

Sometimes you have to go more than halfway to meet in the middle.

Caitlin Moore has every reason to celebrate. She's through with law-school finals, and out for some post-semester fun when she runs smack dab into Eamon Blake, the Irishman with whom she had a summer fling years ago. Time hasn't dimmed their lingering friendship—or their sexual chemistry.

Eamon isn't looking for love when he bumps into Cat while he's in Seattle on a job. Yet over the next year, he finds himself involved in a rekindled long-distance romance that moves from casual to a lot more.

That's the rub. Cat is determined not to repeat her past mistakes with men and give up the dream job for which she's worked so hard. Independence is something she's spent years achieving. Eamon can start over so much easier than she can—why shouldn't he make the sacrifice this time?

But Eamon doesn't much relish leaving the life he's been building in Los Angeles—and he really doesn't like ultimatums. At an impasse, goodbye seems the only direction to go. Ending it is the right thing to do...or the biggest mistake they ever made.

Warning: Like-whoa sexy Irishmen speaking French in the ear of a very willing Seattleite. Sexin with all the big words.

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Always
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Always

Lauren Dane

Dedication

Ray—Always.

Angie—Of course I thank you because you're you and all.

Tracy, Renee, Mary, the Vixenreaders—Thank you.

And to all those men with lovely accents, thanks for the inspiration.

Chapter One

Ignoring the jostle of the crowd, Caitlin let the throbbing beat of the song slide up her spine as she sipped her drink. Amy had gone to the bathroom and God only knew how long it would be before she got back. Amy was ditzy at best and a flake at worst. Still, she'd been a good friend for several years and everyone had their flaws, heaven knew Caitlin did.

School was out for winter break, finals were done, she'd turned in her big paper and she was out to celebrate. Every other day of the year, her life was about control and responsibility. Tonight was about play and damn it, she planned to do it.

Basement Jaxx's "Get Me Off" thumped through the sound system as the lights strobed. Heat from bodies in motion pulsed through the room. The scent of sweat, cologne, beer and sex hung like a heavy curtain.

Caitlin tended to agree with the sentiment of the song. She'd like it if someone got her off, too. It'd been too long since she'd had sex with someone other than a hunk of expensive silicone.

Fuck it. She drained her drink and put her glass on the bar behind her. She wanted to give in to the beat, to move with the crowd.

She made her way to the dance floor, letting the bump of the bass line pull at her lower gut. Once she'd found a reasonably empty space she let go, let the music take her. Her spine loosened, her hips switched from side to side as her shoulders moved.

Reaching up, she clipped her hair out of her face and rolled her head, relaxing. Her gaze fixed on the wide body of a man dancing just ahead of where she stood.

He wasn't so much dancing as soaking in the sexuality of the grinding, writhing crowd. She found herself wanting to press herself against his back, to slide herself down. Wanting to cup that stellar, denim-clad ass. She couldn't tell much about him in the light with his face turned the other way. She'd just fill in the blanks herself. Imagine the feel of his hair as she sifted her fingers through it.

She lost herself in the fantasy, in the beat. The air settled in around her as her eyes slid closed. God she needed to get out more if she found herself having salacious *Penthouse Letter* moments about random strangers in dance clubs.

It wasn't as if she were some innocent young thing. But she'd made an effort to tame her wilder side when she'd come back from that summer in Ireland. She'd buckled down and at first had lived for her ex, Adam, but finally, she was living for herself and her future. Sometimes the path was lonely but it was hers

and hers alone. She jealously guarded her schooling and her schedule because she remembered every day just how easy it was to lose yourself in someone else.

Didn't mean she'd forgotten she'd had wild, hard, furtive sex on a bar once. Actually three times. She smiled at the memory. Some days it felt as if she'd lost touch with that part of herself, but it was there and she needed to take time to remember it more often.

A warm, solid body made contact with hers, sending her forward, despite her bar stance, feet apart and braced for impact.

"Shite, I'm sorry." Strong hands grasped her upper arms and righted her. Unexpectedly, ripples of sensation echoed from the spot he touched her.

Wait. That voice...

Caitlin turned and stared into the amber-brown eyes of none other than Eamon Blake. The sense memory of his voice stirred all sorts of things within her, all of them pleasant.

"Cat? Bloody hell, it's good to see you." She caught a flash of white teeth from his grin as he pulled her into a hug.

Automatically, her arms went around his neck and she breathed him in simply for the pleasure of it. He smelled as good as he had the last time she'd seen him, four years before.

But then he'd been naked. And as it happened, Caitlin really liked it when Eamon had been naked. He was really good when he was naked. Or, she supposed, really bad, which had been even better.

"Eamon! What on Earth are you doing in Seattle?" she asked, lips to his ear. She really should step back, it probably wasn't a good idea to remain plastered to his body but just then her hormones had the reins.

"At the moment? Enjoying myself immensely." Eamon's voice, still deep and sort of scratchy and yep, still totally sexy, sounded very intimate, even in the din of the club.

She laughed and he set her down but kept an arm around her waist as he steered them toward the bar, skillfully weaving through the crowd.

Once they'd gotten away from the dance floor he turned his attention back to her. "You look marvelous, darlin'. It's been a long time, but I believe you look even better than you did the last time I saw you." A smile touched his lips. "But, aye, that's a very fond memory. What brings you here tonight? Your boyfriend?"

"Very smoothly done, Eamon. But no. No boyfriend." *Can I get an amen to that?* "I'm here with a friend. Finals week is over and I'm celebrating."

"Well, my night keeps getting better. Can I buy you a drink or something? I'd love to catch up. You can tell me all about whatever degree you're getting."

Right then Amy stumbled up, her arm wrapped around none other than Nathan Rich. "Hi! Look who I found."

Caitlin didn't bother to hold back her sneer of disgust. "Under your shoe? Behind the toilet in the bathroom?"

He sent a smarmy smile her way. Trying to be charming. But assholes weren't charming. They were just assholes. "Come on, Caitlin, you know it's not my fault. He's my best friend, I couldn't have told you."

She'd never gotten to punch Adam, and right then punching Nathan presented such a lovely substitute. Too bad ending up in jail on an assault charge would totally mess up her chances of practicing law.

"Kathleen. My name is pronounced KATHLEEN." She sighed. Adam had always mispronounced her name as Kate-lynn, from laziness or passive aggressively poking at her, she was never quite sure. But of course his little lapdog buddies had followed suit. "I'm not even discussing that with you." She turned to Amy, wishing her friend had some common sense where this jerk was concerned. "Ames, I'm going to jet. I'll see you later this week at work. Nathan, I hope those antibiotics are working."

Eamon's surprised laughter sounded as his arm tightened around her waist. In her ire, she'd actually forgotten he was standing there.

She turned back to him. "I'd introduce you but it's not worth your energy. You still want to catch up or are *you* here with a girlfriend or friends?"

"No girlfriend. I wouldn't be chatting you up if I had a girlfriend, Cat." He sent her a look. "I actually had a job here but it's done now so why don't you let me take you to a late dinner?"

The way he totally owned her personal space like he was meant to be there was overwhelming and thrilling all at once. He leaned in as he spoke, his lips just touching her ear, breath tickling as it stirred the wisps of hair at her neck. His thumb slid back and forth, back and forth slowly at her waist.

"Yeah, let's get out of here."

Amy took her hand. "Are you mad? I thought you were over Adam. This is about you tonight. I'll send Nathan away. I'm sorry."

Caitlin loved Amy but she was weak when it came to men, a really annoying quality. Still, she accepted Amy's quirks like Amy did hers.

Caitlin hugged Amy. "I *am* over Adam and thankfully I don't have to take antibiotics like your boyfriend there. Look, you know what the deal is. You dig him for whatever reason and I respect that. But I want you to stop trying to make us be nice. I think he's a scum-sucking pig. I have good reason to think so. So you hang out with him and I'm going to leave. I'll see you later. I was getting tired anyway."

"Who's the stud?" Amy looked around Caitlin's body to check Eamon out.

"Remember I told you about the work abroad thing I did four years ago?"

"The pub in Dublin? Ohmigod! That's him?" Amy's eyes widened and Caitlin noted Eamon's body tightening as he stretched to try and hear what was being said.

"Yep. I'll see you later."

"I expect to hear every last detail, Caitlin. And one of these days, you're going to see Nathan's good side." Amy's earnest face made Caitlin want to shake her friend for being so stupid. But what could she do? She'd made her feelings known and Amy was a big girl.

"Do me a favor and stop it. I'm serious." She kissed Amy's cheek and squeezed her hand, allowing Eamon to pull her toward the front of the club. "Bye!"

Outside, the air was cool and the night smelled of the front of a rainstorm. Caitlin loved the rise of electricity in the atmosphere as it readied for rain.

Her ears got used to the relative quiet once they'd gotten a ways from the club's entrance. Eamon ran a hand up her arm to catch her attention.

"Did you drive?" he asked and she let the velvet of his accent stroke her senses for a brief moment before answering.

"I didn't. I took the bus from my apartment to Amy's and we drove here in her car."

"Ah, well that's good then. My car is just up the block in a lot. I'm not very familiar with Seattle. This is only my third time here. Do you have any suggestions for a place to eat?"

Half an hour later they sat face to face in a small but plush hole-in-the-wall filled with the fragrant steam of pho noodle soup.

Eamon couldn't quite believe what a glorious upturn the night had taken. He hadn't laid eyes on Cat Moore in four years. Had thought of her from time to time since, always pleasantly. And yet, the reality of her there as she occupied the space across from him, seemed so much better than his memories. She wasn't hard to look at and after a man had spent any amount of time with her, it wasn't hard to like her either. Smart and funny, she was the best part of the last summer before his father had fallen ill.

"Tell me about what you've been up to in the last four years." He grinned.

"You first. What brings you to Seattle? You said you had a job here?" She studied him through glasses with smallish, rectangular lenses. They lent her something indefinable but it really worked for him. Funky, unusual, they made her look like that smart girl you talked about obscure Scottish bands with until three in the morning back when he was at university.

Even better, the lenses emphasized the flecks of hazel in her eyes, the pale lashes he knew were ginger colored against her pale-as-cream cheeks when she slept. He'd enjoyed watching her sleep. When awake she was constantly moving, laughing, talking, her hands flying as she went about her work. But asleep, he could really see her, take in her features as she breathed deeply and stored enough energy for the next day of nonstop activity.

He took a sip of the very tasty Vietnamese beer as he savored the memory. "I'm a photographer. Mostly commercial work. I'm here to do shoots for a few clients. The owner of that bar we were just in? His wife makes jewelry and we spent the day today down at Golden Gardens park. It's a gorgeous place.

Got loads of work done. They treated me to a few drinks along with my fee. I've also got a few-day shoot for a local record company. I'm doing publicity for some of their artists. In between, well there's enough beauty here to keep the purely artistic part of me busy."

She nodded and a tendril of that pale red hair slid forward. Unselfconsciously, she tucked it behind one of her ears and used her chopsticks to bring noodles to her mouth like a pro.

"When did you take up photography?"

"You mean, how did a publican from Dublin end up in America shooting alternative rock bands and jewelry makers?"

"Yeah." She smiled in her way, drawing his attention back to that mouth of hers. She'd been the kind of woman, despite that need to constantly be on the move, to kiss for hours.

He took in the way she moved, deliberate and economical. There was a kind of grace in that. She'd changed from the free-spirited young woman he'd bedded for three months. He supposed everyone did as they got older.

"My dad got sick and died two years ago. He gave me my first camera when I was eight. I gave up photography when I took over the pub, didn't have time." He shrugged. "Anyway, he made me promise to use my camera again. How could I refuse him? My mother supported me trying it out and my sister and her husband have taken over running the pub so it'll stay in the family. Once I decided to take the leap, it took a year before I realized I could make a go of it. I made some sales. My sister-in-law is American, you remember? She arranged for papers. I came here and did a show. One thing led to another and here I am for at least the next little while. I just opened a studio in Los Angeles three months ago. Well it's in my house, but a studio just the same."

"I'm sorry about your father. I really enjoyed his company. Taught me how to pull the perfect pint. And of course your mother supported this, she was so proud of everything you all did, if I remember correctly." She smiled and those pale, pink lips exposed perfect teeth. He remembered the way she'd nip at his shoulder when he was inside her. A shiver worked through him and their eyes met.

Long, slow moments passed between them as the air heated, sizzling with chemistry. Eamon couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted a woman so bad.

"My apartment is not very far from here," she murmured and he knew what she meant.

He stood, tossing a tip on the table and she took the hand he'd held for her.

Chapter Two

This was total insanity. Caitlin could not believe she'd just invited him to her place for sex. But the truth of it was, he wasn't a stranger and he'd be gone in a few days anyway. They'd been great together. He was inventive and courteous in bed; she'd certainly never walked away without satisfaction. And she *liked* him. When she really thought about it, it was the perfect solution.

Yeah, the perfect solution.

"We can walk. Your car is as close as you'll get anyway. It'll be safe if you're concerned."

He turned to her as they walked down the sidewalk toward her building, his arm around her shoulders. "Darlin', the safety of my car is the *last* thing on my mind."

She grinned, leaning into his body a moment before they crossed the street and turned right.

"That's my building up there on the other side of the street." She pointed briefly, hoping he didn't notice the slight tremble in her hands.

"And what brings you down to this part of town then? The University is a bit away, yes?"

"It's a pretty quick bus ride. Most downtown busses head straight to the University District and my job is down here anyway."

They crossed again and she pulled out her keys to unlock the front door. He followed her to the elevator.

"What do you do?"

Oh how casual she could be. Just chatting about work when they were on their way up to her place to have sex. *Mmm. Sex.* She was glad she'd shaved her legs earlier to prepare for going out.

She blinked up at him, realizing she'd been off in her happy place for long moments. "I'm interning at the Attorney General's Office, in the SHS Division." She quickly added, "Social and Health Services. It deals mainly with abused and neglected children. I'm a Rule 9 Intern. That means I can do trials with supervising attorneys around."

He smiled approvingly. "Ah, you did go ahead and go to law school, then."

"I did. After a fashion. I'm in my second year now." She indicated he get out of the elevator on her floor when the doors opened up and they walked down the long hallway. Caitlin loved the building, loved her studio apartment. It wasn't as grand as the showplace she'd shared with Adam for two years, but it was hers and it felt like home. And it didn't have Adam in it. Bonus.

Her door beckoned, bright gleaming red. She unlocked it and waved him inside, locking up behind herself.

Eamon filled her small entryway with more than just his physical presence. His heat, his vitality took up every inch of the place, sliding over her skin, seeping into her pores. The man was potent. Caitlin hesitated, unable to remember if he'd always been so. She seemed to recall his sexuality had been more casual, playful. Then again, hers had too. Four years had been a lifetime for her. In that time he'd lost his father and had taken on a new life's path. That would change anyone, deepen their focus. It worked on him, she decided after taking a long look.

He put his bag down—he'd told her earlier it contained his camera—and hung his coat up before taking hers.

"I like it here," he murmured, drawing her into the main room. "I don't suppose I'd have imagined you in a room with these deep purples and golds. And yet, looking at you now, here, it works. It's regal." He stood in front of her, the bed only steps away. He drew the backs of his fingers down her cheek and she relaxed. She knew this man, he knew her. Everything would be fine.

"You still with me, Cat?"

She reached down and grabbed the hem of her shirt, pulling it up and off, tossing it on the chair behind her. Releasing the clip that held most of her hair, she sent it cascading down her back and shoulders.

