightened on her waist. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Kinda like getting your sea legs, huh?"

Dolan chuckled. "Kinda." He released her and stepped

Seduction's Spell

back. "That's why I wanted to stop. I don't want your legs to get sore. We'll let the horses rest while we walk a bit."

"Okay."

It felt good to stretch her legs. Maggie had enjoyed riding Cindy more than she'd expected. One of Taylor's best friends lived on a dairy. Whenever her son visited his friend, the two boys always rode horses. Taylor came home from the visits, begging Isaac and her to move to the country so he could have a horse. Mason would chime in, too, even though he'd never been on a horse. That didn't matter. Mason simply wanted to do whatever his big brother wanted to do.

She smiled to herself. How she loved her boys, and how she missed them. She knew her parents were taking excellent care of them, but she wanted to talk to them. She made a mental note to call them tonight before their bedtime.

"You're quiet," Dolan said.

"I'm sorry. I was thinking about my sons. Taylor loves riding."

"Your other son doesn't like horses?"

"Mason has never been on a horse. I have the feeling that will change soon since Taylor gets to ride when he visits his friend."

Dolan chuckled. "Competition so young?"

"You apparently have no brothers or sisters."

"Nope, only child. I was such a holy terror, my parents were afraid to try for more children."

Maggie laughed. "I find that hard to believe. You're a nice man, Dolan."

"I'm nice *now*. You didn't know me when I was a kid. I was constantly in trouble."

LYNN LAFLEUR

"I thought that was normal for boys."

Dolan laughed. "Yeah, it probably is."

Maggie studied Dolan's profile. He was a handsome man and he looked even more handsome when he laughed. The tiny lines beside his eyes deepened, and his turquoise eyes sparkled. Maggie doubted he had any trouble charming the ladies. She wondered if he was involved with Belle. He'd eaten dinner with them last night. She'd never known of a maintenance man having dinner with the guests.

"May I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Are you and Belle a couple?"

Dolan laughed again. "Not hardly. She wouldn't be able to put up with me."

"Y'all seem so . . . close."

"We're good friends." He picked a leaf off a low branch and twirled it in his fingers. "She gave me a job here when I was really down. My personal life . . . Well, it wasn't the greatest. She believed in me and gave me a chance. I owe her big time for that."

"How long have you worked for her?"

"Almost five years. I can't imagine working or living anywhere else. It's such a—"

He stopped and looked past her shoulder, a slight frown turning down his lips. Curious, Maggie turned to see what had attracted his attention. Her mouth slackened when she saw Isaac on a horse, heading in their direction.

"Looks like your husband doesn't give up easily."

Isaac drew the horse to a stop three feet from Maggie. "Hi."

"What are you doing here?"

Seduction's Spell

“Lottie made lunch for us,” he said, patting the basket in front of him. “I thought we might have a picnic.”

He wanted to have a picnic? They hadn’t done anything like that in years.

“How about it, Maggie? Have lunch with me?” He glanced at Dolan. “Alone?”

Maggie looked from Dolan to Isaac and back to Dolan. He shrugged. “It’s up to you, Maggie. I’ll leave or I’ll stay, whichever you want.”

Isaac climbed down from the horse. “Maggie, we need to talk,” he said softly.

The pleading look in her husband’s eyes made the decision for her. She faced Dolan. “You can leave. Isaac and I do need to talk.”

Five

Maggie sat on the blanket while Isaac unpacked the picnic basket. She'd automatically started to do it, but he'd stopped her and said he'd take care of everything. While he was good about picking up after himself at home, the housework and cooking usually fell to her. She wasn't used to Isaac waiting on her like this.

He uncorked a bottle of white wine and poured each of them a glass. "It looks like Lottie packed enough food for six people."

Silently, Maggie sipped the cold wine. He was acting as if they'd never spoken a cross word to each other. She and Isaac had argued in the past. Every couple argued. Making up had never been a problem. They'd given each other the silent treatment for a day or two, but had always kissed and made up. This time was different. She'd opened up to him, told him how she truly felt about the way he'd ignored her. She couldn't go back to staying quiet and accepting anything that her husband handed her.

Seduction's Spell

"Are you hungry?" Isaac asked.

"Not . . . really. I could wait a while to eat."

"Then we'll wait a while." He removed his cap and tossed it on the grass. He sipped his wine, then looked into her eyes. "I missed you last night."

His confession made her heart jump with pleasure. "Did you?"

"Yeah, I did. It was lonely in bed without you."

"I didn't think you'd notice."

"How could you think I wouldn't notice?"

Maggie clasped her wineglass in both hands. "We used to cuddle when we went to bed, Isaac, whether or not we made love. We haven't cuddled in a long time. That's why I didn't think you'd notice whether I was in bed with you or not."

Isaac swirled the wine in his glass. "You used to sleep naked. Now you wear nightgowns. Why is that?"

"You wear pajama bottoms."

"I didn't start wearing them until you started wearing nightgowns."

He couldn't turn this around so it was *her* fault their physical relationship had fizzled. "We have two sons who can come into our bedroom at any time."

"We have two sons who *used* to come into our bedroom at any time. They now know not to come in when the door is closed."

He had her there. Although only six and eight, they understood rules and obeyed them. Most of the time, anyway. As with any young boys, they could be little hellions.

"I'm not trying to make excuses for myself, Maggie. I know I've neglected you. I know I've put my business ahead of everything lately. How do I fix this? What can I do to make

LYNN LAFLEUR

things right between us again?” He touched the back of her hand with one fingertip. “I know it’s been a long time since we’ve made love.”

“Yes, it has,” she whispered.

He slid that lone fingertip up her arm to the sleeve of her T-shirt, watching the movement. “I want that to change, Maggie.” He gazed into her eyes. “I want to feel your body against mine again.”

She wanted that, too, but having sex wouldn’t solve their problems. “What happens after we make love, Isaac? Will you go right back to your notebook computer and cell phone? You promised me no work this week, yet you brought everything with you anyway.”

Isaac opened his mouth as if to speak again, yet said nothing. Instead, he turned his head to the right and frowned slightly.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I hear something.”

Listening intently, Maggie soon heard the noise, too. It slowly grew louder, as if whatever was making the noise moved closer to them. A moment later, she saw Belle coming toward them on a purple golf cart.

She stopped the cart five feet from them. “I’m so sorry to disturb your picnic, but a gentleman named Jules called for you, Isaac. He said you need to call him back as soon as possible.”

Jules. One call from his VP and Isaac would go running. Maggie sighed. So much for a romantic picnic. So much for him making things right between them again.

Isaac looked at Maggie again before speaking to Belle. “If he calls back, please tell him I’m busy. I’ll get back to him when I get the chance.”

Belle smiled. “Will do. Enjoy your picnic and don’t worry

Seduction's Spell

about anyone bothering you. I'll make sure you're completely alone as long as you want to be."

She drove off. Maggie was once again alone with her husband . . . her husband who had just surprised her. "You aren't going to call Jules?"

Isaac shook his head. "Nope. Didn't even bring my cell with me." He slid his hand over her shoulder and collarbone. "I have more important things on my mind right now."

His hand inched closer to her breast. Maggie's nipple puckered in anticipation. "Like what?" she asked, her voice breathless.

"Like . . . this."

He covered her lips with his own. Maggie's breath caught before she released it slowly. She parted her lips, accepting the gentle play of her husband's tongue. His hand covered her breast, his thumb sliding over her nipple as he kissed her. His touch remained easy, unhurried, slowly raising her desire.

Before that desire could take over her brain where she couldn't concentrate, she pulled back from him. "We still need to talk, Isaac."

"I know we do. But right now, let me love you. It's been way too long since I've been inside you."

He kissed her again, deeper this time, his tongue sliding past her lips to mate with hers. Maggie moaned when Isaac squeezed her breast. Arching her back, she pressed her breast harder into his palm.

"You feel so good," he whispered against her lips. He kissed her chin, her cheek, the sensitive area beneath her ear. "I love how full your breasts are."

Maggie tilted her head, exposing her neck for the playful nip of his teeth. "Do you?"

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Mmm, yeah. They’ve always been beautiful, but now . . .” He lifted and squeezed her breast again. “They’re incredible.”

She’d believed for years that he didn’t like her body since she hadn’t lost all the weight she’d gained while pregnant with Mason. “I’m not too heavy?”

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. “You’re perfect. Soft and curvy and sexy.”

Isaac kissed her again while pushing her back to the blanket. He meant what he’d said. He thought Maggie’s body was perfect. But if she didn’t believe his words, he’d be only too happy to show her.

Perhaps it had been weeks since they’d made love, but after ten years of marriage, he knew what his wife liked . . . what she needed to raise her desire. She loved to kiss, which was fine with him because he loved it, too. Long, slow, deep kisses that went on and on. Caresses on her breasts. Flicks of her nipples with his thumbs. An unhurried journey down her body to her pussy. Circles on her clit with his forefinger. A dip into her sheath to collect the essence of her body and spread it over her anus. Everything done nice and easy until she was writhing and begging him to take her.

He did love hearing her beg.

Isaac sat up, yanked off his T-shirt, and tossed it aside. Taking Maggie’s hand, he tugged her into a sitting position. He gathered up the hem of her T-shirt. “Let’s get this off you, sweetheart.”

She raised her arms. Isaac pulled her shirt over her head and let it fall to the blanket behind her. His gaze fell to her breasts bulging over the cups of her bra. He brushed her skin with the tips of his fingers. “Oh, yeah. *Very* sexy.”

Isaac unsnapped her bra, drew the straps down her arms,

Seduction's Spell

and dropped the bra on top of her shirt. He cradled both breasts in his hands. "I want to play with these a while, okay?"

"Okay," she whispered.

"Lean back on your hands and spread your legs."

Still cradling her breasts, Isaac moved between her knees. He squeezed and kneaded her firm flesh the way he knew she liked. Her eyelids grew heavy, her lips parted. He could hear her breathing grow deeper. She arched her back, pressing her breasts further into his hands.

"That's the way, baby. Show me what you want." He skated his thumbs over the hard tips. "*Tell* me what you want."

"Suck my nipples."

Isaac smiled. "Gladly."

He pulled one of Maggie's nipples into his mouth. They were thick and long, bigger than any he'd seen on a woman. He loved sucking them, biting them, rubbing them with his thumbs. Knowing Maggie received so much pleasure from the attention on her nipples made him want to concentrate on them even more.

They used to sit on the couch and watch television while he played with them. He liked for her to wear a thin T-shirt but no bra so his hands could slide easily over her breasts. He'd rub the nipples until they became hard. Then he'd stop. Once they softened, he'd start all over again. Over and over, he'd play with her until she practically tore off his clothes and impaled herself on his cock.

His wife was a very passionate woman. Neglecting her had been a huge mistake. He was lucky she hadn't turned to Dolan, or some other man, for attention.

"God, Isaac, that feels so good." She grabbed a handful of

LYNN LAFLEUR

hair on the back of his head and pulled him closer to her breast. "Suck harder."

She didn't have to tell him twice. Isaac circled one nipple with his tongue while tugging on the other with thumb and forefinger. He squeezed her breasts while alternating between her nipples . . . sucking, licking, biting. Her breathing grew shallow and quick, the sign her desire had almost reached the peak. Releasing one breast, he quickly shoved his hand inside her jeans and panties. Warm cream covered her swollen labia. Isaac gathered her moisture on his fingertips and began massaging her clit.

Maggie's breath hitched. "Isaac!"

She trembled in his arms. Not content for her to have only one orgasm, he pushed two fingers inside her pussy, pumping them in and out as he kissed her again. Mere moments later, Maggie trembled once more. He continued to finger-fuck her while the contractions from her climax milked his fingers.

Once she stilled, Isaac ended their kiss. He watched Maggie's face as she slowly opened her eyes. Her pupils were so large, they almost covered the green irises. "Hi," he said softly.

"Hi."

"You okay?"

"I'm not sure. Did my head blow off?"

Isaac chuckled. "Nope, still there."

She touched his face. "That was . . . Wow."

"I'm glad you approve."

Maggie's hand slid down his chest, his stomach, until she reached his erection. "So now it's your turn."

"I'd like to think it's *our* turn."

She smiled. "I'll accept that." Her smile faded as she squeezed his cock. "Make love to me, Isaac."

Seduction's Spell

Tunneling her fingers into his hair, she kissed him while reclining on the blanket. One kiss led to two, then three, before Isaac pulled away from her.

"Let me get your clothes off, sweetheart. I want to feel your body against mine."

Maggie raised her hips so Isaac could remove the rest of her clothing. Once she was nude, she sat up again so she could watch him take off his clothes. He stood and toed off his shoes, then removed jeans, briefs, and socks at one time. His hard cock jutted forward, as if begging for her touch.

Reaching out, Maggie dragged one finger down the length of his shaft. She looked into her husband's eyes as she wrapped her hand around his cock and gave the head a long lick.

"Maggie," he said hoarsely.

She darted the tip of her tongue into the slit, then ran her tongue down his penis to his balls. Closing her eyes, she savored the musky scent and unique taste of her husband.

"Maggie, I want . . ." He stopped when she slid her lips over the head. "Mmm, baby, don't."

Smiling to herself, she continued running her tongue over the head. "Why not?"

"Because I'm supposed . . ." He hissed in a breath through his teeth. "Damn, that feels good."

He began to pump his hips, driving his cock farther into her mouth. Maggie sucked on the head and tickled the sensitive area beneath the head with her tongue. Isaac clasped the back of her neck. His pumping quickened, as did his breathing. Maggie recognized all the signs of his impending orgasm. Cradling his balls in one hand, she opened her mouth wider and took him all the way to the base of his cock.

"God, Maggie. I don't . . ."

LYNN LAFLEUR

He suddenly jerked away from her. Surprised at his action, Maggie looked up at him. "Why did you stop?"

"I don't want to come in your mouth."

"Since when? You love to come in my mouth."

"It's been too long since I've been inside you." Bending at the waist, he held her face while he kissed her. "I need you to ride me."

He stretched out on the blanket and helped her climb over the top of him. Grasping his cock, Maggie took him inside her with one smooth glide.

"Oh, yeah." Isaac slid his hands over her hips and breasts. "That sweet pussy is so hot and wet. I love that."

"You make me wet." She lifted her hips until he almost slipped from her body, then lowered herself again. "You kiss me and I get wet."

He grinned like a man who had just won the lottery. "Yeah?"

"As if you didn't know that."

A rapturous look replaced his grin when she began to move. "Oh, yeah. Ride my cock, baby. Take it all."

She did, every thick, glorious, impressive inch. She rode him slowly, letting her desire build once more. Isaac grasped her hips, but didn't move. Instead, he lay still and let her move at her pace.

Soon, slow wasn't enough for her. She needed deeper, harder. From the wild look in Isaac's eyes, she believed he felt the same way. Leaning forward, she let her breasts brush across his chest. "Fuck me," she whispered.

That did it. The next instant, she was on her back, her arms held over her head. "Say it again," he rasped.

"Fuck me. Fuck me hard."

Seduction's Spell

“Wrap your legs around my waist.”

Maggie hooked her ankles together at the small of his back. Isaac shifted her wrists to one hand and cradled her breast with the other. He whisked his thumb across her hard nipple as he pounded his cock into her pussy.

“Is this what you want, baby?”

“Yes. Oh, *yes!*” She threw back her head and arched her back. “Harder. *Harder.*”

He pistoned his shaft into her sheath while caressing her breast. The dual sensation sent Maggie over the top again. She moaned as the waves of her orgasm washed over her.

She'd barely caught her breath when she felt Isaac's body stiffen. With an animalistic growl, he pinched her nipple and drove his cock all the way inside her. Tightening her legs around him, she held him as close to her as possible while he shuddered from his climax.

Six

A gentle breeze touched her face. Maggie sighed softly and cuddled closer to her husband. Isaac tightened his arm around her shoulder. "You okay?" he asked after kissing her forehead.

"Mmm, I'm great."

"You certainly are."

Maggie tilted her head on Isaac's shoulder so she could see his face. A devilish light filled his eyes. "You're bad."

"That's not what you said a few minutes ago."

"True." She caressed his chest, letting her fingers sift through the light dusting of dark hair. "This is absolutely decadent, isn't it?"

"What?"

"Lying here naked. Anyone could come by and see us."

"Belle said she'd keep everyone away from here." He kissed her forehead again. "I like lying here with you naked."

"It is nice, isn't it?"

Seduction's Spell

"Oh, yeah." He cradled her breast and ran his thumb over her nipple. "I like reaching out and touching you whenever I want."

Two could play that game. Maggie slid her hand down his stomach and palmed his soft cock. "So do I."

"Careful. That thing could wake up in a hurry."

"Promise?"

Isaac chuckled. "You've always been insatiable. I like that."

He began to respond to her caressing. "I can see how much you like it."

"You said I only have to kiss you for you to get wet. You only have to touch me and I get hard."

His cock grew longer, thicker, with her leisurely stroking. "Hard is good."

"I've always thought so."

Maggie couldn't help chuckling at his joke, despite her arousal beginning to rise again. Isaac had always been able to make her laugh, even during sex. It had made their lovemaking even more special.

She'd missed the lovemaking, but she'd mainly missed the closeness with Isaac.

Propping up on one elbow, Maggie continued to caress his shaft. She could straddle his hips and take him inside her again. She considered doing that, but decided she'd rather make him come before she thought about her own pleasure.

Isaac began to slowly pump his hips. "That's nice, sweetheart."

"It'd be nicer with some massage oil."

"Check the picnic basket."

Maggie stopped her fondling and looked at Isaac's face. "Are you serious? You brought massage oil?"

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Belle and her cook packed the basket, not me.”

“They wouldn’t have—”

“I have the feeling Belle knew exactly what would happen between us on this picnic. Check the basket.”

Maggie scooted over to the basket and lifted the lid. She pushed aside several plastic containers of food in search of a bottle of massage oil. There, on the bottom, lay a bright blue bottle with a white cap. Lifting it from the basket, she read the label. “Spring Flowers Massage Oil.”

“Told you so,” Isaac said with a smug grin.

Maggie returned his grin. “Then I can play.”

“Sweetheart, you can play all you want to.”

She moved back to Isaac’s side. Flipping up the bottle’s top, she poured a generous amount of oil in her palm. The scent of rose and lavender drifted to her nose. “Mmm, this smells good.”

Maggie rubbed her palms together to distribute the oil before touching Isaac’s cock. He hissed in a breath as she ran her hands up and down his shaft, covering it with the fragrant liquid. She looked at his face while caressing him. His eyes were closed, his lips pressed together in a tight line. His chest rose and fell with his heavy breaths.

Tightening her hands on his flesh, she continued the intimate massage. She skated her fingers up and down his hard shaft, paying special attention to the sensitive area directly beneath the head. Every few seconds, she would dip down to caress his balls and anus before returning to his cock. Isaac began to slowly pump his hips in time with her movements. His pumping increased as her caressing quickened. His breathing deepened. A light sheen of perspiration covered his skin. A few more moments and Maggie knew he’d come.

Seduction's Spell

Isaac opened his eyes and looked at her. "I'm close, baby."
"I know."

"You'd better stop if you want . . ." He groaned. "*Damn*, Maggie."

He bucked his hips as his cum flowed from the slit and over her hands. She continued to stroke his flesh with the essence from his body until he once again lay still.

Maggie picked up Isaac's T-shirt and used it to clean his penis and her hands. "I'd better stop if I want what?"

"Never mind," he rasped.

The breathless sound of his voice made her smile. She liked making him lose control.

Isaac opened his eyes and looked at his wife. She'd done something totally unselfish and giving for him, as usual. Maggie always put everyone else's happiness above hers.

He wanted to return the favor.

"Hey," he said softly.

"What?"

"Climb up here. I want to lick on that gorgeous pussy."

She straddled his face, her legs wide. Isaac spread her swollen feminine lips with his thumbs and gave her labia one long lick. Her quick intake of breath made him smile. "You like that?"

"Oh, yes. More."

He licked her again, slowly. "I love the way you taste." Spreading her lips wider, he ran his tongue up and down her slit. "Mmm, delicious."

He slipped his hands around her buttocks to hold her still while he lapped at her pussy. She tried to buck her hips, but he tightened his hold on her buttocks and held her in place where he wanted her. Looking up her body, he saw her pluck at her nipples until they were hard and dark rose in color.

LYNN LAFLEUR

He loved watching her pleasure herself.

Her breathing became choppy. She arched her back and squeezed her breasts. Knowing she was close to coming, he pushed two fingers inside her pussy while he tongued her clit even faster.

She shuddered. "Isaac!"

He continued to gently lick her until she pulled away from him. Slowly, she moved backward until she sat on his stomach. She braced her hands on his chest. Her breasts rose and fell rapidly with her deep breaths. "Wow."

Isaac grinned and wiped her juices from his chin. "Came pretty hard, huh?"

"Yeah." She leaned her head back and blew out a breath. "Whew! You have a very wicked tongue, Mr. Olvera."

"The better to lick you with, my dear."

Maggie snorted with laughter. "So now you're the Big Bad Wolf?"

"If that's what you want."

"I'll be happy with my husband . . . the gentle, loving, considerate man I married." Her expression grew serious as she caressed his chest. "What happened, Isaac? Why did you pull away from me?"

She deserved an answer. Unfortunately, Isaac didn't have one. He never should have ignored her or taken her for granted. Maggie was his wife, his other half. She should always come first.

He ran his hands over her smooth thighs. "I don't have a pat answer, Maggie. I let my job take over my life. It was so important to me to be successful, to take that business that had been on the verge of bankruptcy and turn it around."

Taking her hands, he tugged her down until she lay on top of

Seduction's Spell

him. He wrapped his arms around her, tracing her spine with his fingertips. "I told you about my childhood, how my dad was never there for me. I didn't want our sons to grow up the way I did. I had to make sure they have the best of everything."

"The most important thing you can give our sons is your love and support. Material things are nice, but they aren't more important than love." Propping her chin on her hands, she looked into his eyes. "You pushed me away. And I don't mean only sexually. We never *talk* anymore, Isaac. We used to sit on the porch and just talk. I can't remember the last time we did that."

"I'm sorry, baby. I don't know what else to say. I never wanted to hurt you, and I know I did. All I can do now is swear to you I'll never ignore you again." He slid his hands down to her buttocks and squeezed them. "Especially sexually. I should be kicked in the head for ignoring this beautiful body for so long."

"I won't complain about our sex life picking back up, but I need more than that. I need my husband to be my partner again. I can't settle for anything less, Isaac. I *won't* settle for anything less."

He combed his fingers through her hair. "I love you, Maggie. I'll prove it to you every chance I get."

"What about your business? Will you forget about me again when Jules calls? Or Ron or Clarice?"

Isaac shook his head. "Nope."

"Just like that? No argument?"

"No argument."

"Isaac, you've been wrapped up in your company for years. It isn't possible for someone to change with a snap of their fingers."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Give me the chance to show you how quickly I can change. I’ll prove you’re the most important thing in my life. I have jobs pending I have to work on, sweetheart. After that, I’ll delegate more work. I have a great staff. I know I can trust them to be as thorough as I am.” He once again slid his hands down to her buttocks. “We have six more days here. I’m sure I can think of several ways to convince you I’m sincere.”

The mischievous light in his eyes made her smile. “Well, if you insist . . .”

Yvonne and Dolan



One

“*O*h, yeah,” he said, his voice raspy. “Oh, *yeah*. You are so fuckin’ hot.”

Yvonne Lowe lowered her head to her crossed arms. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the hard cock pounding into her pussy. Nothing. She felt no desire at all. She didn’t want to be with Austin any more than she’d wanted to be with all the other men she’d fucked. Luckily, in the doggie-style position, he couldn’t see her face anyway. She didn’t have to pretend she felt something she didn’t.

“God, you’ve got a sweet pussy.”

She almost laughed. If the idiot was thinking with his brain instead of his dick, he’d realize she wasn’t responding to him. At least she’d had the foresight to use lubricant before Austin climbed on top of her since her body wasn’t producing any natural cream. Otherwise, she’d be so sore tomorrow she wouldn’t be able to walk, much less spend hours in front of a camera.

LYNN LAFLEUR

She jerked when he pushed one thumb into her ass. She liked this position, but didn't like the guy assuming he could do anything he wanted with her ass. Yvonne had never liked anal sex, had never liked a guy doing *anything* to her anus. She almost pulled away, but gritted her teeth and stayed still. Maybe if she let him play, he'd hurry up and come. Most women would enjoy having a lover who could last as long as Austin. Not her. She just wanted this to be over.

"How about if I fuck your ass, baby?"

Dream on, buster. Instead of saying what she wanted to, she said what she thought he'd want to hear. "Your cock feels so good in my pussy. Fuck me harder."

"Mmm, *yeah*. Whatever you want, baby."

Her mother would be mortified to hear Yvonne's language. But there was no way she could refer to the frantic couplings she'd experienced in the last few years as "making love." That implied feelings were involved. The only feelings involved in this were hormones . . . hormones that didn't cooperate with her.

A few more strokes and she felt him tremble. Groaning loudly, he grabbed her hips and squeezed as he drove his shaft to the balls inside her. Yvonne flinched, hoping he didn't leave bruises. Explaining those to the makeup gal tomorrow wouldn't be easy.

Another lover. Another failure.

He pulled out of her and fell to the bed on his back. "Damn, that was *hot*."

"Yeah." Yvonne sat up, her back to him, and pushed her long hair out of her face. Tears pricked her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She couldn't have puffy eyes in the morning. The camera didn't like puffy eyes. Besides, tears

Seduction's Spell

wouldn't help anything. She was a complete failure as a woman. Tears couldn't change that.

The touch of his hand on her bare back made her jump. "Hey, how about suckin' my dick 'til I get hard again? It won't take long, and I want to fuck you again."

Yeah, when elephants fly. Summoning up a smile, Yvonne turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder. "Sounds good, but I can't. I have an early-morning call and need to get some sleep." Her shoot didn't start until after noon, but she wasn't about to tell *him* that.

He reached over and flicked her nipple with his thumb. "I'll let you sleep." He grinned. "Eventually."

God, you're pathetic. Too bad your cock isn't as big as your ego. Calling on all her acting skill, she narrowed her eyes and hoped they looked sultry. Leaning closer, she gave him a gentle kiss. "Can I take a rain check?"

"Yeah, I guess." Disappointment filled his eyes. "You aren't chasing me off, are you?"

"I have to. I'm sorry."

She wasn't the least bit sorry. Yvonne never let a lover spend the night with her. She didn't want to wake up and find someone else in her bed. Her privacy meant too much to her.

He scooted closer to her. Cradling her breast in his hand, he squeezed it while caressing the nipple with his thumb. "I thought I'd get to spend the night with you. I haven't played enough with these great tits."

"I can't, Austin. You know how it is with early-morning shoots."

"Yeah." He continued to caress her breast. "Damn, these are nice. I do love big tits."

Yvonne wanted to scream at him to simply *go away*. She

LYNN LAFLEUR

didn't know why she'd allowed him in her hotel room in the first place.

Yes, she did. She'd wanted to be in a man's arms. She'd wanted to feel as if someone cared about her.

"You'll talk to your manager about the Jamaica shoot, right?" Austin asked. "I really want that job."

Of course he did. Why else would he have jumped into her bed so quickly? Men always wanted something from her.

"You know I'm good, baby. Remember your London shoot? You loved my work."

"Yes, you're good, Austin, but it isn't my decision which photographer does the shoot."

"But you have a lot of influence. You can request me for the Jamaica shoot. One word from you and I'll be in."

Yvonne stood, picked up her silky blue robe from the chair, and slipped it on. "I'll see what I can do," she said while tying the robe.

"Great." He also stood and clasped her upper arms. "With your recommendation, I'm sure to get the job." Leaning forward, he nuzzled her neck. "Then we'll have lots of time for fuckin'."

She tried to move away, but he was too fast for her. Before she realized what Austin was going to do, he turned her and pushed her into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. He pulled off his condom and aimed his hardening cock at her mouth.

"Suck me, baby."

Why not? It's not as if she had anything else to do tonight. Parting her lips, she took him in her mouth.

Yvonne stood on the balcony and stared at the lights of Venice spread out before her. The shoot had been long and tiring, as

Seduction's Spell

usual. She should be ready to fall into bed and get a full night's sleep. Instead, her mind whirled, not letting her get the rest she knew her body needed.

Clouds had played peek-a-boo with the sun, meaning the lighting kept having to be adjusted. Despite that glitch and a swimsuit top that refused to stay fastened, the shoot had gone smoothly. Her manager Lexie had been very pleased with the results. She'd babbled about the next shoots in Rome, Naples, Athens. Yvonne had stopped listening after that. Thinking about all that traveling made her tired.

Closing her eyes, she tilted back her head and released a heavy breath. Austin had wandered onto the set this afternoon. She'd seen him talking to Lexie, and her manager hadn't looked happy. Yes, Austin was a talented photographer, but his cocky attitude had eaten on Lexie when they'd done the London shoot. She'd told Yvonne that Austin would never work with them again.

Yvonne didn't know what Lexie had said to Austin, but he hadn't looked upset when he left. In fact, he'd winked at Yvonne and blew her a kiss.

She'd rather wade through a river full of slimy creatures than kiss Austin again.

She wanted to *feel* something. She was a healthy young woman. Touching her body gave her pleasure. She could masturbate at any time and make herself come. She didn't understand why she couldn't feel anything with a man.

It always started out wonderful. She loved kissing and petting. She loved having her breasts stroked, her nipples sucked. Her desire would start to build. Her pussy would start to weep. But whenever a man penetrated her, everything inside her went dead. Any desire she might have been feeling disappeared.

LYNN LAFLEUR

Yvonne pushed her hair back from her face. She was so tired . . . tired of feeling like a failure as a woman, tired of men, tired of schedules, tired of watching every bite she ate so she wouldn't gain an ounce. What good was living if she couldn't actually *live* every once in a while?

She needed to get away. And not to some exotic locale where tourists would snap her picture every few seconds. As soon as the Athens shoot was completed, she could go somewhere quiet, peaceful . . . a place where she could simply be herself and do whatever she wanted to do. A place where she'd never been and where no one would hound her. A place she could *relax*.

Lexie would blow a gasket, but Yvonne didn't care. She hadn't taken a vacation since her face first appeared on the cover of *Vogue* and her popularity skyrocketed. She deserved some time off.

It took her no more than twenty seconds to make up her mind. Yvonne walked back into her hotel room and closed the balcony doors. Crossing to the desk, she sat down and opened her notebook. A few clicks of the keys, a few searches of websites, and she smiled.

"Perfect."

Two

Dolan peeked over Belle's shoulder at the piece of paper she'd taken from the printer. "New guest?"

Belle nodded. "I just confirmed her reservation. She'll be here later today."

"Yvonne Lowe." Dolan rubbed his upper lip. "Why is that name familiar?"

"Probably because she's famous. She's a very successful model. Her face has been on the cover of practically every fashion magazine printed over the last five years."

"I'm not into fashion magazines, Belle."

"Does the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition ring a bell? She was on last year's cover."

"I only buy it for the articles."

Belle released her tinkling laugh, which made Dolan smile. He enjoyed making her laugh. She was a good friend, one who had been kind and generous to him when most of his so-called "friends" turned their backs on him.

LYNN LAFLEUR

He owed her his life.

"I admire her," Belle said. "She's thirty and still very popular. Most models are already on their way out by the time they're twenty-five. Plus she actually has a *figure*. She isn't a stick with legs."

"Hmm," Dolan mumbled. He remembered that *SI* issue very well, although he wouldn't admit that to Belle. She loved to tease entirely too much for him to admit he remembered the long-haired blonde on the cover. What red-blooded male wouldn't notice the gorgeous woman with the tan skin and incredible figure? Oh, yes, she definitely had a figure, including lush breasts that had spilled over the cups of her tiny swimsuit top. His mouth had watered with the desire to kiss those breasts, suck the hard nipples that were clearly visible through the thin fabric, before he made the journey down her body to lick between her legs . . .

"Dolan!"

He jerked when Belle said his name sharply. "*What?*"

"Are you listening to me?"

"Of course I am." He swallowed to clear his throat of the husky sound. "What did you say?"

"I thought you were listening."

"I was. I just . . . didn't hear every word."

Belle's eyes twinkled with amusement. "I'm going to put her in the President Suite. Would you check with Dara and make sure it's ready?"

"Sure."

"Oh, and Maggie said the toilet was making noises last night."

"Noises?"

Seduction's Spell

"She said it sounded like it was running water all by itself. It happened several times during the night."

"Probably needs a new flapper. I'll take a look at it."

"I saw a loose screw on the left porch handrail. I don't want anyone cutting their hand on it."

"Okay. Anything else, boss lady?"

"Mmm, not now, but I'm sure I'll think of something later."

"No doubt about that."

"You said you like to stay busy."

"I do, but breathing is nice sometimes, too."

She playfully slapped at his arm. "Go fix Maggie's toilet."

"Yes, ma'am."

Dolan left Belle's office and headed to the maintenance shed where he kept his tools. All the outbuildings were separate from the mansion, yet built in the same antebellum style so they blended in with the grounds. They looked more like mini-houses than buildings that held tools and lawn equipment. His own small house half a mile away was built in the same style, as was Belle's. She could've remained in one of the suites in the mansion, yet had chosen to live in a small house by herself and rent out all six suites to guests.

Her generosity and kindness amazed him. He'd never known someone so caring, someone who honestly wanted to help people. Her special gifts let her do exactly that.

Recognizing those gifts hadn't been easy at first. Believing them had been even harder.

He opened the maintenance shed and headed for the work area to get his toolbox and spare toilet parts. He decided to repair the problem in Maggie and Isaac's bathroom first, then

LYNN LAFLEUR

look at the handrail. By that time, he was sure Belle would have thought of at least five more things for him to do.

He loved his job.

Entering the mansion through the kitchen door, he took the back stairs up to the General Suite. He raised his hand to knock on the Olveras' door, but stopped when he heard a feminine giggle. Apparently, Maggie and Isaac had solved whatever problems they'd had during their picnic yesterday.

Chuckling, Dolan rapped on the door. The giggling stopped and he heard Maggie hiss, "Stop that!" A moment later, she opened the door.

"Dolan, hi!" she said brightly. "What can I do for you?"

He couldn't help noticing her blouse was buttoned crooked and her cheeks were flushed. As a gentleman, he'd never mention it. "Belle asked me to look at the toilet."

Her eyebrows drew together. "The toilet?"

"You told her it's leaking."

"Oh. Oh! Of course. I mean, yes. It is."

Dolan glanced past her. Isaac lay on the mussed bed, propped up on one elbow. His shirt was unbuttoned. "Would you like me to come back later?"

Her cheeks turned pinker. She was obviously embarrassed to be caught in an intimate moment with her husband. "No, no, that's fine. Isaac and I were just . . . talking."

"I'll be happy to come back later if you two would like to finish your . . . conversation."

"No, that's silly," Maggie said. "Go ahead and do what you need to do. I'll, uh, I'll go to the kitchen and get some iced tea for Isaac and me. Would you like some, Dolan?"

"I'm fine, thanks." He leaned closer to her and lowered his

Seduction's Spell

voice. "You might want to rebutton your blouse before you go downstairs."

Eyes wide, Maggie looked down at the front of her blouse. If possible, her blush deepened. After shooting her husband a glare, she turned her back on Dolan. He could tell by her movements that she was straightening the buttons.

Dolan looked at Isaac. Maggie's husband gave a one-shouldered shrug and grinned. Dolan turned his head to hide his smile.

Maggie faced him again and smiled sheepishly. "Thanks," she whispered.

"No problem."

"I'll go get the tea."

Once she left the room, Dolan went into the bathroom. He'd taken the lid off the tank when Isaac walked into the room. "Need some help?" he asked.

"No, but I wouldn't mind some company."

"I can do that." Isaac sat on the side of the tub. "To be honest, I'm not much of a plumber. I'm not much of a repairman, period. I have to call in a professional when something is wrong in the house."

"Nothing wrong with that. A lot of guys aren't good with tools." He reached behind the toilet and turned off the water. "I was lucky I had a father who was great at repairing anything and he taught me what to do."

"Yeah, you were lucky."

Isaac's flat tone drew Dolan's attention. "You didn't get along with your dad?"

He shook his head. "We weren't very close." Isaac cleared his throat. "Hey, we don't need to talk about the past."

LYNN LAFLEUR

Dolan had discovered a long time ago that talking about the past often helped the present. "I don't mind listening."

"Uh, no. That would be getting into all that feeling and emotion stuff." He shuddered.

Dolan laughed. "Not exactly a guy thing, huh?"

"No."

He worked in silence for a moment until Isaac spoke again. "I, uh, I owe you an apology."

"For what?" Dolan asked as he flushed the toilet to drain the tank.

"For being so rude to you."

"Forget it." He glanced at Isaac. "I gather you and Maggie made up?"

"Yeah. I told her I'd cut back on my hours, be home with her more."

"Just like that?"

Isaac frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, no one can change overnight. It takes time to break a habit. Or make one."

"You a marriage counselor or something?"

"No. Just a guy who's fought his own battles in life."

"I told Maggie I'd cut back and I will. I have projects I can assign to other people, but I do have projects I have to finish."

"I'm sure Maggie will understand that."

Leaning forward, Isaac clasped his hands between his knees. "I can't lose her."

"You won't. She loves you, man. That's obvious."

"She must to put up with me. I never should've let my job take over my life."

"That's not hard to do."

"You say that as if it's happened to you."

Seduction's Spell

"I know what it's like to let a job become your whole world, where you forget what's really important in life."

Dolan worked in silence again while he removed the flapper. He could feel Isaac studying him. He lived with the knowledge that he could be recognized by a guest, but it made him uncomfortable. He hadn't been in the limelight for five years, yet people still acted as if they saw him on TV every Sunday.

To get Isaac's attention off him and on another subject, Dolan said, "Maggie told me you have two sons."

"Yeah. Taylor and Mason. They're great."

The light in Isaac's eyes showed Dolan how much Isaac loved his sons. Any man who loved his children couldn't be all bad.

"You ever been married, Dolan?"

"Nope. Haven't met Ms. Right yet."

"I love being married. I can't imagine not having Maggie in my life."

"I'd say that makes *you* the lucky man."

"Yeah, I guess it does."

Dolan replaced the lid on the tank and turned on the water. "That should take care of it. If you or Maggie have any other problems, just let me know."

"Will do." Isaac stood. "Thanks."

Dolan nodded in acknowledgment, picked up his toolbox, and left the room. The handrail was next on his list, then he'd check with Belle.

It took him only a few seconds to locate the loose screw. He bent to open his toolbox to get a screwdriver when he heard a car approaching. Raising his head, he saw a white BMW convertible coming up the drive. He wasn't sure of the model, but that didn't matter. The car screamed money.

He watched it pull to a stop. Time seemed to shift to slow

LYNN LAFLEUR

motion as he watched the car door open and she stepped out . . . and out and out. Those denim-covered legs had to be at least five feet long. The breeze picked up strands of her long hair and blew it about her head. Large sunglasses covered her eyes. She tugged down the hem of her blue T-shirt, which pulled it tighter across her full breasts.

She closed the car door. He watched her breasts rise and fall with a deep breath. A smile turned up the corners of her mouth.

She looked . . . content.

Dolan gripped his screwdriver tighter. She also looked make-your-mouth-water sexy.

It didn't matter how sexy she looked. She lived in a world that he gave up five years ago. He had no desire to go back to that kind of lifestyle. Living at Belle On The Bend was everything he wanted. Yeah, he felt lonely sometimes, but a trip into town solved that. He knew several ladies in Roseville who were happy to spend a few hours with him.