"Yes. You?"

"Good Lord, you're beautiful." He bent his body, dipping his head to brush his lips across her bare shoulder briefly.

"Would you like a beer or a glass of wine? It's a bit chilly, I thought I'd start a fire before we got naked."

"I approve of your priorities. What sort of beer and or wine do you have?"

"Take your sweater off first. I want to see you. Or part of you for now." Caitlin realized her voice had shifted lower, into a sort of purr. It had been a while since sex had been more than a perfunctory meeting of a need. A long while since she'd truly felt sexual, especially sexy herself. Perhaps it was that he represented a part of herself she'd lost.

"Pleased to oblige you." His sweater joined her shirt and she sighed happily. His upper body was beautiful. Hard but not bulked. Just the right amount of muscle. She was unwilling to stop herself from sliding her palms across his pecs, delighting in the way they jumped at her caress. Just the right amount of hair on his chest, lovely, flat nipples she remembered were very sensitive.

"You're still so very delicious."

He groaned when she scored his nipples with her short fingernails. "I don't think I've been called delicious since I had a very satisfying fling with this American who worked in my dad's pub a few years back."

“Hmm. Sounds like my kind of girl.”

Laughing, he kissed each one of her hands and she pulled him toward the kitchen.

“I’ve got some merlot, a decent cab.” She stuck her head in the fridge. “And Corona. I even have lime.” She closed the door and laughed. “Ah! And I’ve got some Jameson.”

“You and me, naked, and Jameson. There’s a fine memory. Come on then, I’ll pour us a stiff one while you get the fire started.”

She indicated where the whiskey and her glasses were and headed to the fireplace, flipping the switch. The gas fireplace burst into life.

“Ah, you cheated. I thought we’d have wood smoke and everything.”

She laughed, taking the glass he held out, downing the amber liquid in two swallows. The heat of it spread through her body. It was a good thing she didn’t have to be at work the next day.

“Gas. Flip a switch and it’s on. No fussing with kindling, no pollutants, just instant fire.”

“Let’s get down to business then, my fine lass.” He winked.

One arm caught her about the waist and hauled her against his body. Both of them gasped at the sensation of naked skin meeting naked skin. Well, almost naked.

He must have read her mind because as his lips met hers, he reached between them and popped the catch between her breasts and she shimmied out of her bra, never breaking the kiss.

The warmth of his hands slid up her spine as his work-hard palms moved upward, kneading, holding her against him as he kissed her.

Caitlin would have said he seduced her with that kiss. Slow at first, gentle, almost teasing. And then it deepened as his tongue danced into her mouth, sinuously caressing hers. It was as if that kiss bloomed her back into life, brought her sexuality back from a long nap into full awareness.

Her breathing sped as her heart pounded. Blind need filled her. Her nails dug into his shoulders, making him groan. She eagerly swallowed the sound, taking it into herself.

“Oh, Cat, you need this, don’t you, darlin’?” He broke away before kissing from one shoulder to the other, a feather-light combination of lips and breath. Gooseflesh broke out in waves as her gut tightened and heat settled between her legs.

Desperate for relief, she squeezed her thighs together but the rub of the denim and the lace of her panties only made things worse.

“Shhh, let me take the edge off.”

Caitlin lay down on her bed and looked up at him as he pulled her jeans off and then her panties. His hair, dark and long enough to have a bit of curl at the collar of his shirt, called to her fingers.

“I like the facial hair you’re working.” She tipped her chin to indicate the soul patch just below his luscious bottom lip.

“Thank you.” He held the lacy thong he removed, dangling them from a finger. “Very pretty, these panties.”

She bit her lip to keep from begging, trying hard to rein in the wave of desire threatening to drown her into senselessness. The casual sense of camaraderie they’d had even just moments before bled away. She needed him, needed the touch of someone who knew her and desired her.

He must have sensed the change. “I know.” He got to his knees next to the low bed and slid his palms up the inside of her legs, pushing them apart.

Soft, sure lips met the back of her knee, the tip of his tongue darted out to taste her there. He followed with a nip of his teeth and she felt herself grow wetter.

Lips pressed against her inner thigh, higher and higher until, hallelujah choir, he went exactly where she needed him most.

She wanted to close her eyes, to lose herself in the darkness. But she couldn’t tear her gaze away from him, his mouth on her, the olive tone of his hands against the pale skin of her thighs. Big hands. Sure. Strong.

If there’d been a more erotic sight, she wasn’t sure she’d ever beheld it.

Higher and higher he drove her until pleasure burst through her system and sent her spiraling as she whispered his name, clutching her comforter, her hips moving restlessly.

Drugged with that climax, she watched lazily as he stripped off his jeans, boxers and socks before turning back to her. No doubt he was interested in continuing the evening in her bed. Which worked for her just fine.

“Please tell me you have condoms,” he murmured as she pulled the comforter back to expose the sheets.

That snapped her out of her orgasm-induced coma. “Yikes! Let me see.” Jumping up quickly, she scrambled into the bathroom and rifled through three drawers until she found a strip of them.

She held them aloft as she returned and he laughed. “Victory. I don’t usually leave it up to the woman, you know. I’m not a cad. It’s just I didn’t expect to see you in a bar in Seattle of all places.”

“You weren’t on the prowl for hot chicks?”

He snorted. “I’ve got the only hot chick I need right here. Naked and holding several condoms.”

“Works for me.” After checking the expiration date, Caitlin tossed them his way. He caught her as she moved to crawl over him to the other side of the bed.

“No, Cat, stay right there. I like you perched on top of me. I hope three will be enough.”

She did too. It’d been a while for her, more than three times and she might have some difficulty moving in the morning.

“Let me do the honors then.” Balancing herself over him, she grabbed one of the foil packets and ripped it open. “This has aged quite well.” She slid her fist down and around his cock, slowly rolling the condom on, loving the way his pulse throbbed against her palm as she did.

“Who knew watching a woman put a condom on me could be so hot?” Desire laced his voice, making his accent thicker.

Rising on her knees, she reached around, guided him to her entrance and slowly moved her body down his.

The hands he had resting on her hips tightened as he hissed. “Tight, good Lord, so very tight.”

He didn’t know the half of it.

Once she’d stretched a bit, they entwined their fingers and she began a slow rise and fall on his cock. Each time he filled her, electric arcs of pleasure shot up her spine.

All the while, their eyes remained locked on one another. The intimacy of the moment was stunning and admittedly, it shook Caitlin. She tossed it aside, chalking it up to the length of time she’d done without sex and also her former connection to Eamon.

It wasn’t long before the muscles in his neck corded and he’d begun to thrust up into her as she moved down. The movement brought the length of him over her clit repeatedly until ripples of climax began to echo through her. She let her head fall back on a moan.

Eamon felt her body as she came around his. It was all he’d needed after tasting her, after watching the sway of her breasts as she’d moved on him. Caitlin, this Caitlin, was older and wiser and there was something heady about her sensuality. Barely leashed. He liked being the one to test it. And in truth, she tested him as well.

All thought drained away as orgasm, powerful and intense, shot through him.

She fell forward across his upper body, her sweet-scented hair draped over his lips. Kissing her shoulder, he pulled her off gently and got up, returning in just moments.

“Will you stay or do you need to get back?” she murmured sleepily. He recalled the comment about how she’d just finished finals, she had to be knackered. But he didn’t want to leave.

“Do you mind if I stay?”

She turned, putting her arm over his waist and her head on his shoulder. Half-lidded green eyes blinked into his. “I’d like that.”

“Okay then. I will. Much more convenient when I get to wake you up in an hour or two for the next round.”

She quirked up a smile. “It does indeed. Wouldn’t want to waste those condoms.”

Her eyes closed and she snuggled into him with a satisfied sigh.

He lay there in the dark and looked up at her ceiling trying to figure out just what was different about Caitlin Moore. Or even what was different about being with her now.

He'd taken over running the family public house after a stint in the army. His father had been getting on in years and his older brother had met a very fine lady from America and had been traveling back and forth a lot. His baby sister had started a family and had little ones to raise. Eamon had been the logical choice and he hadn't resented it.

And then one summer morning, a redheaded, long and lithe American popped her head into the pub and said she was theirs for the next several months on a work visa through her college program. She'd had a quick wit, was handy behind the bar, the customers had adored her and he had too.

It hadn't taken long for their attraction to lead them to bed. But it had stayed very casual for both of them and their parting had been as friends. No weeping, no second thoughts. He missed her because they'd been friends as well as lovers but he'd not pined for her.

But lying there, her body tucked into his side, he felt something *more* than he had those years ago and he didn't know why. What he did know was that he couldn't afford to feel *more*. He had a business to build up and he wasn't going to lose sight of his goals. He'd walked away from what he'd known, from the pub and from Dublin. He was in Los Angeles to build something entirely new and as selfish as it might seem, he didn't want his focus stolen by anything, even the lovely Caitlin.

Still, he was only in town for a week. He lived twelve hundred miles south and she would be finishing law school. He wasn't looking for a wife but it appeared she wasn't looking to be one. It worked out for both of them at least for the week he'd be in the area. There was no reason he couldn't simply lie back and enjoy this reunion for what it was and stop worrying about anything else.

Chapter Three

Caitlin woke up to a slight headache and sore thigh and groin muscles. Stretching experimentally, she bumped into the hard wall of warm, naked man and smiled.

Eamon.

It was then she realized what had roused her from slumber after a night where he'd woken her up twice more to make love.

She nudged him gently. "Eamon, wake up."

"We're out of condoms, darlin'. I can run out and grab us some if you let me sleep just a wee bit longer," he mumbled, making her laugh.

"I'm not sure my muscles are up to another romp with you just now. Your pants are ringing."

He opened his eyes and groaned. "Shite." Rolling out of bed, he scrambled to his pants and fished out his phone, answering it quickly.

Not wanting to intrude on his call, she eased out of the warmth of the blankets and headed to the kitchen. Once she'd turned on the coffeepot, she headed to the bathroom and turned the hot water on for a desperately needed shower.

It wasn't but about ten minutes later before he tapped on the door and stuck his head in as she was drying off.

"You have no idea how much seeing you that way makes this even harder." He groaned. "I have to go. The PR guy from the record label needs to reschedule one of the bands to today. I need to get back to my hotel and change and grab some supplies before heading over to Bellevue where they're all waiting."

She frowned, disappointed. Still, she understood the demands of a career. "Oh, okay. I understand, believe me. Work comes first. It was lovely to see you." She grabbed her robe. "Let me give you my cell phone number. Give me a call if you have the time while you're still in town."

Rustling through her utility drawer in the kitchen, she found some paper and a pen and wrote the number down along with her home number and handed them to him. "You want some coffee to take with you? I've got a million travel mugs you can take."

He looked damned good as he cocked his head and gave her a sexy smile. "That would be fantastic. Thank you. Aren't you going home for the holidays then?"

She avoided his eyes as she grabbed a mug and poured the hot coffee into it. Hell no, she wasn't going back to Boston to be harassed about her choices by her family. "Sugar and milk there if you like."

She indicated their spot on the counter. “And no. I’ll be here. My mentor and her family will have me over for Christmas. Anh is a cross between a mom and a big sister. Her kids will run me ragged all day and I’ll eat too much. Her husband is a sous chef so there’ll be plenty on their table.”

“Well, good then. I’m sure your family will miss you though.” He looked at his watch before securing the lid on the mug and sighed. “I really have to get moving. I’ll call you soon. We didn’t do much talking last night. Not that I’m complaining. Still, I want to know what you’ve been up to.”

“Call me and I’ll tell you. I’ll even make you dinner if you like.” She cocked her head and smiled. How could he resist such an invitation?

“Sounds like a very fine offer.” He kissed her quickly before rushing out and she sighed, tossing herself onto her bed, loving the way the pillows still carried his scent.

After hanging out with a bunch of cranky, hung-over twenty-year-olds for a good part of his day, Eamon had had it with people. Fecking boys thought they were rock stars. They weren’t even men! They were boys with too much eyeliner, their hair in their eyes and more money and opportunities than they knew what to do with. All the talent in the world couldn’t make up for bad manners. His mother would have boxed their ears for all the ugly talking they did.

Agitated and feeling old, he headed back to his hotel, took a shower and then a nap, not waking up until nearly seven. He wondered if she should call Cat. He wouldn’t have hesitated before, wanting to grab as much time with her to have sex and visit as he could. But there was something different between them and it threw him off balance.

And it was already seven, she was probably out for the evening anyway. He had a free day the next day, perhaps she’d like to show him the sights. That would be a casual thing, wouldn’t it?

Frowning, he began to pace. He felt like a teenage boy all the sudden. With a growl of annoyance, he grabbed his phone and called her before he changed his mind.

She answered on the third ring. He heard noise in the background, apparently she was out already. “Cat?”

“Hey, Eamon, how was your shoot?”

He smiled at the sound of her voice. “Annoying. Made me feel a hundred years old. I wanted to tell them all to pull up their damned pants.”

“Well, did you tell them to stop playing ball in your yard? Because if so, you *are* a hundred years old.”

A glimmer of the Cat he’d been with four years ago surfaced and he laughed, relaxing. “Funny. Easy for you to say, you’re still young.”

“I am, aren’t I? You can live through me, Pops.”

“Oh you’ll pay for that!”

Her voice lowered, the tone intimate, sexy, and it shot straight to his cock. “Promise?”

“Indeed. Are you free tomorrow? I haven’t had much of a chance to see the city. You want to be my tour guide? I’ll even let you make me dinner afterward or we can eat out, your choice. Oh and I’ll bring the condoms. A lot more than three.” He’d need to grab a big box.

“My. With an offer like that, how can I refuse?”

They made arrangements for him to meet her at her apartment at ten and he rang off. Admittedly, he’d wanted her to ask him over that evening but he stifled any disappointment over it.

So he’d order in some food, catch a movie and get a good night’s sleep. Then he’d be ready for her in the morning.

“Who was that?” Anh Mancuso, Caitlin’s boss, mentor and good friend asked.

“That was Eamon Blake.”

The table full of lawyers, interns and significant others continued to chatter loudly as Caitlin took a sip of her wine.

“Tell me. There’s clearly a very salacious story here.” Anh winked.

“Right after I graduated Harvard, I went to Ireland on a work abroad visa. You know, a summer of fun working in some shit job for no pay but you get your living expenses and learn the culture yadda yadda.

“Anyway, I was assigned to a pub in Dublin. Having Irish roots and all, I thought it would be fun to go. I walked through those double doors and this ridiculously sexy, very braw Irishman stood behind the bar. He sent me a very wicked grin and that pretty much started everything. Eamon was my boss and then my friend, and then my lover. It was a really fun summer. We had lots of sex. He drove me all over Ireland taking me on sightseeing trips. I learned more about my heritage from a near stranger than I ever had from my parents. But, I also learned how to pull a perfect pint from Eamon’s dad, heard a lot of great stories and live music and I came home. I haven’t seen him since then until I bumped into him last night at Club Twenty-One where I was with Amy to celebrate finals.”

“And I assume he’s still hot?” Anh waggled her brows.

“Like the sun.”

“Oh and the accent? Like Gerard Butler?”

Caitlin laughed. Anh had great taste. Her husband, Vittorio, was one of the most gorgeous men Caitlin had ever met in person.

“Yes he has an accent. It’s spectacularly hot. It gets nearly unintelligible when he’s um, worked up. But Gerry is Scottish so their accents aren’t quite the same. Still, I have to say, Eamon is just an all around fantasy on legs. He’s got this very wicked smile, big white teeth, just absolutely sexy.”

“Worked up? Was there any *working up* last night?”

Caitlin nodded enthusiastically. “He spent the night. Used all the condoms I had in my apartment even. Which given the dry spell I’ve been having for the last few years, I was surprised they didn’t have cobwebs! I had to use Epsom salts, we worked so hard.”

Anh did a golf clap as she grinned. “Whee! Good for you. So what’s he like now? I mean, is he here for business?”

“He’s a photographer here for work. He’s a lot like he was before, a bit more serious. His father died, I think that changed him and well, it should.” *If you had parents who cared.*

“I imagine you’re more serious than you were four years ago too. After the mindfuck you went through with Adam, you’re bound to be more focused than you were at twenty-two.”

“Yeah. I appreciate good sex more than I did then. I didn’t know how good he was in bed. Or well, I knew but I didn’t have a lot to compare with back then. And I’d never experienced a long dry spell before.” Caitlin laughed.

“So he’s just a nice fling? A carnal present for finishing up finals?” Anh asked looking unconvinced.

“Sure.” Caitlin shrugged. “Don’t have time for anything else. He lives in LA and I’m building a life here. I gave up my life for a man once and it set me off track for years. Anyway, he’s not looking for a wife, and I’m not looking for a husband. It’s just a bit of fun with an old friend. It’s really perfect.”

“While I get that *and* I agree you need to finish school and not let your universe disappear into a man’s again.” Anh paused a moment as she sipped her drink. “I think it’s bull for women to say anything with a man they admire and like is *just a bit of fun*. You’re a woman who values people and their connection to you. You’re not the just a bit of fun type, Caitlin. There’s nothing casual about you at all.”

“I am now. I am because I have stuff to do. I can have a fling and still value him! Anyway, he lives twelve hundred miles away. So it’s not like I can do anything but have hot sex and some lovely memories.” She held her hand up to keep Anh silent. “No. Look, I *did* just have a nice bit of fun and it totally worked. He and I had three months of no-strings sex and we were friends. I left and you know, I haven’t wept for him for four years. I’ve remembered him here and there fondly. But I left that pub four years ago and came back to the States and I didn’t long for him. I can do this now because I did it before.”

It sounded a lot better than she felt saying it. It was true, she knew. But she was different. So much had happened to her, had changed her.

As usual, she was overthinking. Of course she could have a fun fling with Eamon. If he came back to town she could be open to seeing him again but just casually. It was perfect.

“Caitlin, right now you’re in school, yes. But what about after? Fun is fun, but you are a forever kind of woman. I’m just saying that you should be careful here. If you get attached to him, what then?”

“I’m attached to him as a friend. It was only one night! You’re printing out wedding invitations already. Sheesh. It’s a bit of fun and that’s all there is to it. Now I want dessert.” She closed the door firmly on the discussion and eyed the menu for something chocolate.

Chapter Four

“This is the best farmer’s market I’ve been to since I got here to the States,” Eamon said as he sipped his beer and looked through the windows down over Pike Place Market below.

She’d taken him on a ferry to Bainbridge Island and back, they’d ridden to the top of the Space Needle and now they were having a drink before heading back to her place to have dinner. It had been a really lovely day. He’d made her laugh and she’d lost all her nervousness with him. It was like they’d fallen back to the place they’d been when she left Ireland four years before.

“I’m biased, I know, but I do love The Market. I come here a few times a week to get fresh produce, spend too much money and calories at Three Girls Bakery and have developed an addiction to the fresh pasta and cheese at DeLaurenti’s. Remind me to make you a mug of Market Spice tea before you go home. No, it’s nothing like Irish tea, but it’s really good.” She grinned, happy to share one of her favorite parts of Seattle with him.

He didn’t look convinced about the tea.

“Hmpf, a bunch of flowers in a cup of hot water does not make tea.”

She laughed. “I knew that look was about tea. It’s orange and cinnamon and all sorts of yum. You don’t put milk in it but it’s great when the weather is cold and wet. How you deal with LA after being in Dublin for your whole life is a mystery.”

“At first I liked it. What man can complain about barely clothed women in November, I ask you? But it’s December and it’s nearly thirty degrees!”

She paused a moment, thinking it had never been that cold in LA when she’d visited until she realized he meant Celsius. “Yeah, that’s pretty hot. Now that you know I’m up here, you can come for a visit when you need the cold and wet.”

He put his beer down and took her hand, kissing her knuckles. “And you can escape the cold and wet and be half dressed like the other women in LA when you come visit me. I don’t live in a mansion but my complex has a very nice pool and I’m near the shore.”

She grinned. “Thank you for the invitation.”

“I’m serious, Cat. My brother and sister-in-law don’t live too very far from me, but other than them, I don’t know too many other people and certainly none I like as much as you.” He winked.

“I may take you up on that in February when it’s been dark and raining or snowing for months.”

They had a few beers and watched shoppers below. Afterward, they picked up a lovely bottle of wine and headed back, hand in hand, to her place so she could think about dinner.

“I wasn’t sure about this place at first,” he said as he put the wine on her counter, “but the more I’m here, the more I like it. I suppose I just expected you to need more space.”

“Space is nice. But this place is mine. Belonging is underrated. Compared to that, space is overrated. I’ve lived a long time without things I’d earned. Either I owed someone for the things I had, or I lived with someone as just another possession. My grandmother gave me a wonderful gift when she passed and left me the money to buy this condo. She gave me independence and there’s simply no way to put how much I value that into words.” Her voice began to crack and the heat of unshed tears stung her eyes. Before she blubbered all over him and ruined the evening, she changed the subject. “Would you like to sit in the hot tub? There’s one on the roof. I just put the ziti in the oven, it’ll be a while.”

He paused, started to speak and then shook his head. “A hot tub in the misty rain? Sounds delightful.”

She stripped her clothes off and changed into her bathing suit. He watched, a smile on his face. “I don’t have trunks for you. But I have some old cut-off sweats. They might be a bit tight, but they’ll work.” She dug through a drawer and tossed them his way. It was her turn to watch him undress and change once she’d changed.

“I like yours better.” He looked her up and down. “I like that you’re not that ghastly shade of orange women seem to prefer instead of wearing their pretty, pale skin.” He drew his fingertips over her collarbone and down over the curves of her cleavage exposed by the suit.

His mouth found hers and she liked his taste enough to slide into his embrace and settle in. Eamon took his time, kissing her senseless with small nips and sucks of her lips and tongue.

Fuck the hot tub. She put her arms around his neck and pulled, tugging him toward her bed and he laughed. Instead of her bed, he spun, picking her up and putting her on the counter. She tossed her glasses to the side so they didn’t get broken or in the way.

“I thought we were going to take a soak in the misty rain?” he murmured, his lips skimming down her neck as those clever fingers peeled back the cups of her bikini top and exposed her breasts to his touch.

“We could. And then you kissed me and woke up all the need I have.” She braced her hands on the counter behind her ass so she could arch when he found a nipple with the edge of his teeth.

“We can’t ignore that,” he said as he pressed his fingertip over the front panel of her suit bottom, right over her clit. “You’ve been sorely neglected, Cat. So much need trapped within you. It’s okay to want. Okay to need. Don’t deny yourself this way. Let me give you what you want.”

All she could manage, as he dipped his fingers inside her suit bottom and then moved his body closer to hold her thighs wide with his body, was a breathy sound of assent. He woke things within her that scared her sometimes. When she stayed focused on things that needed to be done, she got through it. Worked

toward her goals. But if she started wishing and wanting, what happened then? The idea of walking around with all this unmet need freaked her out. She had enough empty spaces inside herself.

No. She couldn't think with his hands on her, with his attention on her, but it was all right. She could just feel.

Feel as his mouth, hot and wet, tugged and sucked on her nipples, first one and then the other, over and over as his fingers stroked through her, over her, driving her up until her orgasm shattered through her like shards of broken glass. Pleasure so sharp it nearly hurt flittered through her system.

"That's better then," he spoke softly as he pulled her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

The apartment began to fill with the spicy scent of the ziti and of sex.

"Don't move. Condoms are in my bag by the door."

As if she was going anywhere. Pffft. She did sit up a bit to catch his retreat toward his bag. What an ass the man had, even in tight, women's cut-off sweats.

But when he returned, she pushed him on his back and took the box from him, setting it aside. "You're ambitious. I like that." She pulled his pants off and scrambled over him. "Fucking can wait. First, some nibbling and some sucking."

"You think I'm going to complain?" He laughed as she kissed her way over his chest, the merriment turning into a groan as she flicked her tongue over his right nipple.

His skin was warm and hard and he smelled good. No cologne, just his skin and the light scent of his soap. He was familiar and yet exotic, a very sexy combination. The muscles on his abdomen bunched and released as she scooted down, nibbling over his belly button and down that sweet, sweet trail of hair leading to his very interested cock.

He groaned, deep and rumbley, when she grabbed it at the base and licked around the head. It had been a while but she found herself eager to make him feel good, to give him as much pleasure as he'd brought her. He was so sexy, so delicious she wanted to gorge herself of him.

He clutched the comforter as she set about doing that very thing.

Eamon watched her, ate her with his gaze as she rose and fell over him. Her hair tickled his bare thighs as the heated wet of her mouth engulfed him. Good sweet Christ, but she was gorgeous.

He wouldn't last long this way. He'd wanted her all day long. Had wanted her as they'd strolled hand in hand through the chaos of the Market, had stood on the deck of the huge ferry across Puget Sound to the lovely little Bainbridge Island. He'd begun to do things to coax a smile, to hear her laughter. She'd pointed out the highlights through the rain clouds as they stood on top of the Space Needle, so confident, she'd been, even as they stood far higher than anyone should have. Her natural sensuality had surfaced the longer he'd been with her, unfurling as the day had passed. There was something inside him that prided itself on being the one who'd brought it out from hiding. Something inside that'd craved more. The tenderness she'd evoked when she'd spoken about independence and what this apartment had meant had scared him a bit.

He'd wanted to take her in his arms and talk about her feelings for hours. But where would that take them? Friends did that, but when you added sex to friendship and then the depth of sharing like that it became more. And he didn't need more. More was complicated and he wanted simple. So he'd let her steer the conversation toward a lighter topic and then had been quite happy to substitute sex for deep thoughts.

"Wait," he said in a croak, "I want to be inside you."

Her eyes flicked up to meet his and she shook her head, taking him in deep again, so deep he felt it all the way to his toes. He cursed as she sucked harder and bright lights spun in his vision.

Her hair was like silk against his hand as he reached out to slide it through his fingertips. Soft and cool in reds and golds, so pretty.

His body seized, muscles locking as he came, pleasure barreling through him and into her. When it was over and he could open his eyes again, she was smiling up at him, her head resting on his belly.

"I wanted to come inside you."

She laughed, sitting up. "It's early yet. Let's have dinner and then you can fuck me. Your recovery can't be that long."

He moved, bringing her to lie atop his body. "Pffft there, miss. There's nothing wrong with my recovery time. That was quite a lovely blow job, thank you. I wish I'd have had my camera nearby."

She raised a ginger-colored brow in his direction.

"Just for my own enjoyment. I promise. I don't even have internet access on this trip."

"It's not an experience I'd like to repeat," she muttered as she reached beside the bed to grab a robe.

He frowned, both at the loss of her nakedness and the comment. "Someone put naked pictures of you on the internet?"

"Yes. There's more than one reason I'm single." She got up and he followed.

"What kind of asshole would do that? Your ex-boyfriend did this?"

"He's a big asshole, that's who. That was the least of his many offenses." She handed the bottle opener his way. "Open the wine please. I'm going to make a quick salad to go with the pasta."

"Tell me about it." He settled in on one of the high chairs at the kitchen counter and poured them both a glass of wine.

"Nothing to tell. He was a jerk. I finally walked away."

"You didn't use to be this stingy with details."

She sighed, rolling her eyes at him. "When I got back from Ireland, my parents had a party for me. I was supposed to start Harvard law that fall if you remember. But I saw Adam there. He and I were together in college and had broken up about six months before I went to Ireland." She kept her eyes down as she chopped and cleaned vegetables. "We got back together. Things moved really quickly, I got caught up in his energy, in his plans for a business he wanted to start. I ended up putting off law school for a semester to travel with him for his new business. And then two. He wanted to come to Seattle, establish himself here

for all the IT contacts. Naturally, I came too. I figured I could go to law school at the UW.” She took a sip of her wine and then slid the salad bowl toward him.

She made a quick vinaigrette and then pulled the ziti from the oven. He didn’t push but he wanted to hear the rest of the story.

Caitlin hadn’t told the whole story to anyone but Anh and that had been hard enough. But it felt good to tell him, it felt good that he’d asked. She dished up food for the two of them and sat.

“I applied and got in but each quarter he’d tell me how much he needed me so I put it off another year. We lived together in this ridiculous house in Clyde Hill. Across the lake on the Eastside. His business took off and it did really well, still does actually. He went out a lot for work, which is normal and expected. I never had any reason to suspect anything was wrong until my picture—naked pictures and video—showed up online. His friend, the one you met last night in the club with my friend Amy, he knew about it for a month and didn’t say a thing. I flipped out, Adam laughed it off saying I should be flattered but I made him take it all down, destroyed the files on the computers.

“His behavior only got worse. I’d started to volunteer at a legal clinic and he got jealous, accused me of cheating when, as I was to find out, he’d been for about seven months. With his secretary if you can believe that cliché.”

Eamon groaned and curled his lip. “Boy needs a thrashing.”

She shrugged, agreeing. “Anyway, when I found out about the affair I left. I moved out and stayed with a friend for a few weeks. My grandmother had died and left me some money. Money enough that I bought this place. I started school and I didn’t want to look back. Anyway, that’s the story.” Not the whole story of course, but enough to spill before she was going to eat.

“He was a fool to not see the gift he had. I’m sorry.” He tucked into his food and didn’t drag it out, making her appreciate him even more. Men like him, *people* like him who didn’t have to fill all the empty spaces with words, were rare.

“And your friend from last night? The girl who was with the boy we hate. Does she go to law school with you?”

“No. She and I were at Harvard together. She lived in my dorm, across the hall for the first two years and then she and I were roommates. She moved out here before I did and we re-connected. We’re very different. She and Nathan, the guy we hate,” she laughed, “are in a sort-of relationship. Meaning she chases him. He has sex with her and doesn’t call her. She declares she’ll never speak to him again until the next time she sees him.” Amy had served as an important lesson to Caitlin. Each time her friend would take the call, had sex with that asshole again, put aside her own life, her own sense of self-respect for Nathan, Caitlin remembered that all the loneliness and hard work was worth it to be her own person. It wasn’t that Caitlin didn’t want to be in a relationship and have love. She did. But she knew she had to get through

school, get a job first so she would always have something no matter what happened. Something that was hers and hers alone.

“Pity. She’s a lovely looking girl. Perhaps she’ll watch you and learn a few things.” He sighed before taking a sip of wine. He pointed to the vegetables she was cutting. “Where did you learn to cook? Because if I remember correctly, I did all the cooking when we were together last.”

She grinned. “Yes, I was spoiled. I admit it. I never had to cook, someone always did it for me. But when I came out here I got really sick of take-out food so I took some classes through this group called Culinary Communion. It was a lot of fun and I learned a lot of styles and met people and realized that I could do it. I could do things I’d never tried.”