He never got involved with a guest. Besides, there was no guarantee she'd want anything to do with him, anyway. A woman like her could have any man she wanted. It was highly unlikely she'd settle for a simple maintenance man, not when she'd dated European royalty.

She turned in a slow circle, as if examining everything around her. She smiled again, broader this time. Pushing her sunglasses on top of her head, she headed for the steps.

With one foot on the bottom step, her gaze met his. She stopped. Those incredible sapphire blue eyes widened.

Dolan felt as if he'd been hit in the stomach by a three-hundred-pound linebacker.

"Hello, Ms. Lowe. Welcome to Belle On The Bend."

Three

Tall, at least six two. Dark brown hair pulled back from his face in a long ponytail. Piercing turquoise eyes. Straight nose. Strong chin. High cheekbones. Tan skin. Broad shoulders. Wide chest. Flat stomach. A large bulge behind the fly of his faded jeans.

Yvonne took in every detail of the handsome hunk at the top of the steps in only a few seconds. In those few seconds, she forgot how to breathe. She'd seen dozens of handsome men in her life. She'd had sex with several of those men. None of them had made her heart lurch in her chest with one look.

"Hello," she said as she climbed the steps. "And you are . . . ?"

"Dolan. I take care of the maintenance around here."

Dolan. She liked his name. Smiling, she held out her hand to him. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

He took her hand. His grip was firm, but not hurtful. "Likewise, Ms. Lowe."

LYNN LAFLEUR

"Yvonne, please. But how do you know my name?"

"I was with Belle when she printed out your confirmation."

"Oh."

He released her hand. Yvonne wanted to grab it and press it close to her heart.

Whoa! This guy could be extremely dangerous. Her gaze passed over his body again. He could also be a lot of fun.

As soon as that thought popped into her head, Yvonne dismissed it. Sex with Dolan would be just as disappointing as sex with every other man.

Maybe not. She'd never felt such a strong physical attraction to a man so quickly. Maybe this time would be different . . .

She cleared her throat. "Do I need to check in?"

He nodded. "If you'll give me the key to your car, I'll park it and get your luggage."

"The key is in the ignition."

"Are you sure you trust me with it?" he asked with a crooked grin. "That's quite a car."

That crooked grin made Yvonne's breath catch. What an incredible-looking man. She smiled. "I trust you. Besides, I haven't even become attached to it yet. I bought it yesterday in Dallas."

"You have good taste."

Oh, yeah. Tasting you would be really good.

"I'll take you to Belle," Dolan said. "She'll show you to your room. I'll bring up your luggage in a few minutes."

"Sounds good. Thank you."

Yvonne entered the mansion, Dolan by her side. She felt him next to her. She knew he walked beside her, but she actually *felt* him. It was almost as if their souls were touching.

Seduction's Spell

You're being totally ridiculous, Yvonne. There's no such thing as a soul mate.

Still, she was intrigued. She'd bet he was a fabulous lover. Even though she wouldn't reach a climax with him, it would be fun to play. That nice bulge in his jeans showed her he had a *lot* to play with.

Yvonne imagined pulling his mouth to her breast. He'd tug her nipple into his mouth, lick it, suck it. Then he'd kiss her . . . slow and deep and long. After they'd kissed for several moments, he'd return to her breasts . . . sucking first one nipple, then the other, until they were hard and dark pink.

A shiver passed through her body at the thought. Oh, yes, he'd be a *lot* of fun to play with.

He led the way through a beautiful foyer dotted with antiques and large pots of fresh flowers to an office just as beautifully decorated. A lovely blonde sat at a rolltop desk. Yvonne knew little about antiques, preferring modern furniture instead, but she had no doubt that desk was worth every bit as much as her new BMW convertible.

The blonde looked up from her paperwork. Smiling, she stood and offered her hand. "Welcome, Ms. Lowe. I'm Isabella Patricelli, otherwise known as Belle."

Yvonne accepted Belle's hand. Her skin was warm and smooth. Yvonne liked her hostess immediately. "Thank you. I'm happy to be here."

"I see you've already met Dolan."

Yvonne glanced at the handsome man standing to her left. "Yes, I have."

"All of us at Belle On The Bend want your stay to be enjoyable. Dolan is my maintenance man, but he has many talents."

LYNN LAFLEUR

She let her gaze drop to his pelvis for a moment. "I'll bet he does."

Dolan's mouth quirked. "I'll get your luggage while Belle shows you to your suite."

"See you later."

Yvonne watched him leave the room, then fanned her face with one hand. "My goodness! Is every man around here as gorgeous as he is?"

"Actually, Dolan is from California. But no, not all the men around here are that handsome. Dolan is particularly blessed with good looks."

"Honey, that's an understatement if I ever heard one." She laid one hand over her heart. It beat faster than normal beneath her palm. "If you'd said yes about the local men, I'd move here tomorrow."

"You've been all over the world. I'm sure you've seen many handsome men."

Not like Dolan. "Yes, I have, but there's . . . something about him. He's very sexy."

"Yes, he is."

Belle had agreed with her much too quickly. Yvonne's heart crumbled. They must be involved. "You say that as if . . . Are you and Dolan married?"

Belle burst into laughter. "No. He works for me and we're good friends. That's all."

"How can you resist him?"

"He isn't my soul mate." She shrugged. "It's that simple."

Yvonne wrinkled her nose. "You believe in that?"

"Very much." She tilted her head. "Don't you?"

"No."

Seduction's Spell

"You're too cynical."

"Nothing in my life has convinced me otherwise."

Belle smiled. "Ah, but you're young. You never know what life will send your way."

"Our ages can't be much different, Belle."

She said nothing to that comment, only smiled again. "I'll show you to your suite so you can unpack and get settled."

Yvonne followed Belle from the office and toward the winding staircase. She walked slowly, admiring the furnishings and decorations along the way. The house was breathtaking. She might not know much about antiques, but she recognized beauty. Belle obviously loved her home.

They turned right at the top of the stairs. Belle opened a set of double doors and stood aside so Yvonne could enter the room. She stepped inside, and gasped softly. The room was light, airy, the décor in cream and shades of blue. Pale blue sheers draped down from an oval canopy over the queen-size bed. The carpet was a rich royal blue. Cream draperies covered the double French doors leading to a private balcony. Oil paintings adorned the walls. Vases of fresh flowers in the colors of spring sat on the desk, small table, and bureau.

Yvonne loved everything at first sight.

"It's lovely," she breathed.

Belle smiled. "Thank you. This room is a bit smaller than the other suites, but it's the most feminine. I thought you'd like the blue color scheme."

"I do. Blue is my favorite color."

"Everything you need to know about the mansion is in here," Belle said, crossing to the desk and opening the top drawer. "There's a list of all the amenities, plus meal times,

LYNN LAFLEUR

local attractions, phone numbers, things like that. You can dial 'zero' to reach me, 'four' for the kitchen, 'five' for house-keeping, etc. If you need to make an outside call, just dial 'nine' first."

"Does Dolan have his own extension?"

"Yes. You can reach him by pressing 'seven.'"

"Any time?"

Belle's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Yes, any time."

Yvonne grinned. "Goodie."

"I have to warn you, Yvonne. Dolan doesn't believe in becoming involved with the guests. He's quite adamant about that."

"Maybe I can change his mind."

"You can certainly try." Belle took a key on an oval brass tag from her pants pocket and laid it on the desk. "The key to your suite. Please call me if you need anything."

"I will."

Belle was halfway to the door when Yvonne stopped her. "Belle?"

Her hostess faced her again. "Yes?"

"I appreciate your letting me leave my reservation open. When I originally decided to take some time off, I thought a week would be enough. I might need more than that."

Belle smiled. "It isn't a problem. The room is yours as long as you wish to stay."

She headed for the door again. With one hand on the door-knob, she faced Yvonne. "I made apricot tea shortly before you arrived. Come downstairs after you unpack and have a glass with me."

"I will. Thank you."

Seduction's Spell

After Belle left, Yvonne sat on the side of the bed. She gazed about the room, admiring the decorations and furnishings. She already felt more relaxed, more at peace with herself. She liked her apartment on Park Avenue in New York, but it was simply a place to hang her clothes between shoots. She spent so little time there, she couldn't call it a "home."

A soft knock on her door interrupted her thoughts. "Come in."

The door opened and Dolan walked in, pushing a two-wheeler with her luggage piled on top of it. Her heart kicked back into overdrive at the sight of him.

"Where would you like this?" he asked.

Yvonne didn't care where he put her luggage, as long as she could look at him. She waved one hand toward the closet. "Over there is fine."

She reclined on the bed, letting her knees hang over the side. Resting on her elbows, she watched him move her luggage from the two-wheeler to the floor. When the last case had been moved, he glanced in her direction. He froze for a moment, then slowly straightened and faced her.

Yvonne knew men found her attractive. She'd lived her entire life in the spotlight—first as the child of a famous couple, then as an international model. Men were drawn to that spotlight . . . and to her. She'd never had a problem attracting a man. Dolan wouldn't be any different.

He walked over to the bed. She toed off her sandals and spread her knees another few inches, giving him room to step between them. She watched his gaze move over her body, lingering on her pelvis and breasts.

A shiver of awareness tickled her spine.

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Like what you see?” she asked.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Yvonne. I’m sure you know that.”

She shrugged. “I have no control over my looks. They came from my parents.”

“But you don’t mind using them to your advantage.”

“Who doesn’t use their best traits to their advantage? You’re a hunk, Dolan. You can’t tell me you don’t use your looks to attract women.” She raised one foot and traced the bulge behind his fly with her big toe. “You have a lot of traits to attract women, don’t you?”

He grabbed her ankle and pulled her foot away from his penis. “Don’t play with fire, Yvonne. You could get burned.”

She ran her tongue over her lower lip. “I like the heat.”

He watched the movement of her tongue as she licked her lower lip again. The fire in those amazing turquoise eyes singed every inch of her. Her breathing deepened, her heart began beating slow and heavy.

Releasing her foot, Dolan leaned forward and rested his hands on the bed next to her waist. He leaned forward until their lips were no more than four inches apart. “There’s a lot of heat in Texas.”

“I can take it,” she whispered.

“Can you?”

“I can take anything you want to give me, cowboy.”

“There’s a small problem with that.”

“What?”

“I’m not a cowboy. And I don’t get involved with guests.” He straightened. “Enjoy your stay, Ms. Lowe.”

Four

Yvonne adjusted the rolled-up towel beneath her neck and shifted to a more comfortable position. Sighing softly, she closed her eyes. The warm water of the communal hot tub flowed around her body, the jets churning up the waves so they caressed her bare skin like a lover.

The thought of a lover made her eyes pop open again. Dolan had spurned her. She'd offered herself to him, practically threw herself at his feet, and he'd rejected her. A man had *never* rejected her. She was *famous*. She came from famous, wealthy parents. A camera had been in her face practically since the day she was born. She had the right to turn down a man, but no man had the right to turn *her* down.

The whole thing pissed her off.

She didn't like being pissed off. Dolan had to pay for his lack of attention.

Yvonne picked up the glass of white wine from the hot tub's ledge and took a sip while she plotted what she'd do to Dolan.

LYNN LAFLEUR

Thoughts of him were put on hold when the wine slid down her throat. Light and fruity, it created a warm path to her stomach.

A gal could get totally spoiled very quickly.

She'd stayed at countless hotels around the world. She traveled first class all the way, had her every wish answered. But there was something about the mansion, something almost . . . magical.

Yvonne chuckled. *Magical. Yeah, right. And Santa Claus is going to pop out of the closet.*

Setting down her wine, she once again leaned her head back. She'd never been one for afternoon naps, but the combination of the wine and warm water made her sleepy. Besides, she was on vacation. No clocks to watch, no calories to count, no schedules to meet. If she wanted to take a nap, no one would say a word to her.

Heaven.

The sound of the door opening jerked her fully awake. She lifted her head to see Dolan in the doorway, holding a stack of thick yellow towels.

Her heart skipped into overdrive.

A man shouldn't look so good in faded jeans and a simple T-shirt. Yvonne had been in a room full of men in tuxedos. None of those handsome, charismatic men had made her so aware of her body, of the differences between a man and a woman. Her nipples tightened beneath the churning water.

"Enjoying the hot tub?" Dolan asked.

"Very much. It feels wonderful. So . . . sensual."

It pleased her to see desire flash through his eyes. He deserved to suffer from unfulfilled longing the way she had after he rejected her. Let his cock throb with the need for release the way her clit had.

Seduction's Spell

He turned and opened the large cabinet in the corner. Yvonne sighed as she watched him place the towels he carried in the cabinet. So much for his suffering. Maybe he didn't find her attractive.

But then, he hadn't seen *all* of her.

"I'm ready to get out. Will you hand me a towel please?"

"Sure."

Dolan picked up a towel from the stack he'd placed in the cabinet. He froze with his hand on the fluffy terry cloth when he heard the jets stop. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Yvonne stand in the tub.

Water sluiced over her naked body. She didn't look at him, but raised her hands to her hair, pushing loose strands back inside the clips that held her hair on top of her head. His gaze slid over her body. Her skin was tan with no swimsuit marks, despite all the swimsuit modeling she did. She had large, heavy breasts that looked natural, not pumped full of silicone. The sight of her bare mound made his mouth water. He loved it when a woman shaved her pussy. Her long legs were as shapely as the rest of her body. He imagined them wrapped around his waist as he pounded into that sweet pussy . . .

Tearing his gaze away from her, Dolan grabbed a towel. He held it up so it hid her body from him as she stepped from the tub.

"Thanks." She looked into his eyes while wrapping the towel around herself.

"No problem."

Yvonne tucked one end of the towel between her breasts. "I'm used to being naked around people. A model quickly loses any inhibitions."

"I can understand that."

LYNN LAFLEUR

A hint of mischief lit up her eyes. "Wanna see my body again?"

Dolan chuckled. He liked her. Her playful sense of humor made it easy to like her. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not? Afraid you couldn't control yourself?"

"I'm not a teenager, Yvonne."

Her gaze slowly passed over his body. "I noticed."

"I told you, I don't get involved with guests."

She laid one hand on his chest. "Rules can be broken."

Dolan shook his head. "Not *my* rules."

"You are entirely too stubborn, do you know that?" Her hand drifted over his chest, caressing, massaging. "We could have a really good time together."

He didn't doubt that for a second. He also knew she'd be on her way in a week or so and he'd never see her again. Sex with Yvonne would be hot, but he wanted more from a relationship than hot sex.

When she began rubbing his nipple with her thumb, he almost changed his mind. He hadn't been with a woman in several weeks. His cock reminded him of that by thickening, lengthening, at her caress. One tug and her towel would be on the floor. He could turn her around, bend her over the tub, and fuck her until they were both exhausted.

It sounded *really* good. Gently clasping her wrist, he pulled her hand away from him. "No more nude tubbing, Yvonne. This is a public place. Swimsuits are required for all the guests."

"Another rule, Dolan?"

"Yes. Obey it."

Seduction's Spell

He turned and left the house without a backward glance. He'd be tempted to accept her offer if he looked at her again.

Yvonne didn't like rules.

She especially didn't like rules that kept her from doing what she wanted. Right now, she wanted Dolan. She wasn't about to let his stupid "I don't get involved with guests" rule keep her from having him. So what if she wouldn't have a climax? She still wanted that closeness, that intimacy, with him. She wanted to run her hands over his nude body, lick his nipples, palm his cock. She wanted to pull his mouth to her breast, feel his tongue between her legs.

An orgasm might be impossible, but she still felt desire for a man.

Turning first one way, then the other, she examined her reflection in the full-length mirror. She liked the way the light blue dress made her eyes sparkle. Of course, it wasn't much of a dress. Short, tight, with tiny spaghetti straps and a deep scooped neck that barely covered her nipples.

Dolan wouldn't be able to resist her.

Yvonne grinned at that thought. Watching him walk around the grounds this afternoon in that body-hugging T-shirt and tight jeans had sent her hormones into an uproar. Now it was *his* turn to ache, *his* turn to feel desire nipping at his hormones.

This would be *so* much fun.

She slipped on a pair of bone-colored sandals and left her room. Halfway down the stairs, she heard a door open behind her. She stopped on the steps and glanced over her shoulder. A lovely redhead and handsome dark-haired man exited the suite at the end of the hall. She smiled. "Good evening."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Hello,” the redhead said with a smile.

Yvonne saw the man’s gaze dip to her cleavage a moment, but he quickly raised it back to her face and smiled. “Good evening. I’m Isaac and this is my wife, Maggie.”

“I’m Yvonne.”

“It’s a pleasure.”

“Did you just get here, Yvonne?” Maggie asked.

“This morning. I’m loving the place so far.”

Maggie’s smile brightened. “Isn’t the mansion beautiful? I love all the antiques.”

Isaac groaned. “Here she goes again.”

“What did I do?”

“You’re raving about the old furniture.”

Maggie elbowed him in the ribs. Isaac let out an “oomph,” then grinned and looked at Yvonne. “I love to rile her up.”

Yvonne laughed. She liked the couple already. “You’d better be careful, Isaac. We women are fierce when we get riled up.”

“Don’t I know it.” He grinned again, then took Maggie’s hand and drew it beneath his arm. He held out his other arm to Yvonne. “May I escort you to dinner, Yvonne?”

Smiling, she wrapped her hand around the bend of Isaac’s elbow. “Thank you, kind sir.”

Soft music and candlelight greeted Yvonne when they walked into the dining room. Isaac held her chair for her while she sat, then rounded the table and held Maggie’s chair before slipping into the one beside his wife. Maggie smiled lovingly at her husband. Isaac lifted her hand and placed a lingering kiss on her palm.

Yvonne sighed. How romantic. She couldn’t remember a man ever kissing her palm in such a loving way.

A pang of longing made her stomach churn. She knew love

Seduction's Spell

wasn't in the cards for her. Men wanted her because of her fame, wealth, and beauty. No man seemed to see past the outer shell so he could get to *know* her. A quick fuck with the famous Yvonne Lowe was all they wanted.

She glanced down at her dress, or rather, at her cleavage. *How can I expect men to think differently of me when I dress like this? Dolan won't respect me. He might fuck me, but he won't respect me.*

Despite the glorious scents wafting in from the kitchen, her appetite disappeared. Tears welled up in her eyes. She didn't want Dolan to see her in this dress.

"Good evening, everyone," Belle said cheerfully as she slipped into her chair at the head of the table. "I hope y'all are hungry. Lottie has made an incredible pork roast."

The thought of taking one bite of food made Yvonne gag. She pushed back her chair. "Excuse me."

She hurried from the room, her vision blurred with tears. She didn't see Dolan until she practically barreled into him.

He grabbed her upper arms to steady her. "Whoa! Where's the fire?"

She looked up into his handsome face. The teasing light in his eyes quickly changed to concern. "What's wrong, Yvonne?"

"I need to go. Excuse me."

Jerking from his grasp, she ran toward the back door. Ignoring Dolan's cry for her to wait, she stepped through the door and into the evening.

Five

Dolan started after Yvonne, but a hand on his arm stopped him. He looked around to see Belle standing behind him.

“Let her go.”

“She was crying, Belle.”

“I know. She needs some time alone.”

“It’ll be dark soon.”

“Dolan, it’s barely six-thirty. It’ll be light for at least another hour.”

He blew out a heavy breath. “Do you know what’s wrong?”

Belle shook her head. “She and the Olveras were already seated when I joined them in the dining room. She just suddenly teared up and hurried from the room.”

“No one said anything to her?”

“If you mean did anyone say something to hurt her feelings, no. We didn’t.”

“Well, *something* is obviously wrong. I’m not gonna wait around to find out.”

Seduction's Spell

“Dolan!”

He ignored Belle and took off in the direction Yvonne had taken. Once outside the back door of the mansion, he stopped and looked in every direction. He didn't see her.

Where did you go, Yvonne?

Belle was right that he had at least half an hour of sunlight left. Since he didn't know how long it would take him to find Yvonne, he decided to stop by his house and get a flashlight. He hunched his shoulders against the cool wind. A jacket would be good, too. The temperature would drop rapidly once the sun set.

He grabbed the flashlight and jacket from his cabin and headed south, toward the river. Even if she'd run, she couldn't have gotten far. Dolan decided to travel one hundred yards, then backtrack if he didn't find her.

“Yvonne! Yvonne, where are you? *Yvonne!*”

Nothing. Retracing his steps, he returned to his house and turned to the west. The sun sank behind the oak trees. Dusk was falling. He had to find her before it got dark.

Another one hundred yards produced nothing. He retraced his steps once again and headed east.

A few yards from the stables, Cindy's soft whinny drew his attention. Following a hunch, Dolan entered the horse barn. Yvonne stood outside the horse's stall, petting Cindy's velvety nose.

“Yvonne,” he said softly.

She wiped the back of her hand across her cheek. “I'd rather be alone, Dolan.”

“Sorry, that isn't an option.” He stepped closer to her. “Why did you run out of the house?”

She shrugged. “I wasn't hungry.”

LYNN LAFLEUR

Goose bumps rose on her arms and he could see her nipples through her dress. "It's getting cold." Slipping off his jacket, he draped it over her shoulders. "That dress you're wearing can't be very warm."

"No, it isn't."

"You look great in it."

She turned to face him. The sadness in her eyes tugged at his heart. "Yvonne, what's wrong? Talk to me."

She lowered her gaze a moment before looking at him again. "I was ashamed."

"Of what?"

"The way I'm dressed. You probably have handkerchiefs with more material in them than this dress."

Her comment would've made him chuckle if she hadn't been so upset. "Yvonne, no one will think badly of you for the way you're dressed."

"Not even you?"

"Especially not me. I have no right to judge you."

"Some men would."

"Don't lump me in a category, Yvonne. Not all men are assholes."

"You obviously haven't met the same men I have."

That comment made him chuckle before he could stop it. A bit of the sadness faded from Yvonne's eyes. "Well, it's true. You have no idea how many men I've met who are absolute jerks."

"That isn't reserved just for men, you know. I've met a lot of women who are jerks."

"Yeah, me, too." She shivered and drew his jacket tighter around her. "I thought it was supposed to be warm in Texas."

"We're having unusually cold temperatures right now."

Seduction's Spell

It's been ten to fifteen degrees cooler than normal for several days."

"Great," she said without a hint of enthusiasm.

"I take it you don't like cold weather."

"I'm not a fan of seeing my breath when I talk."

Cupping her elbow in his hand, he drew her toward the exit. "C'mon, let's get you out of the cold."

Yvonne let him lead her out of the barn and into the night. Darkness had fallen while she was with the horses, but Dolan's flashlight gave her plenty of light to see. She looked at the moon over the tops of the trees, noting it was almost full. She'd always loved sitting and watching the moon rise. Here at the mansion, with so many trees surrounding it, the moon would be well up into the sky before anyone could see it.

Yvonne concentrated so intently on the beauty around her that she didn't notice where she and Dolan were going. He opened the back door to a small house.

"Where are we?"

"My place. It's closer than the mansion and you need to warm up."

She stepped into a small, modern kitchen. A quick look around showed her it was decorated in the same cool color scheme as the mansion. She assumed a man would want more earth-toned colors.

"Not what you expected?"

The humor in his voice drew her attention back to Dolan. "It's lovely."

"The houses and cabins on the grounds were decorated long before I came here." He set his flashlight on the counter. "Belle wanted them to be an extension of the mansion instead

LYNN LAFLEUR

of something different. I had no problem with that. If it were my house, I'd probably change some things."

"Like what?" she asked as she sat at the round table in the center of the room.

He took the carafe from the coffee maker and began filling it with water. "Oh, deer antlers on the wall, a big-screen TV in every corner, pictures of nude women with huge tits hanging everywhere." He grinned at her over his shoulder. "Things like that."

Yvonne laughed. "All those things that scream M-A-N."

"Yep."

She watched him continue the coffee preparations. He seemed so . . . confident, so sure of himself. He moved with an ease that told her he was comfortable with himself. She envied that. Yvonne didn't think she'd ever been truly comfortable with her body. She knew she was attractive; a mirror showed her that. But beauty and confidence were two totally different things.

"Do you take cream or sugar in your coffee?" Dolan asked.

"Cream, please. Lots of it."

One corner of his mouth quirked. "You like a little coffee with your cream?"

"Yeah," she said, returning his grin.

Yvonne liked being in Dolan's kitchen. The room was neat, despite a few dishes in the sink and a wrinkled dish towel on the counter next to the stove. She wondered if he took care of his home himself, or if Belle's housekeeping staff did it for him. Having servants her whole life, Yvonne knew nothing about keeping a house clean or cooking. She could make coffee and a sandwich if she had to. That was the extent of her culinary skills.

Seduction's Spell

She suddenly wished she'd learned more.

Dolan set heavy white mugs of coffee on the table. Yvonne wrapped her hands around hers to warm them while he took a bottle of creamer out of the refrigerator. He set it and a spoon next to her mug, then took the chair across from her.

Yvonne added a generous amount of creamer to her coffee. "You don't use cream or sugar?"

"Nah. I drink mine like a man."

She could see the amusement in his eyes over the rim of his mug as he took a sip. "I know a lot of men who use cream or sugar in their coffee."

"Wimps."

Placing her elbows on the table, Yvonne raised the mug and sniffed. The coffee smelled heavenly. "I'll bet you never drink from a straw either."

"Straws are for sissies."

She took a sip of the hot brew. She wanted to play with him, to see if she could rattle him so he wouldn't be able to pop off a quick reply. "And you probably scratch your balls in public."

His eyes widened slightly, then he grinned again. "Only when they itch."

Yvonne burst out laughing. She'd tried to shock him, but she should've known he was too quick-witted to be shocked. "You got me there." She took another sip. "This is really good."

"Thanks."

Setting her mug on the table, she leaned forward. "So what other special talents do you have?"

She saw his gaze dip to her breasts. She knew her position let him see a generous amount of cleavage. "Belle doesn't call me 'Mr. Fix-It' for nothing."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Ah. So you can fix any problem a woman might have?”

Dolan set his own mug on the table and leaned forward, copying her position. “I’m very good at what I do.”

I have no doubt of that. “What’s your specialty?”

His tongue passed over his lower lip. Yvonne felt that lick deep inside her pussy. “I like variety.”

“But there has to be something you feel you excel at.”

Slowly, he leaned back in his chair. “You know what? I’m hungry.”

She blinked at the abrupt change of subject. “What?”

Dolan stood and rounded the table. “Let’s go raid the fridge at the mansion.”

“I haven’t finished my coffee.”

“We’ll make another pot at Belle’s.”

“But I like *this* pot.”

Taking her hand, he tugged her to her feet. “You wouldn’t let me go hungry, would you?”

“You don’t have any food here?”

“Lottie’s a better cook than I am.”

Since it was obvious she couldn’t argue with him, she let him guide her out the door. She thought he’d release her hand once they were outside his house. Instead, he intertwined their fingers, his warm palm resting intimately against hers.

Yvonne never knew holding hands could be so erotic.

The kitchen was deserted, the light over the stove the only illumination. Dolan released Yvonne’s hand once they were inside the house, although he didn’t want to. It felt right to hold her hand, to have that closeness with her. Her vulnerability in the barn had touched him. He wanted to protect her, make sure nothing ever hurt her again.

Seduction's Spell

His blossoming feelings scared him. He knew Yvonne wasn't the woman for him. She'd been born into a life of luxury. It was all she'd ever known. She wouldn't ever give up that kind of life, and he wouldn't go back to it. They didn't stand a chance together. And since there couldn't possibly be any future for them, he refused to have sex with her. That's why he'd brought her back to the mansion. Their playful talk in his kitchen had turned sexual. He couldn't keep up the teasing and not act on his cravings.

He wasn't a teenager, but he had his limits.

"Sit down at the island," Dolan said. "I'll see what I can find for us."

Knowing Belle as well as he did, he went straight to the microwave. Just as he'd suspected, there were two covered plates inside. A folded piece of paper lay on top of the plates. Dolan opened it to see Belle's flowing penmanship.

*There's apricot tea in the refrigerator. Yvonne likes it.
Enjoy your meal.*

Belle

Tucking the note into his pocket, he set the timer on the microwave to warm their food. "Do you want me to make coffee or would you rather have tea?"

"Belle gave me some iced tea today that was really good. Do you think there's any left?"

"Sure. Belle never runs out of tea."

Dolan retrieved two glasses from the cabinet for their tea. As he turned toward the refrigerator, he saw Yvonne slip off his jacket and drape it over her legs. She folded her arms and rested them on the island. He allowed himself a few seconds of

LYNN LAFLEUR

staring at those incredible breasts before he finished preparing their tea.

A soft *ding* signaled their dinner was ready. Instead of sitting on the chair next to Yvonne, Dolan dragged it to the end of the island. He wanted to look at her while they ate.

She took a bite of the tender pork and moaned softly. Dolan would swear it sounded like a woman having an orgasm.

Damn, man, get your mind off sex!

"This is wonderful. Is the food always this good here?"

"Always. Lottie is an incredible cook."

"How do you keep from weighing four hundred pounds?"

"I work it off."

Her gaze passed over his shoulders and chest. "You do a good job."

She fascinated him. One minute she was embarrassed at the tiny dress she wore, the next she was spouting sexual innuendos again. Dolan washed down his bite of scalloped potatoes with tea. "Is that your way of telling me you like my body?"

A slow grin turned up her lips. "What's not to like?"

"Wanna know a secret?"

She leaned closer to him. "I love secrets."

"I like yours, too."

Her grin widened.

"But—"

"No buts. You can stop right there. Women love compliments."

"*But* I meant what I said, Yvonne. I don't get involved with guests. All this teasing will do nothing but get us excited without any way to . . . calm the excitement."

She reached over and drew a circle on the back of his hand

Seduction's Spell

with one finger. "What would it hurt to break your rule, Dolan? I like you and I'm attracted to you."

"I'm attracted to you, too."

"Then why not—"

"Yvonne, you'll be leaving in a couple of weeks. I won't."

"So?"

"So maybe a fling is okay in your world. It isn't okay in mine."

She laid her fork on her half-empty plate. "Are you telling me you've never had a fling?"

"No, I'm not saying that at all. I've had one-night stands. Several of them, but that was a long time ago." He turned his hand and entwined their fingers. "What I'm saying is that I like you. I like your wit, your sense of humor, your touch of vulnerability. And yeah, your beauty. I won't lie about that. You're gorgeous and sexy and I'd like to run my hands over every inch of you, especially your breasts. I've had some pretty erotic fantasies about your breasts."

Her throat worked as she swallowed. He squeezed her hand. "After your vacation, you'll go back to your life and I'll stay here. That's why I can't get involved with you. I could fall hard for you, Yvonne. I can't let that happen."

Tears shimmered in her eyes. "Would it be so horrible to fall for me?"

"Yeah, it would, if I couldn't be with you." Releasing her hand, he leaned back in his chair. "I'll be your friend while you're here. That's all. I won't be your lover."

Seeing a tear slip down her cheek made his heart clench. Dolan was afraid he was already starting to fall for her.

"I've lost my appetite," Yvonne said as she stood. "I think I'll go up to my room."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“All right,” he said softly.

She laid his jacket on the chair. “Thank you for the jacket and . . . everything else.”

Dolan watched her leave the room. He felt like a heel for hurting her, but he had no choice. He had to protect his own heart.

Six

Yvonne stepped out the back door and took a deep breath of the warm air. Whatever unseasonably cool temperatures they'd been having here had disappeared. A check of the weather on her notebook computer this morning showed her it would be close to eighty degrees this afternoon. A bit cool for a swim, but not too cool for sunbathing. All she had to do was find a private place so she didn't have to worry about a swimsuit. She hated wearing clothes, so always wore as little as possible.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Yvonne?" Belle asked from behind her.

Yvonne turned and smiled at her hostess. "Yes, thank you. I ate breakfast, then took a nap. I'm being incredibly lazy."

"You're supposed to be lazy. You're on vacation."

"I can't be *too* lazy. Gaining a lot of weight on vacation would *not* be a good thing."

"There are several ways to work out here."

LYNN LAFLEUR

"I know, and I'll probably hit your weight room in a day or two." She wrinkled her nose in distaste at the idea of working out. "Maybe three."

Belle laughed. "It's available for you whenever you want to use it. There's also three hundred acres to walk, bicycling, tennis, horseback riding—"

"You're making me tired. Right now I just want to lay in the sun."

"Go down by the river. It's beautiful there and very private for sunbathing."

"Private is exactly what I want. Which way do I go?"

"It's almost a mile away. Would you rather ride a bike? Or I can lend you my golf cart. I use it to zip around the grounds."

"A mile is perfect. I'll walk slowly and enjoy this gorgeous weather."

"Then just follow this path. You'll hear the river as you get closer to it."

"Thanks, Belle."

"Do you want some iced tea or water to take with you? Maybe a snack?"

"I already begged Lottie for some goodies." Grinning, she held up a large tote bag. "A sandwich made from that delicious pork she cooked last night, a bag of chips, and brownies . . . none of which is the least bit good for me, but I don't care. Oh, and some of your wonderful apricot tea. I could get addicted to that stuff."

"It is scrumptious, isn't it? Sounds like you're all set. Would you like to take a book with you?"

"I have that, too. I'm ready to waste away the afternoon."

"Good," Belle said with a smile. "Enjoy yourself."

Yvonne took off at a lazy pace, in no hurry to do anything

Seduction's Spell

today. She gazed at the beautiful gardens along her path. She'd always loved the incredible gardens at her parents' home on Long Island, even though she didn't know the names of most of the flowers and plants. Yvonne loved live plants and had many of them in her apartment. A service came in once a week to take care of them. Any plant she tried to take care of herself would be dead within two weeks.

She'd be the first to admit she wasn't a domestic goddess.

The gardens thinned out as the trees thickened. A gentle breeze touched her face, birds chirped all around her. Yvonne had never felt so content. She could learn to love this place very quickly.

Small breaks in the trees let her see the rushing water as she drew nearer to it. Large boulders lined the bank, giving her plenty of privacy. She placed her tote beneath a bush, spread out her blanket, and slipped off her T-shirt and shorts. After a quick look around to be sure she was alone, she took off her swimsuit. She'd had one nap already today, but another one sounded like heaven. With a contented sigh, she stretched out in the sun and closed her eyes.

Dolan paced back and forth in Belle's office. "She isn't back yet?" he asked his employer.

"No, she isn't back yet. She's a big girl, Dolan."

He strode to the window and looked up at the darkening sky. "I don't like the look of those clouds. There's a chance of thunderstorms this afternoon."

"There's a *small* chance of thunderstorms."

"You've lived in Texas a long time, Belle. You know how quickly the weather can change." He turned to face her. "I'm gonna look for her."

LYNN LAFLEUR

"Dolan, she's *fine*. I promise you. She just wanted some alone time. You can understand that."

"Yeah, I can understand that, probably better than anyone." He turned and walked back to Belle. "I . . . care about her."

"I know you do."

Dolan chuckled. Of course Belle knew. She knew everything. "I don't want to care about her."

"Why not?"

"She wants us to be lovers."

"And this is a problem . . . why?"

"You know I don't get involved with guests."

"Make an exception."

He threw back his head and laughed without humor. "You sound like Yvonne."

Belle grinned. "Great minds think alike."

He sauntered back to the window and gazed outside. "I like her, Belle. A lot. I mean, a *lot*. I felt something . . . overpowering the first time I touched her hand. If I get closer to her, if we make love, it'll lead to something much more serious." He turned his head toward her. "I can't fall in love with her. She'll be gone in a couple of weeks."

"Maybe she'll decide to stay."

Dolan laughed again. "Here? Why would she stay at the mansion when she can have the whole world?"

"You might not be the only one who falls in love, Dolan."

"Why would she fall in love with me? I have nothing to offer her. She's used to servants and having everything handed to her with a snap of her fingers. Her family is one of the wealthiest in the States. She's traveled to practically every country in the world. There's nothing for her here."

"There's you."

Seduction's Spell

He spread his arms wide. "I'm a maintenance man. That's nothing."

Belle scowled at him. "Stop putting yourself down or I'll bop you. You have so much to give a woman, I'd need a ream of paper to write down everything."

Dolan smiled. "You're biased."

"Damn right."

"I appreciate your loyalty. It means a lot to me. But I . . . Shit, Belle, I'm a coward. There, I said it. I don't want to get hurt."

"Sometimes you have to hurt to heal," she said softly.

That was true. Dolan knew that better than anyone.

He glanced at his watch "She's been gone for *hours*. You can't sunbathe that long without burning to a crisp."

Something had happened to her. Dolan could feel it deep in his gut. He had to see her, had to know she wasn't hurt. "I'm outta here."

Dolan called Braden on his cell and told him to saddle Ebony. By the time he made it to the stables, Braden had the huge black horse saddled and ready. Throwing a quick, "Thanks" at the young man, Dolan mounted Ebony and took off for the river at a full gallop.

"Yvonne!" Dolan yelled. He pulled up on Ebony's reins. The powerful horse came to an abrupt stop, snorting and stomping his hooves. "Yvonne, answer me!"

The wind whipping through the leaves tossed his voice back at him. "Damn it, where are you?" he muttered. He didn't care if the weather report said only a chance of thunderstorms. He knew those bubbling dark clouds meant a storm would hit . . . and soon.

LYNN LAFLEUR

Belle had said Yvonne wanted to sunbathe in private. There were dozens of places on Belle's land where she could do that. He could spend the rest of the afternoon looking for Yvonne and never find her.

A spattering of raindrops hit the top of his head. Dolan looked up at the sky. The clouds were growing thicker, darker. Surely Yvonne saw the clouds. Even now, she could be on her way back to the mansion.

Unless she was hurt.

His heart clenched in his chest. He had to find her. Soon.

Yvonne jerked awake at the sound of her name. It sounded like Dolan yelling for her. He had no reason to yell since there was nothing wrong. She sat up and pulled her T-shirt over her head. "I'm here!" she called out.

Bushes rustled to her left. Dolan burst through them, his face as dark as the clouds that had filled the sky while she slept. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

"Sunbathing."

He pointed up at the sky. "Do you see any sun?"

"It was shining when I got here."

"It isn't now. You should've headed back to the mansion hours ago."

"I fell asleep."

"You fell asleep." He dropped to his knees beside her. "Do you have any idea how *worried* I was about you?"

He'd worried about her? The knowledge that he cared enough to worry made her heart swell with joy. "You were?"

He cradled her jaw with one warm palm. "I was afraid something had happened to you, that you'd fallen or—"

Seduction's Spell

“Shhh.” She touched his lips with her fingertips. “I’m fine. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

His lips were so soft. She slid her fingers over the upper one, then the bottom. Full and perfectly shaped, they were made for kissing. Desire flooded her body. She wanted to feel his lips against hers, his cock filling her pussy. “Kiss me,” she whispered.

Dolan tilted up her face and lowered his head. Before their lips touched, he stopped, his mouth no more than two inches from hers.

“I shouldn’t do this,” he said, his voice husky.

“Yes, you should.”

Not leaving it up to him to continue and give her what she craved, Yvonne raised her head those final two inches and sealed her mouth to his. Instant heat. She moaned as that heat traveled straight to her clit.

Dolan pulled back and looked into Yvonne’s face. Getting involved with her would end in heartache. He knew that. He also knew some things couldn’t be fought. He didn’t want to get involved with her, but he couldn’t help himself.

The water at the mansion had never affected him as it did the guests. Maybe after five years it was finally getting to him, making him think with his emotions instead of his brain.

Whatever was happening to him, he wanted this woman.