He reached out and drew his thumb over her bottom lip. “Means a lot, doesn’t it?”

She nodded. More than she could express. Having grown up pretty affluent, people had done for her most of her life. She’d *thought* she was independent, travelling and going to school on her own, but really, she’d just been on field trips while her parents had paid her bills. It’s not independence if you owe people for it. It wasn’t really yours, more like a loan. And she’d moved in with Adam because he’d expected her to. Yes, she’d taken care of him and helped him run his business but he’d always been sure to undercut that, never letting her feel good or smart about it. Now, in retrospect she could see it was abuse, he’d kept her down because it suited his needs to do so. But it had taken her a while to figure it out and she was mortified she ever let it go so far. The shame still caught in her throat sometimes but it was over and she was back in control and she’d never lose herself again. That shame was a good lesson, the sharpness of it kept her from forgetting the price of living through someone, of giving your dreams up for someone else’s. She never wanted to be dependent like that again.

She moved out. Bought this place on her own. Went to school without any support from her family, who’d predictably taken Adam’s side and urged her to return to him. Her mother had told her to commit herself totally to Adam, that it was Caitlin’s fault he’d strayed to start with. It had made Caitlin harder but in the end, she’d done it and had thrived and she’d proved to herself that she was worth it. Smart enough and accomplished enough to do what she wanted to do with her life. No one would ever make her doubt herself again. She’d never owe anyone or depend on anyone to her own detriment again. She could do it and she would do it. She would graduate with her law degree. Early even. She would practice law in the public interest and help people and she’d never put her life, her needs and goals, aside for anyone else again. Love didn’t ask you to give up your dreams. Love wanted you to live those dreams. You might alter them, you might delay them but you didn’t simply live through someone else instead of living for yourself. It was a hard lesson but one she’d never forget.

“So much on that beautiful face. He hurt you and because of that, I’d like to thump him.”

She laughed. “Thank you. Yes, he did but I survived. I’m stronger now than I’ve ever been and he’s the reason in a way. So it’s fine.”

They finished dinner, laughing and talking, and he helped her clear up the dishes afterward.

“Now, I do believe I’ve recovered sufficiently to bury myself inside you for an hour or three,” he said, pulling her back toward the bed and tossing her on it.

Yes, that would work quite nicely.

He loved to watch her through the lens of his camera. Especially when she wasn’t aware he was photographing her. Today’s outing had them standing on a platform at Snoqualmie Falls, the mist cold on his face, her hair up in a high pony tail, exposing the beauty of her eyes.

He had to fly home tomorrow and while part of him was eager to get to work on the jobs he had waiting, another part knew how much he’d miss her. Over the last few days, they’d picked up where they’d left off four years before. Their ease with each other had returned to the point where whether it was sex, cooking dinner or going for a long walk, they simply clicked.

He supposed it was better than it had been four years ago because there was an intensity now that he hadn’t felt before. He’d always liked to see her smile before, to hear her laugh, but now he craved those moments when her eyes danced and her face lit with amusement. Craved that moment when he brought enough levity to her that she let go of her seriousness and laughed. In laughing, she was as filled with abandon as she was with sex. Head tossed back, full belly laughter until her eyes began to tear.

Earlier that day they’d curled up in her cozy apartment and had read for a few hours. Devoured the *New York Times* from end to end along with the *Seattle Times* Sunday edition. They drank coffee and he was loath to admit it, but her much touted Market Spice tea did hit the spot rather nicely. It had been a very long time since he’d slept in on a Sunday with a woman and had lazed the morning away. She brought him a lot of pleasure and unexpected moments.

She had so much inside that no one touched. He sensed it, brushed up against it as they spent time together, began to really want her to open up to him with it. She responded so openly, so wantonly when he touched her it was clear enough she had no one in her life doing the good kind of touching. It made him angry even as it also brought a rush of tenderness for her. He’d examine that later, with some distance between them. For the time being, he’d decided to just enjoy it.

As if he’d been calling her name, she turned and rolled her eyes at the camera. “You’re a menace with that thing.”

“I like to look at you. Sue me, as you Americans like to say. It’s different through a lens.”

“What is?”

“The world. Come here and look.” He held the camera out, aimed toward the falls and she looked through. “Now look through at things, me, other people and look with your eyes.”

Caitlin looked around, viewed the world as he did and then pulled the camera away. Living that way could lend a sense of fearlessness to certain choices. Like it felt they were happening to other people. “I never really thought about it but you’re removed from it an extra step. Like watching life in a movie instead of living it.” To a certain extent she could see the appeal of it.

“Sometimes it gives you a different approach to a subject. It’s good and bad, I suppose.”

She took a picture of him standing there, looking so big and male. “You should give me lessons.”

He laughed and she took another shot before handing the camera back.

“We can do a trade. You can give me legal advice and I’ll give you photography lessons. Or you can ply me with sexual favors.”

“I can’t give you legal advice because I’m not licensed to practice yet and I won’t be licensed in California. But I’m always happy to dole out sex.” She tried not to think about how that meant he’d be two states away. It had been a lovely several days. He’d spent the night every night, had woken her up with slow, warm sex and had kept her entertained and happy. She’d miss him when he left the following day but now that she knew he was around, they could email and talk on the phone occasionally. Maybe she would make it down his way when her schedule allowed. Or something.

“Come on. Now that you’ve introduced sex back into the picture, I find myself in need of some.”

Back at her place, just barely through the door, he pushed her against the wall, his mouth on hers, not gentle. He took what he wanted, what she offered willingly, with hands that seemed everywhere at once.

Shoving her jeans down around her ankles, he dropped to his knees and rained kisses along the upper line of her panties, following them down as he bared her to his lips. She could do nothing but lean into the wall for balance, her hands sought the still wet softness of his hair as he kissed the heart of her, pressed his lips and tongue around her clit. Her pants held her nearly as immobile as his intensity did.

Climax struck, quicker than she’d expected but he didn’t break his rhythm. She found herself on her back on the rug in the entry, looking up at him as he fumbled with a condom. She managed to get one leg loose from her pants just in time to welcome his body with her own.

The slow, inexorable entrance into her body with his sent shocks of pleasure up her spine and still she couldn’t look away from his face, the light in his eyes as he claimed her body. That’s what it was. A taking. It’d never been that way for her, ever, and it nearly hurt that it wouldn’t be again. But she’d never forget the set of his beautiful mouth, still wet with her body as he thrust deep. Tenderness, yes, but determination to fuck her, to own her for just a few short minutes. It burned deep and she knew she’d never be the same. In those moments it wasn’t the nice, friendly sex it had been in the prior days but something deeper, more primal and she knew as well as she knew her own name, it would change her.

“With me, Cat. Come around me,” he murmured.

She burrowed her hand between their bodies, found her clit ready and pushed herself over quickly. He groaned and followed, pressing hard and very deep.

He was still against her for some long moments afterward as they caught their breath, but when he finally looked into her eyes he looked worried.

“You look like you think you should apologize. Don’t you dare.”

“How’d you know?” He relaxed but still had some discomfort around the edges.

He sat up and helped her to stand before leaving briefly to deal with the condom.

“You’re a nice guy, you just fucked the hell out of me so you might worry you were too rough or whatever. It was on your face. But I’m not made of glass and it felt really good so don’t apologize. Not to me.”

He watched her face intently until he finally sighed, kissing her chin. “All right then. I don’t hurt women. I wouldn’t want you to think that.”

“If I thought you wanted to hurt me, I wouldn’t have spent pretty much every moment of the last five days with you. It’s okay to be rough sometimes. I sort of like that you couldn’t wait another moment.” More than she should.

He grinned. “Good, because I couldn’t. And by the way, it was very delightful.”

After they’d moved out of the hall, they headed straight to her bed. He lay next to her, her head resting on his biceps. “So what are you going to do with your degree?”

“I really care about the kind of law I’m doing right now. It’s hard working around all these abused and neglected kids but I feel like it’s the kind of job that makes a difference. I’d love to get a job at the AG’s office when I finish school. They like me, I know that, but it’s a competitive hiring process so we’ll see.”

“Have you always felt this passionate about kids?”

“Every child should be wanted and cherished. Sure, kids should be afraid of being bad and screwing up in school or whatever—you want them to succeed. But no child should fear being injured by a parent. No child should go through what I see on a regular basis. Being traded for drugs, having mom turn tricks in the home, mom and dad strung out, the house turned into a meth lab. Being raped by your father. No one should have to deal with that much less children who have no ability to protect themselves. They need someone on their side.”

“What do your parents think about that?”

“I don’t know. I guess they’re proud I’m in law school but I doubt they’d be happy I want to work for the government instead of a big firm. My father would say government work is for losers and people who can’t do any better.”

“You haven’t told them yet? What your goals are?”

She sighed and snuggled back against him. Her ass fit the cradle of his thighs perfectly.

“It’s complicated. I don’t talk to them very often. They don’t know what my plans are. They’ve never asked, I’ve never offered. It’s better for our relationship if we don’t talk at all. That way they don’t have to tell me how disappointed they are in my choices and I don’t have to get an ulcer. Win-win.”

“I don’t get how that can be a win. Of course they’re proud of you. You left a bad relationship and now you’re set to achieve your professional goals. How could they not be proud?”

She snorted. “You’ve never met them. They’re disappointed in my choices. They say I’m exactly like my grandmother, which to them is an insult because she was a fiery, self-made woman who didn’t give a crap what anyone thought. My father named me after her, but I think it was only for the inheritance. They weren’t very close. He’s the kind of man who thinks women exist to serve men, that being a wife is the most important thing she can do. Even if, hello, it’s not like my mother gets up early and makes him breakfast before he goes to work or anything. But she’s a pretty ornament for his arm, she looked the other way when he had mistresses, she spends his money but not too much of it. That’s what I should have been with Adam. For them, I’m still the girl they paid good money to have other people raise. Independence isn’t a quality they admire in a woman. They felt I should have given Adam another chance and that my not committing to him totally was why he cheated. Being in law school instead of with him is a huge failure in their eyes.”

He hadn’t grown up in a television-style family but his parents had both always supported everything he’d ever wanted and done. It was inconceivable to him that her parents would actually want her to stay with her cheating bastard of an ex. She was so smart, so driven, anyone would be proud. He also began to see why it was so important to her to do what she wanted and to succeed.

“They’re gits then.”

She laughed and they fell away from consciousness.

Chapter Five

Amy looked up from her cup of coffee as Caitlin sat down across from her. “It’s about time. Where have you been?”

“Eamon was in town for a week, I’ve been with him. Having great sex and showing him the sights. I’m so relaxed it’s not funny. I gained three pounds from all the eating and wine drinking.”

“Well good! He’s totally hot. So tell me about him.”

As they had coffee and snacked on a muffin the size of a small dog, Caitlin told her friend about Eamon.

“Hmm. I approve of all the sex. He seems like a nice guy who knows you and likes you. I approve of that. But what about the future? Is this like a long-distance relationship or what?”

Caitlin shrugged. “Dunno. I don’t have time for a non-long-distance relationship anyway. I have extra classes to build credits to graduate early. I work. I’m taking the bar early. So if it *is* a long-distance thing, that would work quite nicely.”

“I’m dubious. You’re busy, that’s true. But you’re also one of those people who is true. You know, a monogamist. You *like* being with someone.”

“Is that an insult or what?”

Amy laughed. “It’s a compliment! Despite the fact that Adam was a jerk, you liked being someone’s something. You liked living with him, liked being with him. You’ve not dated a whole lot since, but when you do, it’s one guy at a time and despite your saying how it’s all casual and stuff, it’s serious to you. There’s nothing wrong with that. Nothing to be ashamed of. Clearly you want to be in a relationship with someone. That’s why I wonder how this will end. I just don’t want you to have unreasonable expectations.”

“Says the woman who thinks Nathan will suddenly stop being an asshole.” She winced at her words. “I’m sorry. That was totally uncalled for.”

Amy snorted and sighed. “Maybe so, but it’s true. Maybe I just think you’re stronger than me so I know you can avoid getting hurt the way I keep letting myself.”

“This is all conjecture anyway. He hung out with me for less than a week. We had sex and he went home. He didn’t give me his class ring or anything. All this talk about relationships doesn’t mean much because I think we’re just friends who like to have sex. It’s the reconnection part I’m happiest about. He’s called a few times since he got home, emailed me. What it is right now is good. He’s a good guy. He makes me laugh. I’m glad we reconnected because I’ve missed his friendship.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “And his penis.”

“Well, yeah, that too. Anyway, I start school again in a week. I have a lot more to do than sit around and wonder about what if. I do know one thing—I don’t want to be anyone’s anything. Being someone’s something makes you second place to your own life. Being with someone, yes, admittedly I do like that. Belonging to someone? In the way that I did with Adam, having nothing left for myself, never expecting myself to? I never want that again.”

“Eamon, can you take a look at these proofs please? I’d like to send them out but I want you to sign off on them first.”

He looked up at his assistant, also conveniently his sister-in-law, who helped him two days a week. Laura was petite and dark, big brown eyes with smooth, short inky hair. Her personality was larger than life. She was the kind of woman who filled all the spaces in a room when she was in it. And yet, she and his quiet brother made a beautiful marriage. They were a fine example and one day, when Eamon got around to thinking about marriage, he hoped his could work as well.

After glancing at the proofs, Eamon nodded. “Thank you, that’s perfect.” He stood and stretched. “I’m after some lunch, would you like some?”

“Bring me something back. I’m going to do your accounts while I’m here since you’re a horror with them.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Ah, you’re a good one. Michael is a lucky man. I won’t be long then.”

Outside it was already January but the sun was bright in the sky and it was warm enough his shirtsleeves kept the bite from his skin.

The weather was lovely, the women were stunning, the food was glorious and he loved the ocean. But despite the presence of his brother and sister-in-law, Eamon was lonely.

He took his sub to a nearby park bench and spread it open, laying the wax paper flat and tossing the crisps, or rather chips, next to the meatball sub.

His phone found its way into his hand before he’d given it too much thought and he tapped his thumb on her picture.

“Hey you,” she answered on the second ring.

“Did I interrupt? You’re not in class or at work?”

“Nope. Last class ended an hour ago. Fridays I only have Washington State Con Law. Not that you’d be interested and frankly me? Not so much either. Why I thought an eight a.m. class was a peachy idea I don’t know. I must have been drunk. Sorry, I’m totally babbling.” She laughed and he joined her as he took a bite, the crispy bread mixing with the heat and slight sweetness of the sauce.

“I like your babble. I’m just having my lunch now and I thought of you, wondered what you were up to.”

“I’m in the grocery store. I haven’t been in a week and there’s only so much take-out my budget can afford. Thought I’d take care of it now. I’ve got to work this weekend so I won’t have time and I have a paper to write as well. I hope you’re eating something tasty.”

He could see her smile, the way her nose sort of scrunched up at the bridge, the curve of her bottom lip and cant a little higher on the left of her mouth.

“Meatball sub with crisps and a Coke. I’m watching koi fish in a pond just feet from where this bench is. There’s a deli ’round the corner from my house so I took a break from work and wandered over.”

“What do you think of our chips?” She snickered and he shook his head as he popped one of the extra crispy, kettle salt and vinegar chips into his mouth.

“You’re making fun, missy. There’s a shop over near the Queen Mary where I can buy Irish and British food items. I get Tayto, cheese and onion of course, and good tea too. Real tea instead of that weak, pale stuff you all call tea. In a pinch when I must eat potato chips, I quite enjoy the Tim’s brand, kettle chips they’re called.”

“I’m not being *too* saucy.” She laughed. “I love those too. But when I get a hankering, I special order Chivers gooseberry jam from a local shop here. You Irish do *some* things very well. And now I really have a horrible craving for those darned crisps, thankyouverymuch. Where on earth am I to find Tayto brand chips? I’ll have to go online.”

He heard beeping and talking in the background as she thanked the checker.

“Now I’m going to walk home, so keep me company. How did the wedding go?”

He’d spoken to her a few days prior, about a wedding shoot he’d had scheduled for the weekend. In fact, he found himself texting or on the phone with her at least twice a week. She’d simply slid into that space in his life he hadn’t quite realized was empty.

“It was good. The weather was perfect, it had been cloudy the whole morning but cleared up by the time they started playing the wedding march. They had their pets in the wedding party. Weird. But it made for good pictures anyway.” He’d been hit on and went as far as to head back to the woman’s hotel room but in the end, he’d left because he just couldn’t get Cat’s face off his mind. The woman wasn’t her. There had been moments since then where he’d vacillated between happy about that and resentful of it. Things had changed and he wasn’t entirely sure just how to feel about it.

They spoke for another few minutes, even as she unloaded her groceries.

“I find myself missing you an awful lot now that I’ve found you again,” she said right before they rang off. It warmed him, made him a bit giddy, truth be told.

“Yes, I miss you too. I’m getting quite used to our regular talks but it’s not nearly as fun as seeing your face while we speak. It’s nice not to be totally alone in this great big country. Other than family but they *have* to like me.”

“I’m sure you have no problem with *people* liking you, Eamon. Female people seem to love you.” She laughed and he was happy to hear the sound free from bitterness or anger.

“Well you’re my favorite female people. Anyway, I’ve got to get back to work. I promised Laura, my sister-in-law, I’d bring her back some food. I’ll call you next week. Don’t work too hard this weekend.”

He meant that part. She worked a lot. Her drive stunned him but she was the most ambitious person he’d ever met. The Cat he’d known before had been vivacious and full of life; this Caitlin was still full of life, but she was more intense and he found it admirable and really sexy too. Still it worried him that she seemed to live on a few hours’ sleep at night and bounced between her job and her studies.

“Be well, Eamon. Have a good weekend.” She hung up and he folded his trash, tossing it into the can before heading back to work. And still, even after hanging up, her voice remained in his head like an aural caress.

He tossed the bag with Laura’s turkey and swiss on her desk. “Yes, it’s fresh, I went back after I finished my lunch,” he answered her unasked question. She was an odd one about food after a really nasty experience with food poisoning over the Christmas holidays.

“What took you so long?”

“I sat at the park. Made a call. Just enjoyed a bit of a break.”

“How is she?” Laura smiled like she wasn’t being nosy as she tore into her sandwich.

“She’s good. Off to work. Has a paper due apparently. She works too much. Her parents should help her instead of making her struggle so hard.” He frowned.

Laura shrugged. “Some people are assholes, Eamon. You know that. My guess is, if she’s half the woman you say she is, this is making her stronger. She’ll be a damned fine attorney when all is said and done. You should bring her down in the summer for a week or two. Or maybe even spring break. I’m sure she could use the time away.”

He grinned. “Meddler.”

“Punk.”

She thought of him, of the way his hands felt on her body, the way he delivered openmouthed kisses to the hollow of her hip, the inside of her thigh, over her clit until her knees trembled and she cried out, begging for more. Thought of the prickly-rough of his chin as he nuzzled her awake to take her again. All while she walked, files in her arms like a shield, trying not to kick the shit out of the man approaching who was *not* Eamon but the anti-Eamon, Adam.

“Fancy seeing you here. You look good, Caitlin.” As usual, he mispronounced it. After the first time she corrected every other human on earth, they’d all figured it out. She knew it was a common enough mistake, and it wasn’t a big deal to gently correct people. Instead, Adam had just laughed, suggested she change the spelling because it was too confusing and kept calling her by the wrong name. She’d said, “*It was my grandmother’s name and her mother’s name before that. Why should I change the spelling because you can’t do what everyone else does and pronounce it right once you know it’s Kathleen?*” God, how could she have ever been in love with such a douchebag?

She didn’t even blink, but kept moving toward the elevators just beyond where he stood. The courthouse elevators were notorious; if she could get in one, it might just close on him. Which would totally make her day.

Which didn’t happen because why give her that small pleasure? No, he actually got inside with her and they rode down together.

“You can’t ignore me forever,” he said like the asshole he was.

Ha. Watch me.

She kept her eyes straight ahead and tried not to gag on his Drakkar Noir or whatever stupid fucking douchebag cheaters were wearing to cover the stench of day-old pussy on their manparts.

She snorted, *that was pretty funny*. Too bad she couldn’t kick him in his balls, spit in his eye and leave his head strategically placed so the doors banged his temples over and over all night long until they opened the courthouse the next morning and it was such a sad, tragic story on KIRO. She’d sniff sadly...the door opened and ruined her homicidal fantasy but she managed to make it out as he blathered behind her about having to face him sometime. *Yeah, with her car when he was on foot.*

Until he touched her. She turned and glared. “Get your hand off me now or I’ll have that big giant cop over there step in.”

He put his hands up and stepped back. “I was just trying to talk to you.”

She rolled her eyes and turned to leave as he hurried behind her like one of those spastic little dogs her mother had following her all day long. Except they were cute and they didn’t fuck their secretaries and steal years of her life. They just shit in her mother’s closet, which made Caitlin love them forever, even if they did bark when a mouse farted ten miles away.

Speaking of mouse farts and yapping. “Damn it, wait Kate-lynn.”

She nearly made it while the cross light was up but he caught her as she had to wait. The area was thick with people who were her co-workers, other law students, even people she’d cross examined and he was getting more and more agitated. It was just like him to make a scene.

Instead of darting into traffic or giving into the scene he so clearly wanted, she turned to him and hissed, “You’re wasting my time and I’m busy. I have to get back to work.”

“Just two minutes then,” he wheedled.

“You have two minutes.” She hefted the files up to look at her watch. “Starting now.”

“I just thought we could talk. Have dinner later. A drink? We used to be friends.”

She stared at him as the time ticked past, not commenting. “We used to be lots of things. Then you fucked me over. We’re nothing now.”

“What? Why are you so mean to me? I made a mistake! I was lonely, you were busy off doing other things. It just happened. You used to love me once and I don’t see how you can just throw it all away.”

“Once I’d have stood here with you and argued that stupid point. Once I’d have let you make me feel bad. Once, I’d have missed you. But I’m smarter now. Also, tick tock, Adam. It’s been two years since we broke up. You can’t tell me you’re lonely. We both know you’d fuck anything that moved. I don’t want to have dinner with you. I don’t want to be friends with you. I’d like you to move on. I have. My schedule does not include you in any way, shape or form. Now, your time is up. Do fuck off.” She turned and headed back toward the office.

She’d been slamming around her cubicle—interns didn’t have offices—when Anh came around the corner. “What’s your deal? You snapped at Caroline when you came in, you tossed your pencil and you’ve been bitching to yourself for the last half an hour. You got those motions filed right? The judge told me he gave you a great recommendation, you helped me win three cases this month. Why are you talking to yourself and being so cranky?”

“It’s pathetic isn’t it? That you’d assume it was work related? God, I’m wretched. Yes, I got everything filed. This is not work related, just a big giant neon sign pointing to what an utter failure I am in my personal life.”

“My, very dramatic. Do tell.” Anh perched her size zero ass on the edge of the desk and caught Caitlin between annoyance and amusement. Since she loved Anh, she decided to go for amusement.

“I ran into *Adam* at the courthouse. I have no idea why he was there and it’s creepy to even imagine it was on purpose.”

“Not to mention egotistical.” Anh grinned.

“Bitch. He may have fucked his secretary but he did love me in his twisted way. Anyway, even though I gave him the cold shoulder, he followed me out onto the street! Kept yammering at me until I finally agreed to listen to him for two minutes. Which I did.”

“And he wanted what? Stupid asshole. I hope you kicked him in the balls.”

“Then he’d have had me arrested. No, in a trip to bizarre-world, he asked me to go to dinner with him. He was all, *we used to be friends*, blahdy blahh. Pfft, as if. I don’t want him in my life. I have horrible taste, Anh. I shouldn’t be allowed anywhere near anyone with a penis or I will choose the worst of them.”

“I sense your parents behind this. Why else would he seek you out? In any case, I have no idea why you give him all this power to annoy you. It’s been over two years. You’ve moved on. Who cares about

him? Enough wallowing. I'm glad you told him off." She hopped off the desk. "Let's go. You're coming over for dinner tonight and if you come in here this weekend I will kick your ass myself. I know finals week is approaching and I want you to deal with that. Ace them and you will be in an even better position to come back here next year and then as an FTE."

"Fine. Be logical. See if I care."

"One of us has to be since you're riding on the crazy train and all. As I'm the one getting sex on a regular basis, it'll be me who serves as the reality check. Now, move along, Vittorio said he's planning to teach you something about roux tonight and if I'm late with you, he'll just pout and I'll have to coax him with sex. Wait, that's not a bad idea. See the things I do for you?"

"Drama queen."

Anh just laughed as they made their way out.

Vittorio showed her how to make the perfect roux for the jambalaya he prepared for dinner. She fit in with their crazy family and loved it that they made a Caitlin-shaped spot for her.

After dinner, she played Wii table tennis and then boxed with Anh's two kids.

"I know I shouldn't admit it, but it's hella satisfying to punch your kid in the face on a screen," Anh said quietly as they cleaned up the family room after the kids had gone to bed.

Caitlin laughed as she put on her coat and prepared to leave. "I won't tell. Thanks for tonight and for you know, everything. You're good to me. I appreciate it."

"We love you, silly. Vittorio and I like having you around. The kids love you. You're good to us. That's how family works. Now go. It's a weekend coming up. Don't come in to work. I checked your schedule, you're fine and I know you have a paper due." She paused a moment. "Too bad he's so far away, huh? He doesn't seem to be a giant dingus like Adam is."

"I'm too busy to get involved right now, Anh. I swear to you, too busy. You and Amy bring it up like I have so much time to just flit around and have a social life. Men take effort. I mean, if they know what do to with what they have and they're not trying to stick it in everyone who walks by, they can be worth it. But that's neither here nor there because I have to finish school, pass the bar, get a job. In that order. I'm not saying it wasn't nice he came up here. I'm glad we're back in touch and I'm okay with whatever he and I have long distance. I'm not letting any man steal my focus again. I have plans. *Then* I can have a relationship."

Anh hugged her. "I respect that and I believe you. You've worked hard to get here so I don't think you need to apologize for having goals and wanting to achieve them. It's just, you know, you can have both I think. You don't have a lot of time left to school. You're going to feel the lack of a significant other then. I worry that you'll have this long distance thing with Eamon and then you'll want more."

"And what? So what if I do? People grow, they progress."

“You and he have a deal. This whatever-you-call-it between you has rules. I worry that you’ll put your time and heart into Eamon and when you finally have the space to take a breath and want more, he’ll shrug and say you knew what the rules were. I don’t want your heart broken.”

“Why would you assume he’d not want more too? Am I so horrible that you’d think he wouldn’t want more?”

Anh took Caitlin’s hands, squeezing. “I think you’re peanut butter *and* jelly. So stop. It’s just that from the outside looking in, while you both seem happy with the casual long-distance thing, I *know* you. You are faithful to your people. If he’s worth your time now, when your time is at such a premium, I foresee you wanting more. I love you, I want you happy. It’s my job to worry about you.” She shrugged. “Enough lecturing for now. I can see by the set of your jaw you’re halfway annoyed. Let Vittorio walk you to the car.”

“I’m not annoyed. I know you’re a pest because you care.” She hugged Anh tight. “I’m stealing your husband for a brief walk to my car. Good night and I’ll see you next week.”

On orders, Vittorio walked her to her car and kissed her cheek. “Go on, Caitlin. You know she’ll kick your ass if she finds out you worked this weekend.” He grinned and she got into her car. He was right, Anh would probably check the keycard access to see if she came into the office that weekend.

So she finished her paper first thing that next day and actually spent two hours Sunday getting a manicure and a haircut. She even bought two new lipsticks and some books. All in all, a very good weekend.

Chapter Six

He'd been surfing the web for the last several days, checking out plane fares, going back and forth about inviting Caitlin down to visit. He wanted to see her. If he invited her down it would be a new step, but as he thought it over, it wasn't an unwelcome one either.

He picked the phone up and dialed her number before he changed his mind.

"Well, hello there, sexy Irishman. What's up in your world today?"

He liked that she just answered, knowing it was him. Liked that she recognized his number. He was a marshmallow when it came to her. He wanted to spoil her because he knew damned well no one else did and she deserved it.

"Since you couldn't come down over spring break, how about you spend two weeks with me once school is out? Before you start the summer session? My treat. I'll send you the ticket, pick you up at the airport and we can just spend the time together here at my place. You can sleep in every day if you want, the library is within walking distance, there's an actual newsstand not too far from me either." Eamon smiled as he imagined her there with him. It had been nearly six months since he'd seen her last. He'd spoken to her on the phone or via email or IM nearly every day but it wasn't the same.

"Are you sure? I mean, plane tickets are sort of spendy. Plus, well, you sure you can deal with me for two solid weeks? I won't be in the way?"

"I just checked fares online, it's really not that bad. Plus, I'm counting on you being in my way for two weeks. How else can I have nonstop sex with you?"

She laughed. "Thank goodness you only want me for my body." She paused. "Okay then. My last final is on the 21st. I have the time at work and school won't start again for a few weeks. They're keeping me on over the summer but they won't mind if I take some vacation. I think some time in the sun, being objectified by a hot Irishman is just what I need."

"Good. I'll be sure to objectify you extra hard then. Just so you don't feel cheated."

They rang off and he stared out the window for a few minutes, losing himself in the memory of her. They'd both been very busy since they'd seen each other last, he knew. He'd been rushed off his feet, really building his business, traveling all across the country as well as working close to home and she'd been finishing up her second year of law school and holding down a job on top of that. He knew the second year was the one "they work you to death" in and she'd sounded tired a lot but never discouraged. Even with those extra credits she needed to graduate a semester early to take the bar exam in February instead of July.

The longer she was in his life, the more her found her ambition wildly sexy. They shared that. He also found himself really looking forward to seeing her again. Being with her seemed like just the right thing to start the summer with.

“I take it she said yes?” Laura strolled in with Eamon’s brother.

He jumped. “Jaysus, woman, are you psychic or were you eavesdropping?”

“A little of both,” Michael said as they put the bags of food down on the counter. “We do get to meet her, right?”

“Like I can keep Laura away.” Eamon snorted as he put out plates and silverware.

Laura shook her head and shrugged. “I want to meet the woman who’s kept you from dating since December. What can I say? She’s got to be something else considering the female attention you don’t even seem to notice.”

“God help the poor girl, he’s going to be all over her for a while if he’s been saving it all up for six months.” Michael ducked the set of chopsticks Eamon threw at his brother.

It wasn’t like Eamon was going to tell them about the web cam conversations and the rather interesting and totally stellar IM sex they’d shared. He didn’t want to embarrass Cat and after the mess with the ex-boyfriend and the internet pictures, he knew what a huge statement of her trust it was that she not only used the web cam but had done the sorts of things she had. All for him.