Tilting up her chin, he kissed her again. This time, he didn’t hold back. He poured himself into the kiss, using lips, teeth, and tongue. He sipped at her lips, circled her mouth with his tongue, took tiny nips from that full bottom lip. When she parted her lips, he took advantage and drove his

LYNN LAFLEUR

tongue inside her mouth. She whimpered and clutched at his shirt.

God, she was hot.

Raindrops fell on his head. Dolan ignored them, concentrating instead on ravishing Yvonne's delicious mouth. He almost yelled out, "No!" when she pulled back, not in the least ready to stop kissing her.

He watched her rise to her knees and remove her T-shirt. His gaze passed over her nude form. All the blood in his body fled to his cock at the sight of those luscious breasts and bare pussy.

"I want you, Dolan," she whispered.

He didn't get the chance to respond to her statement for she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again. He had no choice but to return her kiss . . . which didn't bother him at all. Splaying his hands across her back, he pulled her closer to him. Her breasts pressed into his chest, her pussy cradled his cock. She shifted her hips, brushing his hard shaft with every movement.

It would only take him five seconds to unfasten his jeans and be buried deep inside her.

He slid one hand down her side and over her hip. She moved back from him, putting a few inches between their bodies, and spread her knees wider. It gave him room to slide his hand between her thighs. Warm cream covered her swollen feminine lips. Gathering up her moisture on his fingers, Dolan began a gentle massage on her clit.

Yvonne threw back her head. "Yes! More, please."

Still massaging her clit, Dolan leaned down and drew one pink nipple into his mouth. He sucked hard, loving the feel of her nipple growing even larger against his tongue. He rasped

Seduction's Spell

his tongue over the areola before tugging her nipple back between his lips. One breast received his attention, then the other one.

The raindrops grew heavier, pelting his head and back. Dolan tried to ignore them, but couldn't ignore the loud rumbles of thunder. He couldn't leave them out here in the open during a storm. Drawing on all his willpower, he released Yvonne's nipple. "We have to leave."

Her mouth slackened and her eyes widened. "Leave? *Now?*"

He understood her obvious surprise at his comment, but couldn't take the chance of Yvonne getting hurt. "Yeah, now." Lightning flashed in the darkening sky. "We can't be out here during a thunderstorm. Put on your clothes."

Her lips formed a pout. Dolan gave her a quick kiss. "Move."

"Won't we be safe under the trees?"

"Hardly."

"But—"

"No 'buts,' Yvonne. Get dressed."

She didn't look happy, but she did as he ordered. Dolan gathered up her blanket while she tugged her T-shirt back on and slipped into her shorts. Picking up her swimsuit, she stuffed it into her tote bag before sliding on her sandals.

Taking her hand, he led her toward Ebony. "I'll put you in the saddle and I'll sit behind you."

Yvonne stopped suddenly, jolting Dolan to a halt. "What's wrong?"

"That horse is *huge*."

"Yeah, he is. Do you have a problem with that?"

"I've never seen a horse that big."

Despite the thunder booming overhead, Dolan smiled. He

LYNN LAFLEUR

remembered a similar response from Maggie when she first saw Ebony. "I'll ride with you. You'll be fine."

The skies opened up and rain poured down, along with another flash of lightening. Dolan couldn't worry whether or not Yvonne was frightened of Ebony. They had to find shelter *now*. Placing his hands under her arms, he lifted her and placed her in the saddle. "Here," he said, handing her the reins. "Hold on to these while I get on behind you."

He tossed the tote bag to Yvonne, then climbed on the horse behind her. "Put your feet in the stirrups and hang on to the saddle horn." Wrapping one arm tightly around her waist, he took the reins in his other hand and urged Ebony into a gallop.

Ebony's long legs quickly ate up the distance, but they were still soaked by the time Dolan urged the horse to a stop. He dismounted and reached up to help Yvonne from the saddle. He took her hand and tugged her after him as he ran for the back door of his house.

Once inside the kitchen, Dolan toed off his shoes and jerked off his wet socks. "I'll get us some towels. Be right back."

He turned to walk away, but stopped when Yvonne spoke. "Dolan?"

"Yeah?"

"Could-could I use your shower? I'm really cold."

Her hard nipples were proof of that. Dolan told himself not to stare at them. That wasn't easy since he'd had one in his mouth a short time ago, and longed to suck on it again. "Sure. C'mon."

He led her to the bathroom. "Take your time," he said after flipping on the light. "Towels and washcloths are in the cabinet over the toilet."

"Do you have something I could put on?"

Seduction's Spell

If the storm hadn't hit, they'd be making love right now. Desire still flowed through Dolan's veins. The thought of Yvonne wearing a piece of his clothing made him want to take her right here, against the bathroom wall. He cleared his throat. "I'll find something. I'll, uh, hang it on the door-knob."

She smiled. "Thank you."

Dolan stripped off his wet clothes in his bedroom. He caught the reflection of his bed in the mirror as he took a clean T-shirt out of his dresser drawer. Dara changed the sheets for him on Monday and Friday. Since it was Tuesday, he figured they were still clean enough for Yvonne to sleep on.

Hanging his head, he blew out a deep breath. They hadn't even made love yet and he was thinking about her spending the night in his bed.

Yet. He used the word "yet" as if there would be no doubt he and Yvonne would make love. He wanted to. *God*, he wanted to. Thinking about her soft body against his, her lips parted for his tongue, her wet pussy, made his cock hard all over again.

The shower stopped, shaking Dolan from his thoughts. He quickly padded back to the bathroom and hung the T-shirt on the doorknob. Returning to his bedroom, he pulled on a pair of sweat pants. He didn't bother with underwear. He wasn't sure why he bothered with the sweats since he'd probably be naked again as soon as Yvonne came out of the bathroom.

Dolan groaned. It wasn't supposed to be like this. He hadn't made the rule about not getting involved with a guest because he was a saint or didn't like sex. When he cared about someone, he cared deeply. That's why he'd never made love with a

LYNN LAFLEUR

guest, although he'd had plenty of opportunities. He didn't want to fall for a woman and have his heart broken when she left.

That's exactly what would happen with Yvonne.

He heard the bathroom door open. "Dolan?"

"In here."

She entered his bedroom . . . and stole his heart.

Seven

*H*is T-shirt hit her at mid-thigh. He'd given her one of his favorites—an older blue one that almost matched her eyes. Soft from several washings, it flowed over her breasts and hips. Her wet hair lay against her chest, the ends teasing her nipples. They stood at attention, as if begging for his mouth.

She walked up to him, laid her hands on his chest, and offered her mouth for his kiss. Dolan took her gift, parting her lips with his tongue so he could taste her. A hint of mint flowed over his tongue. Groaning, he cradled her jaws with his hands and tilted her head to deepen the kiss. She responded by parting her lips wider and touching the tip of his tongue with her own.

Dolan dropped two more kisses on her mouth before resting his forehead against hers. “Wow.”

“Yeah.”

His hands roamed over her back, enjoying the warmth of her skin through the soft cotton. “You’re quite a kisser.”

LYNN LAFLEUR

“So are you.”

He could feel her breath puff across his lips. It made him want to kiss her again. It made him want to feel that breath all over his body.

Taking her quickly would be easy. He didn’t want that. He wanted to *make love* with Yvonne, not simply fuck her long enough to reach a climax.

Lifting her in his arms, he laid her on his bed and stretched out beside her, propping up on one elbow. “Are you sure about this? If you don’t want me, tell me now.”

Her gaze traveled over his face, his shoulders, his chest. When she looked back in his eyes, he had no doubt of her feelings.

“I want you, Dolan.”

She *did* want him, truly want him. Yvonne hadn’t felt desire this strong in . . . She didn’t think she’d *ever* felt desire this strong. The other men she’d been with had answered a natural, biological need. Well, they’d *tried* to answer it, even if her body hadn’t cooperated.

Dolan answered the need of her heart.

Reaching behind his head, she pulled the elastic band from his hair. She ran her fingers through it, pulling the damp waves forward to fall over his shoulders. She’d never paid much attention to the length of a man’s hair as long as it was clean and neat. Dolan’s was almost as long as hers . . . a thick, dark mane that made him look rugged and incredibly sexy.

“I hate getting haircuts,” he said with a hint of a grin.

Yvonne smiled. “Your hair is gorgeous.”

“I’ve never had any part of me described as ‘gorgeous.’”

“Then there are a lot of blind people in the world.”

Chuckling, he picked up a lock of hair from her breast and

Seduction's Spell

rubbed it between thumb and forefinger. "You're the one with the gorgeous hair." Releasing the lock, he lightly squeezed her breast. "Among other things."

Yvonne closed her eyes and laid her hand on top of his. He moved his hand over her breast, kneading, caressing. A gentle tug on her nipple made her moan.

"Look at me," he whispered.

She opened her eyes again.

"Tell me what you want, what you need from me."

Rolling to her side toward him, she slipped her hand inside the waistband of his sweats. "How about if I show you instead of telling you?"

She kissed him as she wrapped her fingers around his cock. The feel of his hard flesh pulsing against her palm made her moan again.

"God, you're *huge*."

He nipped her bottom lip. "Don't think you can take me?"

She squeezed his shaft until he groaned. "Oh, I can take you, cowboy. Every delicious inch."

Dolan rolled to his back and pulled her on top of him. "I told you I'm not a cowboy."

"Okay. How about stud?"

He grinned devilishly. "That works."

Despite being so turned on she could barely think straight, she could joke with him. How different . . . and refreshing. She sat up, cushioning his erection with her bare pussy. She rocked from side to side, rubbing her clit against his cock. The look of ecstasy on his face made her smile. "Feel good?"

"Oh, yeah." He cradled her breasts through the soft cotton. "It'd feel better without the sweats between us."

"I can take care of that." Moving back on his legs, Yvonne

LYNN LAFLEUR

grabbed the waistband of Dolan's sweats and tugged them past his hips. Her mouth watered at the sight of his hard cock. "Oh, my."

He chuckled. "You're great for a guy's ego, Yvonne."

"*This is great for a gal's everything.*"

She took him in both hands, caressing him with her palms, her fingers. She alternated between looking at the hard flesh in her hands and into his eyes. The turquoise depths seemed to glow with heat. She liked knowing she could make him feel desire so deeply, so fiercely.

His hands tunneled beneath her shirt to hold her bare breasts. Yvonne inhaled sharply and arched her back. "That's nice."

"Take off your shirt so I can see these luscious breasts."

Yvonne did as he asked, tossing the T-shirt to the floor. Dolan squeezed her breasts as he lifted them. "You want to know what's gorgeous? *These* are gorgeous."

So many men had assumed since she was a model, her breasts were the result of a surgeon's help. She wanted Dolan to know she'd never done that. "They're real."

"I knew that when I saw them in the hot tub room." He looked into her eyes. "Why did you feel you had to tell me that?"

"Because a lot of men have assumed they're fake since they're big."

"They're beautiful," he rasped. "*You're* beautiful."

Men had told her that her whole life. She'd always brushed off the compliment, assuming they only told her that because they wanted a job or wanted to fuck her. Dolan's sincere compliment brought a lump to her throat. "Thank you," she whispered.

"C'mere. I need to kiss you again."

Seduction's Spell

“Let me get these off you first.”

Yvonne tugged the sweats down Dolan's legs and dropped them on her T-shirt. She stretched out on top of him, sighing softly at the feel of his nude body against hers. Burying her face in his neck, she breathed deeply of his unique scent . . . man and musk and rain.

“Hey, how about that kiss?”

She covered his lips with her own, kissing him slowly, gently, the way she loved to kiss a man. Dolan's hands drifted up and down her back. He palmed her buttocks and squeezed them, pulling her tighter to his groin. Yvonne wouldn't be able to wait much longer to have him inside her.

She prayed this time would be different, that she'd find fulfillment in Dolan's arms.

Dolan loved kissing Yvonne, but there were other parts of her body he wanted to explore with his mouth. Rolling her to her back, he kissed her lips once more before dipping lower to gently bite her neck. She arched her back and he smiled to himself. She was so responsive, so sexy.

He was going to love every moment of making love to her.

A long lick of her nipple made her moan. She grabbed his hair when he pulled that nipple into his mouth and suckled. She writhed beneath him, as if trying to get even closer to him. Every time she moved, her pelvis brushed his cock.

It would be so easy to slip inside her and find the release his body craved.

That would be selfish. He had to make sure Yvonne was satisfied before he worried about his own climax.

“Dolan, please. I want you inside me.”

“Not yet,” he whispered after dropping a kiss on her navel. “I'm having fun exploring you.”

LYNN LAFLEUR

She grabbed his hair again, lifted his head away from her body, and glared at him. "You're making me *crazy*!"

He grinned. "Good. I like that."

"Arrggh!" Releasing his hair, she dropped her head to her pillow. "Any other man would be in a hurry to fuck."

"I'm not like any other man." He circled her navel with his tongue. "I like to savor a woman, enjoy all the things that make her different from a man."

"Like?"

Dolan ran his hand lightly over her stomach. "Soft skin." He touched her hip and thigh. "Smooth legs." He traveled back up to her breasts. "Lush breasts." His hand caressed her stomach again before gliding between her thighs. "A sweet, wet pussy."

Parting her feminine lips with his thumbs, he inhaled deeply, taking her scent deep into his lungs. He closed his eyes and inhaled again. She smelled like a woman on fire for her man.

"Dolan," she moaned.

"My God, you smell good." He licked her from anus to clit. "You taste even better."

She lifted her hips and spread her legs another inch. "More."

"You want more of my tongue?"

"Yes!"

"Where? Here?" He swiped his tongue across her clit. "Here?" The tip darted inside her. "Here?" Pulling apart her buttocks, he licked her anus again.

Yvonne tightened her buttocks. "No, not there. My clit. Lick my clit."

"Well, if the lady insists."

Dolan had always enjoyed oral sex. He loved to receive it,

Seduction's Spell

but he especially loved to give it. Experience had taught him that a woman could come easier with his tongue than his cock. While he wanted to bury his shaft to the balls inside her, he wanted her to come first. Palming her buttocks, he lifted her pussy to his mouth and began to feast.

She tasted better than the most expensive wine. Her musky, womanly taste hit his tongue and exploded. Growling softly, he lapped at the cream her pussy created. For him. It was all for him.

Yvonne laid one arm over her eyes. Pleasure flowed through her body. Dolan's tongue was absolutely wicked as it flashed over her clit and labia. Close. She was so close to coming. She spread her legs wider, trying to take even more of his tongue.

Everything inside her went dead. In only a few seconds, she went from the height of pleasure to nothing. Dolan didn't change anything. *She* had changed. As usual.

Tears flooded her eyes. She didn't want Dolan to see her cry, didn't want her failure to keep him from reaching a climax. Pulling away from him, she quickly rolled over and rose to her knees.

"Fuck me," she said, not looking at him.

He remained silent for several seconds. "What?"

"Fuck me. Please. I want you inside me."

She felt his fingers probing her pussy. "Are you sure? You didn't come yet."

"Yes. Dolan, *fuck me.*"

Yvonne lowered her face to her crossed arms and silently cried. She felt the bed dip as he moved. A drawer opened. The sound of plastic tearing filled the air. Then he was gripping her hips as he slid his cock inside her.

She knew all the moves and sounds to make so a man would

LYNN LAFLEUR

believe she was in ecstasy. She poured everything into the act . . . groaning, shifting her hips when she needed to, uttering sex words in the right place. All the time, tears flowed from her eyes to wet the bedspread beneath her face.

Dolan's thrusts quickened. Yvonne increased the sex words, begging him to fuck her harder. He obeyed her command, his cock pounding into her pussy. The noise from his flesh slapping against hers covered up her sobs.

A final thrust, a loud moan, and Dolan stopped. Yvonne swallowed the lump in her throat and wiped her eyes. It was over. Once again, she had failed as a woman. She cared for Dolan. She'd been so sure it would be different with him.

She should've known better.

She tensed when he pulled out of her body. She didn't know how she could face him after what happened. Or rather, after what *didn't* happen.

He took one of her arms and pulled her body upright. Yvonne blinked to rid her eyes of any tears before looking at Dolan's face. She gasped when she saw the rage in his eyes.

"Do you want to tell me what the fuck just happened?"

Eight

*T*he guilty look on her face proved what he'd suspected—she'd been faking it. Dolan had no doubt she'd been turned on. The generous cream her pussy produced proved that. But something had happened while he was licking her, something that made her desire fizzle.

“I'm going to the bathroom and get rid of this condom.” He pointed one finger at her. “Don't you move.”

Different women needed different things sexually. Dolan knew that. He thought of the women he'd been with in the past as he took a washcloth from the cabinet over the toilet. Some liked sex tender, some rough, some animalistic. He'd always been able to pick up on their signals and give them what they needed. He thought he'd done the same with Yvonne. She'd been so hot, she should've come as soon as he touched her clit with his tongue.

Obviously, he'd been wrong.

Dolan returned to the bedroom to find Yvonne sitting

LYNN LAFLEUR

cross-legged on the bed. She'd donned his T-shirt again. He'd rather stay naked, but took her cue and picked up his sweat pants. He watched her as he tugged them up his legs. She looked at his cock with longing before dropping her gaze to her lap.

He lay across the bed, facing her. Needing to touch her, he laid his hand on her knee. "What happened?" he asked softly. "Why did you pull away from me?"

Instead of answering his question, she asked one of her own. "How long will the storm last?"

He wanted to shake her for avoiding him. "Depends. It could last a few minutes or the rest of the night. Stop trying to change the subject. I want to know why you pulled away from me."

She shrugged one shoulder. "I wanted you inside me."

"That's bullshit."

She glanced at him, but quickly lowered her gaze again.

Dolan squeezed her knee. "Look at me."

Biting her lower lip, she looked into his eyes.

"I care about you, Yvonne. Talk to me."

Tears filled her eyes. Dolan wanted to take her in his arms, but remained still. Whatever had happened to her, she had to tell him at her own pace.

"I can't . . . I can't come with a man."

"What do you mean, you can't come with a man?"

"I don't think I could've said it any plainer."

"You were turned on. I know you were. Your pussy was so wet."

"I know that." She swiped at a tear that ran down her cheek. "I feel desire. I want to make love. I get so close to having a climax, but it just . . . stops."

Seduction's Spell

"Stops?"

"It's like . . . I die inside. I stop feeling. It's almost as if someone turns a switch off inside my body."

"Has it always been that way for you?"

She nodded. "I was seventeen the first time I had sex." A hint of a smile touched her lips. "My first major crush. We were both virgins and so scared. I figured that's why I didn't come, because I really didn't know what I was doing."

"I'll bet he had no trouble coming."

"I think it took him about forty-five seconds."

Dolan chuckled. "Yeah, that's about right for a seventeen-year-old guy." He ran his hand over her knee and up her leg. "How many lovers have you had?"

"Enough to know it's never different, no matter what." She lifted his hand from her leg and entwined their fingers. "I really wanted you, Dolan. I hope you know that."

"I do. Hell, you've flirted with me since the moment we met."

His joke made her smile, which was exactly what he wanted. "I like to flirt."

"No shit?"

She squeezed his hand while she laughed, then raised it to her face. Tears filled her eyes again as she pressed the back of his hand to her cheek. "I'm sorry I'm a failure."

"Hey." Dolan turned his hand and cradled her jaw. "You aren't a failure."

"I'm not much of a woman."

"You think just because you can't come with a man makes you any less of a woman? Do you have any idea how many women there are in the world who have the same problem?"

She shook her head. "Have you been with any?"

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Honestly? No. But I personally know guys who have. It isn’t that uncommon, Yvonne.”

“Yeah, well, it stinks.”

“Frustrating, huh?”

“Very.”

He circled her lips with his thumb. “What can I do for you?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure?” He dropped a kiss on her knee. “I’ll do anything you want me to do.”

“There isn’t anything you *can* do.”

“No?” Pushing up the hem of her T-shirt, he moved up her thigh, dropping kisses along the way. “Not anything?”

“I don’t-don’t know what.”

The catch in her voice proved his touch affected her. “Well . . .” Dolan licked the crease where her thigh joined her body. “I could take you up again with my tongue.”

“Dolan, you took me as high as I could go. It didn’t make any difference.”

“Hey, no negative thinking allowed. I’m willing to try again.” He touched her clit with his thumb. “Are you?”

Yvonne leaned back on her hands, giving him more room between her thighs. Oh, yes, she was willing to try again. It would be worth any disappointment she might experience to be close to him.

“I have an idea,” he said while continuing to massage her clit.

“What?”

“Do you come when you masturbate?”

She didn’t expect that question, but she wouldn’t lie to him. “Yes.”

Seduction's Spell

"I want to watch you."

His touch made desire flow through her body. His suggestion to watch her masturbate turned that flow into a rushing river. "Watch me?"

"Mmm-hmm." He kissed her as he slid his hand between her legs. She could taste herself on his lips. "I think I should do everything I can to turn you on." He pushed two fingers inside her. "Then I want you to make yourself come."

Yvonne melted. No man had ever cared so much for her that he'd put aside his own feelings to make sure she was satisfied. Cradling his face in her hands, she kissed him tenderly. "You're a special man, Dolan."

He kissed her again, so sweetly it made her heart hurt. For the first time in her life, she thought it possible for her to fall in love.

She parted her lips when his tongue touched them. He explored her mouth slowly, as if there was nothing he'd rather do than kiss her. Yvonne loved to kiss, but most times her would-be lover was in too much of a hurry to get between her legs. Her body responded, growing warmer. Her nipples peaked, her pussy creamed.

"Mmm, I love having my fingers inside you."

His warm breath gusted across her ear. Goose bumps erupted on her flesh.

"You're really wet. And swollen." He flicked his thumb over her clit. "Do you like this?"

"You have to ask?"

He chuckled, a wicked masculine sound that sent a shiver through her body. "I think . . ." He kissed that sensitive spot beneath her ear before devouring her mouth. "I think we need to be naked."

LYNN LAFLEUR

Yvonne agreed with that. Grabbing the hem of her T-shirt, she pulled it over her head and tossed it aside. "Your turn."

He rolled off the bed and removed his sweats. Yvonne had but a moment to admire his naked body before he returned to her side. Bending at the waist, he latched on to one of her nipples. She arched her back, trying to push her whole breast into his mouth.

"Harder, Dolan. Suck harder."

He obeyed her, suckling first one nipple, then the other. The entire time he loved her breasts, his fingers continued to move in and out of her pussy and caress her clit.

She'd never in her life been so hot.

Needing to touch him as intimately as he touched her, she wrapped her hand around his cock. "Inside me. Please."

"No. This is for you."

"But I—"

His kiss silenced her protest. He pushed her backward, until she reclined on the bed. Her new position made her release his shaft. She moaned her objection. "Dolan, please! Let me touch you."

"I'd rather you touch *you*." Taking her hand, he guided it to her pussy. "Touch yourself. I want to watch."

She looked into his eyes and saw the burning lust there. Despite his own need for release, he was ignoring it so she could be satisfied first.

Love bloomed inside her heart.

Yvonne moved her fingers, spreading her own cream over her labia and clitoris. Each time she touched her clit, her desire rose another degree. She knew her own body. She knew it wouldn't be long before a staggering orgasm gripped her.

Dolan slid down the bed and rested his head on her thigh.

Seduction's Spell

"That's the way," he whispered. "Make yourself come for me."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than she arched her hips and shuddered. Smaller tremors shook her body, one after the other. After the last one died, she collapsed on the bed, her heart pounding, her lungs struggling for air.

She didn't know how long she lay there, trying to recuperate. When she could think clearly again, she realized Dolan was gently licking her pussy. She touched the top of his head. He looked into her eyes, but continued to nuzzle her intimate flesh.

"Hey," she said softly.

He licked her from clit to anus and back again. "A woman's orgasm is the best taste in the world."

Yvonne laughed. She'd just had the most powerful climax she'd had in a long time, and Dolan made her laugh. "You're insane, do you know that?"

"Yeah," he said with a grin. "But I'm fun."

Parting her buttocks, he tickled her anus with his tongue. Immediately uncomfortable, Yvonne ran her hands into his hair and tugged so he had to raise his head. "It's my turn to lick you."

"I'm not through down here."

Yes, you are, if you insist on playing with my ass. "Let me take care of you now."

"I'm not in any hurry." He circled her anus with his thumb. "I'd rather play with you a while longer."

Apparently being subtle didn't work with Dolan. Yvonne scooted up on the bed so he could no longer touch her. "Please don't do that."

A frown wrinkled his forehead. "Don't do what?"

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Don’t touch my anus. It makes me . . . uncomfortable.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t want you uncomfortable.” He kissed the inside of her knee. “All the women I’ve been with have liked that.”

“I guess that makes me unique.”

“Mmm, wonderfully unique.”

He kissed his way up her leg, her stomach, her breasts, until he claimed her mouth. Yvonne tilted back her head and parted her lips for his tongue. She reached for his hard shaft, cradling it in both her hands.

“Yeah,” Dolan growled. “Touch my cock.”

She wanted to do more than simply touch it. “Lie down.”

He did as she ordered, reclining on his back. Yvonne moved between his knees and once again took his penis in her hands. She caressed the velvety flesh from balls to tip.

“Damn, babe, that’s nice.”

Other men had called her “babe.” It sounded cheap coming from their lips. From Dolan, it sounded like an endearment.

Leaning forward, she took him in her mouth. He hissed through his teeth. “*Shit!*”

Yvonne circled the head of his cock with her tongue before sliding her lips down the length of him. She’d performed oral sex on several men because she felt as if she had to. With Dolan, she *wanted* to. She wanted to give him as much pleasure as possible.

He gathered up her hair in one fist and guided her movement. “Right there. Yeah, that’s the way. Take me deeper.”

Opening her mouth wider, she took him as far as she could. He shifted his hips, driving his cock even farther down her throat. Yvonne gagged and released him.

Seduction's Spell

Dolan sat up and kissed her. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You're bigger than I'm used to taking, stud."

He chuckled. "Sorry about that."

"Trust me, I'm not the least bit sorry." She pushed on his shoulders. "Lie back so I can love you."

The combination of Dolan's and her scents teased her nose as she took him in her mouth again. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply while running her tongue up and down his length. Oral sex with other men had always been distasteful for her. She loved sharing this intimacy with Dolan.

"Yvonne, I'm close. You'd better stop."

She licked his length again. "I don't want to stop."

"I'm gonna come, babe."

"I want you to."

With a groan, he arched his hips. He grabbed her head, pulling her hair, but she didn't care. All she cared about was his pleasure. "Yvonne . . . *Fuck!*"

His essence filled her mouth. Yvonne swallowed it greedily, not wanting to lose one drop. His hips jerked once, twice, before he lay still.

She climbed over the top of him on her hands and knees. Dolan opened his eyes. He blew out a breath and pushed his hair back from his face. "Dayum."

Yvonne laughed at his heavy Southern accent. "Does that mean you liked it?"

"Oh, yeah." Tunneling his fingers into her hair, he tugged her face closer and kissed her. "I liked it a lot."

"So did I."

She stretched out on top of him, resting her cheek on his chest. The feel of his hands sliding up and down her back

LYNN LAFLEUR

made her want to purr. For the first time ever, she wasn't in a hurry to chase off a lover. In fact, she wanted to stay right here with Dolan for the rest of the night.

He kissed the top of her head. "Are you thirsty?"

"Mmm-hmm. And hungry."

"Me, too. I don't have a lot of food in the kitchen, but I'll find something for us."

A knock on the front door made Yvonne raise her head. "Someone's here? In the rain?"

"I'd better see who it is."

She moved aside so Dolan could get up from the bed. He bent over and picked up his sweat pants from the floor. She sighed at the sight of his firm buttocks.

He must have heard the sound, for his eyes were twinkling with amusement when he looked back at her. Tilting up her chin, he dropped a kiss on her lips. "Be right back."

Nine

Dolan opened his front door to find Belle standing beneath the overhang on his porch. She wore a heavy rain slicker. “Belle?”

“Hi.” She lifted a plastic-covered tray. “I brought you and Yvonne something to eat. I figured you two would spend the evening alone instead of coming over to the mansion for supper. Here’s the rest of the pork roast, plus fruit, cheese, and that crusty bread you like so much. Oh, and a bottle of Chardonnay.”

He was about to ask Belle how she knew Yvonne was here, but stopped before he voiced the question. Logically, she shouldn’t know about Yvonne, or the fact that they hadn’t eaten yet. He’d learned a long time ago that Belle defied any logic. Instead, he asked, “You came over here in this storm with a *snack*?”

She shrugged. “I like walking in the rain.”

He burst out laughing. “Forty-mile-per-hour wind gusts with thunder and lightning is more than simply ‘rain,’ Belle.”

LYNN LAFLEUR

She handed the tray to him. "Chocolate chip cookies in the blue bowl. Enjoy your meal. I'll see you tomorrow."

Chuckling, Dolan shut the door with his foot. Only Belle would brave a storm to make sure her friend had something to eat. She was an incredible woman.

Another incredible woman waited for him in his bedroom. The snack would help build up their strength. He planned to make love to Yvonne over and over. Dolan wanted to help her. Even if he never made love to her again after tonight, he wanted to help her find fulfillment in a man's arms.

The thought of another man touching her sent a sharp pain through his chest.

Shaking off any bad feelings, Dolan continued to the bedroom. He almost stumbled when he walked through the doorway. Yvonne lay on the bed on her back, one knee bent, one arm over her head. The position let him clearly see the pink flesh between her thighs. Despite having two recent orgasms, his cock responded to the sight of her sweet pussy.

She turned her head toward him and smiled. "Whatcha got?"

"Belle brought us a snack."

"She came over here in the *rain*?"

"Yeah. She's a good friend."

Yvonne sat up and leaned against the headboard. "So she knows I'm here with you?"

He set the tray on the end of the bed, then removed his sweats. "She knew you were here before I opened the door."

"How is that possible?"

Dolan propped a pillow against the headboard and sat next to her. "Belle is a woman of many talents."

"You make her sound like a witch or something."

Seduction's Spell

"Or something." Tugging the tray between them, he peeled off the plastic cover. "Belle is . . . unique."

"How?"

"I think Belle should tell you about Belle." Dolan plucked a large red grape from the bunch and held it up to Yvonne's mouth. She parted her lips and accepted the piece of fruit. "I'd rather hear about you."

"I'm boring."

"I doubt that." The special bread Lottie baked was still warm and slathered with butter. Dolan tore a hunk off the loaf and took a healthy bite. "How long have you been a model?"

"Since I was twelve."

"Wow, that's pretty young."

She shrugged. "I know models who started younger than that." With a mischievous grin, she snatched the bread from his hand and took a bite.

"Hey, that's mine."

"It's mine now."

"Brat."

"Yes, I know." She took another bite of bread. "How about some wine?"

"I guess I can pour it since my hands are empty."

Yvonne grinned. She liked teasing with him. A lover had never stuck around long enough so she could play with him. But then, she'd never allowed a lover to stick around. She'd always made them leave as soon as the sex was over.

"Here," he said, handing her a glass of wine.

"Thanks." She watched Dolan spear a piece of pork with a toothpick and pop it into his mouth. The man oozed sex appeal, even eating. The fact that he ate while in the nude helped that sex appeal immensely.

LYNN LAFLEUR

Men had flitted through her life. She hadn't cared anything about them, hadn't cared if she ever saw them again. She cared about Dolan, and wanted to know everything about him.

Scooting down on the bed, she propped up on one elbow and took a sip of wine. "Tell me about you. Where were you born, where did you grow up, what did you do before you came to work here, how—"

"Hold it. How about letting me answer a question before you ask twenty more?"

Yvonne grinned. "I get ahead of myself sometimes."

"I noticed."

She waited while he ate another bite of pork. "I was born in San Jose and grew up in the Bay Area."

"What got you from there to here?"

When he didn't continue, she nudged his stomach with one finger. "So? Give. What brought you to Belle On The Bend?"

A look of unease filled his eyes. "I thought we were going to talk about you."

"What's wrong? Are you hiding some deep, dark secret?"

The uneasiness didn't leave his eyes. In fact, she thought he looked very uncomfortable. "Dolan? Talk to me."

He poured a glass of wine for himself and took a healthy sip. "I left a life I wanted no part of, Yvonne. I'd rather not talk about it."

"That bad?"

He swirled the liquid in his glass. "Nothing illegal, if that's what you're thinking."

"That never entered my mind. You're too honorable a man to do anything illegal."

His turquoise gaze speared hers. "You don't know me that

Seduction's Spell

well, Yvonne.”

“I know enough about you to be sure you’d never intentionally hurt anyone.”

“Intentionally, no,” he muttered, staring down into his wine.

He remained silent for several moments, gazing into his wine, at the tray, at the ceiling . . . everywhere but into her eyes. The tortured look on his face touched her heart. She nibbled on her bread and waited for him to speak.

Finally, he released a heavy sigh and looked into her eyes. “Are you a sports fan, Yvonne?”

The question surprised her, so she didn’t answer for a moment. She couldn’t imagine what sports had to do with them. “You mean professional sports? Baseball, basketball, stuff like that?”

Dolan nodded. “Football, to be exact.”

Yvonne wrinkled her nose in distaste. “All those brawny guys carrying a little ball from one end of a field to the other? Looking at those firm asses in tight pants is nice. Other than that, the game makes no sense to me.”

Chuckling, he stretched out beside her. “I’ve never heard football described like that, but yeah, that’s the game.”

“What does that have to do with you?”

“I was a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers until five years ago.”

“Quarterback. That’s the one who throws the ball, right?”

“Right. He’s also the one usually in the limelight. I couldn’t go out on a date without a photographer in my face.”

“So you know how *I* feel.”

“Yeah, I do.” He took another sip of his wine, then set the glass on the nightstand. “I was good friends with a lot of my

LYNN LAFLEUR

teammates. When you practically live with guys most of the year, you get to know them pretty well. One of my closest friends—Randy—was a wide receiver. God, he was good. I swear he'd jump six feet in the air to catch my pass."

She didn't like Dolan talking about his friend in the past tense. "'Was'? He doesn't play anymore?"

"No. Not anymore." He ran his fingers through his hair, pushing it back from his face. "We liked to party. Nothing wrong there. We were both young and single and perpetually horny. Women were easy. It wasn't unusual for us to fuck two different gals a night. Or more."

"And compare stories."

"Yeah." He shrugged one shoulder. "Pretty juvenile, huh?"

Yvonne laid her hand over his. She softly caressed the back with her fingertips, silently giving him her support.

"We went to a party at a friend of a friend's house. Actually, more of an acquaintance than a friend. Anyway, Randy immediately hooked up with a gorgeous redhead and spent most of the evening with her. I didn't care that he deserted me 'cause I had a brunette on each arm. We drank a lot, again nothing unusual. I hooked up with him again shortly after midnight. His eyes were too glassy for just booze. I suspected someone slipped something into his drink. There were people at that party who would do exactly that. Randy liked to drink and have a good time, but he didn't do drugs of any kind . . . not even pot.

"His actions bothered me. He was laughing too loud, clumsy, falling over furniture. This guy was like a ballerina on the field. Everyone bumps into a wall now and then, but this was so totally unlike him, it scared me. I knew I had to get him out of there. We'd come in our own cars, but I didn't want him driving. He refused to go with me at first. I finally talked him

Seduction's Spell

into it.

"I went to get our jackets. When I got back to the living room, he was gone. He'd left with the redhead."

A chill raced down her spine. She was afraid to ask her next question. "So she drove and Randy was fine, right?"

"No, she didn't drive." Dolan took her hand in his. "Randy did. He . . ." His voice broke. After clearing his throat, he started again. "He missed a curve and drove off a cliff into the bay."

Yvonne gasped and tears flooded her eyes. "Oh, no."

"Both of them were killed. They found drugs in Randy's system when they did the autopsy."

"Did-did the police catch who drugged him?"

Dolan shook his head. "Whoever did it certainly wasn't going to confess. No one came forward with a name. There were dozens of people at that party, some of them drop-ins. It could've been anyone. It could've even been the redhead." He closed his eyes and threw his head back. "Damn it, Yvonne, I should've done something more. I should've made him go with me to get our jackets. I should've left the fuckin' jackets there! *Shit!*"

He jerked to an upright position. Drawing his knees up to his chest, he lowered his forehead to his crossed arms. Yvonne watched his back lift and fall with a deep breath. It broke her heart to know he was in pain.

Rising to her knees behind him, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and hugged him tightly. "Your friend's death isn't your fault."

"He was *twenty-six years old*, Yvonne. He had his whole life ahead of him. I could've done *something*—"

"No." She moved to his side and slid her hand beneath his

LYNN LAFLEUR

chin, forcing him to look into her eyes. "There's nothing you could've done, nothing you could've changed. It was his time, Dolan."

"You believe that shit, that we all have a 'time' to die?"

"Yes, I do. No matter how much we might want things to be different, we can't change the course of Fate." Cradling his face in her hands, she kissed him softly. "You can't feel guilty."

"But I do," he rasped. "I'll feel guilty the rest of my life. I was off getting smashed on bourbon and fucking some nameless woman when someone drugged Randy's drink. If I'd been there with him, it wouldn't have happened. He wouldn't be dead."

"It wasn't your fault, Dolan. You have to believe that."

He pulled her hands from his face and held them tightly. "I had to watch his parents and brother at the funeral. I sat there with my teammates and their families and watched his mother sobbing. I couldn't even talk to her after the service. I didn't feel worthy of offering my sympathy."

His eyes glittered with tears. Yvonne's throat clogged with her own tears, leaving her unable to speak. All she could do was clutch his hands and let him talk.

"Other than an occasional glass of wine or a beer, I don't drink anymore. I gave up my football career and came to Texas to try and forget, to try and figure out if I could've done something different. I've been here five years. *Five years*. I still think about Randy and wonder how I could've saved him."

If there'd been any doubt in her mind that she loved him, that doubt completely vanished. Love bloomed in her heart and flowed throughout her body. It made her want to protect him, to do whatever she could to help him. "I wish I knew

Seduction's Spell

what to say to make you feel better.”

“I appreciate that.” His gaze skittered away from her. He blinked and cleared his throat. “I, uh, unloaded a lot on you.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“I don’t talk about that to anyone.”

“Then I feel special.”

He looked at her again. “Yes, you’re special. You’re *very* special.”

The look in his eyes made her breath catch. She wanted to call it love, but didn’t dare. Just because she loved him didn’t mean he returned her feelings.

“It’s getting late,” Dolan said. “I should walk you back to the mansion. Unless . . .”

Her heart jumped. “Unless?”

He kissed her palm. “Unless you’d like to spend the night with me.”

Yvonne smiled. “I’d like that very much.”

Ten

Yvonne lay on her side, her hands beneath her pillow, and watched Dolan sleeping. She had a hard time believing this man—this charming, loving man—had made love to her last night. He'd watched her masturbate, something she'd never done in front of any man. It had been so important to him for her to be satisfied. He'd put aside his own needs, his own desires, for her.

Dolan couldn't be the only unselfish, considerate man in the world, but he was the only one Yvonne had ever met. The men she'd met had used her, wanting to fuck her because of her fame, fortune, or family.

She'd never trusted any man except Dolan.

He'd tell her it didn't matter if she couldn't reach a climax with him. He'd tell her again that a lot of women had the same problem. It might not matter to him, but it did to her. And in time, if their relationship continued, it *would* matter to him. Dolan blamed himself for his friend's death. He'd do

Seduction's Spell

the same with her—blame himself for not satisfying her.

Because of that, she had to leave him.

Tears filled her eyes at the thought of never again waking up beside him, feeling his warm skin touching hers. She felt so safe with him, as if nothing could ever hurt her with him by her side. But for him, because she loved him, she'd leave so he could find a woman who would be worthy of him.