What man wouldn’t eschew other women for that?

“Christ, man, it’s just six months. It’s not like I’m a monk or anything.” He shrugged. It wasn’t as if they’d forbade the other from dating but he knew she hadn’t been with anyone else either. It had been an unspoken but accepted thing that they were seeing each other, whatever that meant.

He just smiled as he spooned up the kung pao. There would be two weeks of time in which he could gorge himself on her.

“So this is getting serious then. Are you going to ask her to move here when she finishes school?” Laura took a sip of her Diet Coke.

“She has a life in Seattle. A specialized skill. We’ll cross that bridge if it comes to that, when it does.”

“So you’d move there, then?” Michael asked.

“He just moved here from Ireland, why should he move to Seattle? Why shouldn’t she move?” Laura asked, her voice sharp.

“That’s rich coming from you.” Michael stared at his wife.

“What’s that supposed to mean? She’s young, she’s at the beginning of her career, why should he make the sacrifices? His family and friends are here. It would take some gall to expect him to move again after he relocated already.”

“It’s supposed to mean *I* moved from Ireland to LA for *you*. I was in the middle of my career. I made sacrifices and I don’t know why Eamon or anyone else should get a pass simply because *you* want him

around. If the girl has a specialized career, it would be a much greater sacrifice for her to move. You assume a lot, Laura.”

Eamon looked toward his brother, taken aback. Michael rarely got pissy and almost never with his lady. He tended to agree with Laura, why should he be the one to make sacrifices?

“This is a moot point anyway. We’re long-distance dating. No one is moving anywhere. It’s just a bit of fun. Stop it now before you get into a fight.”

Caitlin aced her finals. She just felt it in her gut. She had some summer classes but the term didn’t start for a few weeks and in the meantime, she could enjoy a little bit of free time. Summer wasn’t too bad credit wise. It would be much easier than it had been during the academic year. Her schedule was heavy in the fall so she could graduate and then have January for bar prep.

She knew the good grades would help with her job search along with her letters of recommendation, which she was already lining up. No one could say she wasn’t prepared. Now she just had to keep up the pace and her dedication level so she could get through the next months and get a job offer.

Just one thing at a time. Step by step until she reached her goal. And then she’d make a new list of goals.

But all that fell away as she got off the plane and headed to baggage claim where she knew Eamon waited. She’d been dying to touch him for months. Since about five minutes after she dropped him off at SeaTac to come home in December, probably. Web cam sex wasn’t a good substitute for the real thing any more than telling him about her day on the phone was the same as relating it all snuggled into his side.

It had been a good thing her schedule had been so packed or she probably would have been depressed at not seeing him for so long. But in reality, even though it’d been six months, the time had flown by. Underneath it though, she’d missed him, missed that spark they’d made on his visit and that they’d built in the months since.

She saw him before he caught sight of her and she used those moments to look her covetous fill. Tall, dark and ridiculously handsome, the sight of him made her heart leap. She quickened her pace and they both grinned when he finally saw her.

“Cat, my darlin’!” He grabbed her and hugged, picking her up and kissing her so soundly she saw stars behind her closed eyes.

“Hello there. That was some greeting. I may have to go around the corner and come back so I can get more,” she said, breathless, as he put her back down.

“There’s plenty more where that came from. Let’s get your bag and get out of here.”

They waited while the bags circled, his arms around her waist, her back to his front. He felt good, smelled even better and holy cow did she really want to rip his clothes off with her teeth and jump him until they were both too tired to move.

"I want you so much my teeth hurt," he murmured into her ear, bringing a shiver rolling over her skin.

"Thank all the angels in heaven, there's my bag." She moved forward to grab it, but he tsked at her and shook his head.

"The red one?" She nodded and he grabbed it. "Let me do that. You'll need your strength."

He all but hauled her out into the heat and toward the parking lot. "I'm not too far. Come on. Have you eaten?"

"It can wait until after."

"Christ," he nearly growled as he tossed her suitcase in his trunk and practically shoved her into the passenger seat before jogging to the driver's side.

"A Mustang huh? Can't say I'm too very surprised. It's sexy."

The drive to his place took less than an hour, even though traffic sucked. "I should have thought ahead and not chosen the arrival during rush hour. You look good." He gave a quick look her way. "I've missed your face."

She smiled, warmed by his words. "You've seen it, and more, at least three times a week for months."

"It's different in person, when I can see all the golds and deeper reds in your hair. God, you smell good too. Maybe we should stop at a hotel."

"How far do you live?"

"Ten more minutes." He got off the freeway and headed west.

"You have twelve then. I can wait twelve minutes." She leaned back, letting the light wash over her skin and he nearly died at the sight of her pale, beautiful throat, exposed just for his eyes. "It was raining and sixty degrees when I left home today. The sun feels good."

"Did you bring sunscreen? I don't want you to get burned while you're here."

She cracked her eyes open and looked over at him with a grin. "That's very sweet. I've got the industrial strength stuff since I'm whiter than college-lined notebook paper and get burned when the sun as much as winks in my direction."

He turned down his street and hit the gate opener.

"This is your building? It's really nice." She sat up and looked around as he drove back toward his covered spot.

"I like it. Come on." He pulled in the spot, popped the trunk, leaned across and opened her door and was out to get her suitcase before she'd even undone her seatbelt.

A relatively quick walk from his car to the front doors and thank God, a fast elevator had them unlocking his front door in less than two minutes.

He left the suitcase near the door and tugged her down his hallway to the bedroom. It was cool and dim but the bed beckoned.

"I'm not sure I can do slow right now." He pulled her dress up and over her head, sucking in a breath as he caught sight of her bra and the wispy panties she wore beneath.

"Don't." She grinned as she got rid of her bra and panties, kicked her sandals off and got on the bed. "There's time for slow later."

Music to his ears. He was naked and lying on her in moments, the shock of how good it felt being skin to skin with her echoing through his system. He groaned at the pleasure of it, of the way everything about her seemed to settle into him.

"Man, you feel good." She kissed his throat, digging her fingers into his shoulder as she did. His need for her roared into overdrive, nearly sending him to his knees.

"Ditto." He kissed the side of her face and then her lips as she turned to meet his mouth with her own. Her tongue met his, sliding into his mouth as he tried not to eat her alive. They'd bumped teeth once already in their eagerness and he was pretty sure he'd rather fuck all afternoon than spend time at the dentist getting a tooth capped.

She moaned, arching into him when he sucked her tongue and then nipped her bottom lip before moving to her neck.

Her body, strong and lithe, made way for his as she widened her thighs and he angled, his cock siding against the wetness between her legs. Inferno-hot and slick enough he could press right into her without any effort.

"Yes, yes, I'm so ready. Please," she whispered as she rubbed herself against the length of his cock.

"Foreplay," he managed to croak, hoping like hell she didn't care about anything but him being inside.

"Put your cock in me now or I will die."

Reaching under the pillow, he pulled a condom back with him and tore it open quickly. "Wouldn't want that. The cops would not be pleased."

The sound she made when he pushed his way inside her body nearly brought him to climax on the spot. Her inner muscles fluttered and clutched around him as she writhed, making it nearly impossible not to come.

"Be still or this will be over before it starts."

Her eyes, which had been half-lidded, came fully open and the shock of it, when their gazes locked, sizzled his nerve endings. Recognition in a way he'd never had before, not even with her in the past.

"Okay then. Do me."

He took a steadying breath and got to his knees, holding her thighs so her knees clasped his hips, her feet flat on the bed. The sight of his cock disappearing and then retreating from her, slick and shiny wet with her honey, mesmerized him. When he was able to tear his gaze from where they were joined, he

looked up her body, past the curve of her breasts and the darkened stub of her hardened nipples, up the arch of her throat and to her face. Everything about her was so beautiful it made him ache just to look at her.

But when she reached down to find her clit, her eyes snapped open and met his as she began to get herself off—he knew he didn’t have much time left. Once she started to come it would be all over for him, the clasp of her body would be too much to resist.

Caitlin arched to take him deeper and change the angle just slightly. Her thighs began to tremble as the orgasm he’d been working on, building her up since she woke up that morning, began to manifest itself in her muscles.

He thrust hard and deep, over and over, his fingers digging into her thighs just above her knees. That edge of pain held her climax back, but not for very long. It burst through her as she tried to suck in oxygen, trying to remain open to him as he continued to thrust.

And then his strangled cry as she watched him, saw the muscles in his neck cord as his head dropped back and he pressed deep. The jump of his cock within her as he came was incredibly sexy and intimate, like a secret.

Moments later, he opened his eyes and looked down at her with a grin. “Now I feel I’ve greeted you properly and I can probably manage not to molest you long enough for us to grab a bite.”

She sat up as he went to deal with the condom and really looked around his room. The walls were covered by photographs, black and white and color. It was like multiple windows to different worlds.

He had so much talent. She’d seen his work on his website and he’d been kind enough to send her prints that she’d had framed, but this was stunning.

He came back and saw her staring at a photograph he’d taken of the street his family’s pub sat on. The focus was the bench out front, the front windows and door of the building just behind.

“You’re amazing, Eamon. I’ve been there, standing in this very spot. This photograph transports me right back. I can hear the sound of the busses passing by on the street, of the children playing in the schoolyard just down the way. I can smell the bakery down the block. I’m so impressed.”

She turned and he didn’t make any effort to hide how much it meant to him that she liked his work.

“Thank you. That one’s very special to me. Come through and I’ll show you the rest.”

She bent to pull her dress back on, thankfully leaving off the panties and bra, and took his hand.

His hallways were lined with photographs and, she noticed with a twinge in her gut, some were of her. It made her smile. She pointed to one he’d taken of her at Pike Place, her face lit as she smiled at the elderly man who ran the stall where she got her organic honey.

“I didn’t even know you took that.”

He opened the door to what was his studio and showed her around. “You never know when I’ll snap a picture of you, darlin’. You’re such a beautiful subject I can’t help myself.” He winked. “This is my office here.” She noted he had another shot of her, snuggled up in a chair near her windows, her eyes half closed

as the rain on the glass made shadows on her face. “I like this one the best. Your hair is pulled back so all the curves of your face are visible. The light from the window is just right.”

“I look so beautiful.” She cocked her head, embarrassed and flattered to be caught in such a moment.

“Why do you sound surprised? You are beautiful. This is how I think about you when you’re not here. So thoughtful but the set of your mouth is stubborn. I like that contradiction.”

“That’s, well thank you, that’s a lovely compliment.”

“I like when you blush.” He drew a fingertip down her cheek.

“I blush when I’m offered mindblowing sex and food. You’ve offered me one, how about the other?”

He laughed. “Come on through to the kitchen.”

“This is a great place. I’m very impressed. It’s pretty big and you have great light.” She continued to look around, seeing evidence of a feminine hand but it didn’t seem possessive or romantic. Perhaps the sister-in-law.

“It’s easy enough to walk around. Not a lot of walking neighborhoods left these days. Some really good places to eat within a few blocks, a park, the water isn’t too far, you can see it if you peek between those two buildings and squint your eyes.”

She stood near his patio doors and the light behind her highlighted her body, naked beneath the wispy dress she wore. He hardened at the sight. She tiptoed up, the muscles in her pale, bare calves firm as she did.

“There it is.” She grinned at him over her shoulder.

“What? My God, your legs are sexy.”

She laughed. “The ocean. I squinted and I saw the blue of it.”

“Ah. Sorry, I lost my train of thought there for a moment. You’re much nicer to look at than the ocean. Come sit here.” He placed a glass of sparkling water with ice on the counter. “I have some shrimp and steaks marinating. Would you like me to fire up the grill?”

Her face lit and he was instantly glad he’d suggested it to get such a response.

“Yes! I’d love that. I don’t have the space to barbecue on my own although there’s a place on the roof of my building. Anh and Vittorio are big on grilling, or rather, he is and we just eat what he makes.”

“I’m going to have to meet the infamous Anh and her man when I get back up your way. You talk about her so often I feel like I know her.” He pulled the meat out and stepped out onto his deck to ready the grill. He liked the propane grill he’d picked up on a whim the month before while at the hardware store. It was easy to use, quick to heat up and if it made her smile like that, he’d use it every day for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

When he stepped back inside it was to find his brother and sister-in-law standing in his living room, sizing Cat up.

“Hello. Funny, I didn’t hear the phone ring so you could ask if I wanted visitors. Or even the doorbell.” He raised an eyebrow at his brother who just shrugged and looked to Laura.

“That’s because none of those things happened, as you well know. Now, Caitlin was just telling us about her studies and you were going to make up a batch of margaritas, Michael. I’ve already put the macaroni salad in the fridge and I’m having a brownie right now.” Laura simply plopped her ass down on one of the barstools and dug into the pan, handing Cat one and taking one for herself.

He sighed.

“Don’t think you can avoid it. I managed to hold her off this long but you know how she is,” Michael said in an undertone as he got the blender out to make the ordered margaritas.

“If you two scare her or make her uncomfortable I will toss you off the deck to the street below. Christamighty, she’d better not bring up moving anywhere.”

Michael just laughed. “Oh fer fuck’s sake, Eamon, you know Laura wants to know this girl because you talk about her all the time. We like the difference in you. And between you and me, if that girl asks you to move to be with her, you’d be an edjit to say no. Anyway, we’ll not harm her but Laura will be unconscionably nosy because that’s my wife.”

He harrumphed but when he turned around to check on Cat, she was animatedly discussing something with Laura, a big smile on her face, her eyes lit with amusement behind those sexy librarian glasses.

She turned and saw him looking and grinned, easing his discomfort a bit.

“I’ll be right back, I’m just going to get the steak on. Don’t eat all those brownies, I want one.”

Aside from some minor embarrassment that it was totally obvious they’d come in the door, dropped her bags and rushed in to have sex, Caitlin enjoyed meeting Eamon’s brother and his wife.

They had a really nice dinner, drank some tasty margaritas and it felt an awful lot like she and Eamon were an actual couple. Which, come to think of it, was a nice thing even if she didn’t quite know if it was true or what. They hadn’t really discussed it or anything. She hadn’t dated anyone, not that she’d really had the time, but the two times she had been asked out she’d said no because at least in her mind, she was seeing someone.

“Did Eamon tell you we’re having a dinner on Sunday out at our house for you? You know, to introduce you to our friends and my side of the family. A welcome of sorts. Get you used to the city and everything. Nothing fancy, we know this great Mexican place that does platters so we’re ordering in. Oh my, it’s okay, really.” Laura touched Caitlin’s arm as she must have paled a bit.

“Um, okay. I guess. Sure.”

“Laura, can you not make her want to run back to Seattle at first light please?” Eamon muscled his way over, putting an arm around Caitlin’s waist. “Also, how could I have told her anything? This is news to me. How many people? Are they even people I know?”

Laura laughed and as petty as it was, Caitlin found herself amused that Eamon appeared as shell shocked by her as Caitlin felt. Still, she wasn't sure how to feel about Laura's comment that she needed to be used to LA. On one hand, it was nice that his sister-in-law wanted to get to know her, on the other hand, it seemed dangerously like an assumption that she'd be coming down there. Gah, as usual, she was overthinking. It was probably just a friendly way to introduce her into Eamon's circle.

"My mom and dad, you know them! You just did their portraits a few months back for their fortieth wedding anniversary. My sister and brother. Nicholas, that's Michael's business partner, he's Irish too," Laura said to Caitlin. "Just a few people who are around anyway and are always up for free food."