She kissed the tip of her finger and touched his lips. "Good-bye, my love."

Breakfast in bed sounded like a good idea.

Dolan awoke slowly, the thought of doing something special for Yvonne tickling his brain. He usually ate at the mansion, but he did know how to cook. He could whip up a huge cheese omelet that they could share. After they made love. He smiled as his cock roared to life. Oh, yeah, he liked that idea a lot. He loved early-morning sex. He liked waking up with a woman in his arms, feeling her smooth skin next to his. Since he rarely spent the night with a woman, he hadn't awakened next to anyone in a long time. He wanted to slip inside Yvonne's body, experience that warmth, that tightness, around his shaft.

The sound of his front door closing brought him fully awake. Opening his eyes, he looked on the other side of the bed. It was empty.

"Yvonne?"

He raised up on one elbow and listened for any noise. Nothing. "Yvonne," he called louder.

Dolan threw back the covers and rose from the bed. He searched every room of his small house. No Yvonne. That meant the sound of the door closing must have been her leaving.

LYNN LAFLEUR

Oh, no. She wasn't going to get away from him that easily.

Dolan tugged on his sweat pants. Snatching up his keys from the dresser, he ran into the living room and out the door. He stepped out on his porch and scanned the area around the house. A flash of light caught his eye. Dolan jerked his head to the left in time to see Yvonne jogging toward the mansion, her blond hair flying behind her.

"Yvonne, wait!"

He dashed after her, his long legs quickly eating up the distance between them. She disappeared through the back door of the mansion. By the time he entered the house after her, she was running up the stairs. If she made it to her room before he caught her, she'd hide in there and never talk to him.

"Yvonne, stop!"

He caught the tail of her T-shirt in one hand. She twisted away from him before he could get a good hold on the fabric. Two more steps and she slammed the door to her room in his face. He heard the deadbolt click into place.

"*Damn it!*" he muttered. Banging on the door would wake up everyone in the mansion. He had to convince her to open the door on her own. He knocked softly. "Yvonne, please talk to me."

"Go away!"

Her voice sounded close. She must be right inside the door. Dolan placed his mouth against the facing where the door closed. "Yvonne, let me in. We need to talk."

Silence. He knocked again. "Yvonne?"

When she still said nothing, Dolan took his ring of keys from his pocket and located the master key. He aimed it for the deadbolt.

"Don't do that, Dolan."

Seduction's Spell

He jumped at the sound of Belle's voice behind him. He looked at her over his shoulder, the key still poised in his hand. She wore a purple jogging suit, her hands buried in the jacket pockets.

"She doesn't want you right now."

"I have to talk to her."

Belle took a step closer to him. "Let me talk to her first, all right? Lottie's in the kitchen. Go get a cup of coffee."

"I don't want any goddamn coffee!"

Belle frowned. "Don't take that tone with me."

Frustrated, Dolan ran his hand through his tangled hair. He knew Belle only wanted to help him, but he didn't want her help. He needed to settle this with Yvonne himself.

Except Yvonne didn't want to talk to him right now.

Sighing heavily, Dolan slipped his keys back into his pocket. "I'll go get some coffee."

"Good. I'll join you in the kitchen after I talk to Belle."

Yvonne hurt everywhere. Crying always made her ache, and she hadn't cried so much in years.

Leaning back against the door, she drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. She'd managed to make it to her room, but her legs had given out when she walked through the door. She'd slid to the floor, sobs shaking her body. She'd fallen head over heels in love with Dolan. Waking up in his bed this morning had been a tiny slice of heaven. But she knew he could never love her back. He couldn't possibly want a woman who couldn't find enjoyment in his arms.

The knock on her door made her wince. She couldn't face Dolan, not now when she hurt so badly. "Go away, Dolan!"

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Yvonne, it’s Belle. May I come in?”

No, she didn’t want to talk to anyone, not even Belle. “I-I’d rather not, Belle. Would you leave me alone please?”

“It’s important that we talk. I’d really like to come in.”

Yvonne wiped the tears from her cheeks, but they continued to trickle from her eyes. “I want to be alone.”

Several moments of silence passed before Belle spoke again. “Yvonne, it’s very important to me to give my guests their privacy. It’s also important for me to make sure they’re all right. I don’t like the idea of using my master key to open your door, but I will.”

It appeared that Yvonne didn’t have much of a choice. She pushed herself up from the floor, turned the deadbolt, and opened the door.

Tears flooded Yvonne’s eyes again at the look of concern on Belle’s face. She turned away and covered her eyes.

She heard the soft click of the door, then felt Belle touch her shoulder. “You can tell me anything, Yvonne. I hope you know that.”

Yvonne let Belle lead her to the bed. She sat on the side while Belle disappeared into the bathroom. Her hostess returned with a box of tissues. Belle sat on the bed, placing the box between them.

“I thought you might need those.”

Yvonne couldn’t help a weak chuckle. “Yeah, my nose is running like a river.” Popping one tissue from the box, she blew her nose. She used another tissue to wipe her eyes, then clutched it to give herself something to do with her hands. She glanced around the room, looking at everything but Belle.

Belle touched Yvonne’s arm. “Dolan cares deeply for you.”

“He can’t. I’m not even a whole woman.”

Seduction's Spell

"That isn't true. Whatever problems you think you have, Dolan will help you work through them."

Yvonne wiped her eyes again. "He-he's the first man I've ever really wanted. I mean, there've been men." She laughed without humor. "Oh, God, have there been men. I don't think I can count high enough to tell you all the lovers I've had."

"You were looking for your soul mate. Now you've found him."

"He can't love me." Fresh tears flooded her eyes. "He might say it-it doesn't matter, but I-I know it does. He'll grow to hate me someday. He'll feel like it's his fault, that he can't satisfy me. But it isn't his fault! It's all m-me."

"Dolan would never hate you. He cares so much for you. I don't think he realizes yet how much he cares." Belle pushed Yvonne's hair back over her shoulders. "Did he tell you about Randy?"

Yvonne nodded.

"That had to be difficult for him. He was here almost two months before he told me about his friend. Dolan is a great listener, but he doesn't open up to very many people."

"He told me I'm sp-special."

"He truly believes that or he wouldn't have said it. Dolan never lies." Belle squeezed Yvonne's hand once more before standing. "I'm going to tell Dolan you need some time alone, but you'll talk to him later. All right?"

"All right," she whispered.

Once Belle left the room, Yvonne curled up in a ball on the bed. No man had ever treated her like a lady the way Dolan had. Even when she'd thrown herself at him, he'd remained a gentleman. A man that kind, that considerate, deserved a woman who was truly whole.

LYNN LAFLEUR

She wasn't that woman.

She'd talk to him. She owed him that much. Then she'd leave Belle On The Bend and never come back.

Dolan sat on the top step of the stairs, legs spread wide, his clasped hands resting against his chin. He wanted so badly to go in Yvonne's room. Despite what Belle had said about giving Yvonne time, he felt as if he needed to talk to her now. He loved her. He'd never loved a woman in his life. He needed to tell Yvonne that.

He lurched to his feet at the sound of Yvonne's door opening. He whirled around, expecting to see the woman he loved. Instead, Belle stepped from the room and closed the door behind her.

"Can I go in now?"

Belle shook her head. "She's pretty upset. She needs some time alone."

Dolan pushed his hair back from his face. "I need to talk to her, Belle."

"I know you do, but she wants to be alone. Go take a shower and get cleaned up. Maybe she'll be ready to talk to you by then."

He stared past Belle to Yvonne's door, torn between wanting to give Yvonne her privacy and needing to hold her.

"She's fine. Upset, but fine. I promise." A hint of a smile touched her lips. "Go shower, Dolan. You smell like sex."

Dolan chuckled. Leave it to Belle to say something outrageous to make him feel better. "Yeah, I probably do."

"She'll come to you when she's ready. Don't push her."

"Easier said than done. I want to go in her room right now and tell her I—" He stopped before admitting his love.

Seduction's Spell

Yvonne should be the first one he told of his feelings, not Belle.

Belle smiled tenderly. "I know."

"You would." He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "I'll be back later."

A quarterback learned to wait for the best time to throw the football. He had to hold it, look for his open man, even when the entire defensive line was about to tackle him. Dolan had been one of the best quarterbacks in the game.

Playing the game hadn't prepared him for being in love. This took a totally different kind of patience.

Problems popped up all day around the mansion, meaning he never got the chance to talk to Yvonne. He wanted to take her in his arms, hold her, show her with his body how much he cared. He didn't believe one roll in the hay with him would magically "cure" Yvonne of her problem. That would take time and understanding.

He was willing to devote his life to help her.

Marriage had never been a consideration for him. Despite his parents' happy relationship, Dolan hadn't believed there was one woman in the world perfect for him. After only two days with Yvonne, he knew she was that one woman.

Now he had to convince Yvonne he was the one man for her.

Dolan had already talked to Lottie about preparing a special dinner for two to be served at his house. Dara would check everything, make sure he had plenty of clean towels and fresh sheets on the bed. And candles. Dolan knew women loved candles. He and Yvonne would have the entire evening—and night—to talk and learn about each other.

LYNN LAFLEUR

After a day of working on all the problems he hadn't planned to work on, Dolan desperately needed a shower before he did anything else. He pulled off his T-shirt on the way to the bathroom.

A gentle knock on his front door stopped him in the bathroom doorway. It was too early for Lottie, and he hadn't found Yvonne yet to invite her to dinner. He hoped it wasn't *another* problem he had to solve today. Tossing his shirt on top of the dirty clothes hamper, he headed for the door.

Yvonne stood on his small porch. He smiled. "Hey."

She smiled weakly. "Hi."

He rubbed a hand across his sweaty belly. "I was about to hit the shower. Come on in."

"No, that's okay. I don't need to . . . This won't take . . ."

She cleared her throat. "Dolan, I'm here to say good-bye."

Eleven

Dolan stared at Yvonne. He couldn't possibly have heard what he thought he'd heard. "What?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow morning."

"You're leav— What?"

"I went online a few minutes ago and made my flight reservation. My plane leaves at ten-thirty from the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport."

Dolan's shock at her sudden decision to leave soon turned to anger. She'd made a reservation without even talking to him first. Taking her wrist, he tugged her into the house and closed the door. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I decided to go home. I need to get back to work."

"You've been here two days. That's hardly a vacation."

She shrugged one shoulder. "I wasn't sure how long I'd stay when I came here. Belle knew that."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Dolan leaned against the door. "You're running away."

LYNN LAFLEUR

Guilt flashed through her eyes before she tilted up her chin. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it? You don't want to face your problems. I guess you really are a coward."

Yvonne's mouth dropped open. He saw the pain in her eyes before she looked away. "I don't have to answer to you."

"That's true. You only have to answer to yourself. Do you honestly think running away from me will solve anything?"

She looked at him again. Dolan could see the fire of anger building in her eyes. Good. Anger would make her fight . . . and tell him the truth.

"I have to work, Dolan."

"That's bullshit. I know who your parents are, Yvonne. Your father invented a navigation device that's used by every major airline in every airplane they fly. You're loaded."

"I don't sit back and collect an allowance from my father. I *work*, Dolan. You may think modeling is easy, but it is *far* from easy. I watch every bite I eat so I don't gain weight, exercise every day to keep in shape, work long hours with little sleep."

"I understand that. I went through the same thing in football training. What I don't understand is why you're running away from me."

"God, you're impossible." Yvonne threw up her hands and turned her back on him. "Can't you just accept the fact that I'm going back to work?"

"No, I can't. It's more than simply your job."

"I just want to go home. I don't need to explain myself to you."

"I thought you were a fighter, Yvonne. Fighters don't run."

"I don't need this." She faced him again. "Please move. I want to leave."

Seduction's Spell

"Not until you're honest with me. And yourself."

"Dolan, I'm not—"

"You're afraid to be intimate with me again, afraid of 'failing' as a woman. That's it, isn't it?"

"I have to go."

He leaned closer until his face was no more than six inches from hers. "Isn't it?"

"Yes!" Tears filled her eyes. "Yes," she whispered.

His heart broke to see the agony in her eyes. Drawing her into his arms, he held her while her tears fell on his shoulder. "Don't you know how I feel about you?" he asked, his voice husky. "I love you, Yvonne."

Lifting her head, she looked in his face. "We've known each other for two days."

He wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs. "What difference does that make? I love you as much as you love me."

A hint of the teasing he adored crept into her eyes. "I never said I love you."

"You don't have to say it. I know how you feel."

She touched his face, her fingertips gliding over his cheekbones. "Yes, I do. So very much." She kissed him softly. "I've never trusted a man the way I trust you. I thought I'd be alone my whole life. Men only wanted to use me, to further themselves with my family. They'd fuck me and toss me aside, like last week's newspapers. You didn't do that."

"I avoided you because I knew I couldn't toss you aside. You touched my heart as soon as I met you, Yvonne."

Dolan kissed her, slow and gentle. He wanted to make love to her, but now wasn't the time. They still had a lot to talk about before they shared their bodies with each other.

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Lottie is bringing over a special dinner for us in about an hour. We can talk while we eat.” He kissed her once more. “Do you want to use my computer to cancel your plane reservation?”

“Dolan, are you sure? What if I’m never able to come with you?”

“Then I’ll watch you make yourself come.” He slid his hands up and down her back. “I think it’s incredibly sexy to watch a woman masturbate.”

She drew a circle on his chest with one fingertip. “You do?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Maybe you’ll do the same for me sometime.”

“If that’s what you want.”

Her smile was totally wicked. He liked that. “Goody.”

Dolan laughed, then kissed the tip of her nose. “My computer is in the spare bedroom. Go cancel your reservation while I take a shower.”

Yvonne watched him walk down the short hall and into the bathroom. It felt as if her heart were swelling with joy. How she loved him. What other man would be willing to push aside something he might need sexually to be sure she had what she needed?

What did I do to deserve a man as wonderful as Dolan?

She headed for the spare bedroom, but stopped before she’d taken three steps. Maybe she had a problem achieving an orgasm during sex, yet Dolan certainly didn’t. Right now, this moment, she wanted to do whatever necessary to please him. It would be a bonus for her to look at that delectable body.

The bathroom was steamy when she opened the door. She could make out the outline of Dolan’s body in the opaque glass shower stall. Closing the door behind her, she began to

Seduction's Spell

remove her clothing. After she dropped her panties on the floor, she opened the shower door.

He stood facing the spray, so he didn't see her. Yvonne let her gaze slowly travel over his back, buttocks, and down his long legs. His body was tan, except for that cute white bottom. She smiled. The man needed some time sunbathing nude.

Closing the door behind her, she took a step closer to him and touched his back. He jerked and whipped his head to the side, looking at her over his shoulder. "Yvonne."

"I thought you might like your back washed."

"Sounds good." He held the wash cloth out to her. "There you go."

"Uh-uh. I'd rather use my hands."

She reached past him, picked up the bar of soap, and worked up a thick lather in her hands. "Lean forward." He did as she said, resting his palms on the wall. Yvonne spread the lather over his back slowly, enjoying the feel of his warm, slick skin beneath her palms. She washed his shoulders, the back of his neck, under his arms. She ran her hands down his sides to his hips before reaching for the bar of soap again. Once his back was completely covered in white foam, she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly.

Dolan took her hands in his. "Mmm, nice."

"You like my breasts touching your back?"

"I like your breasts touching any part of me."

She smiled and kissed his shoulder. "So you'd like a breast massage?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Maybe that can be arranged." She slid her hands down to his buttocks and squeezed them. "Do you know you have an incredible ass?"

LYNN LAFLEUR

“I can say the same thing about you.”

The soap lather slithered down his body, making her hands glide easily across his skin. She squeezed his buttocks again before moving her hands over his thighs to his groin. It didn't surprise her to find his cock already hard.

“Ooh, what's this? A toy for me to play with?”

Eyes narrowed, he looked at her over his shoulder. “You'll get about five seconds of play time before this turns serious.”

She caressed the length of him with her palms and fingertips. “God, you're huge. I can't believe I had all this inside me.”

Yvonne barely had time to yelp before she found herself plastered against the wall with her wrists pinned above her head. “Believe it,” he growled.

He devoured her mouth with his lips and tongue. The warm water cascaded over them, washing away the last of the lather as he kissed her. She accepted the thrust of his tongue, the nip of his teeth on her lips. His pelvis shifted with each kiss, pressing his erection into her belly.

Yvonne sighed at the feel of that hard cock against her.

She moaned when Dolan leaned down and pulled her nipple between his lips. His tongue circled the hard tip and areola before he drew her nipple back into his mouth and suckled. Each tug of his mouth made her clit throb.

“My God, you have incredible breasts.”

He kissed her again, his tongue dueling with hers. The heat built inside her, taking her desire higher and higher. She tried to arch her back and get her pussy closer to his shaft. It didn't work. His body pressed hers to the wall, holding her in place.

When his tongue darted into her ear, Yvonne couldn't take

Seduction's Spell

any more. "Dolan, fuck me!"

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"I can't get any readier."

His lips quirked in a devilish smile. "Then you'd better hang on."

He released her wrists, cupped the backs of her thighs, and spread them wide. Yvonne wrapped her arms tightly around his neck as her feet left the floor. One thrust and he was buried inside her.

"Oh, yes," Yvonne breathed. Dolan began to drive his cock into her pussy. Each movement sent him deeper. Each circle of his hips made his pelvis brush her clit. She'd never felt anything so delicious. "That feels so good."

He sucked on the side of her neck. She threw back her head and bit her bottom lip as goose bumps covered her skin. "Dolan," she moaned.

Continuing his deep thrusts, he looked into her eyes. "What do you need me to do?"

"Just . . . that. Move like that. Mmmmm."

Another toe-curling kiss sent her blood pressure higher. The orgasm streaked through her body, stealing her breath and her strength. She clung to Dolan's shoulders as the waves washed over her.

Then the tears came.

Dolan cradled her face in one hand and wiped at Yvonne's falling tears with his thumb. In his heart he knew why she cried, but he needed to hear her say the words. "Why are you crying?" he asked softly.

"Be-because you . . . Oh, Dolan, I came!"

"Yeah, I know. Those contractions damn near broke off

LYNN LAFLEUR

my cock.”

She laughed, which was exactly what he wanted her to do. Her tears continued to fall, even though she smiled. “Thank you.”

“Believe me, it was entirely my pleasure.”

Yvonne’s smile suddenly faded. “*You* didn’t come.”

He kissed her cheek, her jaw. “Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not through with you.” He withdrew his shaft from her body and let her down slowly until her feet touched the floor again. Her knees buckled. “Easy.”

“Sorry. My legs are weak.”

Dolan grinned. “Ah, words a man loves to hear after sex.”

The shower spray stopped with a flick of his wrist. Dolan pushed open the stall door and stepped out. Once Yvonne had cleared the lip of the stall, he scooped her up in his arms and laid her on the pile of clothing on the floor.

“What are you doing?” she asked around a giggle.

“I told you I wasn’t through with you.”

“You have a bed.”

“I like spontaneity.” Pushing her legs apart, he laid between them, his chin resting on her tummy. “A bed isn’t the only place to make love.”

Dolan parted her labia with his thumbs and licked her. Yvonne released a long moan and arched her back. He licked her again, his tongue darting inside her pussy before circling her clit.

“That’s *soooo* good, Dolan.”

It certainly was. He loved her taste, her musky scent. He’d be happy to lie here the rest of the evening and lick her sweet pussy. And ass. He slid his tongue past the feminine lips

Seduction's Spell

to her anus.

Yvonne stiffened and pushed away from him. "Dolan, no."

He'd never do anything she didn't want him to, but he wanted her to experience everything sex could offer. He gently nipped the inside of both her thighs. "I won't hurt you, I promise. Just let me love you."

Her body relaxed, her thighs fell open. Dolan paid special attention to her clit before returning to her anus. This time, she didn't try to pull away. He licked the tiny puckered hole, then pushed his tongue inside her. She stiffened again, but this time by lifting her ass closer to his mouth.

A strangled sound from her throat made Dolan lift his head. "You okay?"

"Yes. I didn't . . ." She pushed her hair back from her face. "I never thought that could feel so good."

Dolan rose to his knees. "You want more than my tongue?"

She looked at his cock, then back at his face.

"Yeah, I'm talking about fucking your ass."

"Do you like doing that?"

"I *love* it. Are you willing to try?"

Yvonne nodded. Dolan stood and took her hands to help her stand. Still holding her hand, he led her to his bedroom.

Twelve

Opening his nightstand drawer, Dolan took out a bottle of lubricant and set it on top. Yvonne picked up the bottle and read the label.

“Expensive stuff.” She replaced the bottle on the nightstand. “Do you often have women spend the night with you who want anal sex?”

“No. I rarely have a woman spend the night with me at all, but I’m prepared for anything she might want.” He also removed a plastic packet from the drawer and set it next to the lubricant. “I don’t keep condoms in the shower.” He cupped her neck in his hands and kissed her. “I haven’t been with a woman in a long time and I always wear a condom. I’m clean.”

“Me, too. And I’m on the Pill, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

He wasn’t worried about pregnancy at all. The idea of Yvonne carrying his child made his heart beat faster with joy. “So do you want me to use the condom?”

Seduction's Spell

Yvonne shook her head. "I just want you."

The frantic fucking in the shower had fueled his libido to the point where he wanted to *take* her. He wouldn't do that. He wanted her to enjoy every moment of their lovemaking, make it as special as he possibly could.

He had to spark her desire once more.

Dolan kissed her again. "Lie down. I'm not through licking that pretty pussy."

She stretched out on the bed, her legs spread wide. Holding her ankles, Dolan pulled her buttocks to the edge of the bed. "Pull your knees up to your chest."

Hooking her hands behind her knees, she pulled them forward until they touched her breasts. Dolan knelt on the floor, slipped his hands beneath her buttocks, and lowered his mouth to her pussy.

Slow. Easy. Dolan repeated those words to himself as he licked the slick, feminine folds. He wanted to take Yvonne up to the heavens gradually, to build her desire until she couldn't wait another second to be one with him. He already felt that way about her. His hard shaft kept making demands for attention. Ignoring those demands wasn't easy, but Dolan was determined to please Yvonne before himself.

Her pussy leaked cream. He lapped it up as quickly as it formed. His tongue passed over her clit and labia several times before he ventured to her anus. By the time he ran his tongue around the small hole, Yvonne was breathing heavily.

Parting her buttocks, he laved her anus. Yvonne's breathing became heavier, the soft moans from her throat louder. Unable to wait any longer, Dolan quickly stood and picked up the small bottle. "Are you ready?"

She nodded.

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Keep holding your legs up.”

“Okay.”

Dolan coated his penis with a generous amount of lubricant, then slowly guided the head inside her. Yvonne closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip. He’d stop if she asked him to, even if his hormones screamed. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No.” She opened her eyes again. The striking blue almost glowed with desire. “Don’t stop.”

He continued the leisurely progress . . . pushing in, pulling out, pushing in a bit farther, until his shaft was buried inside her ass. Leaning forward, he rested his hands on the bed next to her shoulders. “Wrap your legs around my waist.”

When he felt her legs clasp his waist, he began to move. Yvonne grabbed his shoulders, her fingernails digging into his skin. He didn’t feel any pain. All he felt was the pleasure of being a part of her body.

“I love you, Yvonne.”

“And I love you.” She dug her nails a little deeper into his shoulders. “Faster.”

He watched her face closely as his thrusts increased, looking for any sign that she was uncomfortable. Her face showed nothing but pleasure. “Do you like this?”

“Mmm, yes. It feels incredible. More.”

Dolan stared into her eyes as he gave her what she wanted, driving hard and deep. He leaned over and drew her nipple into his mouth. Yvonne gasped and arched her back. “Dolan!”

Her contractions grabbing his cock sent him over the edge with her. He took her in his arms and held her tightly while his orgasm slithered down his spine and grabbed his balls.

Moments passed as Dolan tried to catch his breath. He’d

Seduction's Spell

collapsed on top of her when he came, so she had to feel his entire weight. Gathering what little strength he had left, he struggled to his elbows. "You okay?"

Her smile made her look like a chocoholic who'd just finished off a plate of chewy fudge brownies. "I'm great."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "I still want to watch you masturbate."

She burst into laughter. She grabbed a fistful of hair on each side of his head and drew him down for a kiss. "It's a deal."

One kiss led to two, then three. Dolan would be happy to start their lovemaking all over again, but they didn't have time. Lottie should've already been there with their dinner.

"We have to get dressed."

"Uh, I have a slight problem with that."

"What?"

"A caveman made love to me on the bathroom floor and got my clothes wet."

Dolan grinned. He liked that comparison. "Caveman, huh?"

"Don't start beating your chest and thinking you can drag me around by my hair."

"You're no fun." Dolan slowly withdrew from her body. "Give me a sec and I'll get you a T-shirt."

"You keep that up and you won't have any T-shirts left," she called out as he went into the bathroom.

"True." Returning to the bedroom, Dolan rummaged in the middle drawer of the dresser. "Maybe you should move your clothes over here."

When he turned back to her, he saw the anxiety in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

LYNN LAFLEUR

"You want me to move in with you?"

"Yeah. There's no reason for you to stay in the mansion. I want you with me."

"For how long?"

Dolan sat on the bed next to her and handed her the shirt. "For as long as you want to be here."

Yvonne looked at the piece of cotton in her hands. "What if . . . What if I want to stay here for a while?"

"I'm hoping you will."

Her gaze lifted to his face. Dolan touched her cheek with his thumb. "I love you. I want you with me forever."

She tilted her face until her cheek rested in his palm. "I want that, too. But what about—"

A knock on the back door cut off Yvonne's words. Dolan gave her a soft kiss before standing. "That's probably Lottie with our dinner. I'll be right back."

He tugged on a pair of jeans and hurried from the bedroom. It surprised him to see Belle in his kitchen, unloading a tray of food on the table. "Hey."

She looked up and smiled. "Hi. I hope you don't mind my coming in. The tray was heavy. Lottie really loaded it up."

"No, I don't mind."

He stepped forward and took the tray from her hands. Belle smiled again. "Thanks. You'd think Lottie was feeding a small boy scout troop instead of two adults. Of course, sex does build up an appetite."

Dolan knew she was trying to bait him and he wouldn't fall for it. "Yep, it sure does."

"So everything's okay in that department?"

"Everything's great."

Seduction's Spell

"Wonderful." She set the last container on the table. "Where is Yvonne?"

"Right here."

Dolan turned at the sound of Yvonne's voice. She must have borrowed his brush for her hair was soft and shiny. The T-shirt hit her mid-thigh. She looked feminine and sexy and thoroughly loved.

He wanted to take her right back to bed.

"Now that you're here, Yvonne," Belle said, "I have a proposition for you."

Dolan drew Yvonne in front of him and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Hey, *I'm* the only one who gets to proposition her."

Belle continued as if he hadn't spoken. "Remember the first day you were here and we were having tea?"

"Yes."

"You told me you were tired of modeling, that you'd like to do something different with your life but you didn't know what."

Dolan leaned down so he could see Yvonne's face. "You did?"

"I did say that, but I didn't have anything specific in mind."

"How would you like a job here as Dolan's assistant?"

"What?" Dolan said at the same time as Yvonne.

Belle grinned. "It's the perfect solution. You're tired of modeling and you can be with Dolan as much as you want. Although I'm sure there will be times you'll want to get away from him. The man can be a total—"

"Wait a minute," Dolan said. "You're offering Yvonne a *job*?"

"If she wants it, yes. With pay, of course, although nothing

LYNN LAFLEUR

close to what you're used to making. But the job includes room and board, too. I can offer you one of the new cabins that are almost finished, unless you'd rather live here with Dolan."

Yvonne looked at Dolan, a soft smile on her lips. "I'd want to live with Dolan."

"Great. Then it's settled."

"Belle, wait. This isn't settled. I can't drop everything and move here."

"Why not?"

"Yeah, why not?" Dolan said.

"I can't be Dolan's assistant. I don't know the difference between a screwdriver and a hammer."

"You don't have to know the difference," Dolan said. "There are a lot of things you can do around the mansion that won't require tools."

Belle picked up the empty tray from the table. "I'll let y'all figure this out while you eat. See you tomorrow."

Once Belle had left, Dolan sat down and pulled Yvonne onto his lap. "Okay, let's discuss this. Why can't you drop everything and move here?"

"I have obligations. I have a photo shoot scheduled in San Francisco in three weeks."

"Perfect! I'll go with you and you can meet my parents. What's next on your agenda?"

"Nothing definite, but—"

He placed one finger over her lips. "No 'buts' allowed when you're solving problems."

"Do you really think I can quit modeling just like that?" She snapped her fingers. "What about my manager? What will she do? And I'm not ready to meet your parents."

Seduction's Spell

"She'll find someone else to manage. You aren't the only model in the world. My parents will love you."

"I know I'm not the only model in the world, but Lexie's been with me for ten years. You don't know if your parents will love me."

"Maybe she wants a change, too. You're wildly popular, Yvonne. Maybe your manager would like to take someone new up the ladder. Yes, I'm sure my parents will love you."

"Stop it!" She slapped her hands over her ears. "I can't handle two different conversations at once."

Dolan grinned. He loved to rile her, watch her blue eyes turn stormy. They were going to have an incredible life together. He pulled her hands away from her ears and laced their fingers together. "It's very simple, Yvonne. Do you want to be with me?"

Her eyes turned soft and liquid. "Of course I do."

"Then everything will work out. You're on vacation. You can take your time and decide what and when you want to do something. There's no rush." Releasing her hands, he slid his arms around her waist. "In the meantime, you finish up whatever assignments are scheduled, you meet my parents, I meet yours, and we plan the wedding. Simple."

He struggled not to laugh when her eyes widened. "Wedding?"

"Right here at the mansion. Everyone in Roseville will come. And we'll fly in any of your friends or family who want to be here. I made great money as a quarterback and most of it is in CDs. Whatever you want is yours. Designer gown, fancy flowers, food I can't pronounce—"

"I don't remember hearing a marriage proposal."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“You don’t? Hmm. I guess I could do the whole down-on-one-knee thing, but I figured a wedding is a given since we love each other.”

She huffed out a breath. “A woman wants to hear the proposal, Dolan.”

He grinned. “God, you’re gorgeous when you’re ticked.”

She frowned, then her frown faded and she drew circles on his chest with one fingertip. “Are you sure, Dolan? We’ve only known each other two days.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he said, all teasing aside. “There’s no rush to set a wedding date, if you’d rather spend more time together and be sure you can put up with me the rest of your life.”

“Putting up with you won’t be a problem at all.”

“Then I’ll have to see if *I* can put up with *you*.”

“Hey!”

Dolan laughed, then kissed her soundly. “I have an idea.”

“What?”

“I’m not that hungry yet. How about if I take you back to bed and we’ll work up an appetite?”

She smiled, slow and sexy. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

Lara and Vince



One

Sara Fletcher stared at the thick envelope in her hands. She knew what was inside, yet she dreaded opening it. Seeing the words in print seemed so . . . final.

“You okay, baby?” Bonnie Fletcher asked her daughter.

Sara nodded her head. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Are you going to open it?”

“Not yet.” She laid the envelope on the kitchen table between her and her mother. “I’m . . . not ready to look at it.”

“You know what it says, sweetie.”

“Yes, I know it says Vince and I are divorced. Our divorce was final the day we walked out of that courtroom. But this . . .” Sara stared at the envelope, certain it would sprout horns at any moment. “This makes it official.”

“You don’t ever have to look at the papers, Sara. I can put the envelope away for you. Do you want it in your burn-proof safe?”

LYNN LAFLEUR

Sara nodded. "The key is in my jewelry box."

Once her mother left the kitchen, Sara rose and crossed to the bay window. The view of the Gulf of Mexico usually calmed her. Not today. Today, the gentle waves lapping the shore did nothing to ease her pain or loneliness.

She should've known better than to marry a man like Vince Wagner. Tall, handsome, rich, self-confident, incredibly charming . . . he was every woman's dream man. Sara had never understood what he'd seen in a mousy little thing like her. But from the moment they'd met, he'd courted her relentlessly until she'd agreed to marry him.

Three years later, she was now an ex-wife instead of a wife.

"Okay, that's done," Bonnie said as she came back in the kitchen.

"Thanks, Mom."

"Anything for you, baby." She ran her hand down Sara's hair. "You know what? You need to get away from here, go someplace peaceful and beautiful where you can forget about the divorce."

"Mom, I live on the Gulf of Mexico. It doesn't get any more beautiful than this."

"But you're used to this. You need to go someplace different." Bonnie walked over to the corner office area, opened her purse, and withdrew a brochure. "I ordered this from the Internet."

"*You* ordered from the Internet?" Sara asked, surprised. "You couldn't even turn on a computer six months ago."

Bonnie grinned. "Those classes paid off. Anyway, I looked up some resorts in Texas. You'll still be in the state, but with a different view. Look at this place."

Sara appreciated her mother trying to help, but she had no

Seduction's Spell

desire to go anywhere. She'd rather wallow in self-pity. "I don't want to go to a resort."

"Sure you do. A change of scenery will be good for you." She held out the brochure to Sara. "It's an antebellum mansion in North Texas right on the Rose River. Three hundred acres of flowers and trees and walking trails."

Since it seemed to be so important to her mother, Sara took the brochure and opened it.

"Look at those suites. Aren't they incredible?" Bonnie pointed to a picture of a bedroom decorated in rust and gold. "That's the Captain Suite. Isn't it the most beautiful room you've ever seen?"

"It's very nice."

"A hot tub, swimming pool, horseback riding, workout room, full spa." Bonnie pointed to the bulleted list as she read it. "And look, a massage therapist comes every Friday. No extra charge to the guests." She tapped the brochure with one fingertip. "That's where you need to go. You need to relax and be pampered."

"What about my store?"

"You don't give that store one little thought. Your sister and I will run it for you."

A weekend of her mother and sister running her bookstore would be fine, but Sara didn't think it fair to ask them to run it longer than a couple of days. "Thanks, Mom, but I can't ask y'all to do that—"

"You aren't asking, I volunteered. You know how much Susan loves to work in your store."

Sara gazed at the brochure. The resort looked beautiful. Getting away from family and friends who meant well but tended to smother her sounded wonderful. But a place as

LYNN LAFLEUR

glamorous as Belle On The Bend had to be terribly expensive. Sara had money in the bank from her divorce settlement, yet she hated to spend it on anything frivolous. Her bookstore income barely paid her expenses. Someday, she might have to dip into that settlement to pay her bills. "It's probably too much money, Mom."

A cat-who-drank-the-cream grin turned up Bonnie's lips. "It's all paid for."

Sara's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"I cashed in a CD and made the reservation for you."

"Mom, you can't do that! You bought those CDs with Dad's life insurance money. They're for your retirement."

"I make a comfortable living from the restaurant. I'm fine." She shrugged. "It was due to mature soon anyway, so I only lost a couple of months interest. It's worth it to see my baby happy."

Tears welled in Sara's eyes. She really lucked out in the mother department. "Thanks, Mom."

Bonnie blinked quickly. Sara almost smiled at the sign of her mother trying to keep from crying. "Now, we have a lot to do before you leave. I made the reservation for April twelfth. I would've made it sooner, but that's the first opening they had available."

"Is the reservation for a week?"

"I left that open. You get there on the twelfth. The owner said you could stay as long as you want."

Sara folded the brochure and clutched it to her chest. It all sounded wonderful, but she wasn't sure if she should go. "Are you sure about the bookstore?"

"I'm positive. Susan and I have already talked about our schedule. You don't have a thing to worry about. You just go

Seduction's Spell

and have a good time.” Bonnie glanced at her watch. “Speaking of Susan, I’m supposed to meet her in fifteen minutes.” She drew Sara into her arms for a fierce hug. “Call me later, okay? We’ll make a date to go shopping. You need some new clothes to take with you. My treat.”

“Mom, you’re already doing enough.”

“Don’t spoil my fun. I like spending money on my girls.” She dropped a kiss on Sara’s cheek. “Talk to you later.”

Once her mother left, Sara returned to the table. Opening the brochure, she spread it out on the table. There were no prices, so she had no idea what her mother had spent on the reservation. Sara wasn’t a tightwad, but living off one income had made her aware of the price of everything. She’d made a budget that she followed religiously. She had to, or there would be too much of the month left at the end of the money.

She wrapped one tendril around her finger, over and over, while she studied the brochure. When she realized what she was doing, she lifted the curl so she could see it. Her hair hung past her shoulders, medium brown and limp. She’d tried permanents and curling irons, but it refused to do anything but hang straight.

Her budget included regular trims. It didn’t include anything extra.

Sara sat up straighter in her chair. To hell with budgets. She was about to go to a resort and she wanted to look her best. That included doing something with the mop on her head.

Bonnie pulled her car over to the side of the road and turned off the motor. She sat still for a moment, biting her lower lip. If Sara knew what she was about to do . . .

LYNN LAFLEUR

She couldn't worry about Sara finding out and getting angry. This was for her daughter's future. That's all that mattered.

Taking her cell phone from her purse, she flipped it open and punched in the numbers.

Vince Wagner looked at his watch one more time. The hands had crawled around the face all morning. Maybe he should take it to a jeweler and have it checked. Time couldn't possibly be going this slowly.

"What's wrong with you?" his brother Sean asked. "You've been looking at your watch every two minutes for the last half hour."

"I'm expecting a phone call."

"It must be a hell of a call."

"Yeah, it is. It could mean my whole future."

"Sounds serious." Sean sat back in the booth. "What's going on?"

Vince lifted the beer bottle to his lips and took a gulp of the cold brew. Sean had invited him to lunch at their favorite tavern. While food had been the last thing on his mind, he'd agreed to the outing so he could spend time with his brother. "Bonnie's supposed to call me."

"Bonnie? Sara's mother?"

Vince nodded. "She's helping Sara and me get back together."

"She's helping . . ." Sean leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table. "If you wanted to stay married to Sara, why did you agree to the divorce?"

"Because I didn't have a choice. Sara wanted the divorce. I couldn't stop it."

Seduction's Spell

"You could've done *something*."

"What? I tried everything. She wouldn't listen to anything I said." Vince ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "She believed I was unfaithful to her."

"Vince, you woke up in bed naked with that gal."

It hurt Vince to know his brother believed him capable of cheating on Sara. "I did not have sex with her."

"So what happened?"

"I don't know!" He'd already told the story to his brother half a dozen times, but he'd tell it again if it would make Sean finally believe him. "I don't know how I ended up in her bed. I don't know why we were naked. I *do* know I wasn't unfaithful to Sara. I couldn't be. I love her too much."

The waitress arrived with their sandwiches. Vince had no appetite, but he smiled at the waitress and thanked her when she set the Reuben in front of him. He declined her offer of another beer. All he wanted was to get back to the conversation with his brother.

Sean picked up the salt shaker and liberally sprinkled his French fries. "You're my brother, Vince. I want to believe whatever you tell me. But look at the evidence, man. Three of your teammates walked in and found you two together. The gal claimed you fucked her brains out. You can't blame Sara for believing the worst."

"Or you?"

Sean quickly glanced at Vince before looking back at his food. "The evidence is overwhelming."

"How about if you believe me because I'm your brother and wouldn't lie to you?"

Sean dropped his half-eaten fry back on his plate. "Okay, you

LYNN LAFLEUR

got me there. I just . . .” He blew out a breath. “Damn it, Vince, it made me furious that you hurt someone as sweet as Sara.”

“I wasn’t exactly thrilled either, Sean. I love Sara. I didn’t want to lose her.”

The sound of a jazzy ring made Vince fumble in his jeans pocket to retrieve his cell. His heart beat a little faster when he saw Bonnie’s number on the display. “Hey, Bonnie.”

“Hey, Vince. It’s all set.”

“You talked her into going?”

“Yes. I lied and said I cashed in one of my CDs to pay for the trip. I couldn’t tell her you’re paying for everything.”

“No, you couldn’t tell her that.”

“The reservations are for April twelfth. She has the Captain Suite, you have the Admiral Suite. They’re next door to each other.”

“How long did you make the reservations for?”

“I left it open. The owner said that wouldn’t be a problem.”

Vince smiled. “Bonnie, you are the best. Remind me to kiss you when I see you.”

Bonnie laughed. “I’ll never turn down a kiss from a handsome man, but I’d rather you kiss my daughter.”

“It’s a deal.”

“Keep me posted, okay?”

“Will do.”

Still smiling, Vince closed his cell phone and placed it on the table. “I have the best mother-in-law in the world.”

Sean laid down his sandwich and wiped his hands. “Technically, she’s an ex-mother-in-law.”

“Not for long. She’s helping Sara and me get back together.”

“What’s she doing?”

Seduction's Spell

“She talked Sara into going to a resort a couple hundred miles from here.”

“And you’ll just happen to show up at the resort?”

Vince grinned. “You catch on fast, bro.”

“For your sake, I hope it works out for you.”

“It will. Everything is going to be perfect.”

Two

The resort was as beautiful as Sara had imagined. No, it was *more* beautiful than she'd imagined. Tall windows, large columns, colorful flowers, wide veranda. Everything about the place made Sara smile.

She had no doubt she'd love her stay here.

"Hi."

She turned to the right at the sound of the masculine voice. Her eyes widened before she could stop them. A gorgeous, dark-haired man stood at the top of the porch steps, smiling down at her. "You must be Sara Fletcher."

Sara cleared her throat so her voice wouldn't croak. "That's me."

"Welcome to Belle On The Bend." Still smiling, he descended the steps. "I'm Dolan. I take care of the maintenance around here."

"So you're the Guy Friday?"

"You could say that." He reached for the tote she had slung

Seduction's Spell

over her shoulder. "I'll bring up your luggage and park your car for you. Belle is in the parlor. That's the first room on your left as you walk in the front door. She'll show you to your suite."

"Thank you, Dolan."

"You're welcome. I'm on my way to the stables, but give me a holler if you need anything."

Sara could think of several things Dolan could help her with, but she'd never say them. It wasn't in her nature to be forward with a man. Besides, someone that good-looking had to be taken.

Just her luck.

Dolan had taken her tote, so Sara had nothing to do with her hands. The large denim bag also doubled as her purse. Clutching the thick straps always gave her something to hold so she didn't fidget. Vince had always teased her about her non-stop gestures, telling her she wouldn't be able to talk if he held her hands. Many times, he'd take her hands in his and say he was simply saving her from giving herself a black eye.

So many sweet memories of her time with Vince. She'd hoped to make a lifetime of memories with him. He'd killed any hope of that when he cheated on her.

Despite his adamant denial of making love to that . . . bimbo, evidence didn't lie. Some "helpful" person had taken pictures of Vince in bed with the blonde. The wire services had picked up the story. It had been plastered all over the news within hours.

Vince had admitted he'd woken up in bed with that woman, but claimed he had no idea how he got there. He'd begged Sara to believe him. She'd wanted to, but couldn't; the evidence was too overwhelming. He'd broken his vow to her to always be faithful. That was something she couldn't forgive.

So now, six months later, she was divorced and alone.

LYNN LAFLEUR

Sara slipped her hands into the front pockets of her jeans. *No feeling sorry for yourself. Your mother spent a lot of money on this trip. You're going to have a good time, no matter what.*

That decision made, Sara climbed the steps and entered the mansion. She stopped in the foyer to gaze around the room. Being married to Vince had exposed her to how people with money lived. Not even his parents' opulent home in Dallas prepared her for the mansion. Her mouth actually dropped open as she turned in a circle, taking in everything around her.

"Sara?"

The feminine voice jolted Sara from her musings. She turned to see a lovely blonde standing in the doorway to her left. "Yes, I'm Sara."

The blonde smiled and walked toward her. "Hi. I'm Belle Patricelli. Welcome to Belle On The Bend."

First Dolan, and now Belle. Sara wondered if everyone at the resort possessed incredible good looks. "Thank you. I'm happy to be here."

"Has Dolan seen to your luggage yet?"

"He said he would get it for me."

"Good." She clasped her hands in front of her. "Would you like to see your suite or would you prefer some refreshments first?"

"I'd love a glass of tea."

"So would I." She gestured at the doorway behind her. "Why don't you make yourself comfortable and I'll get our drinks?"

Sara nodded. Belle smiled again and gave Sara's arm a quick squeeze. "Be right back."

The parlor was even more beautiful than the foyer. Sara

Seduction's Spell

sighed as she gazed at the antique furnishings. She had no doubt some of the pieces were centuries old. This was the kind of place Vince would love . . . the kind of place where he belonged. Sara knew she had never fit in his world, despite loving him desperately.

She thought he'd loved her desperately, too. He'd proven her wrong.

"Here we are," Belle said.

Sara watched Belle walk over to a round table between two chairs and set her tray on it. "I have peach tea and regular. You take which one you want and I'll drink the other one. I also snatched some of my cook's lemon bars. She just made them an hour ago. They are absolutely to die for."

Sara had always been a plain eater, reluctant to try anything new. As the cliché went, this was the first day of the rest of her life. She wanted to live that life, be bold and daring. Drinking peach tea wasn't exactly "daring," but it was something she'd never done. "I'll try the peach."

"Excellent choice." She waited until Sara sat before taking the other chair. "The peach is the one closest to you. I had a feeling you might try it."

"Are you psychic?"

"I have my moments."

Sara chuckled. She liked Belle already.

Taking a lemon bar from the plate, Sara nibbled off a tiny bite. The tart taste exploded on her tongue. "Oh, my."

"Aren't they wonderful? I swear Lottie could make dirt taste good."

"I can already tell I'm going to gain weight here."

Belle's gaze quickly passed over her. "You have nothing to worry about, Sara."

LYNN LAFLEUR

"I will if I keep eating lemon bars."

Belle settled back in her chair and sipped her tea. "Have you always been slim?"

Sara nodded. "Petite, slim, no boobs. I'm built like a boy."

"You look nothing like a boy, Sara. You're a very attractive young lady."

Warmth crept into Sara's cheeks at the compliment. "Thank you, but most days I don't feel very attractive."

Belle crossed her legs. "I take it since you're here alone, there's no Mr. Sara?"

Sara looked down into her glass. "No. Not anymore."

"I'm sorry. Am I being nosy? Dolan tells me I have a bad habit of that."

"So you and Dolan are . . . involved?"

"Oh, heavens no. We're just good friends. In fact, he's in love with one of my guests. He took one look at her and fell hard. She fell just as hard for him. I'm very happy for them."

Silently, Sara sipped her tea. Hearing about two people falling in love only made her loneliness seem greater.

"You'll meet someone soon, Sara."

She laughed without humor. "I doubt that."

"You never know. There's something magical about Belle On The Bend."

"I'm not looking for a man."

"Sometimes you don't have to look to find him." Belle set her glass on the tray. "Why don't I show you to your suite? I'm expecting another guest shortly."

"Oh, sure. I didn't mean to take up so much of your time."

"You can take up as much of my time as you'd like. I'm available for any of my guests at any time. I simply thought you might like to relax a bit after your long drive."

Seduction's Spell

"Oh. Yes, that would be nice. May I take my tea with me?"

"Of course."

Sara followed Belle up the winding staircase to the second story. She felt like a professional seamstress in a designer fabric store. She wanted to touch everything.

"Your mother ordered my brochure and requested the Captain Suite. I hope you like it."

Rust and gold and green greeted Sara when she entered the suite behind Belle. She immediately fell in love. She'd always loved earth tones. "Oh, it's beautiful," she whispered.

Belle smiled. "I'm pleased you like it." She reached into the pocket of her slacks and withdrew a key on a brass tag. "Here's your key. You have the choice to lock your room, but I can assure you your items will be safe." She glanced around the room. "I don't see your luggage. I'll check with Dolan and find out where it is."

The door closed behind Belle. Alone in the suite, Sara turned in a slow circle. The room was beautiful with its antiques, oil paintings, and thick rugs. She had no doubt she would greatly enjoy her stay here.

She'd enjoy it more if she had someone here with her.

Stop it! she told herself. *You don't need a man to be happy.*

Continuing her exploration of the suite, Sara walked through the doorway into the bathroom. She gasped. It was huge, a large oval bathtub taking up most of the space. Situated beneath the window, she could soak in a tub full of bubbles while the sunlight warmed her.

It sounded heavenly.

Sara turned on the taps full blast. When the water reached the temperature she wanted, she closed the drain. An array of bottles in different shapes and colors sat along the edge of the

LYNN LAFLEUR

tub. Sara glanced at the names, finally deciding on a mango tangerine bubble bath. She poured a generous amount of the liquid under the running water. Bubbles formed instantly, releasing a citrusy scent. Sara smiled. She couldn't remember the last time she'd taken a bubble bath. Life was so hectic with running her store and making a living, she barely had time for a quick shower.

Sara pulled her T-shirt over her head and dropped it on the floor. She turned from the tub as she unsnapped her jeans. The sight of herself in the full-length mirror made her freeze. Slowly, she finished removing her clothing until she stood nude before the mirror. She turned one way, then the other, studying her body. She'd always believed she was built like a boy. Standing here, with the natural light filling the bathroom, she had to admit her body looked good. She wished her breasts were larger, but she liked the rest of her. While her sister Susan inherited their mother's voluptuous figure, Sara had inherited her father's slim build.

She ran her fingers through her short, highlighted hair. She'd had waist-length hair as long as she could remember. Part of "the new Sara" included a haircut. She'd actually cringed when the stylist began cutting off huge chunks of hair. Now, Sara was glad she'd decided on the drastic change. She thought the new 'do fit her perfectly.

Turning away from the mirror, Sara turned off the taps and climbed into the warm water. A contented sigh escaped her lips. Oh, yes, she could get spoiled by this quickly. She hadn't decided yet how long she would stay at Belle On The Bend, but she planned to enjoy every moment of it.

Three

Vince slammed the car door. Hands on hips, he stared at the tire quickly losing its air. “God damn it!” He kicked the tire, even though he knew it was juvenile to do such a stupid thing.

One more delay. A stupid flat tire was one more delay in him getting to Sara.

He should’ve gotten to Belle On The Bend yesterday, no more than an hour after Sara arrived. Interruptions, including phone calls and visits from family members, kept him at his house instead of hitting the road the way he’d wanted to. Determined to see Sara first thing this morning, he’d left at six A.M. He hadn’t counted on road construction bringing traffic to a total stop. He’d been stuck for well over an hour with no way to get off the farm-to-market road.

Cursing under his breath, Vince walked to the back of the SUV and popped open the hatch. The sooner he changed the flat, the sooner he could get to Sara.

LYNN LAFLEUR

★ ★ ★

A light breeze ruffled Sara's short hair when she stepped onto the covered patio. She saw Belle sitting at a table with two other women—one with chin-length red hair, the other with long, flowing blond hair. Belle looked toward Sara and smiled.

"Good morning, Sara. Join us, please."

Not wanting to intrude, Sara hesitated. The friendly smiles from each woman gave her the confidence to walk to the table. She took the chair across from the blonde.

"Sara, this is Maggie Olvera and Yvonne Lowe. Ladies, this is Sara Fletcher. She arrived yesterday morning."

Maggie's smile brightened. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Sara."

"Thank you."

"You got here yesterday?" Yvonne asked. "I didn't see you at dinner last night."

"No." Sara pushed her hair behind her ears. "I, uh, stayed in my room. I soaked in the tub, then read until I fell asleep."

"Anything good?" Belle asked.

Sara shrugged. "Just a romance."

"Oh, yeah?" Yvonne leaned forward, an eager look on her face. "Is it one with lots of hot sex?"

Heat filled Sara's cheeks. She loved reading erotic romances, but rarely told anyone about them. "Well . . . Yeah."

"I love those. The kick-ass heroines, the hunky heroes who know how to make a woman come at least twenty different ways." Yvonne shivered. "Delicious."

"Isaac's a wonderful lover, but a man could always use some pointers. Maybe I should buy one for him."

"Well, I certainly don't have to buy one for Dolan. He

Seduction's Spell

doesn't need any pointers." Yvonne waved her hand in front of her face as if to cool herself.

Sara laughed along with the other three. She barely knew these women, yet she felt comfortable listening to them talk about something so personal. She never talked about sex with another woman, not even her sister.

Definitely a first for her.

"Sara, would you like coffee or tea?" Belle asked. "That's regular tea in the pitcher, but I can get you another flavor. I've spoiled Maggie to my raspberry tea and Yvonne to the apricot."

"Do you have any peach?"

"Of course." She stood. "I'll be right back."

"Belle is such a gracious hostess," Maggie said. "She's been wonderful to Isaac and me."

"To me, too." Yvonne rested her forearms on the table. "Are you here alone or with someone, Sara?"

"Alone. My mother paid for everything."

"Wow, nice mom," Yvonne said with a smile.

"She's the best. She's always been supportive, especially after my di—"

Sara stopped. No matter how nice these women seemed, she couldn't share something as personal as the end of her marriage with strangers.

"Your divorce?" Maggie asked softly.

Since it was out in the open, Sara decided she might as well tell the truth. She nodded. "My ex-husband cheated on me."

"The bastard," Yvonne hissed.

"Yeah, I called him that, along with some other names that I rarely use."

LYNN LAFLEUR

Maggie gave Sara's forearm a quick squeeze. "Good for you."

"I received the final papers three weeks ago. That's when my mom told me she'd made this reservation. She wanted me to go somewhere and be pampered."

Yvonne smiled. "You've come to the right place. I like the pampering so much, I'm never leaving."

"And Dolan has nothing to do with that?" Maggie asked with a grin.

"Well, maybe a little."

Belle returned with Sara's tea and a plate of mini cake donuts. "Lottie sent us a pre-brunch snack."

Yvonne snatched a donut from the plate and popped it into her mouth. "I love Lottie. Can I adopt her?" Her eyes rolled and she released a loud moan. "Oh my *God*, that's good."

Sara watched Dolan step up behind Yvonne and lay his hands on her shoulders. "Are you talking about me again?"

"You wish." Yvonne looked over her shoulder at him. "Just because I'm making moaning sounds doesn't mean I'm talking about you."

"When I make you moan, baby, you aren't *able* to talk."

He kissed her soundly. The sight sent a pang of jealousy through Sara. She missed that closeness so much. She'd been a virgin when she and Vince got together. It hadn't taken her long to decide she liked sex a lot.

He'd been a tender and considerate lover, one who took the time to satisfy his lady. He'd been patient with her attempts to please him. She'd had no idea how to touch a man to bring him pleasure. Vince had been an excellent teacher and a willing pupil.

Seduction's Spell

The thought of him touching another woman made pain curl in her stomach.

Sara picked up her glass and sipped her tea. She should've stopped loving Vince the moment she found out he'd cheated. Her heart had other ideas. No matter how hard she tried to forget him, she couldn't. No matter how hard she tried to stop loving him, she couldn't.

A handsome man with black hair walked up behind Maggie. Bending over, he dropped a soft kiss on her cheek. "Good morning."

Maggie smiled tenderly at the man. "Good morning. Did you finish your phone calls?"

"I did. Everything is on schedule with the FanFare presentation." He cradled her neck in his hand. "So that means I have plenty of time to concentrate on you."

"Mmm, I like the sound of that."

"Oh, good grief," Yvonne said with laughter in her voice. "Will you two go to your room?"

Belle refilled her glass of tea from the pitcher on the table. "Actually, I have an idea. Why don't we four gals slip away for the day and let the guys take care of themselves?"

Sara bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing at the deflated expressions on the men's faces. They looked like they'd been told there was no Santa Claus.

"Slip away?" Dolan said.

Isaac squeezed Maggie's neck. "For the whole day?"

Belle nodded. "I need to do some shopping. Maggie and Yvonne have been here a few days, so they might like a change of scenery. And I'll bet Sara loves to shop. Don't you?"

"Is there a bookstore in town?"

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Absolutely. So it’s settled. We’ll go into Roseville after brunch. We’ll shop ’til we drop, then have dinner at Red’s Steakhouse. He makes the *best* ribeye you’ve ever tasted. After that, we’ll go to The White Rose for drinks. Thursday is Ladies’ Night and all drinks are two dollars. I *love* their frozen margarita.”

“Wait a minute,” Dolan said. “You’re talking about all day and half the night, Belle.”

“We’re big girls, Dolan. I know my way to Roseville and back.”

“A lot of guys go to that bar on Thursday nights because they know a bunch of women will be there. I think Isaac and I should join you.”

Yvonne laughed and almost choked on her tea. “I don’t think so.”

“We won’t get there until . . . say, eight o’clock. How’s that?”

Belle looked at each of the ladies. “Should we invite them or not?”

“Later would be okay, I guess,” Yvonne said with a shrug.

“Maggie?” Belle asked.

“Make it eight-thirty. That’ll give us some girl time first.”

“Sara?”

“I’m good with that.”

Belle smiled. “Wonderful! Lottie should have brunch ready by now. Why don’t y’all go in and get started? I think I heard a car drive up. It’s probably my new guest.”

“I’ll take care of your guest, Belle,” Dolan said. “Go ahead and eat with the ladies so you can leave.”

“Thank you, Dolan.”

Sara stood to follow Belle. She glanced back in time to see

Seduction's Spell

Yvonne kiss Dolan softly. Tears filled her eyes before she could stop them. She watched Dolan run his finger down Yvonne's cheek in a gesture so tender and loving, it made Sara's heart hurt. She wanted that kind of love for herself.

Blinking away the tears, Sara fell into step beside Maggie. She was startled to feel Maggie squeeze her hand.

"Hang in there, Sara. There's a man out there just for you."

"I doubt it."

"Never give up hope. When you find that special someone, it makes all the pain you've suffered worth it."

I thought I had that special someone. "I'm barely divorced. I'm not looking for a man."

"Maybe you're not looking for him, but I'll bet he's looking for you."

Vince climbed out of his SUV, pushed his fists into his lower back, and slowly twisted from side to side. The hours sitting behind the wheel had made his back stiff. He had to keep in shape during the off season or he'd never make it through training camp. He'd be the first to admit he let his workout slack off until the month before he left for camp. That slack-off time caught up with him when he sat for a long period of time.

He released a soft whistle as he looked at the mansion. He felt as if he'd stepped into the pages of *Gone With the Wind*. He expected to see Scarlet O'Hara step out onto the veranda any moment. "Wow," he whispered.

"Vince? Vince Wagner?"

Vince turned at the sound of his name. A man walked toward him from the side of the mansion. The man obviously knew him, but Vince had no idea who—

LYNN LAFLEUR

“My God.” Vince smiled when he recognized Dolan. “LeBlanc? What the hell are you doing here?”

“I work here.” He held out his hand for Vince to shake. “Are you Belle’s new guest?”

“Yeah. Well, to be honest, I’m here for Sara.”

“Sara? You know her?”

“She’s my wife.”

“Sara said she’s divorced.”

“Okay, technically she’s my ex-wife, but I hope to change that soon.”

“You’re here to get her back.”

Vince nodded. “Yeah. Although I know that won’t be easy.”

“No, I don’t suppose it will. I, uh, heard about what happened to you.”

Vince held up both hands, palms forward. “I *did not* have sex with that gal.”

“Hey, man, I’m not your judge.”

“I know that, but I . . .” He stopped and blew out a breath. “I’m used to defending myself to everyone. Very few people have believed me.”

Dolan remained silent a moment before turning toward Vince’s vehicle. “Let’s get your luggage and I’ll show you to your suite. Or should I move your SUV first? Will Sara recognize it?”

“No, it’s new. I bought it a couple of weeks ago.”

“Nice.”

Vince pushed a button on his key fob and the back door popped open. “I traded in my car. I’m hoping Sara and I can start a family soon.”

“Sounds like you have a plan.”

Seduction's Spell

“Not exactly.” Vince pulled out a duffle bag and slung it over his shoulder. “I’m kinda winging it.”

“Maybe I can help you,” Dolan said, tugging a suitcase out of the vehicle.

“How?”

“I have an idea. It’s kinda crazy—”

“A crazy idea is better than anything I’ve come up with so far. I contacted Belle and asked her to do some special things in Sara’s room, like fresh flowers.”

“Belle always puts fresh flowers in the suites, so that wouldn’t be anything new.” Dolan rubbed his chin. “My idea is iffy. You’re pretty famous around here. You’re the best tight end the Cowboys have ever had. You’ll be recognized in a second.”

“Were you when you moved here?”

“It was different for me. I played for the enemy,” he said with a grin.

Vince chuckled. “That’s true. The Cowboys and 49ers do have a heated rivalry.” He shut the door of the SUV. “I’m willing to try anything, man. I love Sara and I want her back.”

“Then it’s worth a try. C’mon. I’ll show you to your suite. We can talk about it there.”

Four

*T*he White Rose was nothing like what Sara expected. Being a native Texan, she assumed it would be a country-western bar, complete with wooden benches and sawdust on the floor. Instead, it looked more like an English pub with its beamed ceilings and dart boards on the walls. Or what Sara assumed an English pub looked like since she'd never seen a real one.

"Surprised?" Belle asked next to Sara's ear.

"Very. I expected something . . . different."

"Like a honky-tonk?"

Sara grinned. "Well, we are in Texas."

Belle laughed. "That we are." She pointed to an empty table for six in the corner. "Let's grab that table before someone else gets it."

The Rolling Stones' "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" started playing as Sara fell into line with the other three women. She chuckled. She definitely wouldn't hear the Stones at a honky-tonk.

Seduction's Spell

"I love this place," Yvonne said once she was seated. "Do they play strictly rock?"

"No, the music is varied." Belle scooted her chair closer to the table. "They play rock, pop, jazz, country . . . whatever's good to dance to. Bubba plays recorded music until nine, then a local band plays. It's quite good."

"Bubba?" Maggie asked.

"The owner. Everyone calls him Bubba. I'm not sure if anyone even knows his real name."

"Hiya, Belle," a buxom brunette said as she stepped up to the table.

"Hi, Janet. These ladies are guests at the mansion. This is Maggie, Yvonne, and Sara. Ladies, this is Janet White. She and her husband are the owners."

"You haven't been here in a while, Belle. Too busy?"

"Good for my wallet, bad for friendship."

Janet bellowed out a deep laugh. Sara liked her immediately.

"Frozen margaritas all around?" Janet asked.

"Yes, and keep the glasses full."

"You got it. Nice to meet you, ladies."

Janet had barely left when a tall, dark-haired man approached Yvonne. "Dance?" he asked with a smile.

Yvonne smiled back. "Sure."

She'd no sooner accepted the man's hand when another dark-haired man approached the table and asked Maggie to dance. Sara chuckled at Maggie's flustered look. Apparently, she wasn't used to a man other than her husband asking her to dance. After a slight hesitation, she accepted the man's hand and let him lead her to the dance floor.

"I suppose you're next," Sara said to Belle.

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Why me? Why not you?”

“C’mon, Belle. Why would a guy ask a stick like me to dance when he could ask a gorgeous blonde?”

“You’re much too hard on yourself, Sara.”

“Yeah, well, divorce does that.”

Belle leaned closer to her. “You’re a lovely young woman. I wish you could believe that about yourself.”

A ceramic serving dish sat in the middle of the table, one side holding mixed nuts, the other holding pretzels. Sara reached for a pretzel and nibbled off a piece of it. “You must think I’m pathetic.”

“No, not at all. I think you were hurt badly and you’re having a hard time getting over it.”

Instead of eating the rest of the pretzel, Sara broke it into several pieces and let them fall to the table. “I shouldn’t still love the jerk, but I do.”

Belle smiled tenderly. “The heart doesn’t always listen to the brain, does it?”

“Here you go, ladies.” Janet set four large frozen margaritas on the table and a fresh bowl of pretzels and nuts. “Lots of cashews for you, Belle.”

“You always take good care of me.”

“Of course I do. You’re one of my best customers. I’ll put the drinks on your tab.”

Sara reached into the pocket of her jeans for her wallet. “I’ll pay for these—”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Belle said sternly. “This is my treat.”

“The whole day has been your treat. At least let me buy a round of drinks.”

“No.”

Seduction's Spell

Sara huffed out a breath. Janet grinned. "Give up, honey. You'll never win an argument with Belle."

"I just want to be fair," Sara said once Janet left.

"I don't get to treat my guests often. Don't spoil my fun, all right?"

Put that way, Sara couldn't argue. Besides, even at only two dollars per drink, her budget wouldn't let her buy more than one round.

What happened to you blowing the budget, huh? You're here to have a good time and forget about bills and obligations and your divorce.

That decision made, Sara picked up her glass and took a healthy drink of her margarita. The tequila burned all the way to her stomach. "Whoa!" she rasped since the tequila had destroyed her vocal cords. "Bubba makes 'em strong, doesn't he?"

"Sorry. I should've warned you."

"You plan to drive after drinking these things?"

"I only have one and I sip it slowly. I like to savor the taste."

"I think one will be enough for me, too."

"Don't cheat yourself. Have a good time. That's why we're here."

Belle was absolutely right. It'd been a long time since Sara had let go and simply enjoyed herself.

"You're right, Belle." Sara lifted her glass. "Here's to a good time, and wherever it may lead."

Vince peeked around the corner into the packed bar. The lights were low, but he still worried someone would recognize him and spoil Dolan's plan. "This won't work."

LYNN LAFLEUR

"It'll work," Dolan said from behind him. "It's dark, people are drinking and having a good time, and no one will expect a Cowboy to be here."

Vince adjusted the bandana on his head so it didn't cover his ears. "I feel like a gang member."

Isaac grinned. "You don't look like any gang member *I've* ever seen. You're too . . . clean."

"How many gang members have you seen, Isaac?"

"Hey, man, I didn't always live in a classy neighborhood."

Vince had. He'd grown up with money and every privilege money could buy. He'd been a straight A student in high school and college. Everything had come easily for him . . . money, fame, women.

Everything except keeping the woman he loved.

Dolan slapped Vince on the shoulder. "I promise everything will go according to plan. I'm gonna check with Bubba to make sure we're on schedule. Isaac, why don't you join the ladies?"

"Love to. See you later, Vince."

Vince watched Isaac weave through the crowd. He could see Belle and Yvonne sitting at the table. Maggie wasn't there, nor Sara. He scanned the dancing couples, looking for her. The dim lighting and dancers who constantly moved kept him from finding her.

"I'll find you, baby," he whispered. "And when I do, I'll never let you go again."

Belle folded her arms and rested them on the table. "What are you up to?"

Dolan paused in the act of scooping nuts out of the bowl. "Huh?"

Seduction's Spell

"Don't give me that innocent look. You're up to something."

"You're too suspicious, do you know that?" He tossed the nuts into his mouth, chewed, then washed them down with a gulp of his beer. "Have you danced with anyone?"

"You're changing the subject."

"I asked a simple question. Jeez, you're touchy tonight."

"Fess up, Dolan. You know I'll find out. I always do."

Belle saw the indecision flash through his eyes before he looked away. Whatever he'd done, he must not think she'd approve. He always refused to look her directly in the eyes when he was hiding something. "You wouldn't do anything to harm one of my guests—"

His gaze whipped back to hers. "Of course I wouldn't!"

"You didn't let me finish. You wouldn't do anything to harm one of my guests, so it's something else."

He stared into her eyes another moment before speaking again. "I'm helping someone."

"Who?"

"Sara's ex-husband. He checked in this morning."

"Yes, I know that."

"He loves Sara and wants her back."

"And you're helping him."

"Yeah."

"Why would you help a man who cheated on his wife?"

"Because I don't think he cheated."

"He was caught in bed with a woman. We both saw the pictures in the tabloid."

"Yeah, I know that, but . . ." Dolan ran a hand across his chin. "Vince says he didn't have sex with that woman."

"Of course he'd say that. He wouldn't *admit* to his guilt."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“He loves Sara. He’s miserable without her. Why would he fuck up— Oops. Sorry. Why would he mess up his marriage with a one-night stand?”

Belle smiled to herself at his correction. Dolan rarely used any foul language around her, but sometimes he slipped. “A lot of men have done that.”

“That’s true, but I don’t believe Vince is one of them.” Dolan pushed his mug aside and clasped his hands together on the table. “Vince was a rookie my last year playing football. We played the Cowboys during the regular season and the playoffs. Several of the guys got together after the games, so I got the chance to talk to him. I’m a good judge of character. You know that.”

“Yes, you’re an excellent judge of character.”

“I still have a lot of friends in the game. I’m gonna put out some feelers, see what I can find out.”

“Do you think he was set up?”

“I think it’s a possibility.”

“Who would do that?”

“Someone jealous of Vince’s success. There’s a lot of money in pro football, Belle. Maybe one of his teammates thought he could get the starting position if he made Vince look bad.”

“That really stinks.”

“Humans often do.”

Belle looked up when Sara approached the table. Isaac had escorted her to the dance floor as the latest Kenney Chesney hit came through the speakers. She plopped down in her chair, her skin gleaming with perspiration. “Boy, Isaac can *move*! I haven’t danced that much in a long time. I’m pooped.”

“Not too pooped for another dance, I hope.” Dolan came around the table and took her hand. “My turn.”

Seduction's Spell

"Don't I get a break?"

"Nope." He tugged her from her chair.

"Wait, wait! At least let me take a drink first." She pulled on her straw, slurping up the last of her margarita. "Belle, order me another one. I think I'm gonna need it."

Belle laughed. "Will do."

The music stopped. Sara turned to walk back to the table, glad for the break. She loved to dance, but it'd been a long time since she had. Muscles she hadn't used in months protested the strenuous workout.

Dolan grabbed her elbow and tugged her back to his side. "Where do you think you're going?"

"The song's over."

"The song, but not the music. It'll start up again in a sec."

"Dolan, I need a break. You're a wonderful dancer, but I'm *tired!*"

He grinned. "Wore you out, huh?"

She pushed her damp hair off her forehead. "I've sweated off three pounds and I certainly don't need to lose any weight."

"You're gorgeous and sexy, Sara. Don't ever believe otherwise."

His praise warmed her, even though she knew he was simply being polite. "Why don't you find Yvonne and dance with her?"

"Because I'm dancing with *you*."

"Okay, guys and gals," a booming voice said through the speakers, "it's time for some fun."

"That's Bubba, the owner," Dolan told Sara.

She turned toward the bar, where a large man with a shaved head and a cute goatee held a microphone.

LYNN LAFLEUR

“You’ll see my helpers moving through the crowd with scarves. Guys, you get to blindfold the ladies for the next dance.”

Sara’s eyes widened. “Blindfold?”

Dolan shrugged. “Bubba likes to try different things.”

“It’s definitely time for me to sit down.”

“Hey, be a sport. You’re with me. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Sara believed him. She barely knew Dolan, but she sensed that he was a gentleman. Besides, she wanted to try different things. Wearing a blindfold while dancing would be different. Even a little bit . . . kinky.

Dolan plucked a green scarf from the hand of a helper as he walked by. “Turn around.”

Sara’s heartbeat sped up when Dolan placed the scarf over her eyes. The lights were already dim in the bar. With the blindfold blocking her vision, she couldn’t see a thing.

A slow ballad by Elvis Presley started playing. Dolan drew her into his arms. Sara leaned her head on his shoulder and released a soft sigh. It’d been so long since she’d been in a man’s arms. Even though this would only be one dance, it was nice to be close to a man, to feel his strong body against hers.

She’d missed that so much.

“Sara, someone wants to cut in. Do you mind?”

The thought of a stranger holding her while she couldn’t see sent a tremor of fear through her. That fear quickly turned into a spark of interest. A stranger wanted to dance with her. Out of all the women in this bar, he wanted to dance with *her*. “Okay.”

Dolan released her and the man took her in his arms. She couldn’t see him, but she could smell him. The subtle scent of his aftershave reminded her of the outdoors. Vince had never

Seduction's Spell

worn aftershave or cologne of any kind, which had been fine with her. She'd loved his natural scent, especially when he was fresh from the shower.

The stranger was as tall as Dolan, which meant he was quite a bit taller than her five-foot-three. She slid her hands up his chest and over broad shoulders to around his neck. *Nice body*, she thought. He pulled her closer to him until their bodies touched from chest to thighs. Something about the way he held her seemed so familiar . . .

"You feel good against me," he whispered into her ear.

Sara would've stumbled if he hadn't held her so tightly. His warm breath made her shiver. Goose bumps erupted on her flesh. She couldn't possibly know this man, and yet . . .

The song switched from Elvis to The Eagles' "Best of My Love." The way he guided her, the ease with which she followed him, almost made her believe it was Vince who held her. They'd always danced well together. Sara knew this man wasn't her ex-husband, but she let herself fantasize that Vince held her. She imagined Vince's hands gliding up and down her back and over her hips.

His touch became more intimate, more daring. Sara moaned softly when she felt his hands beneath her tank on her lower back.

"Meet me later," he whispered in a husky voice.

His words did make her stumble. The music was so loud and he spoke so softly, she must have misunderstood him. "What?"

"I want more of you. Meet me later."

"I-I can't. I don't know you."

He nipped her earlobe. Sara groaned. Nibbling on her ears had always turned her on. "I promise you won't regret it."

LYNN LAFLEUR

This couldn't be happening, not to her. *Nothing* like this ever happened to her. A perfect stranger, a man Sara had never met, wanted to meet her later. "I-I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll meet me." He kissed the side of her neck. "Please."

His kiss made her bones dissolve and her resistance evaporate. "Where?"

He released her. Sara stood still for several moments before she realized he'd left her. She whipped off the scarf and turned in a circle, scanning the room. Couples danced all around her, but she didn't see a lone man anywhere.

I didn't imagine it. A man danced with me, kissed me, said he wanted me to meet him. Why did he leave?

"You okay, Sara?"

Dolan's voice interrupted her thoughts. Arms clasped across her waist, she turned to face him. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine."

Taking her arm, he led her off the dance floor. "That guy you were dancing with? He asked me to give you this."

He held out a folded piece of paper. Sara stared at the paper a moment before taking it from Dolan. She unfolded it to see a handwritten note in a bold scrawl.

I know you're staying at Belle On The Bend. New cabins are being built on the back of the property behind where the maintenance man lives. I'll hang a towel over the doorknob of the one where I'll be. Meet me there. I'll wait for you.

Five

Yvonne folded the paper and handed it back to Sara across Belle's kitchen table. "I think you should meet him."

"So do I," Maggie said.

"Make that three."

Sara stared at each woman, one at a time. "Y'all think I should meet a strange man in a dark cabin out in the middle of nowhere?" Her voice came out sounding like a squeak, but she couldn't help that. These women actually thought it was all right for her to do this crazy thing.

"It isn't in the middle of nowhere, Sara, it's here on my property. You'll be within screaming distance of Dolan."

"Well, that makes me feel a *lot* better," she said dryly.

Yvonne picked up the pitcher of peach tea in the middle of the table and topped off Sara's glass. "You said you wanted to be more daring. Here's your chance. And just because you meet the guy doesn't mean you'll have sex with him."

LYNN LAFLEUR

Sara fingered the piece of paper. "But what if that's what he wants?"

"Just because that's what *he* wants doesn't mean you do it," Maggie said firmly. "You're in control, Sara. Always remember that."

She was in control. Right. She didn't know *how* to be in control. God, she hated being such a mouse. She gulped her tea while trying to decide what to do.

"What do you want to do, Sara?" Belle asked. "Do you want to meet that man?"

Sara shrugged. "Kinda." Warmth filled her cheeks at her confession. These women probably thought she was a slut. "I mean, he seemed . . . nice."

"Don't forget hunky," Yvonne said.

Sara didn't know Yvonne had seen him. She sat up straighter in her chair. "You *saw* him?"

"Sure, while you two were dancing."

"What does he look like?"

"I didn't get a *good* look at him 'cause it was dark, but he's very cute and tall with a really nice body." She grinned. "He has a great ass."

"What color hair does he have?"

"He wore a bandana, so I don't know."

A bandana? Good grief, he was a gang member! "I can't meet him if he's a crook."

Belle frowned. "What makes you think he's a crook?"

"He wore a bandana."

"That doesn't make him a criminal. Maybe he got a bad haircut and was covering it up. Men can be just as vain as women."

Sara hadn't thought about that. "Yeah, I suppose." Picking

Seduction's Spell

up the piece of paper, she unfolded it and read the note once again. It was totally against her character to even *consider* meeting this man. She didn't know what she'd say to him, how she'd act if they met face-to-face.

A tiny thrill raced through her body at the thought of doing something . . . wicked.

"I'd like to be alone for a while and think, okay?"

"Of course." Belle smiled. "Why don't you walk in the gardens? There's a full moon tonight, so you'll be able to see clearly. Take your tea with you."

Sara nodded. "Thanks, ladies." She picked up her glass and walked out the back door.

Vince sat on the side of the double bed, head lowered, hands dangling between his spread knees. She wasn't coming. He'd been in this unfinished cabin for almost two hours and no Sara.

He should've known she wouldn't show up. His Sara was too shy to have a rendezvous with a strange man.

He'd been so eager to try anything to win Sara back, he'd agreed to Dolan's crazy idea. The dim lighting had kept anyone at the bar from recognizing him, but Sara would know him as soon as he pulled her close to him. She'd told him many times that even with her eyes closed, she could pick him out from his scent. That's why he'd showered with different soap and borrowed Dolan's aftershave. It must've worked because Sara hadn't known the strange man dancing with her was actually her ex-husband. She hadn't recognized his handwriting for he'd asked Dolan to write the note.

It had felt so good to hold her again.

She'd changed in the last six months. He'd noticed her

LYNN LAFLEUR

short hair first. Sara's hair had flowed almost to her waist like a dark curtain of silk. He'd loved wrapping his hands in it while he kissed her. He'd bury his nose in it and inhale the sweet scent of the flowery shampoo she used while he made love to her. It was almost as soft as her skin.

Vince ran his hand through his wavy hair and chuckled. She'd cut hers and he'd let his grow. He'd always kept it military short, but Sara had said many times she wished it were longer. Wanting to please her, he'd refused to get a haircut since their break-up.

He propped his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands over his mouth. He'd always tried to please Sara, to put her desires before his own. His brother said he was pussy whipped. Vince didn't believe that. A man wanting to please his woman didn't make him weak. In Vince's eyes, it made him even stronger.

He had to admit he liked her short hair. It made her look as if she'd stumbled out of bed after a long night of blistering sex.

Maybe that's the way she wanted to look. Maybe that's the way she lived now, changing lovers as often as she changed her clothes. She certainly hadn't pushed him away at the bar when he'd suggested meeting him.

Vince knew all too well that Sara would blush at a dirty joke, yet turn into a tigress in bed. Her shyness concerning sex had quickly disappeared. She'd become a passionate, inventive lover . . . one willing to try new positions, new toys. Nothing had been wrong with their sex life.

Vince swallowed hard. He hated the thought of another man touching Sara, yet she had every right to make love with whomever she chose. They were no longer legally married, even though Sara was still his wife in his heart. Because of

Seduction's Spell

that belief, he hadn't been with a woman since they separated.

Why can't I remember going to bed with that woman? I know I didn't have sex with her. I'd never cheat on Sara.

"Shit," he muttered.