Michael, who was a few inches shorter than Eamon but otherwise had the same sort of broad, burly handsome his brother did, sighed and kissed his wife's cheek before turning to Caitlin. "She fancies herself like a cruise director. You know, she's the one in the group who wants to picnic and who plans trips to Catalina. It's best to nod and go along because she's very American." He paused with a blush. "No offense, but you lot are pushy. She means well and she can put together quite the dinner party. They're a fun group."

Eamon made a sexy little growly thing in his throat and tightened his arm around her protectively. She snuggled into him, relaxing.

"I'm sure it'll be wonderful. Thank you. I don't know many people here in LA so I'm looking forward to it."

"What time is this dinner?"

Laura told him the time and ordered them not to bring anything but themselves. Eamon grunted again and all but shoved them both out his front door, his back against it as he was sure to use the deadbolt.

"Sorry about that. They mean well." He smiled and she couldn't help but smile back.

"Nothing to be sorry about. I liked them both and they went out of their way to make me feel welcomed here in LA. It's nice and I appreciate it."

"Good. Now, let's have more sex."

He chased her into his room again and she laughed the whole way until she allowed him to catch her, conveniently right at the foot of his bed.

Chapter Seven

“What do you want to do today?” Eamon asked her on the third morning of her stay. She’d actually begun to slide into vacation mode and had slept really soundly the night before.

They sat, perched on his deck, reading and having a light breakfast.

She stretched, setting her book to the side. “Anything you want to. I’m at your mercy.” Looking him up and down, she smiled. From the bare feet, up the muscled thighs and tapered waist, broad shoulders, bare to the sunshine and his very fine face, partially obscured by sexy sunglasses, he was utterly, ridiculously handsome.

His low laugh was laced with sensual awareness of what she’d meant. “Be that as it may, lass, how about we head over to Olvera Street? You did the touristy thing for me when I was in Seattle. Let me return the favor.”

How could she refuse?

They headed out and he even put the top down on the Mustang as they drove over. The day was warm but not ridiculously so, far more bright than she’d been used to for years, and perfect because he was in it.

She didn’t fail to notice all the female attention he garnered everywhere they went. He was delicious enough just to look at in his snug T-shirt and faded jeans, but once he opened his mouth and the Irish spilled out, women nearly creamed their pants. Eamon Blake was a charmer and women responded to genuine, sweet flattery. He worked his magic on women from two to a hundred but it wasn’t the same as how he treated her, so the flirting didn’t bother her at all. He might compliment their hair or the color of their eyes but that was just like commenting on the weather to him. With Caitlin, he *saw* inside. Yes, he made his casual, flirty asides about her ass or her lips, but he also noticed how efficiently she flipped pancakes, he liked how she made his tea, he remembered just how she liked her steaks cooked. He treated her like she mattered in his life. That wasn’t just casual, that was something altogether serious and it got to her, ate away at the woman who’d been put on the back burner first by her parents and then by a man who claimed to love her. Eamon was different, she could simply be herself and not feel indebted or responsible to anyone or for anything.

Four years before, he’d been her lover and her friend. They’d traveled around and he’d shown her a good time. He’d certainly never done anything as rude as hit on other women in her presence but he wasn’t *hers*. Now, as they walked past brightly colored stalls and swayed to live music, she felt a sense of possession she hadn’t before.

He enabled her to let go of her control just a bit, to remember what she was like before but also be secure in the woman she was now. That trust was important and she couldn't think of anyone else who knew her the way he did. Which seemed odd given that they'd not spent a lot of time face to face in years. At the same time, she'd begun to open up to him in their communications, usually on the phone, to share with him her dreams and hopes. He listened without judgment but offered tangible advice when she asked. He treated her confessions as important and special. He had no idea how much that appealed to her.

Eamon took her in his arms and swayed to the loping song the band played in the plaza. Laughing, she threw her arms around his neck and danced with him, singing along with the song in Spanish.

What a siren she was. God, he was falling and he wasn't sure he wanted to stop. "Is there anything you can't do, Cat? You're a miracle, all sorts of facets to you." He kissed her forehead and she smiled in her shy way, the way she only smiled for him and a certain sort of greed flashed through him, the way it always did. He loved that he made her that way, and he wanted more. Wanted to fill her up with joy and to draw it back out.

Her nose crinkled as she thought. "I can't parallel park. Seriously, I am the worst at it. I trip a lot, drop things, I curse like a sailor. I'm horrible at remembering birthdays. I've always wanted to speak French but I just can't. I totally suck and I gave up years ago. Um, oh, I can eat a big bag of peanut M&Ms in under five minutes. All that's left is the empty bag and the shame."

"You can't tell it by looking at you." He squeezed her ass and she snorted, amused. "As it happens I'm quite good at parallel parking now that I drive on the wrong side of the road like you Americans do, so I'll be happy to take that task. You seemed to do just fine when you sent me that bottle of Jameson and the Market Spice tea on my birthday in March."

"Well, *you're* memorable."

Christ he liked that she thought so. "I'm glad you think so. It makes it far easier to have sex with you."

"Mmm hmm. I'm hungry again. I need a churro. And I don't mean that as a euphemism for your penis."

"You can have both." He spun her around before steering them toward a bakery stand he liked.

He kept her tucked against his side as they continued to walk and explore. She may not be able to master French but she was a top-notch Spanish speaker. She often paused to comment to the people in the stalls, complimenting them on their wares. She bought things here and there, refused to let him pay for any of it, stubborn woman. This Caitlin was far more complicated and fascinating than the young woman he'd sexed up for a few months all those years before.

When he kissed her as they got back to the car a few hours later, she tasted of cinnamon and sugar. Her skin was warm and pliant, her hair shining in the sun. He wished she lived in LA.

He wished he was a different man and he was capable of committing forever to her, because once she finished up school, he had the feeling she'd need something more than phone calls, web cam sex, and the occasional visit up and down the coast.

"Now I need another kind of churro and I totally mean it in a euphemistic sense," she said lazily as they pulled onto the freeway to go back to his place.

"So tell me about yourself, Caitlin. Eamon has shared some but you know how men are." Laura handed her a plate and Caitlin began to fill it.

Michael and Laura's home was impressive. Nearly as impressive was the buffet Laura kept assuring them was simple but anyone with eyes could see how much work had gone into it. The spread was massive with appetizers, entrees and flan for dessert. The pool had floating flowers and candles and tiki torches were lit all around the back yard. A yard that looked out over not just the canyon below but the ocean not more than five miles away. The house was a freaking spread from a magazine without making Caitlin freak that she'd spill. Who had white carpet? And yet it was warm instead of institutional. Michael and Laura had made a home for themselves there. It was lived in and obviously loved but also, there was no doubt Laura had an able hand with decorating.

In many ways, Laura Blake was sort of intimidating. She was accomplished and beautiful. Clearly adored by her husband and family and Eamon as well. She gave off a sense of utter competency. Like she could manage any task that came her way with one hand. But she had gone out of her way to be friendly to Caitlin, to make her feel comfortable and welcome and she couldn't help but respond in kind.

"Not much to tell really. I'm in law school. Going into the end of my second year. I work for the SHS Division of the State Attorney General's Office. I do parental rights termination cases under a supervising attorney. Essentially I work with the state to remove abused and neglected children from bad situations. It's rewarding but sometimes emotionally exhausting. Still, it's what I really want to do and I hope I can after graduation."

"So, um, what are you going to do after you finish school? About Eamon I mean. It's clear you two have a great connection."

"I have no idea and to be quite honest, I adore Eamon but I have many things keeping me so busy at the moment I simply don't have time to think about it. Which is assuming he'd want me to anyway. I don't know that he would. For the time being I'm enjoying him and whatever we have just now." She said it nicely, but firmly and Laura didn't seem offended, thank goodness.

They moved to a small table and Caitlin watched Eamon and his brother play horseshoes in a pit just to the south of the pool area with a bunch of other men, many of whom were also Irish. The hot accent quotient was through the roof.

"Pretty aren't they? I love Irishmen to death. The accent could strip the panties off a nun."

Caitlin laughed, surprised by the comment but in total agreement.

But Laura wasn't done. After they'd settled, she continued with her interrogation. "You're not from Seattle originally though, right?"

"No. Originally I'm from Boston. Born and raised there. I came out to Seattle four years ago. I like the west coast. I especially like the winters." She laughed. "I don't have to slog through snow. Oh every once in a while it snows enough to last a day or two in Seattle but the entire city just stops when it snows. It's so hilly and steep it's insane to try and drive so essentially it's like a city-wide snow day. Very festive. What about you?"

"What made you choose Seattle? You took a big break from school from what I gather." Like a pretty pitbull, this woman. Anh would love her.

"I moved out with my then-boyfriend. I put off school to help him with his business. And I put it off some more until I finally broke up with him and went back." She shrugged.

"Let me guess, he was intimidated by you going to school, wanted you to help him do stuff anyone else could have. But it was you so it was *special* so you kept putting your own life and dreams aside. What a prick. Let me guess, he was fucking your best friend? Your sister?"

Caitlin laughed. "His secretary. Anyway, that was nearly three years ago and I'm not with him. I'm living my own life and realizing my own dreams." That sounded more blunt than she'd planned but it was something she was so committed to, it just came out that way.

"I get you. You're right to do it. You can't live for anyone else. You can't live through anyone else. You can't live someone else's dreams. I respect your choices, Caitlin." Laura took a drink and leaned back in her chair.

"I'm from San Francisco originally, but my dad moved here when me and my sister were in high school. Been here ever since except for the few months I got waylaid in Dublin when I met Michael. I was lovestruck after one meeting. We were married and he emigrated here to finish his education within six months of meeting. That was eight years ago. He gave up a lot for me, but I hope I've been worth it." Laura sent her a bright look and Caitlin wanted to laugh at how obvious she was being.

"Nice house you've got here. You've done an amazing job decorating it. Very elegant without being fussy and overdone. Simple but you've added just the right touch here and there to make it a home."

Laura blushed and reached out to squeeze Caitlin's hand. "That was a wonderful compliment. Thank you. And thank you for letting me badger you and be nosy. Michael designed the house. It was one of his first projects after he and Nicholas had their first year in the black. I love the ocean so it's a joy to be able to see it every day and put my feet in it a few times a week."

"Eamon mentioned you write a monthly column in *Women on the Move* magazine?"

She smiled and Caitlin found it impossible not to like a woman with a smile so beautiful.

“Yes, I do. I’m the west coast correspondent on all things culture in the Southland mainly but I do travel around to other parts of California and up into Oregon, Washington and BC. It’s a fabulous job and it enables me to help Eamon out. And by that, I mean, it enables me to keep an eye on him and keep him out of trouble. He’s been in far less of it since you came back into the picture, though.”

Caitlin felt the heat of her blush work up her neck and across her cheeks.

“What on earth are you saying to the poor girl that you’ve made her blush so?” Laura’s mother laughed as she approached.

The whole extended family was as charming and effortlessly nice as Laura. As when Caitlin was with Anh’s family, a little slice of envy cut through her at what she’d never had.

Eamon kept an eye on Caitlin throughout the evening. He would drop in from time to time, assure himself she was all right and make sure she didn’t need him before he’d go back to darts or horseshoes with his friends. He liked that she didn’t need to be taken care of or managed around other people. In fact, she’d fit in really well with their group, something he liked but also didn’t know if he should like all at once. But he’d promised himself not to question it overmuch while she was visiting. There was no point, he liked being with her, she liked being with him, they were friends and the sex was marvelous so why complain?

Still, he was sick of sharing her and tired of being surrounded by people so at ten or so, he scooped her up. “Ready to go? How about a walk on the beach by moonlight?” he murmured into her ear.

“Nice. I’d like that.”

“Thank you all for the lovely company and the dinner. Laura, as always you throw a very good party.” He kissed Laura’s cheek and then hugged her mother and sister before he took his leave, Caitlin in tow.

He loaded them both in the car and headed the short way to the beach.

Her hand fit just right in his as they walked over the sand, still warm from the day’s sun. “I hope that wasn’t too much for you. They can be sort of overwhelming.” Really, the moonlight on her skin was overwhelming. His fingers itched for his camera.

“I liked them all. Laura’s family is really charming. Your brother is very nice, he’s a lot like you, by the way. Your expat friends are all rogues. I had a great time. By the way, we’re all going to karaoke on Tuesday night.”

He froze as panic shocked him into silence for a moment. “What? No. She got to you. She promised me never again.”

He was going to kill his sister-in-law, that’s all there was to it. Eamon held the door of the karaoke bar open so the ladies could enter and he glared at Michael, who at least looked as miserable as he did.

“Oh look, a table right up front!” Laura nearly jumped up and down as she yanked Caitlin toward an empty table, yes, right up front. *Great.*

“I need a beer.” Eamon looked around and got the attention of a server who came to take drink orders.

“Shots. We need shots.” This not from Laura, but from Caitlin.

“She’s corrupting you.” Eamon glared at Laura who just agreed with Cat that a few shots were just the thing.

Still, he wasn’t going to complain at the sight of his luscious woman licking the salt from her hand and getting tipsy. He hadn’t seen her this carefree since she’d been in Dublin those years before. How could he begrudge her some fun? Especially when she looked so sexy at it? And undeniably, he liked seeing her getting on so well with Laura.

“You choose the song Caitlin will sing!” Laura ordered Eamon who only glowered. “Fine, I’ll choose then. B 14!” she shouted.

Cat finished her second shot and stood, shaking her hair from her face. “All right then, if it’s Bon Jovi, I’ll retaliate in kind. I’ll make your ass sing Celine Dion.”

She marched up to the small stage and keyed up B 14 and groaned, flipping the bird at Laura as they both laughed.

Cat giggled. Thank God she took those shots or this would have been embarrassing. May as well go for it all the way. A girl needed to go big or go home. It wasn’t like she’d see any of the people in the bar except for Eamon and crew again anyway.

She started dancing and waited...

“You can dance, you can jiiiive, having the time of your life. Ooooh see that girl, watch that scene, dig it the dancing queen.”

She had to close her eyes or they’d all make her laugh again. Instead she pretended she was in her bedroom, eleven years old, in front of her dresser mirror singing into her hairbrush.

“And when you get the channnnnce, you are the dancing queen! Young and sweet only seventeen...”

Laura was so going down for this, but they’d both have fun doing it.

At the end of the song she did a little boogie up and down the stage, bowed and waved to the clapping crowd before going back to their seats.

“All right, bitch. C17. Let’s hear the emotion.”

Laura high fived the waitress, who looked bored, and ran up to begin to play Celine singing about the Titanic.

“You’re an awfully good sport,” Eamon said, after they’d gone back to his place and he’d backed her into his bedroom. He pulled her shorts and panties off and made very quick work of her shirt and bra too.

“ABBA turns you on, doesn’t it? You’re afraid to tell anyone, so ashamed, but those Swedish women dressed in period costume singing about Waterloo get you hard. It’s okay. Admitting you have a problem is the first step.” She slapped his hands away as she surged up to get him naked too.

He laughed. “*You* singing ABBA turns me on apparently since you and Laura made each other sing ABBA and Celine Dion all night long.”

“We sang ‘Love Shack’ too. Although I have to say, Michael did a very fine job with ‘Salt Shaker’, accent and all.”