Vince stood and headed for the door. He might as well go up to his room. Dolan had helped him carry the mattress and box springs in here and make up the bed, but it wouldn't be used tonight. Sara wasn't coming.

He stopped at the window next to the front door. The full moon illuminated the area, letting him see clearly. Sara stood less than ten feet away.

His heart jumped up in his throat, knowing she was so close, then fell down into his stomach. She actually planned to meet a strange man and possibly make love with him. Vince didn't know whether to be glad she'd decided to come, or hurt that she'd jump so quickly at a chance to have sex with a stranger.

He moved to the corner of the room so she couldn't see him. Breath held, he waited for her to enter the cabin.

She pushed the door open slowly and stepped inside, closing the door behind her. He could see her with the moonlight filtering through the window, yet he stood in the shadows. She'd taken the hand towel off the doorknob. Vince smiled when he saw her twining the piece of terrycloth through her fingers. Sara never had been able to keep her hands still.

"Hello?" she said weakly.

"I'm here," Vince whispered in a gravelly tone.

She whirled around, her eyes wide. One hand flew up to her chest. "You scared me."

Vince remained silent. There was no loud music here to cover his voice, so he had to speak as little as possible.

LYNN LAFLEUR

"I-I'd like to see you."

"I'd like to touch you."

He thought he heard her whimper.

"Come here."

"I can't." She pushed her hair back from her forehead. "I don't know why I'm here. I *never* do anything like this."

"Like what?"

"I don't even *know* you! I shouldn't be here alone with you."

"So why did you come?"

She shrugged. "I was . . . curious. I mean, I'm not used to a man coming on to me."

His sweet, shy Sara still didn't believe any man found her attractive. He'd never understood that. She was so pretty with her huge brown eyes and creamy skin. "Why not? Don't you date?"

"No, not since . . ."

She stopped. "Since when?" Vince prodded.

"I haven't . . . dated anyone since my divorce."

She *hadn't* been with another man. Caveman mentality or not, Vince was glad no other man had touched her.

"I can't do this." Sara dropped the towel. "I'm sorry. I can't do this."

She turned for the door. Vince hurried over and stepped behind her. He held both her arms before she could turn the doorknob. "No, don't leave," he rasped in her ear. "Stay with me." Releasing her arms, he splayed his hands over her stomach and began a gentle caress. "Let me touch you. Let me love you."

Slowly, he slid his hands to her breasts. Small and firm, they fit perfectly in his palms. He knew Sara had always

Seduction's Spell

wanted larger breasts, but he thought they were just the right size. He squeezed her flesh and heard her breath catch.

"Do you like this?"

"I— Yes."

He tugged on her earlobe with his teeth. Sara moaned. He knew she loved it when he licked and sucked her earlobes . . . almost as much as when he sucked her nipples. Taking each nub between thumb and forefinger, he plucked them while he darted his tongue into her ear.

This time he was sure he heard her whimper.

Vince rolled his erection between her buttocks. "I want to be inside you."

She reached behind her and clasped his neck. The position arched her back and pressed her buttocks against his cock. Vince had to concentrate not to groan. He couldn't take any chances that she might recognize some of the sounds he made while making love with her.

"I-I don't know you."

He'd anticipated her reluctance and brought condoms. He hated to wear one with her since it wasn't necessary, but he didn't want her uncomfortable in any way. "I'll take care of you." He kissed the curve of her jaw, her nape, her shoulder. "Make love with me."

Sara wanted to. It'd been months since she'd been touched, caressed. She'd missed that closeness. But she couldn't, not with this man. She knew nothing about him. Yvonne said he was hunky. Good looks didn't mean he couldn't have some vile disease or a criminal record.

Go for it, Sara. Do something daring for a change.

The little voice inside her head had been bugging her all evening. She'd never even *heard* that voice before tonight. Sara

LYNN LAFLEUR

couldn't decide whether to keep ignoring it or to finally take its advice.

Another tug on her nipples made her groan. Maybe if she saw his face, she'd feel more comfortable. "Will you turn on a light?"

"No lights in here yet." One hand slid down her stomach to between her thighs. "You don't have to look. Just feel. Concentrate on what's happening in your body."

He pushed up with his fingertips. Sara released a soft cry when he pressed her clit. He rubbed gently, sending sensations down to her toes before settling low in her belly.

"I want to make you come."

His husky whisper in her ear sent those delicious sensations galloping through her body again. Sara spread her legs a few inches to give him more room to touch her. It wasn't enough. She needed his fingers on her bare skin.

As if he read her mind, he unfastened her jeans and tugged them and her panties down to her thighs. He touched her again, spreading the feminine lips with one hand while rubbing her clit with the other.

Sara rolled her eyes in pleasure.

"Mmm, you're nice and wet. I like that."

She barely heard him since she was so focused on her body. It'd been so long since a man had touched her, it wouldn't take long for her to come.

He pushed two fingers inside her pussy, and she shattered.

His erection pumping against her buttocks brought Sara back from the heavens. The denim scraped her skin, but not in a painful way. It made her want more.

The moonlight shining in the window would give her

Seduction's Spell

enough light to see him. She tried to turn around so she could look at his face. His arms held her firmly in place.

"Let me see you."

"Not yet." He tunneled one hand under her tank and bra and clasped her breast. "I want to love you first."

The hand between her thighs kept doing its magic to her pussy. One orgasm should've satisfied her. It didn't. Her desire soared with each pass of his thumb across her clit. Her breathing deepened, her heartbeat became heavy.

"That's the way." He squeezed her nipple. "Come for me. I want you to come again and again and again."

"Oh. Oh! *Ohhhhhhhh!*"

Sara pushed his hand harder against her mound as the orgasm shimmied down her spine. Her knees lost their strength. She would've drifted to the floor if he hadn't held her so tightly.

"God, that was *hot*. I love making you come."

"You won't hear me complain." She inhaled deeply and exhaled through her mouth. "Whew!"

The rumble of his chuckle tickled her back. "Good one, huh?"

"Oh, yeah."

He kissed her neck. "And we've only just started."

The man was crazy. He couldn't possibly think she could have a third orgasm. One was normal, occasionally two. Three? Never.

Sara stumbled a step when he started walking backward, tugging her with him. "What are you doing?"

"Getting us more comfortable."

He led her away from the windows and into a dark corner of the cabin. Her stomach clenched in fear. Maybe he was an

LYNN LAFLEUR

ax murderer after all. He got off on making a woman come, then he chopped off her head.

You watch too many horror flicks, Sara.

He twirled her around, his chest still to her back, and urged her forward. She landed on her hands and knees on something soft. "There's a bed in here?"

"Yeah." Cool air touched her buttocks as he pushed her clothes down her legs. "Lift your legs one at a time."

Sara did as he said. He removed her clothes and shoes, leaving her naked from the waist down. He slid his hands between her thighs and pressed, silently asking her to spread her legs wider.

"That's the way," he whispered. "Just like that."

She swallowed when she heard the clink of a belt buckle. The sound of a zipper being lowered made her close her eyes. She heard nothing for a moment, then the soft rasp of tearing plastic.

She lowered her head to the bed and waited.

Holding her hips, he slowly guided his cock into her pussy. Sara bit her bottom lip to keep from gasping. His shaft felt thick and hard and incredible inside her. He drove forward until his balls touched her.

"Oh, yeah," he growled. "That's where I'm supposed to be."

He began with gentle thrusts, slow and easy. Sara clutched the sheet and spread her legs another inch, wanting him as far as she could take him. He caressed her hips, back, and buttocks as he moved. Each movement sent him deeper. Each movement fanned her desire higher.

The desire burst into mind-numbing pleasure when he pushed his thumb into her ass.

"Oh, *God!*"

Seduction's Spell

Sara trembled from the strength of her release. It took her several moments to be able to breathe, much less think again. She came back to reality when he clasped her hips and groaned out his own release.

Now that her body was finally beginning to return to normal, she didn't know what to do. She couldn't face him, not now. She'd wanted to see his face, but she didn't know how she could look into his eyes after having sex with a stranger.

A stranger who had reminded her so much of Vince.

He leaned over her back and nipped her earlobe. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, unsure what to say to him. This man had just made love to her and she didn't even know his name.

She whimpered when he withdrew from her body.

"C'mere." Taking her shoulders, he gently pulled her upright. She let him take off her tank and bra. "Lie down."

The effect of three orgasms left her weak and sleepy. She had no strength to argue with him. She lay on her side and faced the wall.

He crawled into bed behind her and pulled her into his arms, her back to his chest. A soft kiss fell on her shoulder. "Goodnight."

Snuggling closer to his warm body, Sara closed her eyes.

Six

*S*ara slowly opened her eyes. She blinked, then frowned when she didn't recognize her surroundings. She was inside a small unfinished cabin . . . no draperies, no carpeting, no furniture. Well, no furniture except for the bed beneath her.

Cabin. Bed. Sex with stranger.

It came back to her in a rush. Her eyes widened as her heart began to pound. He was behind her. She could feel his warmth against her back.

She could either turn over and finally see his face, or she could crawl out of the cabin and forget this ever happened.

She opted to crawl.

They'd made love again during the early-morning hours. After it was over, she'd ended up on the outside of the bed. It would be easy for her to simply get up, slip into her clothes, and disappear before he awoke. She could hide in her room until he left the property.

Moving cautiously so as not to wake him, Sara lifted the

Seduction's Spell

covers and eased out of bed. She slipped on her jeans and tank and stuffed her underwear in a pocket. It took her a moment to locate her sandals, which had slipped beneath the edge of the bed. She slid on one and had her foot poised to slide on the other when he spoke.

“Where are you going?”

No husky whisper in the dark this time. Sara heard his voice clearly. Her heart sped up, her breath caught. No, it couldn't be . . .

She whirled around to see her ex-husband propped up on one elbow in the bed.

“Vince?”

“Where are you going?” he repeated.

“What are you doing here?” Her shock quickly shifted to anger. He had *tricked* her. “What the *hell* are you doing here?”

His eyebrows shot up. “Such language from a lady.”

“Don't you even comment on my language after what you did.”

Vince moved to the edge of the bed. The sheet slipped off one leg, but still covered his other leg and groin. Sara was grateful for that. Despite her anger, seeing his nude body made it difficult for her to think clearly. “I had to talk to you, Sara.”

“We didn't ‘talk’ last night, Vince.”

“I know,” he said softly.

The sorrow shining in his eyes almost made her weaken. Almost. “How could you have done that to me? You tricked me into thinking you were a stranger.”

“Whom you didn't hesitate to meet.”

“Oh, yes, I hesitated. I debated with myself over and over again about whether or not to come here.”

LYNN LAFLEUR

“What made you decide?”

“Because I thought . . .”

She stopped. She’d almost admitted the stranger had reminded her of Vince and that’s why she’d finally decided to meet him. Instead, she lifted her chin. “It’s none of your business what I do. We aren’t married anymore.”

“Your decision, not mine. I didn’t want the divorce.”

“Surely you didn’t expect me to stay married to you when you cheated on me.”

“I didn’t cheat on you!”

He bounded from the bed. Sara gasped at the sight of his nude body. Everything about him screamed *male*, from the broad shoulders to the wide chest to the dark hair arrowing down his stomach. His shaft was flaccid, but that didn’t make it any less impressive.

Damn him for looking so gorgeous.

He clasped her upper arms. “I never cheated on you, Sara. I *swear* it.”

“Then explain to me how you ended up in bed with that . . . woman who had semen between her thighs.”

“I *can’t* explain it. I don’t remember anything.”

“How convenient.”

His eyes narrowed, his lips thinned. “You won’t give an inch, will you?”

“Why should I?” To her dismay, tears flooded her eyes. “Do you have any idea how humiliated I was to have so many people tell me how *sorry* they were, how *sad* it was that my husband couldn’t keep his pants zipped? My so-called ‘friends’ said that to me, Vince. Oh, and while they were being so *helpful*, some of them mentioned they weren’t surprised, that surely you’d been screwing around on me at every away game you played.”

Seduction's Spell

The agony that filled his eyes caused her heart to clench in her chest. "You can't believe that. Sara, I love you. I'd never hurt you. *Never*."

"But you did. Don't you see that?"

"I never meant to." He wiped her tears from her cheeks with his thumbs. "You're the only woman I want in my life, in my bed. I want to grow old with you." Leaning forward, he rested his forehead against hers. "I want to have a baby with you."

Her tears fell faster at his declaration. She'd dreamed of carrying Vince's baby. She wanted a miniature version of him with the same brown hair and hazel eyes. Boy or girl, she didn't care, as long as their baby looked like Vince.

"I don't know what happened, Sara," he whispered. "I swear that on my love for you. But can't you give me another chance? Can't we start over?" He ran his hands up into her hair. "We're so damn good together in so many ways." He kissed her forehead. "We like the same music." Her eyebrow. "We like the same foods." Her cheek. "TV shows." Her jaw. "Movies." The tip of her nose. "And in bed. My God, in bed, we're . . ."

He kissed her. He sipped at her mouth, kissing her softly over and over. Sara parted her lips when she felt the tip of his tongue. It slid along the seam of her lips, then ventured inside to duel with her tongue.

Sara melted against him. Vince had always been an incredible kisser. She'd never been able to resist him once he started kissing her. Not that she'd ever wanted to resist him, when he unselfishly gave her so much pleasure.

His hands drifted down to her buttocks. Sara moaned when he pushed his erection into her pelvis.

"Do you feel that, Sara? It's for you. Only you. I don't want to be inside any other woman."

LYNN LAFLEUR

She believed him. The sincerity in his eyes couldn't be phony. He truly loved her and didn't want to be with any other woman.

Her heart soared with joy.

He kissed her again while cupping her buttocks and lifting her. Sara tunneled her fingers into his hair and wrapped her legs around his waist. She didn't let him go, not even after he'd laid her on the bed and settled between her legs.

The kisses continued until Sara had to pull away to take a breath. Even then, Vince continued to kiss and nip her neck and shoulder. He pushed up her tank and licked one nipple, then the other. Cradling her breast in his hand, he tugged her nipple into his mouth and suckled.

Sara purred.

Vince smiled to himself at the sound of pleasure Sara made. He wasn't a stranger to physical love. He'd had plenty of women before he met Sara . . . enough to know the huge difference between making love and fucking. The fact that he loved her so much made their lovemaking even more special.

And hotter than a mid-August day.

He sat back on his heels and looked at her. Her cheeks were flushed, her skin dewy, her nipples puckered. He saw her gaze drift down to his hard cock and linger there a moment before she looked back at his face. Desire clearly showed in her eyes, yet he needed to hear her say the words.

"Do you want me, Sara?"

She nodded.

"Tell me."

Her throat worked as she swallowed. "I want you. Make love to me."

"Take off your clothes."

Seduction's Spell

She sat up, pulled off her tank, and tossed it to the floor. Vince moved to her side so she'd have room to remove her jeans. She lay back down before unfastening her jeans and sliding them down her legs. They joined her tank on the floor.

Vince slowly ran his hand up the inside of her leg. He cradled her mound, his fingers caressing her labia. He smiled when he discovered her pussy was already wet.

"Mmm, creamy. I like that." He started to push two fingers inside her, but stopped. He'd fantasized many times about doing certain things with Sara. Now would be a good time to fulfill one of his fantasies.

Rising from the bed, he reached for his jeans on the floor. He looked into Sara's eyes as he drew the scarf from the bar out of his pocket. "How about if we play a little?"

"Play?"

"Yeah. Sit up."

Curiosity filled her eyes, but he also saw heat. She sat up and Vince returned to his spot between her legs. "Close your eyes."

She did, and he tied the scarf over her eyes. Her mouth slackened and she gasped softly. "What are you doing?"

"We had sex last night without you seeing me. Now I want to make love to you . . . nice and slow." He squeezed her breasts. "Lie back."

She lay down again, her arms at her sides. Vince took her wrists and raised her hands over her head. "Like that. Leave your arms there."

Sara licked her lips. "What are you going to do?"

He kissed her softly. "Love you," he whispered.

Vince straddled her body. Touching her only with his lips and tongue, he worshipped her mouth. He circled her lips with his tongue, traced the seam, darted inside. He tickled the

LYNN LAFLEUR

corners of her mouth, nipped her full lips. He loved feeling those full lips sliding down his cock. Later. Right now, he wanted to devote all his attention to pleasing his wife.

Sara licked her lips to savor Vince's taste. He'd kissed her mouth over and over. Now his tongue followed the curve of her ear, his teeth nibbled her earlobe. She had to concentrate to keep from writhing on the bed. Every tug of her earlobe sent a zing through her clit. She could feel her cream dribble from her pussy down the crack of her ass. If she'd ever been this wet, she couldn't remember when.

He stopped licking her ear. She could hear his heavy breathing so knew he was still with her, but she couldn't see anything. Several seconds passed. Sara waited, not knowing what he'd do next.

She cried out when he began sucking one nipple. She grabbed handfuls of his hair and pushed him closer to her breast. He immediately lifted his mouth from her flesh.

"Hands over your head."

"Vince, please, I want to touch you."

"Nothing happens until you do what I say."

She moaned in frustration, but did as he ordered. As soon as her arms were over her head, he latched onto her nipple. He treated it as he had her mouth, with gentle nips and long licks mixed in with the suckling. Sara clutched the pillow over her head to keep from grabbing his head again when he circled the areola with his tongue. First one nipple, then the other . . . licking, sucking, flicking. The orgasm began to build low in her tummy.

It died when Vince released her nipple.

"No! Don't stop."

Seduction's Spell

"You can't come yet."

"What?"

"I want it to be *really* good for you."

"Trust me, it'll be really good." She arched her back, shamelessly asking for more. "Suck my nipples."

He kissed the spot between her breasts instead.

"Vince!"

He dragged his tongue down the center of her body to her navel. After circling it with the tip of his tongue several times, he licked his way back up to her breasts. Each nipple received a quick tug with his teeth. It wasn't nearly enough for Sara. Ignoring his command to keep her arms above her head, she once again threaded her fingers into his hair to hold his head close to her.

She was no match for his strength. Sara whimpered when Vince pulled away from her. "Am I gonna have to tie your hands?"

Sara's clit throbbed. She'd fantasized about being bound and completely at Vince's mercy, but never had the courage to tell him that.

He flicked one nipple with the tip of his finger. "You like that idea, don't you? You want to be tied up."

She didn't answer. He flicked her nipple again. "Don't you?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"*Damn*, babe." He kissed her roughly, deeply, his tongue diving past her lips. "I don't have another scarf. Wait. I have an idea."

Sara started to remove the scarf from her eyes and watch Vince as he rose from the bed, but she resisted the temptation.

LYNN LAFLEUR

A moment passed, then soft cloth wrapped around her wrists. She felt a gentle tug on her arms as Vince positioned them higher on the pillow.

"I'm using your tank. I'm tucking the ends between the mattresses. You can get loose if you want to." He ran his tongue around the rim of her ear. "Next time, I'll use something so you *can't* get loose."

Sara groaned.

The mattress dipped. Vince's hair-dusted knees brushed against her hip. "Open your legs, Sara."

Sara shivered from the cool air against her wet flesh. She clenched her hands into fists as she waited for what Vince would do next.

The stroke of his tongue over her clit made her gasp. Placing both feet on the bed, she arched her hips and pushed her mound closer to his mouth.

"Mmm, you smell good." Vince kissed the inside of each thigh. "You taste even better." He lay between Sara's legs, slipped his hands beneath her buttocks, and feasted. He licked her from anus to clit and back, then licked her a second time. After the third time, he settled over her clit and suckled.

Sara almost gave him whiplash when her hips jerked upward. She released a low, keening sound. Vince pushed two fingers inside her and felt the walls of her pussy contract as she came.

He gave her a moment to recover before asking, "So was it really good for you?"

She blew out a breath. "Good doesn't do it justice."

Vince smiled. He loved making her come.

Seduction's Spell

He stretched out on top of her and thrust inside her, resting on his elbows so he wouldn't be too heavy. Blindfolding her had been fun, a fantasy fulfilled, but he wanted to look into her eyes as he loved her. He tugged off the scarf and let it fall to the floor.

Sara blinked several times. Vince kissed each eyelid, the tip of her nose, her mouth. "Are you still on the Pill?"

She shook her head.

He kissed her again, longer this time. "I'm not wearing a condom, Sara."

"I know," she said softly.

Lifting his head, he looked into her eyes. "Can you get pregnant now?"

"I'm . . . not sure. Maybe."

Vince's heart jumped for joy in his chest. She wasn't pulling away from him or telling him to stop. His thrusts quickened. "So we might make a baby?"

"We might."

Knowing she could soon be carrying his child sent Vince over the edge. Cradling her face, he kissed her deeply as the pleasure engulfed him.

He lifted his head and looked into the eyes of the woman he adored. "I love you, Sara."

She smiled tenderly. "I love you, too."

"Does this mean we can start over?"

"Well, considering I might be pregnant, I think we'd better."

Her teasing made him chuckle. "That's true." Sobering again, he kissed her brow and untied her wrists. "I want to marry you again as soon as possible. If you want another big

LYNN LAFLEUR

ceremony with family and friends, I'm fine with that."

She ran her hands up and down his spine. "I don't need a big ceremony. A justice of the peace will suit me."

"When?"

Her stomach growled loudly. "Can I eat breakfast first?"

Vince laughed. "Yeah, I think that can be arranged."

Seven

*I*t wasn't easy to make it to the mansion when Vince stopped her every three steps for a kiss. By the time they climbed the back stairs to her room, Sara wanted him fiercely, despite the intense climax she'd experienced a short time ago in the cabin. The large erection filling the crotch of his jeans proved he wanted her just as much.

Food would have to wait. She had another hunger to feed first.

She led him to the bathroom. She shed her clothes quickly and turned on the shower, then faced Vince. He'd wasted no time taking off his clothes. Sara stepped into the shower with Vince behind her.

A moment later, he had her against the wall, his cock buried deep inside her, as the warm water rained down on their bodies.

Sara wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck. His thrusts were swift and deep, which was exactly

LYNN LAFLEUR

what she wanted. The orgasm built quickly and spread through her body faster than wildfire.

A loud moan and hard thrust signaled Vince's climax. Sara tightened her hold on him while his breathing slowed and his heart stopped pounding against her breasts. She slid her fingers into his wet hair, content to be in his arms until he was ready to move.

He lifted his head from her shoulder. "You've *got* to be pregnant now. I came a cupful."

Sara snorted with laughter. "You wish."

He grinned. "It's a guy thing."

"Yeah, I know." She pushed his hair back from his forehead. "I like your hair."

"I like yours, too."

"Do you? I cut it on a whim."

"It's very sexy." He squeezed her buttocks. "Everything about you is sexy."

She knew better. "Vince—"

"Don't tell me you aren't sexy. Your skin is smooth and soft." He lifted one hand to her breast and squeezed it. "You have this gorgeous body with breasts that fit perfectly in my hands." One fingertip tilted up her chin. "An incredible mouth with full lips made for kissing. And a man could drown in these eyes. They're beautiful. *You're* beautiful."

Warmth crept into her cheeks at his praise. "You'll give me a swelled head."

A devilish grin turned up his mouth. "No, *I'm* the one who gets the swelled head."

He shifted his hips, driving his hardening cock farther into her pussy. Sara's eyes widened. "So soon?"

Seduction's Spell

"I've been without you for six months. We have a lot of catching up to do."

She wanted to ask, but feared the answer. They were legally divorced. Vince could've been with two dozen women while they were apart. He'd certainly had that right.

He smiled tenderly. "I know what you're thinking. You've always been my wife in my heart, Sara. I haven't been with another woman."

Tears filled her eyes. They'd wasted six months of their lives because she hadn't believed in his love. "I'm so sorry I didn't trust you."

"Shh." He kissed her softly. "That's over. We're together now and we're going to stay together. No regrets, no looking back."

He kissed her again, longer and deeper. Sara once more tunneled her fingers into his hair as he began to move inside her. She kissed his lips, licked the corner of his mouth, lightly nipped his tongue. Vince groaned and pumped faster.

"I'm close, Sara." Cradling the back of her thighs, he spread her legs wider. "Come with me, baby."

The new position let the base of his cock brush her clit harder. Sara threw back her head and closed her eyes. "Right there, Vince. Yessssss. Oh, yessssss!"

The climax galloped through her body a moment before Vince's body tightened. She could feel the pulsations of his cock deep inside her. His hips jerked once, twice, before he dug his fingers into her thighs and moaned loudly.

Sara tugged on Vince's hair until he looked at her. "Now *that* felt like a cupful."

He burst out laughing. "Yeah, maybe it was." Releasing a

LYNN LAFLEUR

shaky breath, he leaned his forehead against hers. "My God, you're an incredible lover."

"I learned from the best."

"We learned together. I never knew what making love was like until I met you, Sara. We get pretty hot together, but I always feel as if we're making love, not simply having sex." He pulled back and looked into her eyes. "Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense," she whispered.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

By the time he and Sara entered the dining room, Vince was ready to chew the wallpaper off the walls. He nodded a hello to everyone seated, then quickly made his way to the buffet table. Making love with Sara had left him ravenous.

Not that he was complaining one bit.

He watched her lift a silver cover and peer inside at the French toast. "You'd better get a piece of that now or there won't be any left."

She stuck her tongue out at him before placing a piece of toast on her plate.

God, she was cute.

He added scrambled eggs and ham to the pile of French toast on his plate and joined Sara at the table. He glanced at Yvonne when he sat across from her. She gave him a naughty wink.

"Did you work up an appetite, Vince?"

He grinned at her while scooping up a forkful of eggs. "Yeah."

Sara blushed. Chuckling at her embarrassment, he nuzzled her ear. "I'm not ashamed for everyone to know we made love."

Seduction's Spell

"So everything's okay?" Belle asked.

"Everything is great."

She smiled. "I'm so glad. I was afraid Dolan's crazy idea would backfire."

"You knew?" Sara asked Belle.

"Not all the details, but yes, I knew."

"My guy's a romantic," Yvonne said. "He told me he's the one who wrote the note that supposedly came from your stranger, Sara. He talked Bubba into the blindfold thing, too. He planned every romantic detail. Is it any wonder why I love him so much? Of course, the fact that he's incredible in bed doesn't hurt."

"Yvonne, I don't need to know that much information about my employee," Belle said while everyone else laughed.

Vince washed down his eggs with a gulp of orange juice. "Where is Dolan?"

"He said he had some phone calls to make. I thought he'd be here by now." She turned to Isaac, seated beside her. "You two were talking earlier. Did he tell you what he was doing?"

Isaac glanced at Vince before looking at Yvonne. "I think it would be better for Dolan to speak for himself."

"What am I speaking about?" Dolan asked as he walked into the room.

"There you are." Yvonne raised her lips for his kiss. "Where have you been?"

"I told you I had some calls to make." He took his place at the foot of the table on Yvonne's left. "The calls concerned you, Vince."

Vince stopped with his fork raised halfway to his mouth. "Me?"

Dolan poured himself a cup of coffee from the carafe next

LYNN LAFLEUR

to Yvonne. "I had a hunch that you were set up to make it look like you had sex with that blonde. I still know a lot of people in the game, so I contacted one of them." He returned the carafe to the table. His gaze touched everyone before he looked back at Vince. "Do you want to talk about this in private?"

"No. Everyone here knows about my . . . situation. Go ahead."

"Does the name Jack Keating ring a bell?"

"Sure. He was a receiver for the Cowboys. We were good friends until he decided to move to New York a couple of months ago."

"He didn't decide to move on his own, Vince. He was *told* to move."

"I don't understand."

"He could stay in Texas and face possible charges, or leave the state and the game of football."

Vince dropped his fork on his plate. "What?"

"Jack Keating's responsible for your being in bed with that woman."

Vince didn't believe it. Jack had been his teammate and one of his closest friends. "No. That isn't possible."

"Jack was jealous of you, Vince. You were getting a lot more playing time than he was and he didn't like it. He was supposed to be the star, the hottest thing football had seen in years. It didn't turn out that way. *You* got the playing time, the huge contract, the fans."

"Wait a minute." Vince couldn't absorb this, couldn't believe Jack would've betrayed him. "Who did you talk to?"

"Chet Davis."

"Chet? How did you find him? He left the Cowboys at the end of the season."

Seduction's Spell

"Chet was a trainer for the 49ers before he transferred to the Cowboys. We became good friends and still keep in contact. He wasn't the least bit suspicious when I called him and casually mentioned you. He told me no one could prove it, but he'd always suspected Jack was responsible for what happened to you." Dolan sipped his coffee. "I'm not through, Vince. I will find out what happened and who helped Jack set you up."

His appetite now gone, Vince leaned back in his chair. A man he'd considered his friend had destroyed his marriage. He and Sara had gone through hell and months of being apart because of stupid jealousy.

Sara laid her hand over his. "I'm so sorry, Vince. I thought Jack was our friend."

"Yeah." Vince turned his hand over and intertwined his fingers with Sara's. "I appreciate everything you've done, Dolan, but don't make any more calls. Chet said there's no proof."

"There might be someone willing to talk—"

"Talking isn't proof. Hey, don't get me wrong. I'd like to hunt down Jack and smash in his face, but that won't help anything, either." He lifted Sara's hand to his lips and kissed the back. "I have my wife. That's all that matters to me."

"You're more forgiving than I would be."

"It has nothing to do with forgiving. I just want to forget the last six months and start my life over with Sara. We're getting remarried as soon as possible."

"How wonderful!" Belle said, clapping her hands. "You should get married right here, in the garden. Judge Bishop can marry you."

Vince looked at Sara. "What do you think? You said you didn't need another big ceremony."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“All I need is to be your wife.”

The love shimmering in her eyes brought a lump to Vince’s throat. He kissed Sara softly. “Then it looks like we get married in Belle’s garden.”

Belle raised her glass of orange juice. “A toast to the soon-to-be newlyweds.” She waited until everyone at the table had raised their glasses, too. “Here’s wishing Sara and Vince fifty years of happiness.”

Vince looked into the eyes of the woman he loved more than his own life. “I’ll go for that,” he said, clinking his glass against Sara’s.

Belle and Mitch



One

Belle looked up from her paperwork when Lottie set a saucer of brownies before her. She smiled. "Thank you. A chocolate fix is just what I need."

"I thought you might." Lottie sat in the chair by Belle's desk. "You okay?"

"Of course I am. Why do you ask?"

"Because I've known you for twenty years. You can't hide your feelings from me."

Belle knew that. No matter how hard she tried to behave normally, Lottie always knew when something was wrong.

"It's silly."

"It isn't silly. What's up?"

"I'm happy for all my guests. You know that."

"Yes, I know that. Your guests are important to you. But . . ." She circled one finger in the air, indicating for Belle to continue.

"But seeing Sara and Vince so happy this morning, and

LYNN LAFLEUR

knowing Dolan has found love with Yvonne, and the Olveras have fallen in love with each other again . . ." Belle sighed. "I'm a little . . . jealous."

Sympathy softened Lottie's eyes. That made Belle feel guilty. She had no right to be jealous of her guests' happiness.

But she'd been alone for a long, long time.

"I keep thinking *he'll* walk through the front door, the one who'll steal my heart. That's such a silly wish."

"Why is it silly?"

"Because it isn't going to happen. I've been waiting for *years*."

"You've had men in your life, Belle."

She waved a hand, dismissing what Lottie had said. "I've had sex. That isn't the same thing. I haven't found my soul mate."

"So you'll wait a little while longer. Love is worth waiting for."

She'd told her guests the same thing. The words directed back at her didn't seem as helpful.

"Since it's Friday, I thought I'd fix shrimp scampi for supper and buttermilk pie for dessert. How's that?"

Belle smiled. "You know I love your shrimp scampi and buttermilk pie."

Lottie grinned. "Yes, I do." She stood. "Eat your brownies before they dry out."

"Yes, ma'am."

At the door, Lottie turned to face Belle again. "I forgot to tell you. I answered the phone while you were outside with Maggie and Sara. That journalist from *World Travel* will be back this afternoon."

Belle frowned. She didn't remember meeting anyone from *World Travel*. "Journalist?"

Seduction's Spell

"Yeah. Remember he was here a couple of weeks ago? Braden was showing him around the grounds since Dolan was gone, but then he got a phone call and had to leave." Lottie tapped her chin with one finger. "Come to think of it, I don't think you actually *met* him. You were in Roseville and got back to the mansion as he was leaving."

Belle vaguely remembered Braden mentioning a photographer coming to take pictures, but she didn't remember any other details. "Let Dolan help him when he gets here, all right? I have to finish up this paperwork so I can order supplies."

"Okay."

Once Lottie left the room, Belle leaned back in her chair. Sighing softly, she looked out the window to her left. Her office faced the rose garden. While there were several gardens on the grounds, the rose garden was Belle's favorite. She had employees who took care of the landscaping, but the rose garden was her baby. She took care of every flower and bush herself. Looking at the colorful blooms always gave her pleasure.

Today, not even her favorite flowers made her feel better.

She knew she should give up on the notion of finding her soul mate. After all, what man in his right mind would believe her age? If she fell in love, she'd want to be totally honest with him. She had no idea how she'd tell him she was over one hundred and sixty years old. He'd burst into laughter, then haul her off to the nearest mental hospital.

Belle stood and strolled around her office, touching the furnishings as she walked past them. She loved her home. It took a lot of time and money to maintain the mansion's original grandeur, but money wasn't a problem. Belle had amassed

LYNN LAFLEUR

a fortune over the years. Wise investments plus her long life had made it easy for her to make money. She'd poured a lot of funds into the mansion, wanting it to remain the same as it had when her grandfather built it in 1844.

She'd succeeded. The guests who stayed here all loved it. Most of them came back for a return visit, some several visits. Belle didn't lack for companionship or friends.

Friends couldn't hold her, touch her. Friends couldn't share her life with her.

She'd lived here since she was a tiny baby. Living anywhere else simply wasn't possible. She didn't want to move, plus she had no idea what would happen to her physically if she moved away from the mansion and the water she'd drunk her whole life.

A soft knock on the door caused Belle to turn. Maggie stood in the doorway, her face flushed and her skin dewy with perspiration.

"Am I disturbing you?" Maggie asked.

"Of course not. Please come in."

Belle returned to her desk and Maggie flopped down in the chair where Lottie had sat earlier. She pushed her wet bangs off her forehead. "Whew! I'm pooped. Isaac and I played two sets of tennis."

"Who won?"

Maggie grinned. "Me."

Laughing, Belle pushed the saucer of brownies closer to Maggie. "Here. Have some congratulatory chocolate."

"Thanks." She picked up a brownie and ate half of it in one bite. "Gosh, that's good. I'll miss Lottie's cooking when we leave."

"You should stay another week. I had a cancellation, so

Seduction's Spell

your room will be available next week.”

Maggie dusted the crumbs from her fingers and shook her head. “I appreciate the offer, but I miss my babies. Sunday is Easter. We always do a big family thing on Easter at my parents’ house with my sister and brothers and their kids.”

A big family thing sounded wonderful to Belle. She’d had two older brothers, but they’d passed away decades ago. She’d outlived their children. Any great-nieces or great-nephews she may have had been lost to her a long time ago.

Living to be past one hundred wasn’t always a good thing.

“Where’s Isaac? Recuperating?”

“He had a message on his voice mail from his VP. Isaac is calling him back.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

Maggie nodded. “Isaac and I have talked so much since we’ve been here about his business, our relationship, the boys. He’s proud of me for opening up and telling him how I really feel.” She clasped her hands together in her lap. “I don’t know if I would’ve ever had the courage to do that if I hadn’t come here. There’s something special about your place, Belle. It’s almost . . . magical.”

If you only knew. “I’m glad everything is working out. It’s obvious how much y’all love each other.”

“The time here has been wonderful for us. We’d like to come back in the fall.”

Belle smiled. “I’d like that.”

“Great.” Maggie snatched another brownie from the saucer and stood. “I’d better get cleaned up. If I’m lucky, Isaac will join me in the shower.” She bobbled her eyebrows.

Belle laughed. “Have fun.”

“I intend to.”

LYNN LAFLEUR

Once Maggie left, Belle picked up her pen again to continue work on her supplies order. Several minutes later, she realized she'd been staring into space instead of concentrating on her work. She frowned, angry at her self-pity. She had a wonderful life. Not everyone could say that. Instead of wanting what she didn't have, she should be grateful for what she *did* have . . . a beautiful home, a job she loved, loyal employees who were also wonderful friends.

Knowing she wouldn't get anything productive done now, she rose from her chair. A walk in the gardens would clear her head. She had far too much to do to waste her time wishing for things that weren't going to happen.

Mitch stepped out of his rented Jeep and stretched his arms over his head. A gentle breeze touched his face and ruffled the hair on his nape. He smiled. The place was certainly peaceful. He'd felt that sense of peace the first time he'd come here two weeks ago. It made the flight from San Francisco and the two-hour drive from DFW Airport worth the trip.

Seeing Isabella Patricelli would also make this trip worth it.

He didn't like the word "obsessed," but he hadn't forgotten her since he'd gotten that short glimpse two weeks ago. Her image would pop into his head during the day when he was helping his father with physical therapy. He'd picture her in his mind when he should be writing his latest article. She'd appear in his dreams, all smooth skin and soft sighs.

Okay, so maybe obsessed was the right word.

Before he could see her, he had a job to do. Deciding to get his luggage later, Mitch reached across the seat and nabbed his camera bag. He might go without his suitcase, but he didn't go *anywhere* without his cameras. He wanted to take a few exterior

Seduction's Spell

shots of the mansion before he went inside to register.

He got off five shots before a man moved into his viewfinder. Mitch lowered his camera and watched the man walk toward him from the side of the mansion. Something about him seemed familiar . . .

Mitch's eyes widened. "Holy shit," he muttered.

Smiling, the man held out his hand to Mitch. "Hi, Mr. Cavanaugh. I'm—"

"Dolan LeBlanc. You're Dolan LeBlanc."

His smile widened. "Yes, I know that."

"Oh, wow." Mitch took Dolan's hand and pumped it enthusiastically. "Is this where I'm supposed to make a total ass of myself and tell you you're the greatest quarterback the 49ers ever had?"

"You can if it'll make you feel good, but I'd rather you didn't."

Mitch released Dolan's hand. "My brother would shit if he knew where I'm standing right now."

"Then let's not tell him."

"Are you kidding? I'm gonna call him later and gloat. It'll be fair payback for all the rotten things he did to me when we were kids."

"I know what you mean. I have a cousin who's almost as close to me as a brother. Unfortunately, *I* was the one who did the rotten things."

Mitch laughed. He liked Dolan already.

"The owner is tied up with paperwork now, so she asked me to show you around. Would you like to see your suite first, maybe have a drink?"

He wanted to see *Belle* first. Disappointment curled in his belly. "Sure. A drink sounds good."

LYNN LAFLEUR

Dolan headed for the back of the vehicle. Mitch fell into step beside him. "We have covered parking in back. I'll move your Jeep later."

"No problem." He cleared his throat. "Will I get to meet the owner today?"

"Oh, sure. She's working on a supply order now, but she should be through soon." Reaching inside the back of the Jeep, Dolan grabbed the large suitcase and duffle bag. "Belle usually greets her guests, but she has to get the order done today so everything will be delivered on Monday."

"So she takes care of most of the details around here?"

"Belle is a hands-on owner."

Mitch picked up his notebook case, shut the hatchback, and followed Dolan toward the mansion. "Does her husband help run the place?"

Dolan stopped walking and looked at Mitch. A teasing grin turned up his lips. "If that's supposed to be a sneaky way of asking me if Belle's married, it didn't work."

Mitch shrugged. "Just trying to get information for my article."

"I don't see a memo pad or tape recorder in your hands."

He tapped his temple. "I have a great memory."

"Uh-huh."

Dolan started toward the mansion again. When Mitch realized Dolan wasn't going to answer his question about Belle's marital status, he sighed to himself and jogged to catch up with the former quarterback. Apparently, any information about Belle would have to come from her.

Mitch followed Dolan up the stairs to a suite decorated in navy and forest green. His shutter finger itched to capture everything he passed, but he curbed his desire for now. He'd

Seduction's Spell

brought plenty of rolls of film, plus extra memory cards for his digital. Before he left Belle On The Bend, he'd have more than enough photographs for his article.

And, he hoped, some personal photographs for himself.

Dolan placed the luggage on the bed. "Do you want to unpack first?"

"That drink sounds mighty good."

"Iced tea, beer, or something stronger?"

"Beer works."

Dolan gestured toward the desk. "You can put your computer on the desk. There's wireless Internet all over the mansion. The drawing room is a great place to write."

"Drawing room. Man, it sounds like something from the Civil War. Do you have fainting couches, too?"

Dolan grinned. "Actually, there's one in the drawing room. Only the house and furnishings are old. Belle insists on all the modern conveniences available for her guests."

"She sounds like quite a lady."

"One of the nicest, most gracious women you'll ever meet." He clapped Mitch on the shoulder. "Let's go get that beer."

Two

*M*itch had died and gone to football lovers' heaven. Not only did he personally meet his all-time favorite quarterback, he also met Vince Wagner. So what if Vince played for a 49ers' rival team. He was still one of the best tight ends the game had ever seen.

His brother was going to throw a fit when Mitch called him tonight.

Meeting an international model hadn't been bad either. Mitch's eyes almost bugged out of his head when Yvonne Lowe strolled up to the table and kissed Dolan. He'd tried to act cool, but he couldn't help feeling a bit . . . starstruck. She was even lovelier in person than in her photographs. And obviously very much in love with Dolan.

The lucky bastard.

Mitch took a sip from his second bottle of beer and watched Yvonne kiss Dolan again before walking away. The gentle

Seduction's Spell

swing of her hips in those tight jeans made all his hormones stand up and take notice.

Dolan leaned closer to him. "Get your eyes off her ass. It's mine."

Mitch grinned. "Hey, a guy can dream."

"Sorry. I won't share."

"A famous quarterback like you hasn't ever shared a woman with another guy?"

"I didn't say that."

"Oh, true confessions time," Vince said, grinning. "Who, when, and where?"

Dolan picked up his beer bottle and sat back in his chair. "A long time ago in San Jose and I'm not naming names."

Isaac chuckled. "Mine was in college."

"You, too?" Mitch asked.

"Three guys, one gal." Licking his thumb, Isaac touched it to the table and made a sizzling sound. "Very hot."

Mitch shook his head. "Man, I've missed out in life."

"There's still time," Dolan said before sipping his beer.

"Nah. I did all that crazy, acrobatic sex stuff in my early twenties before I got married."

"Maybe your wife would like that crazy, acrobatic sex stuff," Vince said.

"She did, with a number of guys besides me. That's why we divorced two years after we got married."

"Ouch," Vince said, wincing. "That hurts."

Mitch shrugged. "It did at the time, but I got over her long ago. My mom claimed Meira wasn't my soul mate and that's why we didn't work out. Who the hell believes in soul mates?"

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Belle does,” Dolan said, twisting the cap off another bottle of beer.

“So does Maggie,” Isaac said, leaning back in his chair. “She said when we met, she was sure we were meant to be together.”

“Sounds like girl stuff to me.” Vince accepted another beer from Dolan. “Don’t get me wrong. I love Sara. There’s no doubt in my mind about that. But I don’t know if I believe she’s the only woman in the world I would’ve fallen in love with. One different turn in life and I never would have met her. Does that mean I’d be alone forever?”

Mitch looked at each man in turn, but no one answered Vince’s question. “Are we getting too deep here?”

“Absolutely.” Dolan set his bottle on the table. “Besides, Belle’s coming.”

Mitch almost choked on his mouthful of beer. He swallowed quickly several times to keep from coughing. Finally, he’d get to see Belle up close.

“Hi, guys. Enjoying the warm weather?”

“Yep,” Dolan said. “I was letting Mitch get acquainted with your other guests. Mitchell Cavanaugh, meet Isabella Patricelli.”

He pushed back his chair and stood. Slowly, he turned to face her.

He wasn’t prepared for the kick in the gut at the sight of Isabella Patricelli. She stood less than a foot away, her blond curls flowing to her shoulders. She wore cream-colored slacks and a blue blouse that made her eyes look huge.

She stared at him, her eyes wide and her lips slightly parted. Mitch had been taught that a woman offered her hand first if she wanted to shake, but he ignored his mother’s etiquette les-

Seduction's Spell

sons and held out his hand. She blinked a couple of times, then looked at his hand. He saw her flex her fingers before she touched him. Mitch closed his fingers around hers. "A pleasure."

"For me, too," she said softly.

Her throat worked as she swallowed. Mitch recognized attraction when he saw it. Belle was as interested in him as he was in her. His hormones did a happy little jig.

"Dolan has been taking good care of me."

"Good. That's . . . good." She looked down at their hands still clasped together. Clearing her throat, she released his hand. "How-how can I help you?"

Now that was a loaded question if he'd ever heard one. She could help him the most by going up to his room and making love the rest of the day. *Patience, Mitch ol' boy. It'll happen.* "I'm here to interview you and take pictures of the mansion and grounds. I hope this is a convenient time. My office was supposed to call and set up a new appointment. Dolan said that didn't happen. I apologize for that."

She smiled. "No problem. You've caught me at a good time. I'm all yours."

She must have realized how that might sound. A lovely blush colored her cheeks. "I mean, I'll be happy to do the interview with you."

Mitch smiled. "Great. I'll get my notepad and tape recorder. Where shall I meet you?"

"How about the veranda? It'll be cool there."

"Sounds perfect. I'll see you in a few minutes."

Belle leaned back against Mitch's chair and watched him walk toward the mansion. *My goodness, what an absolutely edible man!* She admired the broad shoulders in the teal T-shirt

LYNN LAFLEUR

and the way his faded jeans cupped his buttocks. His hair covered his nape in soft waves. She tilted her head and studied the color. Not quite auburn, but brown with red highlights. He had a sexy mustache the same color as his hair. And his eyes! A gorgeous green that reminded her of the first grass of spring. She would've been happy to stare into those eyes for the rest of the day.

And night.

"Yo, Belle!"

Hearing her name snapped her back to the present. She turned to face the men. "What?"

"You wanna wipe the drool off your chin?" Dolan said, a smirk on his lips.

Belle scowled at her employee. "I'm not drooling."

"Looked like drooling to me." Dolan switched his attention to Vince and Isaac. "Did it look like drooling to you guys?"

"Yep," Vince said, grinning.

"To me, too," Isaac agreed.

"All right, stop it. So I noticed he's an attractive man. Is that a crime?"

Dolan held up his hands, palms toward her. "Hey, you're a grown woman. You can do whatever you want."

"I plan to."

Belle ignored their chuckles as she whirled around and headed for the mansion. Jerks. As if they hadn't drooled over women. Dolan's tongue hung out every time Yvonne came into sight. Vince and Isaac did the same with Sara and Maggie. How dare they accuse her of lusting after Mitch?

Even if that's exactly what she'd done.

She stepped through the back door into the kitchen. Luckily, Lottie wasn't there. Belle leaned against the wall and took

Seduction's Spell

a deep breath. She couldn't remember ever feeling such a strong attraction for a man so quickly. One look into Mitch's green eyes and her stomach had dropped down to her toes. That had never happened to her. She'd had sex with a number of men. She'd felt desire many times. This was different. She wondered if . . .

She wondered if Mitch was the one . . . her soul mate.

Her heart began to pound with that thought. Perhaps finally she would experience the love so many of her guests had found or rediscovered here at the mansion.

"Hey, Belle," Lottie said. She walked out of the pantry carrying a large bag of wild rice. "Did you finish your order?"

"All done."

She set the bag on the island. "Did you meet that hunky reporter yet?"

Heat filled Belle's cheeks, but she tried to act normally. "Yes, I met the reporter. He's very nice."

"Nice? Honey, you need glasses." Lottie's eyes narrowed. She placed one hand on her hip. "Or maybe you don't. Why are you blushing?"

Belle's cheeks grew even warmer. "I'm not blushing."

"You are!" Lottie laughed. "Well, how about that? Here we were talking about you falling in love just a few hours ago, and you've gone and done it."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not in love with Mitch. I just met him!"

"You ever hear of love at first sight?"

"Of course I have. That doesn't mean it's happened to me."

Lottie walked over to Belle and gave her a fierce hug. "Go for it, honey. If this Mitch is the one you're meant to be with, your heart will tell you."

LYNN LAFLEUR

"But what if . . . What if he doesn't feel the same way I do?"

"That's the chance you take when you fall in love, Belle. No guarantees." She smoothed Belle's hair back from her face. "Although I don't see how he could resist you."

Belle smiled. "You're partial."

"Damn right. You may be older than me in years, but you're my daughter in my heart."

Lottie's statement brought tears to Belle's eyes. She felt the same way. Belle didn't think of any of her employees as simply the hired help. They were her family. "Thank you."

Lottie sniffed. "Okay, enough mushy stuff. Get out of my kitchen and go find that young man. I have work to do."

"Yes, ma'am."

Belle started toward the door, but stopped and turned back to Lottie. "Will you—"

"Lemonade coming right up."

"And you tell me *I* can read minds."

She found Mitch already on the veranda. He'd chosen to sit on the wicker loveseat, his tape recorder, notepad, and pen lying on the small round table before him. She'd like to sit next to him, but that would make her seem too eager. She moved toward the chair across from him.

He stood when he saw her and smiled. "Hi again."

Gorgeous and manners, too. Belle was impressed. "Hello." He waited until she'd sat down before he resumed his seat. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

"I've only been here a minute. No problem." He pushed the tape recorder closer to her. "May I tape our conversation?"

Belle nodded. "Whatever makes it easier for you."

He pressed the record button. "Are you married or involved with anyone?"

Seduction's Spell

She blinked, surprised at the question. "That's part of the interview?"

"No. That's a personal question just for me."

Belle crossed her legs, hoping to ease the dull throbbing that had begun low in her belly. It didn't help. "No, I'm not involved with anyone."

Mitch smiled, slow and sexy. "Good."

Ah, he liked to flirt. So did Belle. She returned his smile. "Are *you* married or involved with anyone?"

"Nope. Free as the wind."

"Do you like it that way?"

"It has its advantages." His gaze dipped to her breasts a moment before he reached for his notepad and pen. "I've made a list of questions, but I like to be spontaneous, too."

"Spontaneity can be good."

He speared her with that green gaze again. "Why, Ms. Patricelli, are you flirting with me?"

"No more than you're flirting with me."

"Touché." He rested one ankle on the opposite knee and laid his pad on his thigh. "Let's start with the name of your home. Your name is Belle and so is the mansion. Is it named after you?"

"No. 'Belle' is short for 'antebellum.' The 'Bend' part is because of the Rose River. We're less than a mile from the bend of the river."

"You know, you could lie and say it's named after you."

"Considering the mansion was built in 1844, that would be difficult, wouldn't it?"

"True. That'd mean you'd have to be over one hundred fifty years old. I'd say you're about . . ." He tilted his head to the side. "You can't be more than thirty."

LYNN LAFLEUR

Belle inclined her head. "Thank you."

"Ah, so you're older? How far off am I?"

She grinned. "Mitch, you never ask a woman her age or her weight."

His gaze dipped to her breasts again and lingered. "Your weight is perfect."

Mitch saw someone approaching from the corner of his eye. He was grateful for the interruption. It gave him the chance to shift on the loveseat and take some of the strain off his burgeoning erection. Teasing with Belle had made his hormones stand up and take notice even more than staring at Yvonne Lowe's ass.

The thought of seeing Belle's bare ass made Mitch moan softly.

"Lemonade and shortbread cookies," the lady said as she set a tray on the table.

"Thank you, Lottie. Mitch, this is my incredible cook, Lottie. You'll never want to leave here once you taste her cooking. Lottie, Mitch Cavanaugh from *World Travel*."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Cavanaugh."

"Mitch, please. If you call me Mr. Cavanaugh, I'll start looking around for my father."

Lottie laughed, and so did Belle. He liked the sound of her laughter. The only thing that would sound better would be her soft sighs when he slid his cock inside her pussy.

So much for making the erection disappear.

"I hope you enjoy your stay, Mitch," Lottie said. "Let me know if you have a favorite food. I'll try to fix it while you're here."

"I appreciate that, Lottie."

Seduction's Spell

Mitch waited until Lottie was out of sight before facing Belle again. "She's very nice."

"I have wonderful employees."

"How long has Lottie worked for you?"

"Twenty years."

He frowned in confusion. That couldn't be possible. "Twenty years? You were ten when you hired her?"

The blush that made her even lovelier bloomed in her cheeks. "I mean, she's worked here at the mansion for twenty years."

Mitch had traveled to practically every country in the world. He'd studied people and felt he was a pretty good judge of character. He also knew when someone was holding something back. Belle might not be lying to him, but she wasn't telling him the whole truth either.

Leaning forward, he pushed the button to stop the recorder. "What's going on, Belle? What aren't you telling me?"

Three

Her chin came up and she uncrossed her legs. “Nothing’s ‘going on,’ as you put it. You misunderstood my statement. That’s all.”

Mitch tapped his pen against his pad. His gut always fluttered when something didn’t ring true. It was fluttering like a flag in hurricane-force winds. “I’m sorry if I said something I shouldn’t have. Shall we continue?”

He started to push the record button again, but her words stopped him. “Why don’t we do this tomorrow? It’s supposed to start raining later tonight. Perhaps you should take your pictures first.”

Her offer sounded considerate, yet Mitch couldn’t help feeling she made it to avoid answering any more questions.

She didn’t realize she was dealing with a determined man.

“All right.” He opened his camera case and removed his Nikon. “Let’s start with you.”

Belle laughed and held up one hand in front of her face.

Seduction's Spell

"No! Surely you can find something better than me to photograph."

"I doubt that." *Snap*. "C'mon, put your hand down and give me a smile."

"I don't want my picture taken."

"I need it for the article." *Snap*. "My editor won't like my wasting his film on your hand."

"Oh, all right! You're going to shame me into it, aren't you?"

Mitch grinned. "I'm so talented."

Belle lowered her hand to her lap. "Better?"

"It will be when you smile. That's the way." *Snap*. "Prop your elbow on the chair arm and rest your chin on your hand. Lift your chin a bit. Yeah, like that." *Snap*. "Nice. Very nice."

He laid the Nikon on the loveseat and removed his digital camera from the bag. Dropping to his knees, he raised the camera to his eye. "This one's for me. Give me that sexy smile again. Oh, yeah." *Snap*. "One more." *Snap*.

Standing once again, he moved closer to Belle's chair. "Lean your head back on the chair. No smile this time. Just . . . look at me."

He zoomed in until her face filled the viewfinder. He took one shot, then zoomed in on her eyes for another shot. "God, you're stunning," he whispered.

She licked her lips. Mitch lowered his camera and stared at her wet mouth. Too tempting to resist, he slowly leaned forward until his lips touched hers.

A mingling of breaths, a slide across wet flesh. It wasn't enough. Mitch tunneled his hand beneath her hair and cradled her neck. Tilting his head, he slid his tongue along her lips, seeking entrance. With a soft moan, she gave it. Her

LYNN LAFLEUR

tongue peeked out to touch the tip of his. It still wasn't enough for Mitch. It wouldn't be enough until she accepted him inside her body.

The fierce desire hit him quickly. He wanted to carry her over his shoulder up to his room and spend the rest of the night learning her body. He doubted if Belle would appreciate the caveman attitude, so he tried to satisfy his desire with kisses.

His cock wasn't happy with only kisses.

He stopped letting that part of his anatomy rule him a long time ago. With one more deep kiss, he lifted his head. Belle slowly opened her eyes. The heat in the blue depths seared him to his toes.

He wanted her beneath him. Or on top of him. Either position worked for him.

"Should I apologize for that?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

She shook her head. "No."

"Good." He ran his thumb over her lower lip. He could spend a lifetime touching that lip. "I don't like apologizing when I'm not the least bit sorry for kissing you."

A soft, teasing smile touched her lips. "You're still not getting the interview today."

She gently pushed on his chest until he released her and moved back a step. Rising from her chair, she tugged down her blouse. "You'd better start taking your photographs or you'll lose the light."

Mitch had plenty of time to take pictures. He had no intention of leaving Belle On The Bend for several days. But he wouldn't push her. She'd be worth the frustration now to have her in his arms. "Yeah, I'd better."

Seduction's Spell

"Dinner is served at six-thirty. I hope you like shrimp scampi."

"Love it."

"Then I'll see you at dinner."

He watched her walk away, curling his fingers into his palms. How he'd love to caress that round ass . . .

Dinner at six-thirty. Shrimp scampi did sound good. Then he hoped to have Belle for dessert.

Belle relived that kiss over and over while she dressed for dinner. She hadn't reacted so quickly to a man in a long time. Months of abstinence might have caused her strong reaction to Mitch. She didn't think so. *Mitch* caused her reaction to Mitch. It was that simple.

And that scary.

She remembered the phone conversation with *World Travel*. She'd agreed to the interview, knowing an article in the popular magazine would be wonderful publicity for the mansion. "Fudging" a little here and there to keep from revealing too much about herself would be easy. After all, she'd been avoiding direct questions from her guests for years.

She hadn't counted on staring into a pair of green eyes that made her want to open up and bare her soul.

The logical thing would be to let Dolan do the interview. He and Lottie knew the whole truth about her age and the water well, but he wouldn't let a pair of long eyelashes distract him from saying something he shouldn't. Well, unless the eyelashes belonged to Yvonne.

No. Belle owned the resort. She should be the one to do the interview. She'd always kept her personal and public life separate and would continue to do so. She had a lot of practice

LYNN LAFLEUR

keeping secrets. Just because Mitch was a killer kisser didn't mean she'd lose her head when he started asking questions. She'd slipped up once today. It wouldn't happen again.

She ran a brush through her hair one more time before stepping up to the full-length mirror. She smoothed her hands over her hips as she studied her image. The soft fabric flowed over her curves and stopped below her knees. Lavender had always been a good color for her, and she'd wanted to look especially nice tonight for Mitch.

Tonight, she only wanted to be a woman who desired a man.

All the women were seated when she entered the dining room. Belle took her place at the head of the table. "Good evening, ladies. Where are the guys?"

"On the patio talking football." Yvonne rolled her eyes. "I swear I could smell the testosterone when I walked by them."

Sara snickered. "Vince is so into the game. He loves having guys around to talk shop, especially Dolan. He's a big fan of your guy, Yvonne."

"I suppose I'll have to put up with this forever, huh?"

"'Fraid so," Maggie said. "That's what you get for falling in love with a superstar."

Yvonne snorted. "Don't let him hear you call him that. There'll be no living with him."

Loud laughter announced the arrival of the men. Belle's stomach tightened in anticipation of seeing Mitch again. Maybe he hadn't affected her as strongly as she'd thought. Here in her dining room, he would be just like any other guest.

He stepped through the doorway . . . and her heart stopped.

The men were still talking and laughing, so it gave Belle the

Seduction's Spell

chance to study him. She'd never insisted her guests "dress" for dinner, but most of them did. Mitch now wore crisp khakis and a dark green shirt, the long sleeves rolled up to the middle of his tanned forearms.

A man shouldn't look so sexy in khakis.

He turned her way and stopped laughing. "Good evening," he said softly.

"Good evening."

He waited while the men took their seats. The only chair remaining was the one on Belle's right. "I guess that's where I sit."

"Yes, please."

Belle caught a whiff of Mitch's aftershave as he sat down. Subtle and spicy, the scent curled her toes. The ends of his hair were damp, his cheeks smooth. He must have showered and shaved as well as changed clothes.

Dolan picked up a bottle of Chardonnay from the table. "Would anyone like wine?"

Murmurs of agreement passed around the table. Belle waited until Dolan had opened the bottle and began to fill Yvonne's glass before she turned to Mitch. "Did you get your pictures?"

"Some of them. I took several outside shots of the grounds. The cloudy weather was perfect for pictures."

"Perhaps you'll have some sun in a day or two. Thunderstorms are due in tonight, but they don't usually last long."

"We don't get many thunderstorms in San Francisco."

"Just fog."

He chuckled. "Yeah, we get our share of that. But I don't mind." His gaze touched her hair, her eyes, her lips. "Tell me something."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“What?”

He leaned closer to her, his mouth mere inches from her ear. “Do you like to make love during a thunderstorm?”

The man was a flirt and totally outrageous. Belle liked that. She’d never backed down from sexual teasing and she wouldn’t start now. She looked him straight in the eyes. “Yes, I do.”

His eyebrows shot up as if she’d surprised him. “A genteel Southern lady like you?”

“I’ll let you in on a secret.”

“I love secrets.”

Now Belle leaned closer to him and whispered in his ear. “Genteel Southern ladies like sex, too.”

His gaze touched her lips again and lingered. “Sounds promising.”

“It might be.”

Mitch liked teasing with Belle. She fired right back at him when he said something flirtatious. No coy glances, no pretending to be shocked when he spoke about sex. She was *real*.

Mitch sipped his wine while watching Belle sip hers. The cold wine did nothing to bank the fire in his stomach . . . or his cock. The damn thing kept trying to stand up and be noticed.

It twitched when she looked into his eyes and licked the wine from her bottom lip.

Oh, lady, do you realize what you’re doing to me? Do you know how much I want you?

He took another sip of wine. “So, what’s the plan after dinner?”

“Friday and Saturday are movie nights,” Dolan said. “We have the latest theatrical releases.”

“Big screen, popcorn, the whole works?”

Seduction's Spell

"The whole works. Only we won't make you pay five dollars for a Coke."

"Thank God."

Dolan chuckled. "I think tonight's movie is some kind of psychological thriller."

"Sounds like a good movie to watch with your gal," Vince said, grinning. "She'll jump in your lap when she gets scared."

Mitch laughed. "How big is your theater?"

"It'll seat seventy-five. Once a month, we show a children's movie and invite the local kids. Free movie, hot dogs, popcorn, and drinks."

Mitch turned back to Belle. "Your idea?"

She shrugged. "I like giving back to the community."

"Belle had the theater built four years ago," Dolan said. "The guests have loved it, and so have the kids' parents. They know they can drop off their kids here and they'll be safe."

Not only was she beautiful and charming, but generous, too. The lady continued to fascinate him.

A cute brunette came into the room with salads on a tray. Once she'd set his salad in front of him and moved on, he leaned toward Belle again.

"Will you sit with me at the movie?"

She smiled. "I'd like that."

Mitch had seen better movies, but it didn't matter. He spent more time watching Belle than the big screen.

He stood with his hands in the pockets of his khakis while Belle chatted with her guests outside the theater. Although barely ten-thirty, everyone declined her offer of after-movie drinks. The couples obviously wanted their alone time.

That worked for him.

LYNN LAFLEUR

She strolled toward the mansion and he walked beside her. "Did you like the movie?" he asked.

"Not really."

"Me neither. Not enough sex."

Belle laughed. "How many sex scenes would it take to make it a good movie?"

"At least four." He rubbed his chin. "Make that five."

"Sorry. I don't show porno flicks in my theater."

"God, you're mean."

He opened the back door to the mansion and let her step inside ahead of him. Candlelight and quiet greeted him. Tapers and pillars sat on every surface, casting their glow around the entrance and down the hall.

"Nice."

"I like candles."

Smiling, he drew one fingertip down her cheek. "You're a romantic."

"Yes, I am."

He slid his finger down her smooth cheek again and across her lips. They parted. Accepting her silent invitation, he kissed her softly.

Mitch didn't deepen the kiss, didn't press for entrance into her mouth. Instead, he cradled her jaw in his hand and moved his lips ever so slowly over hers. He kissed her with tenderness and care. Passion would come later when he held her naked body against his.

One kiss, two, then he lifted his head. "Come upstairs with me," he whispered.

Belle nodded.

Four

*B*elle had enjoyed sex with dozens of lovers in her lifetime. Other than the first time when she'd had no idea what that fumbling boy would do to her, she'd never been nervous.

She was nervous now.

Mitch opened the door to the Master Suite and she stepped inside. She'd seen this room hundreds of times, but never as a place for lovers. She took in the navy and forest green furnishings, the thick rugs, the fresh flowers in crystal vases on the desk and beside the bed. Candles had been lit in here, too. Dara always took care of lighting the candles downstairs, but left it up to the guests to light candles in their room if they desired. Belle had no doubt Lottie had done this, or told Dara to do it.

She gasped softly when Mitch took her upper arms and pulled her back against his chest. His erection pressed into her buttocks. "I can't put into words how much I want you."

His warm breath in her ear raised goose bumps on her skin. Her nipples peaked inside her bra.

LYNN LAFLEUR

He nuzzled her hair aside and nipped her earlobe. "From the first time I saw you two weeks ago, I've thought about touching you . . ." He released one arm and slid his hand over her stomach. "Holding you . . ." His other hand glided across her hip and down her thigh. "Feeling your bare skin against mine."

Belle moved one hand between their bodies and caressed his cock. Mitch jerked and groaned in her ear. "Careful. I'd like this to last more than three minutes."

"I think the first time will be *really* fast."

"The *first* time?" He chuckled and slid his hands up her body to her breasts. "You have high expectations."

"Are-are you saying you . . ." Her breath hitched when he plucked her nipples. "Oh, that feels so good."

"It'll feel even better when I suck them." He rubbed her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. "Am I saying what?"

"Is once your limit?"

"Hardly."

A gentle bite on her neck, a soothing lick of his tongue, had Belle struggling to breathe. She squeezed his cock, cradled his balls in her palm. Desire churned inside her, hot and demanding satisfaction.

"God, Belle." He thrust into her hand. "Talk about feeling good."

One more caress of her breasts and Belle couldn't wait any longer. She pulled out of his arms and turned to face him. Two small ties were the only things holding her dress together. She released the outer tie at her waist and let her dress fall open. Another tug and the inside tie came loose. Belle let the dress glide off her shoulders and to the floor. She stood before

Seduction's Spell

him wearing a sheer white bra, tiny white panties, and white high-heeled sandals.

Mitch's gaze roamed over her body and back to her face. "You're so beautiful, Isabella."

A small smile touched her lips at the sound of his strangled voice. She liked knowing he wanted her as much as she wanted him. She arched her back and watched his gaze snap to her breasts. "Your turn to take off your clothes."

He began to unbutton his shirt. Impatient to see his body, Belle stepped forward and unfastened his belt, then his khakis. She pushed his pants over his hips as he shrugged out of his shirt.

He wasn't wearing shorts.

Once free of his pants, Mitch's cock sprang up toward his belly. Belle whimpered. His cock was long and thick with large veins running the length. His balls were tight and hairless. A line of brown hair ran down his abdomen and formed a nest at the base.

Mitch toed off his shoes, then leaned over to remove his pants and socks. When he straightened, he was surprised to see Belle on her knees. She took his cock in her mouth, and his surprise turned into pleasure.

He hissed in a breath through his teeth. "Ah, Jesus, babe."

Her mouth was wet and warm. She licked around the head, then down his length once, twice. Mitch tunneled his fingers into her hair. He wouldn't come like this, no matter how much he wanted to, but he'd enjoy the pleasure for a few more moments. He moved his hips, gently fucking her mouth as she sucked him. Her tongue circled the head again, the tip darting into the tiny slit. She licked the veins, his balls, the sensitive area beneath the head.

LYNN LAFLEUR

The lady definitely knew how to make a man crazy.

“Hey.” He cradled her jaws and pulled her head back until his shaft popped free of her mouth. “That’s enough.”

The little wildcat stuck out her tongue and licked the very tip of his cock. “I’ve been wanting to do that since I met you.”

“I’m not complaining, believe me, but let me love you a while.” Placing his hands beneath her arms, he helped her to her feet. “I haven’t kissed you yet . . . *really* kissed you.”

She touched his chest, her fingertips grazing his nipples. “What are you waiting for?”

Mitch drew her into his arms, tilted his head, and ravished her mouth. Teeth, tongue, lips . . . he worshipped her mouth with every part of his. She returned his kisses with no hesitation, her tongue driving deep into his mouth to mate with his. He caressed her head, her back, her buttocks, as they kissed. Drawing one of her legs up to his hip, he rubbed his cock against her pussy. Her panties felt damp next to his hot flesh.

“I think you’re right,” he rasped.

He darted his tongue into her ear and she shivered. “About what?”

He kissed her again before answering her question. “About the first time being fast.”

Cupping her buttocks, he lifted her and carried her the short distance across the room. With one knee on the bed, he lowered her to the soft comforter. He followed her down, reclining on top of her while kissing her again.

He thumbed her nipple through her bra, but that wasn’t enough. He needed to feel that hard nub with his skin, his tongue. Slipping his hands beneath her back, he unhooked her bra and pulled it down her arms. He stared at her large breasts as he tossed the bra to the floor.

Seduction's Spell

"My God." Mitch rose to his knees between her widespread legs. He palmed both Belle's breasts and kneaded them. "Nice and big and firm." His thumbs skated over the peaks. "Big nipples, too. *Very* nice."

Belle stretched her arms over her head. "You like big nipples?"

"Oh, yeah. The better to bite and suck."

She arched her back. "Then bite and suck them."

"I will, baby, I promise. But I *really* need to fuck you now."

She grabbed handfuls of his hair and pulled down his head for a deep kiss. "Fuck me, Mitch," she whispered.

The graphic language from Belle's luscious mouth snapped the little bit of control Mitch had left. He tugged off her panties and pitched them to land on top of her bra. Leaning over, he parted her labia and gave her slit several long licks.

"Mitch!"

He suckled her clit and licked her again, then raised his head. "I'll be right back."

He bounded off the bed and hurried into the bathroom. He came back into the bedroom, condom packets in hand, to see Belle propped up on her elbows. Standing at the end of the bed, he let his gaze wander over her body. The candlelight turned her skin golden. Nude except for her high-heeled sandals, she looked like a goddess.

A goddess who was ready to be well loved.

"Put your feet on the bed and let your legs fall open."

She did as he said. A small blonde tuft covered her mound, but she didn't have any hair on her labia. Even in the dim light, he could see her wet and swollen lips. Mitch swallowed. "I want to bury my face in your pussy and leave it there all night."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“How about burying your cock in there first?”

She didn't have to ask him twice. Mitch crawled on the bed, handed her one packet, and tossed the other one on the nightstand. Her hands felt soft on his shaft as she rolled the condom down his length. As soon as she released him, he hooked her knees over his arms and thrust into her wet sheath.

“Oh, *yes!*” Belle dug her fingernails into Mitch's shoulders. It'd been months since a man had been inside her. She'd missed this closeness so much. “Mmm, deeper, Mitch. Go deeper.”

He shifted position. Now each thrust brushed her clit. “Right there. Oh, yes, right there!”

She couldn't call this lovemaking. Something so raw, so earthy, could only be called fucking. And it's exactly what she wanted. This first time with Mitch was filled with heat, with passion. They'd make love later. For now, her body demanded an orgasm as quickly as possible.

Which wouldn't take long.

“Can-can you . . .” Mitch groaned. “*Damn*, you're tight.”

“And you're big. Fuck me faster. *Faster!*”

Belle arched her back and wailed as pleasure engulfed her entire body. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she held him tightly while he continued to pound his cock into her pussy. If he could last just a little longer . . .

Her second orgasm rushed down her spine and curled her toes. “*Mitch!*”

“Yeah. Yeah! *God!*” He bit her shoulder and shuddered.

Small tremors whooshed through her limbs, leaving her weak. Round two would have to wait a few minutes.

“Wow,” Mitch whispered in her ear.

She chuckled at his breathless voice. “Drained you, huh?”

Seduction's Spell

"Literally."

"And you said once wasn't your limit."

"It isn't, but give me some time, okay?"

Belle slid her hands up and down his damp back. "As much as you need. I'm not going anywhere."

He blew out a breath directly into her ear. She giggled and hunched her shoulder. "That tickles."

"Tickles. I'm dying here and you say it tickles." He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. A crooked smile turned up one corner of his mouth. "You surprise me, Isabella."

She liked the way her name sounded on his lips. "How?"

"I thought you were a genteel Southern lady. I didn't think you knew the word 'fuck.'"

"I calls 'em as I feels 'em."

He burst into laughter. "Yeah, you do. I like that." He released her legs, but didn't move from between them. "That was way too fast."

"Do you hear me complaining?"

"No, but . . ." He cradled her breast with one hand. His thumb lazily caressed her nipple. "I wanted to *make love* to you, enjoy every inch of you. I lost control."

Belle pressed his hand closer to her breast. "Mitch, I wanted you just as much as you wanted me. We . . . released the pressure. Now we can enjoy each other."

He smiled. "Yes, we can. And I think we should start with something to drink. How about if I sneak down to the kitchen for some wine?"

"I think that's an excellent idea."

Five

The sight of Belle propped up on several pillows made Mitch smile. He liked having her in his bed. Forget the photographs and interview. He'd be happy to spend the rest of his time at the mansion right here with her.

He set the wine bottle and two glasses on the nightstand. "You look good there."

She smiled. "I like it here."

Mitch shucked off his pants, then picked up the bottle of wine again. "Your fridge is huge. I couldn't find any more Chardonnay, so I brought white zin."

"That's perfect."

After handing a glass to Belle, Mitch filled his own and climbed into bed beside her. "What shall we drink to?"

"How about . . ." She scrunched up her mouth, as if deep in thought. "Hot sex?"

Mitch grinned. "I'll drink to that." He tapped her glass with his and sipped the cold liquid. "And to the future."

Seduction's Spell

"The future?"

"I think it's a good idea to always toast the future. We both want a long one, right?"

The humor faded from her face. She looked away from him and he heard her sigh softly. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." She looked back at him, but her smile seemed forced. "Sometimes thinking about the future is scary."

"Not for me. I plan to live to at least one hundred forty-four."

Laughter bubbled from Belle's mouth. "One hundred forty-four?"

"It's a good number."

"A very good number." She tapped his glass with hers. "Here's to a long and healthy life."

He watched her as he drank. Her hair was mussed from their lovemaking. A light sheen of perspiration made her skin glow. She'd pushed the comforter to the end of the bed. The sheet covered her only to her waist. His gaze strayed to those luscious breasts and the suckable nipples.

"You're a breast man."

With a grin, he looked back into her eyes. "Breast, ass, legs. I love every part of a woman."

"I didn't notice any mention of an intelligent mind."

A teasing light filled her eyes, but Mitch didn't want to tease anymore. Honesty was important to him. He wouldn't give Belle anything less.

"I'm a typical man. I'm attracted to good looks. I believe most people are. Yeah, I like sex. I enjoy being with a woman who likes sex, too. But when it comes to a relationship . . ." He drew one fingertip down her cheek. "I want a woman I can talk to, one who shares my interests, my desires. I want a woman who fascinates me."

LYNN LAFLEUR

He sipped his wine. "I got married when I was twenty-two. It didn't last two years. I'm sorry about the failure, but it taught me a valuable lesson. If I ever do get married again, it'll be for keeps."

"Marriage takes a lot of work."

"Yes, it does, and it takes two people willing to make it work. Meira wasn't willing. She didn't want to try and solve our problems, or take care of our son."

Her eyes widened. "Your *son*? You have a son?"

Mitch nodded. "He's thirteen with the raging hormones and gangly limbs that go along with puberty. The poor kid. I remember when I shot up in height and everything else had to catch up. I felt like a freak."

Belle smiled tenderly. "You love him."

"He's the greatest thing that ever happened to me."

"Do you have custody?"

"Technically, yeah, but he spends a lot of time with his mom and stepdad. Once she got the running around out of her system, Meira settled down with a nice guy. She and I are friends now."

Mitch realized he'd been monopolizing the entire conversation. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bore you."

"I'm far from bored. It's wonderful to meet a man who loves his son so much." She skated her fingertips across his chest. "You're a special man, Mitchell Cavanaugh."

His stomach clenched at the adoring look in her eyes. It was way too soon to put a name to the way she made him feel. He wanted to call it simple lust. Lust had never made his heart beat with such a heavy rhythm. Lust had never made him fantasize about a future with the woman in his bed.

Mitch took her lips in a soft kiss. He tasted her gentle sigh

Seduction's Spell

when she yielded to him. He kissed her once, twice, then took the wineglass from her hand and set both glasses on the nightstand.

“How about if we start round two?”

Belle threaded her fingers into his hair. “Oh, yes.”

This time, she'd take it slow. Two orgasms had left her body sated, so she wasn't in such a hurry to rush to the peak. She'd told Mitch earlier that they could savor the next time they made love. That's exactly what she planned to do. She planned to caress and lick every inch of his delectable body.

He apparently had other ideas.

Belle managed to lick his nipple once before he flipped her to her back. “Uh-uh. *I'm* the one who gets to play with nipples.”

“You don't like your nipples licked?”

“I didn't say that. But I want to concentrate on *you*.” He cradled her breast and caressed the hard nub. “I want to lick and suck and touch every part of you.”

She grinned. “Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you.”

“You can lick and suck and touch next time.”

It would be terribly selfish of her to destroy his fun. Belle laid back, arms by her head. “Start with my breasts.”

“Gladly.”

So much for being sated. Sixty seconds of his suckling and biting had Belle writhing on the bed. “Mitch, I want you inside me.”

Her nipple popped free of his mouth. “Not yet. I'm not ready.”

Not ready? She could feel his hard shaft against her hip. He was *more* than ready. “Are you trying to drive me crazy?”

LYNN LAFLEUR

His eyes twinkled with a devilish light as he slid one hand between her legs. "What happened to savoring?" He cupped her mound, his index finger pressing her clit. "My mouth goes here next. I want to make you come with my tongue."

Nips and kisses down her stomach made Belle whimper. Trying to savor, as they'd both agreed, she closed her eyes and let herself feel. The rasp of his tongue across her flesh. His warm breath coasting over her skin. His fingers exploring the wet silk of her pussy. He took his time, his mouth slowly moving from one spot of her body to the next. She clasped her hands into fists to keep from grabbing his head and directing him. He'd said he wanted to make her come with his tongue. She was *so* ready for that.

The bed shifted when he pushed her legs far apart and moved between them. Belle tensed, waiting for him to lick her clit. Instead, he blew on it.

She lifted her hips off the bed at the arousing sensation. "Oh, I like that."

He blew on her clit again, then swiped it with his tongue. Belle lifted her hips another inch. "Oh, I *really* like that."

She heard him chuckle. "You like your pussy licked?"

"Is there a woman who doesn't?"

"I doubt it." He spread her lips and licked her from anus to clit. "God, you taste good."

Belle opened her eyes and looked at him. He continued to move his tongue over her intimate flesh, but with his gaze locked to hers. A connection passed between them, something she'd never experienced with a man.

She wondered if the same thing happened to Mitch. He raised his mouth from her pussy and a look of awe filled his eyes. He gazed at her face another moment before climbing up

Seduction's Spell

over the top of her. Straddling her on hands and knees, he lowered his lips to hers.

It was a sweet kiss, a loving kiss . . . the kind of kiss he'd given her at the foot of the stairs. Belle could taste herself on his lips, smell herself in his mustache. Her arousal shot up another degree.

"I love the way you kiss," he whispered against her mouth.

She would've returned the compliment, but he kissed her again. She didn't need to talk anyway when she could kiss. Her tongue drove into his mouth. He caught it between his teeth and nipped it gently.

Belle mewled.

"God, you're hot." He tweaked her nipple while kissing her again. "I want to do everything to you."

She wasn't sure what he meant by "everything," but her clit throbbed at the fantasies.

Reaching between them, she caressed his cock with both hands. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Are you?"

"If it involves small animals, forget it."

He chuckled. "No, nothing that tasteless." He sat back on his knees and cradled both her breasts. "I'd love to come on these."

Other men had admired her breasts. Other men had done what Mitch wanted to do. Belle had never found pleasure in the act. It would be different with Mitch. It excited her to think of him coming on her breasts.

She tightened her grip on his shaft. "How about if I help you?"

A vein throbbed in his jaw. "Yeah. I'd like that."

He began to pump his hips as she slid her hands up and down his length. She alternated between looking into his eyes

LYNN LAFLEUR

and looking at the hard flesh in her hands. His eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared. Gripping her hands with his, he guided her movements over his cock.

“Right there, Isabella. Touch me like that.” Closing his eyes, he threw back his head and pumped his hips faster. “God, yeah, like that. Ah!”

The first drops of semen fell on her breasts, followed by a long stream. Mitch groaned loudly, his body shuddering. More drops splattered her skin before he stilled.

Mitch slowly opened his eyes. His legs were so weak, he wasn't sure if he could move. Blowing out a breath, he lowered his head and looked at Belle. He still clasped her hands over his softening cock. His cum dotted her breasts and belly.

It looked sexy as hell.

He raised her hands to his mouth and kissed each palm. “You okay?”

Smiling, she nodded her head. “I'm good.”

“Oh, baby, are you ever.” He caressed her breasts, watching his hands as he spread his essence over her skin. “Would you like a wash cloth?”

“No.”

His gaze snapped to hers. “No?”

She dipped her finger into one drop, brought it to her mouth, and licked it off. “No.”

Desire roared to life inside him again. She'd given him what he'd wanted sexually. Now it was his turn to please her.

“I believe I promised you the next time you came would be with my tongue.”

“Yes, I do remember that promise.”

“And I'm a man who keeps my promises.”

“That's such a good trait.”

Seduction's Spell

Mitch chuckled. He loved teasing with her. "Well, then . . ." Stretching out between her legs once again, he slipped his hands beneath her buttocks. "Let's see how fast I can make you come."

He lifted her pussy to his mouth. Her scent filled his nostrils, her taste exploded on his tongue. He licked her slowly, gently, until her breathing deepened and she began to shift her hips. Parting her lips with his thumbs, he concentrated on her clit . . . sucking, nibbling, lapping. He fucked her pussy and ass with his tongue, then concentrated on her clit again. The third time he repeated the cycle, he pushed two fingers inside her and pressed upward.

Belle's back arched off the bed. Mitch massaged her G-spot while he continued to lick her clit. Her body jerked and she cried out. He could feel the walls of her pussy grabbing his fingers. He stopped licking her for he knew her clit would be tender after she came, but left his fingers inside her until the contractions completely stopped.

She was still breathing heavily when he lay on his back and pulled her into his arms. He kissed the top of her head, her eyebrow, the tip of her nose. "See? I kept my promise."

"You certainly did."

Her words sounded slurred. "Tired?"

"Extremely."

Now that the sex was over, Mitch wondered if she'd leave him. He didn't want that. He wanted to hold her all night, wake up with her in his arms tomorrow morning. "You'll stay with me, right?"

Tilting her head on his shoulder, she smiled at him. "Yes, I'll stay with you."

Lix

Mitch found Belle in her office, the phone next to her ear while her fingers flew over computer keys. He crossed his arms over his chest, leaned on the doorframe, and shamelessly listened to her conversation.

“Yes, Mrs. Anderson, I’ve reserved the President Suite for you and your husband for July first through seventh. I’m sure y’all will be pleased with it.”

Mitch chuckled at Belle’s “y’all.” He knew practically everyone in the South used the contraction, but it still tickled him whenever he heard it.

“Then we’ll have to work on him, won’t we?” she continued. “Oh, yes, the fishing is wonderful in the river.”

Not willing to wait one more moment to touch her, he walked up behind Belle and kissed her neck. She jerked, then smiled at him and mouthed, “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” he whispered.

“What’s that?” Belle said into the receiver. Mitch took ad-

Seduction's Spell

vantage of her distraction to wrap his arm around her waist. He kissed her neck again, then nipped her earlobe. She hunched her shoulder and tried to move away from his searching lips, but he wouldn't let her. Tugging aside the strap of her top, he kissed her shoulder.

"Yes, Roseville is small, but still has a lot to offer. There are some wonderful shops and boutiques there."

He knew he should let her work, but he was having too much fun playing with her. He slipped one hand into her top and palmed her breast.

She covered the receiver with her hand. "Stop it!" she hissed, her eyes shining with humor.

Mitch grinned, totally unrepentant for flustering her. Instead of stopping, he thumbed her nipple through her bra until it hardened.

"Yes, that will be fine," she said, once more speaking into the phone. "I can send your confirmation by e-mail or regular mail, whichever you prefer . . . Thank *you*, Mrs. Anderson. I'll see you and your husband in July."

She pressed the "off" button and laid the receiver on the desk. "You are in so much trouble."

He'd be worried if it weren't for the amusement in her eyes. "What did I do?"

She tugged his hand out of her top. "You can't feel me up when I'm on the phone with a customer!"

"You're off the phone. Can I feel you up now?"

Belle laughed. "Mitchell Cavanaugh, you are a devil."

"And damn proud of it." He knelt next to her chair. "I missed waking up next to you."

"I had a lot to do this morning."

He slid one finger up and down her bare arm. "I was hop-

LYNN LAFLEUR

ing we could shower together. Then I wanted you to lie on your stomach on my bed so I could see that gorgeous ass in the daylight. I felt it last night, but I haven't seen it yet."

"If you haven't seen it, how do you know it's gorgeous?"

"It has to be. Everything else about you is gorgeous."

Smiling, she palmed his cheek. "You're very sweet."

Mitch turned his head so he could kiss her palm. "Even sweet devils have to work. I need to finish your interview, Belle."

"I know. How about after brunch? That'll give me time to get some paperwork done."

"And I can take some more outside shots."

The rumble of thunder made Mitch glance out the window. Dark clouds hung low in the sky. "Hmm, maybe I *won't* take some more outside shots." He looked back at Belle. "Is it supposed to rain all day?"

"Off and on. There's a sixty percent chance of thunderstorms today. That means the rain will come and go."

Remembering something Belle had told him gave him an idea. "We could do the interview in bed. I'll ask you three or four questions, then we can make love again. You said you like making love during thunderstorms."

"You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think you should go take whatever pictures you need to before it starts raining."

"So we aren't going to do your interview in bed?"

She shook her head. "No, we're not."

"You're a hard lady, Isabella." He kissed her palm again, then stood. "How long before brunch?"

She glanced at her watch. "Forty-five minutes."

Seduction's Spell

"I'll go take some pictures." Tilting up her chin, he dropped a soft kiss on her lips. "See you later."

Belle watched him leave her office. Last night had been incredible. Great sex, lots of kissing, tender touches . . . she couldn't ask for anything more from a man.

Except love.

She'd awakened in Mitch's arms this morning. Being careful not to disturb him, she'd slowly rolled to face him and watched him sleeping. Her heart seemed to swell and fill up her entire body with affection for the man lying so close to her. That had never happened with another man.

So many things with Mitch had never happened to her.

Confused and needing to talk to someone about her feelings, Belle rose and headed for the kitchen. She found Lottie hard at work cracking eggs into a large glass bowl. "Hi."

Lottie looked her way and smiled. "Hi, Belle. Getting hungry?"

"Kinda." She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the center island. "Actually, I'd like to talk to you."

"Sure, honey." Wiping her hands on her apron, Lottie approached the island. "What can I do for you?"

"I spent the night with Mitch."

Lottie arched her eyebrows. "That was fast."

"I wanted him, he wanted me. There was no reason to wait."

"That's true." She leaned forward, resting her forearms on the island. A wicked gleam lit her eyes. "Was he good?"

"Oh, yes. *Very* good."

"I thought he might be. He has that swagger in his walk that's a sure sign of a good lover."

Belle laughed. "Since when do you look at younger men's swaggers?"

LYNN LAFLEUR

"I'm fifty-nine, not dead." She cocked her head. "What's your problem?"

"I think . . . I think he's the one, Lottie."

She smiled tenderly. "Of course he is. I told you that yesterday. You fell in love with him as soon as you looked into those sexy green eyes."

Belle bit her bottom lip. "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to tell him how you feel."

"How do I do that? We haven't known each other twenty-four hours!"

"How long do you think you should wait before you admit your feelings?"

"Maybe on our tenth anniversary?" She rubbed her forehead and sighed. "I've wanted to find that special someone since . . . well, forever. Now that I have, I don't know what to do." She lowered her hand and looked back at Lottie. "I have to be honest with him. How do I tell him about my past and the water?"

Lottie clasped Belle's hand. "You'll find a way, honey. When the time is right, you'll find a way to tell him. Don't let fear stop you from holding on to that young man."

"That's another thing. He may not want to live here and I can't leave. I don't know what will happen to me if I stop drinking the water. I could age overnight or . . . or . . ."

"Or die," Lottie said softly.

"Yes."

Lottie straightened and rounded the island to sit next to Belle. "Did you consider that the water could affect Mitch the same way it does you? Maybe it'll stop his aging process, too."

"No, I never considered that. It hasn't affected Dolan

Seduction's Spell

at all.”

“You don’t think so? Belle, Dolan has more strength and stamina than three men put together.” She leaned closer and nudged Belle’s ribs. “Now that man has a *swagger*. I’ll bet Yvonne likes his stamina.”

She giggled and Belle joined her. “You’re terrible.”

“I know, but I have a lot of fun.” Lottie patted her hand. “You just trust your heart, Belle. It’ll tell you what to do.”

Mitch watched Belle fork a piece of tender ham and place it in her mouth. He enjoyed watching her eat. So far, he’d enjoyed watching everything she did.

She fascinated him.

He’d teased her last night about sex. When he’d told her he wanted a woman who fascinated him, he’d been serious. Sex was fun. Sex was a big part of a relationship, but it didn’t make that relationship last. Trust, caring, communication . . . all those things had to be present for a couple to survive whatever the world threw at them.

She’d rarely left his mind while he’d been outside doing his job . . . and not because of the hot sex they’d shared last night. He’d thought of long walks, picnics by the river, dressing up for treat-or-treaters at Halloween, decorating the mansion at Christmas. He’d thought of how much his son would like it here, and how much he’d like Belle.

It shocked Mitch to realize he’d been thinking of Belle in long-term ways, not simply the four days he was supposed to be here.

He laid down his fork and sat back in his chair. He was falling in love with her.

The realization didn’t hit him like a ton of bricks, but rather

LYNN LAFLEUR

like a soft summer breeze . . . welcome and pleasant. He'd looked for the right woman since he and Meira had divorced, one who could share his life, his dreams. That woman sat on his left, close enough to touch.

Now all he had to do was tell her how he felt . . . and hope she didn't laugh in his face.

"Is something wrong?" Belle asked.

Mitch smiled. "Nope. Just full. You were right about me loving Lottie's cooking. Can I take her home with me?"

Belle returned his smile. "Sorry, she stays here."

"Drat. Then I guess I'd better get back to work. Are you ready to finish your interview?"

She wiped her hands on her linen napkin. "I'm ready."

Mitch held her chair as she stood and wished each of her guests a good day. Once back in the foyer, he picked up his camera bag, notepad, and tape recorder that he'd left on a side table. "Where do you want to do this? Your office?"

"No. If I stay in the mansion, I'll be tempted to work. I know how I am."

He chuckled. "I understand. The veranda?"

"No, still too close to my office." She tapped her chin. "Let's go to my house."

He had no idea she didn't live in the mansion. "You have a house?"

Belle nodded. "I had it built four years ago, when I built the theater and started adding cabins. It was silly of me to take up a suite when I could let a guest enjoy it. And it gives me a place to escape to, like now."

She led the way out the back. The temperature had dropped since Mitch had taken pictures an hour ago. He looked up at the sky. Dark clouds billowed and danced with the wind.

Seduction's Spell

"I think we're gonna get that rain soon."

"I think you're right. I usually walk, but we'd better take my cart."

He followed her to a small shed that housed a golf cart. But Belle's golf cart was unlike any he'd ever seen. This one was purple and decorated with bright flower decals. Beads and bangles dripped around the outer edge of the canvas top. It looked like something that belonged to a 1960s' flower child.

Mitch coughed to keep from laughing. "Nice."

She scowled at him. "Don't make fun of my cart. I've had her for years."

"I said it's nice."

"You'll appreciate her if it starts raining before we get to my house."

Mitch climbed into the passenger seat while Belle sat behind the wheel. Thirty feet from the mansion, the clouds opened up and rain pelted them. Even with the canvas top for protection, the wind blew the rain inside the cart. Mitch's clothes were wet by the time they made it to Belle's house. Her top and slacks didn't look any drier than his clothes. The fact that they had to dash from the cart to her back door in the pouring rain didn't help the state of their clothing.

The back door opened directly into her kitchen. Mitch toed off his shoes as he pushed his wet hair off his forehead. "Second shower today. Good thing my camera bag is waterproof."

"I'm sorry. We should've left the mansion earlier."

"Hey, no problem. Just give me a towel and I'll be happy."

"I'll do better than that. Follow me."

She led him to the bathroom, then disappeared down the short hall. She came back a moment later carrying a burgundy robe.

LYNN LAFLEUR

“Take off your clothes and I’ll toss them in the dryer.”

He took the terry cloth robe from her and held it up so he could check out the size. It looked big enough to fit him. “You keep a man’s robe hanging in your closet?”

“Leave your clothes on the counter. I’ll pick them up in a bit.”

She left, closing the door behind her. He noticed she didn’t answer his question about the robe.

Jealousy could be an evil thing.

Mitch found her in the kitchen, preparing a pot of coffee. She’d changed into a light green, floor-length gown that looked like an oversized T-shirt. Her feet were bare. He’d never realized bare feet could be so sexy.

She smiled when he stepped up beside her. “Better?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “You, uh, didn’t answer my question about the robe.”

When she still didn’t tell him whose robe he wore, he asked her again. “So? Did it belong to a former lover?”

She pressed the “on” button to start the coffee brewing. “Do you think that’s any of your business?”

“No, it isn’t. I still want to know.”

“Why?”

“*Why?* Well, because . . .” Mitch stopped, not wanting to sound like a jealous fool. *Hell, man, you are a jealous fool.* “Because I don’t like the idea of another man touching you.”

Smiling tenderly, she laid her hands on his arms. “You’ve had other lovers, Mitch. So have I.”

“That was before . . .” He stopped again. He wasn’t ready to admit his love. It was too soon. She couldn’t possibly feel the same way about him yet.

Seduction's Spell

“Before what?”

“Nothing.” He uncrossed his arms and took her hands.

“Where do you want to do your interview?”

Her smile faded. Mitch thought he saw disappointment flash through her eyes before she moved away from him.

“We’ll be the most comfortable in the living room. Why don’t you get set up and I’ll bring our coffee?”

Seven

What did you expect? Belle asked herself as she poured their coffee into two heavy mugs. *A declaration of love?*

Well, yeah.

Maybe not a declaration of love, but at least an admission of caring for her. He'd been jealous of her having a man's robe. That had to mean he cared.

Belle rubbed her forehead. He might care, but he'd probably run as fast and far away as possible when she told him the truth.

She added a saucer of Lottie's peanut butter cookies to the tray and carried it to the living room. Mitch sat on the couch, his cameras and tape recorder on the coffee table before him, his notepad on his lap. He tossed his notepad to the couch and started to rise when she entered the room.

"Let me help you—"

"It's okay. I have it."

She set the tray on the table next to his cameras. "I hope you

Seduction's Spell

don't plan to take any pictures of me looking like a drowned rat."

He gave her that crooked grin that made her heart beat funny. "You're a beautiful drowned rat."

"Yeah, right."

She handed him one of the mugs and sat on the couch, curling up in the corner with her legs beneath her. A loud clap of thunder sounded in the distance.

"Is the storm getting worse?" Mitch asked.

"Not yet, but it might."

"Do you lose your power during a thunderstorm?"

"Sometimes. But I have lots of candles, so we won't be in the dark."

"I'm not worried at all. I like you in candlelight."

Warmth spread through her at his compliment. "You look pretty good in candlelight, too."

He shifted on the couch, straightening the robe over his lap. "I'd better get my mind on business before I ravish you."

Ravishment didn't sound bad to Belle. With a sigh, she sipped her coffee and waited for the first question.

"The mansion was built in 1844 by Salvatore Patricelli. I assume he's your ancestor."

"Yes."

"He must have been your . . . what? Great-great-grandfather? Or do I need to throw in some more greats?"

He'd given her the perfect opening to tell him about her past. Belle's heart thudded in her chest. Her mouth felt dry. She took another sip of coffee before speaking again. "Actually, Salvatore was my grandfather."

Mitch stared at her a moment, a frown drawing his eyebrows together. Then he laughed. "C'mon, Belle, that isn't

LYNN LAFLEUR

possible. Math wasn't my strongest subject in school, but I can compute in my head. He couldn't have been your grandfather."

"He could if I was born in 1846."

All traces of amusement disappeared from his face. "What?"

Her hands grew slippery on the mug. Afraid she'd drop it, she set it on the table. "It's true. I was born in 1846. I've out-lived every member of my family."

"And how did you manage this amazing feat?"

The skepticism in his voice hurt, but she could certainly understand it. If their roles were reversed, she'd have trouble believing Mitch was well over a century old. "The water well on my property has . . . special powers. The water affects people differently, depending on their needs. For me, it's kept me young."

His eyes narrowed. "Your water well has special powers."

She nodded. "It's . . . enchanted."

He looked from her to his coffee and back to her. "So the water you used in this coffee will make me younger?"

"I don't know how it will affect you. Everyone is different."

"Everyone, meaning your guests. The water does weird things to your guests and they never question it?"

"They don't realize anything is happening to them. They aren't here long enough to figure it out. And it doesn't affect all my guests . . . only the ones who need help of some kind. If it is going to affect someone, it does so quickly."

"How quickly?"

"Almost immediately after the first drink."

He set his mug on the coffee table. When he looked back at

Seduction's Spell

her, she cringed at the disbelief in his eyes. "Is this what you Texans call a tall tale, Isabella?"

Tears tightened her throat. "It's true, Mitch. I swear it." She swallowed hard, trying to keep the tears from falling. "You can ask Dolan or Lottie. They both know the truth."

"They're the only ones of all your staff who know the truth?"

"I told Lottie after she'd been here about two years. I told Dolan sooner than that. We became good friends right away and I wanted to be honest with him. Plus, he'd had some issues in his private life. We confided in each other. My other employees aren't here long enough to notice anything. I pay well, but they still take other jobs, or get married and move away. Braden, the one who manages the stable, has been here three years. If he stays much longer, I'll have to confide in him, too. I don't like keeping secrets."

"And none of them are affected?"

"They don't seem to be, except for Lottie. Her memory is amazing. She can quote word for word a conversation she had fifteen years ago. She prepares a dish once and she never has to look at the recipe again. Well, and Dolan. I hadn't thought about it until Lottie mentioned it today, but he's very strong. I think the water may have contributed to his strength."

He laughed without a trace of humor. "You really can't expect me to believe any of this. You've lived here since 1846 and *no one* in the area is suspicious of your age? No one has questioned why you've stayed young for decades?"

She had to make him believe her. He'd never be able to love her if he didn't believe her. Belle rose to her knees and scooted closer to him. "Mitch, I don't have a lot of close friends in Ros-

LYNN LAFLEUR

eville, so I haven't spent very much time with other people. I'm busy here practically twenty-four/seven. I'm very close with Lottie and Dolan. They're my friends, my family."

"I don't suppose you have any proof, like a birth certificate."

"No, I don't have my real one. There wasn't one officially recorded when I was born. I had some . . . help getting one several years ago so I could get a driver's license, social security number, things like that."

"You had some help. Who helped you?"

"A . . . friend."

"A friend. Did this 'friend' ask for a lot of money?"

"Some," she said softly.

He pushed his hair back from his forehead. "I can't understand why you're saying these things, Belle. You know I can't print anything like this in the interview."

"No, it isn't for the interview. It's for you, because I want to be honest with you." Taking a chance that he wouldn't push her away, she said what was in her heart. "Because I love you."

No expression showed on his face. Belle's heart crumbled. He didn't believe her.

"Excuse me."

Belle grabbed his hand to stop him from rising. "Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom."

Reluctantly, she released his hand and he stood. She watched him walk away from her. He said he was going to the bathroom, but it seemed as if he were walking out of her life, too.

When he came back dressed in his wet clothes, she knew she'd lost him.

Seduction's Spell

She scrambled off the couch. "Why did you get dressed?"

"Because I'm leaving."

He began loading his cameras in the case. Belle took his arm, but he jerked away from her. "Mitch, please don't leave. Let's talk some more."

"I can't now, Belle." He blew out a breath. "You're asking me to accept something that can't be real."

"But it is! I didn't have to tell you any of this. I did it because I wanted to be honest with you before . . . before our relationship went any further."

"I don't know if there's any chance of that happening now." He slung the camera bag strap over his shoulder. "It's like you live in some kind of weird fantasy world. I'm not sure if I can ever be a part of it."

She followed him into the kitchen. He slipped on his shoes and walked out the back door without another word.

Belle pushed the door closed behind him. She turned and slowly slid down the door to the floor. Tears fell down her cheeks as she drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. She could've remained silent. There had been no reason for her to say anything yet. Once she and Mitch had been together for a while, then she could've told him the truth. But she didn't want any relationship they might have to be based on a lie. It was important to her for him to know the whole truth about her.

Now that he did, she'd lost him.

Sometimes life sucks big time.

That thought flashed through Mitch's mind as he signaled for another beer. He'd found the perfect woman. Belle was smart, sexy, beautiful, caring . . . everything a man could want.

LYNN LAFLEUR

He didn't understand how someone as intelligent as she could believe the story she'd told him. It didn't make any sense. Maybe she'd been drugged, or hypnotized.

Yeah, that makes as much sense as her story.

The buxom brunette set a full mug in front of him and picked up his empty one. "You're starting your drinking early today, aren't you?"

He looked into her eyes and saw compassion. Mitch didn't want any sympathy now. "I don't want to be rude, but I'd appreciate it if you'd leave me alone, okay?"

"Sure. But if you're looking to get drunk, there are faster ways to do it than beer."

"This will do me fine."

Mitch watched her walk away, then stared down into his beer. The rain had stopped by the time he made it back to the mansion. After changing into dry clothes, he'd headed for Roseville, needing to put some space between Belle and him. The public exterior of The White Rose drew his attention as he drove by it. He hadn't been drunk in a long time. Today seemed like a good day for it.

He heard the door open behind him, but didn't bother to see who had entered. At two in the afternoon, the place was quiet and almost empty. The sense of someone behind him straightened his spine. Just what he needed—some "good ol' boy" looking for a fight with an out-of-stater.

Slowly, he turned his head and looked over his shoulder. Dolan, Isaac, and Vince stood behind him.

"Awww, fuck," he muttered.

Dolan clapped him on the shoulder. "Nice to see you, too, Mitch. Are you buying?"

"Hell, no."

Seduction's Spell

"Janet, beers all around on Mitch's tab."

The brunette smiled. "Gotcha."

"Now wait a minute—"

"There's a table," Vince said.

"I'm fine right here."

Dolan tugged on his arm. "You'll be better at the table."

Mitch had the choice to go with him or end up on the floor.

"Let me get my beer."

"Janet will bring it."

With Dolan on one side and Isaac on the other, Mitch couldn't argue. He joined Vince at the table in the corner and flopped down in the chair opposite him. Isaac sat on his left, Dolan on his right.

"How the hell did you find me?"

"Janet called me." Dolan picked a fat cashew out of the bowl on the table and tossed it into his mouth. "She asked if I was missing a guest. I believe she described you as 'a hunk with green eyes and a cute ass.' I told her I wasn't sure about the cute ass part."

Isaac and Vince chuckled. Mitch didn't. "I came here to be alone."

"Tough." All traces of teasing disappeared from Dolan's eyes. He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. "I'm trying to decide whether or not to kick your cute ass for hurting Belle."

"*Me* hurt *her*? Do you know what she told me?"

"Yeah. She told you the truth about her and the well."

Mitch's mouth slackened. He looked from Isaac to Vince and back to Dolan. "You don't actually *believe* that bullshit."

"Every word of it."

Janet arrived with their beers. Dolan sat back in his chair so

LYNN LAFLEUR

she could set his in front of him. He smiled at her. "Keep 'em coming, Janet."

"Will do." She nudged Mitch's shoulder. "I take all major credit cards."

"Yeah, I'll bet you do."

Laughing, Janet placed the other mugs on the table. "Y'all give a holler when you're ready for the next round."

Once she left, Mitch turned his attention back to Dolan. "You work for her. I can understand why you'd defend her—"

"It has nothing to do with defending her. Hell, man, I didn't believe her at first either. I thought I'd have to call the guys with the padded wagon when she first started talking to me. But I listened with an open mind as she explained. I believed her. Plus, I've seen proof of her . . . other talents."

"What other talents?"

Dolan rubbed his chin. "I don't know if you'd call it psychic or not, but Belle can sense things. I don't think she has any control over it. She just . . . knows."

"Dolan talked to us on the way here," Vince said. "Yeah, it sounded crazy at first, but I believe it's true. I know the water affected Sara."

"And me," Isaac said after taking a sip of beer. "I've never been the jealous type. The water made me realize what a fool I'd been to ignore my wife. I could've lost her if not for Belle's help."

"Belle told me her guests don't know about the water."

"They don't. I trust Vince and Isaac, so I confided in them."

"Besides," Vince added, "who're we gonna tell? Anyone would react just like you did and figure we're nuts."

Seduction's Spell

Mitch winced. They made him sound so . . . heartless.

Dolan leaned forward again. "Look, man, I realize it's a lot to absorb. All we're saying is give Belle a chance to explain everything. She's waited a long time to fall in love and she's miserable. Talk to her."

It still seemed unbelievable to Mitch. If the water was giving Belle eternal life, there was no guarantee it would do the same for him. He didn't know if he even wanted that. It would be strange to watch his son grow old while his hair remained brown.

"Belle said she has no idea how the water will affect someone. Just because she stays young doesn't mean *I* will."

"That's true," Dolan said. "But isn't she worth the chance?"

Eight

“How about there?” Belle asked, pointing toward a stand of tall oak trees. *“We could set up chairs beneath the trees.”*

Sara slipped her hands into the pockets of her jeans. *“You’re going to so much trouble for me.”*

She smiled. *“It’s no trouble at all. I’m thrilled you and Vince are going to renew your vows here.”*

“Belle’s a romantic,” Yvonne said from her perch atop one of the wooden picnic tables. *“She’s going to do all my wedding stuff when Dolan and I get married.”*

“Absolutely.”

“Then I’m going to return the favor when she and Mitch get married.”

Belle’s smile faded. There was no chance of that ever happening. *“You’re getting a bit ahead of yourself, Yvonne.”*

“No way! I saw how you two looked at each other last night at dinner. There’s definitely a wedding in your future.”

Seduction's Spell

Yvonne couldn't possibly know how much her words hurt. To keep from bursting into tears again, Belle turned back to Sara. "We can order a gown online and put a rush on it so it'll be here by next Saturday."

Sara chewed on her bottom lip. "I don't think I want a wedding gown again. What about a nice dress?"

"The color of oyster shells," Yvonne said. "V-neck, cap sleeves, a handkerchief hem."

"Ooh, I like that idea."

Sara's eyes glowed with happiness. Belle was thrilled Sara and Vince had found each other again and were getting remarried. Seeing her so happy, though, only made Belle feel worse about Mitch.

Maybe honesty wasn't always the best policy.

Pushing him from her mind, she checked her list of notes she'd jotted down for the ceremony. "Sara, you and Vince will apply for your license Monday. There's a three-day wait, but you'll have it in plenty of time. Lottie will bake a cake, I'll make flower arrangements from my garden. I've already called the newspaper. The announcement will be in Thursday's edition. I'll call Judge Bishop tomorrow."

"Are you sure he'll perform the ceremony on such short notice?"

"If I promise him one of Lottie's apple pies, he'll be here in an hour."

"Someone else who loves her cooking?" Maggie asked as she boosted herself up on the table next to Yvonne.

"I think the judge would marry Lottie if she'd have him."

"I've always heard the way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

LYNN LAFLEUR

"There are other ways to a man's heart," a masculine voice said behind Belle.

She sucked in a sharp breath. A thousand butterflies took flight in her stomach. Slowly, she turned to see Mitch standing three feet behind her.

Everything around her disappeared. All she could see was the man she loved, the man she thought would never speak to her again. The breeze ruffled his dark hair. His disheveled appearance only made him more handsome.

"Well, I think this is our cue to leave." Yvonne hopped down from the table. "C'mon, ladies."

He nodded to the three women as they walked past him. Once they were gone, he looked back at Belle. "Hi."

"Hi," she whispered.

"Can we go for a walk?"

"Sure." She laid her clipboard and pen on the table where Yvonne and Maggie had been sitting. Wiping her sweaty palms on her thighs, she turned toward the path that led to her house. So many questions flew through her mind, but she waited for him to speak first.

"What you told me about the well . . . It's hard to believe."

He'd come back to tell her good-bye. Belle was sure of it. A lump formed in her throat, her heart thudded heavily in her chest. She'd had a tiny glimpse of happiness and it had been snatched away from her. "I know it's hard to believe."

"Can we talk about it?"

Belle cleared her throat to try and get rid of the lump. "If you'd like."

"How does the water thing work? You said it doesn't affect everyone."

Seduction's Spell

"I don't know exactly how it works. I don't have any control over it. It . . . helps people, however they need to be helped."

He hooked his thumbs in the front belt loops of his jeans. "What about you? Did you grow up more slowly or just stop getting older?"

"I had a normal childhood. I never noticed that I was different. I just thought I was aging well." She glanced at him. "Every woman's dream."

He chuckled.

"I looked in the mirror on my fortieth birthday, expecting to see gray hairs and laugh lines. Instead, I saw a woman who still looked twenty-five."

"Guess that was kinda freaky, huh?"

"Yes, it was."

"How did you decide it was the water keeping you young?"

"Process of elimination over the years."

They walked for several yards before Mitch spoke again. "Are you okay? Physically?"

"I'm fine. I never get sick." She stopped walking and faced him. "I can tell you things throughout history that aren't public knowledge, but have no way to prove those things. I have no *proof* that I'm telling you the truth. All I can do is say I fell in love with you as soon as I looked into your eyes and wanted to be honest with you. Maybe you think that's crazy, too. Maybe you think people can't fall in love so quickly."

"No, I don't think it's crazy at all. The same thing happened to me."

Mitch saw the surprise in her eyes at his confession. To him, communication was the most important thing between two people. If they didn't talk, their relationship would never

LYNN LAFLEUR

work. Words were easy for him on paper. Putting his feelings into words wasn't so easy.

"Last night was incredible, Belle. The sex was so hot, but it was more than two bodies coming together." He took her hands in his. "I felt . . . content after we made love. I held you in my arms and it was like . . ." He stopped and frowned. Damn it, he wrote for a living, yet couldn't find the right words to make her understand how much she meant to him.

"It was like our souls touched."

She'd said it perfectly. "Yeah. That's exactly how it felt." He squeezed her hands. "So here I find this perfect woman who stole my heart within seconds of touching her hand, and she tells me she's over a century old. It kinda threw me, you know?"

"Yes, I know," she whispered. "I should've found a better way to tell you."

"Whatever way you told me, I probably would've been an ass and walked out on you. I'm so sorry I did that." Mitch lifted her hands to his mouth and kissed both palms. "I want the chance to get to know you better, Isabella. Give me a little time to get used to what makes you so special and unique."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I can give you all the time you need."

Mitch lowered his head to kiss her. The rumble of thunder stopped him. "More storms?"

She nodded. "Off and on for the next few days."

A spatter of raindrops hit the top of his head. "Looks like we're gonna get wet again."

"Then we'd better run."

The downpour held off until they reached Belle's house. Mitch tugged her beneath the porch overhang a moment be-

Seduction's Spell

fore the skies opened up. The overhang didn't provide protection from the wind. Mitch tried to shield her with his body, but a strong gust blew rain at them before Belle could push open the door.

Rain dripping from his hair, Mitch followed Belle into her kitchen. "So much for dry clothes. Do you still have that robe handy?"

"I have a better idea."

She took his hand and led him through the living room and down the hall. He glanced at paintings of people on the walls as he walked past them. He assumed some or all of them were Belle's ancestors. Before he could ask her, she led him into her bedroom. Mitch hadn't made it this far this morning, although he'd planned to. Work first. He'd planned to finish the interview, take some pictures of her, then spend the rest of the day learning her body.

She stopped beside her bed. Releasing his hand, she pulled her damp T-shirt over her head and tossed it to the floor. Her hard nipples clearly showed through her sheer bra. His cock responded to the sight, growing longer, thicker.

Her bra hit the floor next, then she shimmied out of her jeans and panties. She stood before him with her chin up and breasts thrust forward. "Your turn," she said.

His gaze traveled from her face to her feet and back again. "Can I drool for a minute?"

She chuckled. The movement made her breasts jiggle. Mitch reached out and cradled both mounds in his hands. "You're so beautiful, Isabella."

He moved his thumbs over her nipples and was rewarded with her soft moan. "Mitch, take off your clothes."

Instead of doing as she requested, he bent over and opened

LYNN LAFLEUR

his mouth over the tip of her breast. He sucked it until she whimpered, then moved to the other peak. Back and forth, he licked and sucked her nipples until she grabbed his hair and jerked his mouth away from her.

“You. Naked. Now.”

He grinned. He liked it when he made her lose control. “Yes, ma’am.”

Seconds later, he pulled her nude body against his. Her damp skin felt cool. If he had anything to say about it, she’d warm up *very* soon.

He backed up to her bed, tugging her along with him. When his legs hit the bed, he sat down and scooted backward until he could lean against the headboard. Belle followed him. She straddled his lap, took his cock in her hand, and impaled herself.

Mitch hissed in a breath through his teeth. “*Jesus*, Isabella.”

“You don’t want this?”

“Hell, yes, I want it, but what about foreplay? We haven’t even kissed yet.”

“I can fix that.”

Tunneling her fingers into his hair, she tilted his head back and kissed him. Mitch closed his eyes and simply let himself *feel*. The touch of her hands. The whisper-soft brush of her lips. The sleekness of her tongue. The press of her breasts against his chest. The fullness of her buttocks in his hands. He savored every sensation.

He held her waist as she began to move her hips. Clutching his shoulders, she closed her eyes and threw her head back. He loved the sight of her so hot, so uninhibited. Remaining still was impossible. Mitch shifted his grip to her buttocks and thrust up into her pussy.

Seduction's Spell

She lowered her head and looked into his eyes. "I love having you inside me."

"I love being inside you." Gripping her buttocks tighter, he increased the speed of his thrusts. "Come for me, Isabella."

The walls of her pussy milking his shaft triggered his own climax. Mitch pushed his cock as far inside her as he could. Pleasure flowed down his spine, into his balls, and throughout his body.

It'd never been like this with another woman. Loving Belle made the feelings deeper, stronger. Whatever happened to him, however the water affected him, he'd accept it as long as she loved him.

She rested her forehead against his. "My goodness."

"Yeah. Pretty intense, huh?"

"But good." She kissed him softly. "That's a much better way to dry off than a towel, don't you think?"

Mitch chuckled. "Definitely." He passed his hands over her breasts. "I don't want to say anything to spoil this, but I didn't wear a condom. Is that all right?"

"Are you asking me if I'm clean?"

"No. I know you are. So am I. I'm asking about birth control."

Biting her bottom lip, Belle looked down at his chest. "That isn't a problem." Her chest rose and fell with a deep breath before she looked back into his eyes. "I don't think I can get pregnant, Mitch. I've been sexually active for a long time. Birth control wasn't exactly easy to come by the first hundred years of my life."

"No, I guess it wasn't."

"Does that bother you?"

"Why should it?"

LYNN LAFLEUR

"You have a son. Do you want more children?"

"I haven't thought about it. I love my son and spend as much time as possible with him. If I'd become involved with a woman who wanted kids, then yeah, I'd probably consider it. But there's no burning desire inside of me for more children." He kissed her softly. "Having you in my life will be enough."

She smiled. "I'm glad."

He kissed her again. "We still have a lot to talk about."

She cocked her head. "Like?"

"Like me moving here."

Sudden tears made her eyes sparkle. "You'll do that?"

"Of course I will. I'm not going to ask you to leave a place where you've lived for over a century. Besides, you probably can't leave, can you?"

"I've gone on trips and never had any problems, but I don't know what would happen to me if I moved away permanently."

"There's no reason for you to find out. I travel a lot in my job, so I can call anywhere home. I'll want my son to visit a lot, of course, and my parents. My dad had a stroke two weeks ago. He's doing well, but I want to keep close tabs on him."

"Of course you do. Any of your family will always be welcome here. We can build a house just for them, if you'd like." Belle brushed his lips with her fingertips. Without any argument, he was willing to move halfway across the country to be with her. "Thank you, Mitch."

With a wink, he kissed the tips of her fingers. "And speaking of my job, I need to finish your interview. Oh, and pictures. I want to take more pictures of you." He wrapped his

Seduction's Spell

arms around her waist. "Speaking of pictures, I noticed the paintings in the hall. Ancestors of yours?"

"Yes. I have some great photographs, too. Some of them are so old that . . ."

Belle stopped. How stupid could she possibly be? She had the proof all along of her age. She almost clapped her hands in her excitement. "Mitch! I have pictures!"

His eyebrows drew together and a look of confusion crossed his face. "I'm happy for you, Isabella. A lot of people have pictures."

"No, I mean I have *pictures* . . . of my ancestors, of *me*. I have pictures of me all the way back to the 1880s. There's the proof I'm telling you the truth."

He brushed her hair back from her face before kissing her softly. "I want to see them because they're a part of you, but not as any proof. I believe you, Isabella. I love you and know you'll always be honest with me."

The complete trust in his eyes tugged at her heart. He believed her. He wasn't simply saying he did to placate her. He *truly* believed her.

"I love you, Mitchell Cavanaugh."

"And I love you, Isabella Patricelli." He grinned crookedly. "Wow, that's a mouthful, isn't it?"

"Why do you think I go by Belle?"

He laughed, but his laughter quickly died. She watched his gaze travel over her face and down to her chest. He cupped both breasts in his hands. "How long will it take you to get ready for dinner?"

"Not long. Why?" His thumbs skated over her nipples. "Mmm, that's nice."

LYNN LAFLEUR

“I was thinking we could make love again before we head back to the mansion. Do you think that sounds like a plan?”

Belle arched her back, pressing her breasts more firmly into his palms. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

Lynn LaFleur

About the Author

LYNN LAFLEUR can't imagine ever writing anything but romances. "I love writing about a man and a woman falling in love. If you enjoy the story I tell enough to smile in places, shed a tear at times, or get a warm and fuzzy feeling, that is my greatest reward."

After living on the West Coast for twenty-one years, Lynn is back in Texas, seventeen miles from her hometown. She works for her small-town newspaper during the day and writes books of romance at night.

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