He had been nearly as drunk as Cat was right then but Laura must have promised him a blow job or something equally attractive to make his brother actually sing karaoke. Not just karaoke but rap. He snorted at the memory. That’s certainly why *he’d* agreed to sing U2’s “Sweetest Thing”. And heavens but she was.

She licked around his belly button and he watched down his body as her head dipped lower and lower. Until he had to lock his knees when her mouth found the head of his cock and took him inside so slowly he thought he might beg.

Caitlin was good at many things. Singing karaoke, cooking, making friends, but there was always a sort of hesitance, she kept herself back a step, didn’t open herself up totally. Except for sex. When they had sex, she opened herself to him completely, gave him everything, took everything he offered. It was the time between them when he felt they were both completely honest and vulnerable.

An ache he couldn’t name swelled inside that had nothing to do with fucking.

He stopped thinking and just felt her mouth on him, the soft tickle of her hair as it caressed his thighs when she swung forward. His hands sought that softness, the cool strands slid through his fingers as his cock slid into and back out of her mouth. Hot and wet, cool and dry.

He said things to her in French, a language he rarely used, but he had to say it, just not so she could understand. In the words she’d admitted she didn’t understand, he’d hidden all the feelings he’d had. He said it all, let it roll from his mouth without thinking, trying hard not to understand it himself but the words hung in the air, wrapping around them both like magic.

Before he came, he pulled her back and laid her on the bed, covering her with his body, simply luxuriating in the way she felt against him, beneath him, pliant, warm skin, her body fitting against his just right.

When he sank into her, her eyes slowly opened and focused and he felt it all the way to his toes. He groaned and began to lose himself in the lure of her.

When he looked at her that way, when he made that groan, she didn’t know how to react. Part of her wanted to run, but most of her just wanted to snuggle in close and let him claim her and take care of her.

When he’d spoken moments ago in French, she hadn’t known what he was saying but she could sense the import of it. The ebb and flow of emotion came through. It was beautiful, *he* was beautiful and this was the most wonderful vacation she’d had since the last time she was his lover.

Always

He filled her, fat and long, but more than that, she loved the way he felt there, his body a solid weight but not a suffocating one. Because she wanted to, and because she knew he liked it, she reached in between them, down her belly until she found her clit, slowly circling it with each thrust he made into her body.

The pleasure built slowly and when it broke and she came, it rolled through her from her toes up to her scalp.

But it was the intensity of the emotional connection that stayed with her even after she'd boarded the plane back home.

Chapter Eight

“Caitlin, I’ve been looking for you. Do you have a moment?”

Caitlin turned to catch sight of Damon Thompson, one of the attorneys from the Consumer Protection division, hailing her in the elevator lobby.

She’d had a major thing for him since the first time she’d had a conversation with him back at a mixer at Anh and Vittorio’s right after she’d started interning. Tall, athletic, big blue eyes and pale hair, he was one of those guys who windsurfed down in the Columbia Gorge on weekends and biked to work.

“Hey, Damon, how are you?”

“I’m good. You look great today.” He smiled, all straight, white teeth and she responded. How could she not? He was so very pretty to look at.

“Thanks. You too.”

He smoothed a hand down his tie. “I was wondering, um, I just moved into my new house a few weekends ago and I haven’t had anyone over for dinner yet. Would you like to?”

She licked her lips, trying to work out how to ask the question she needed to ask. “Would this be like a friendly dinner or a date type dinner?”

“I’ve wanted to ask you on a date for a while now but you were still in your 2L year and it felt, well I thought it would be more professional if I waited and now I don’t have anything to do with your division and I don’t mentor the interns and well, I’m sorry I waited but I hope you understand it was about me trying to do this right.”

She laughed. “I appreciate that. I really do. And I’m totally flattered. If you’d asked me last year I would have said yes. I’m seeing someone now.”

His smile dimmed and he nodded. “Ah. Okay then. That’ll teach me to do the right thing.”

“I’m sorry. Like I said, if you’d asked before I began seeing Eamon I would have definitely accepted.”

“Should this guy not work out, call me, all right? In any case, I’m still your friend so I expect to be invited to any graduation or bar passage type celebration.”

“Of course.” She stepped back. “Thanks again for asking. I’ll see you around.”

Caitlin hurried back down the hall toward the paralegal who’d been helping her with some research.

“Did you hear a word I just said?”

Caitlin turned back to Anh and blushed. While making photocopies, she'd been off in her happy place, thinking about Eamon. "I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

They began to walk back to Caitlin's cubicle where she put all her paper down before turning back to Anh.

"I was saying good job on the brief, thank you for writing it and also, where do things stand between you and Eamon? I overheard Damon asking you out and your subsequent rejection. He's very cute. He lives in the same state. Nice house in Wallingford. He's all sporty and he watches you like you're on the dessert tray. You used to think he was hot. What's the story? I know he's not the only guy you've said no to. Vittorio said his brother asked you out the last time you were at our house for dinner. He's really cute! Girl, you can't be saving yourself for a man you see twice a year. It's not healthy."

"Damon *is* attractive. I do like him, quite a bit. But the fact remains, I'm with someone." She looked at her calendar, made sure she didn't have anything due and turned back to Anh, who looked dubious.

"Are you sure this thing with Eamon isn't a way to keep yourself closed off?"

"Look, Dr. Phil, I *like* Eamon. I've turned down dates because as far as I'm concerned, I'm taken. I don't *want* to go out with anyone else. Anyway, I barely have time to sleep, in case you haven't noticed."

"Okay, the number of times you can insist you don't have time is now expired. Bullshit. You have time to fall in love. You have and you can't deny it. I don't want you to get hurt. You have feelings for this guy and he's too busy off being hot Irish photographer guy all over the world. Do you know if he thinks *he's* taken? Because I see you taking this thing seriously but he's still oh-so-very-casual."

"How do you know what he is or isn't? I share with you, yes, but you're extrapolating out all sorts of stuff I've never said. As for him thinking he's taken? He's not seeing anyone else. It's an unspoken thing but it's clear. I'm not in love, Anh. I'm in like and whether you think it's true or not, I am too busy to deal. I need to go home and study right now."

She grabbed her bag and shrugged into her sweater. This was a conversation she'd had enough times and it wasn't a road she wanted to go down again. She loved Anh but enough was enough and she didn't want to get into an argument over it.

October had snuck up on them and the air was crisp but not yet too cold. School would be over in a little over a month and then she'd start bar prep classes in the evenings in January and take the bar exam in February.

In truth, it felt as if her entire life had been focused on these next few months. She spent nearly every waking moment working, studying or sitting in class, so she should have been too busy to miss Eamon. But she wasn't. She'd totally lied to Anh but she wasn't ready to face it just yet. She just couldn't. So she told herself and everyone else that she was too rushed to think about anything and tried not to. Despite the fact that she'd had three summer courses, had worked and had managed to even start studying for the bar exam,

she felt his absence. He'd come up for the weekend before she'd gone back for the fall semester but that had been a month before already.

They'd been playing phone tag for the last two weeks but he'd traveled quite a bit and she was always in the middle of something. She missed hearing his voice, so much so that she played his voicemails back just to hear him say her name. In her low moments she wondered if he missed her as much. Gah! This was precisely why she didn't want to be in a relationship.

"Stop thinking about it for now," Anh said, knowing Caitlin was fibbing but letting her. "Let me walk you downstairs."

They small talked while waiting for the elevator and on the way down. Anh chided her about eating right. Caitlin knew Anh worried that she was just a booty call to Eamon, she didn't know him so it wasn't that unbelievable that she'd think so. But Caitlin knew it wasn't that at all. He may not love her, but she wasn't just some woman he fucked from time to time either.

Once they were out on the street Anh stopped her. "Don't tell anyone else but," Anh looked around and lowered her voice, "I've got you an interview. You wouldn't be coming on in the same 3L hiring process, this would be different. But your grades are spectacular, your work has been amazing and you've got a lot of influence behind you with your recommendations. With you taking the bar exam early, I think you have a real chance at this spot."

Caitlin hugged her friend. "Thank you so much! I appreciate it. I won't let you down, I swear." Anh was one of the most senior AAGs in the office, her opinion would mean a lot. But they'd also look at other things so she'd have to shine her ass off. Or something to that effect anyway.

"November fifth. You'll need to come into the office here. First there'll be a panel and if they like you, you'll go to another round. They're interviewing three other people as well. But you can do this, I know you can."

"I will, I promise. Thank you again. Thank you for all your support and for believing in me."

Anh shook her head, smiling. "Honey, of course I believe in you. Who wouldn't? Look at you. Go home and eat something please. Or I'm going to sic Vittorio on you."

On air, she practically skipped the long blocks back to her building. So much she planned for, so much she worked for and it may just happen yet.

Eamon was in London on a job. The time difference sucked but she wanted to tell him about the interview. She'd have to wait because it was six there in Seattle so it was still the middle of the night for him. She wanted to reach out to him, wanted to share this thing with him because she knew he'd understand what it meant.

Putting it from her mind, she made herself some soup and hit the books.

Eamon woke up and began to pack. He'd be heading back to New York that afternoon and then LA a few days later. He missed his own bed but more than that, he missed not talking to Caitlin more frequently.

As if he'd summoned her like magic, his cell rang.

"Hello, Cat, it's awfully late for you, darlin'," he said without preamble when he answered.

She laughed and he heard the weariness.

"I was just about to go to sleep, but I figured you'd be awake by now and I wanted to catch up with you. With all your jet setting, it's hard."

"I wanted to ring you, but I'm afraid to wake you up. Selfishly, I'm glad you stayed up to call. I've been up a few hours now. You could have woken *me* up you know. I'm just packing my bags. The cab will be here in a few hours to run me to Heathrow. I'll have a meal with Hannah and Billy before I go." He tossed himself on the bed. "You sound knackered."

"I am but it's worth it to talk to you. I don't have to be in school tomorrow until eleven so I have some time to sleep in."

He knew she wouldn't. That was her way.

"I got an interview with the AG's office," she told him excitedly, following up with the details. He smiled, knowing it was what she wanted, knowing it made her so happy.

"That's great news, Cat! I'm proud of you. I know how hard you've worked for it." What a feather in her cap this would be if she got the job. God knew she deserved it, she spent every waking moment working for it.

"Thank you. And how did your work go?"

"I did two classes that were totally sold out. Shot two weddings, a lot of commercial stuff I hadn't even planned on, as well as my other jobs. Some portraiture, that sort of thing."

"Nudes?" she teased.

"A few." And not a one of them even tantalized him. Sure he appreciated the beauty of a woman's body. He worked with many young, nubile and fit women, many of them scantily clad or naked. But it was his memory of Caitlin, her hair in a messy topknot, glasses slipping down her nose as she sat curled up somewhere reading that made him want to reach for his zipper.

"Mmm hmm. You sound so casual."

"It's a job. Pretty women, sure. But you're the one I want to get naked for lascivious reasons. Although if you'd let me photograph you naked, you'd make my entire year."

"Pffft. So you'll be in New York for a few days and then back to LA?"

"Indeed. I'm meeting with a guy from NYU who's interested in setting up some classes back and forth between the coasts using photographers from a wide array of styles and voices. He's the person I'm writing the grant with. I've got some miles stored up, by the way. Seattle isn't too far afield if you have the time? Like say, over Thanksgiving?"

“As a matter of fact, I’m done with school by the Tuesday of Thanksgiving week. I have a few exams the second week in December but I could totally use a visit from a friend. I’ll make you turkey if you like. That is, if you’re sure you want to be away from your family.”

“Thanksgiving is an American holiday, Cat. I’m happy to spend some time with you. It’s been months and months since I’ve had you last. You smell good and you’re quite the cook. I’ll look into a flight and my work schedule and I’ll get back to you.”

They spoke for a few more minutes. He wanted more, loving the sound of her voice but she was so tired, he wanted her to rest even more so he rang off, promising to call her when he got to NY.

His sister, Hannah, and her oldest son Billy had come over to London two days prior and he was due to meet them for a meal before they went their separate ways home.

Hannah reminded Eamon of his mother, the same quiet but implacable will, merry eyes, both of them excellent mothers. While Eamon was similar to Michael in personality, he was closest to his sister, despite the distance. He’d shared some of his situation with Caitlin but Hannah knew he wasn’t telling him everything so she simply turned to him when he arrived at the café near the hotel and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Now you’ll be telling me why you aren’t getting serious about this girl. I’m done playing with you and your evasions. Your face changes when you talk about your Caitlin. Your world weariness falls away. Laura says she’s a fine woman, strong, intelligent. Ma says she’s a vivacious girl, she said Da thought the world of her when she worked in the pub. Irish blood, Irish name, that’s a sign. Why are you wasting your time playing in Los Angeles when you could just as easily be in Seattle with her? You’re too old to be chasing skirts.” One of her eyebrows rose imperiously and he resisted the urge to dig his toe into the linoleum below his feet and stammer an apology.

“Playing? I’m not playing, I’m trying to build a damned business! I’m *busy*, Hannah. She’s busy. She’s finishing up law school, taking extra courses to finish early as it happens. On top of that the girl works as well. I’m not chasing any skirts but hers, for the record. We may not be engaged but she’s the only woman I’m seeing and it’s been that way for nearly a year. Even with the distance. Surely I get some credit for that?”

“What credit? That you’re not shoving your lad into every betty you see?”

He burst out laughing at her use of slang. “I’ll have you know, I never shoved my lad into bettys indiscriminately. Thank you very much. She’s special. Ma is right about that, Laura too. She’s the kind of girl you’d bring home. But she’s not interested in it and neither am I. I didn’t move halfway across the world to tie myself to anyone. I have a business, a career to build. I’m not ready to settle down.”

“Not ready to settle down? What will it take then? You’re being stubborn for no reason at all. You’ve been playing at house with this girl, well, sort of. And she’s only going to take so much. If she’s the kind of girl you’d bring home, why aren’t you? Because if you don’t, what’s to say one of those men she works

with won't? You're going to look up and she'll be gone, Eamon, and then what? You'll move on? You two found each other again after four years. In another country by total happenstance. What if this is meant to be? Can you be so cavalier about something when it just might be the most right thing to ever happen to you? If she's as special as you say, how can you be sure there'll be another like her when this one moves on? Hmm?"

"Much as I love you, Hannah, you don't know what you're on about. I won't rip up my life like Michael did. He gave up everything for Laura. I'm too old and set in my ways to let anyone lead me by the nose."

Her brows flew up and he knew he'd gone very close to the edge of the ice with that one.

"Michael had what here? A job and some friends. A flat. What does he have now? A great job, a home with his wife, friends and a life. A real life. You can take pictures anywhere, boyo, why feck around with this he-man bullshit? Rip up your life?" She made a sound of derision and he suddenly felt all of fifteen years old. "Yes, poor Michael the victim. He's clearly lost sooo much in making the sacrifice to move to where Laura was. Sometimes, Eamon, one of the people in a couple has to make choices, choices that benefit the relationship as a whole. If all you want is a quick fuck, don't mess around with nice girls like your Caitlin. You're so much smarter than this."

Billy wandered in, saw the look on his mother's face and laughed at Eamon.

Eamon re-thought the skateboard he planned to send to his nephew for Christmas. "Go ahead and laugh. I'm getting on a plane to New York, you've got to go back home with her in this mood."

Billy just continued to laugh and his mother shook her head. "I want you to be happy, Eamon. And that's worth more than just a job. You're meant to share your life with someone. Love is a good thing. Stop running from it. Stop or you'll lose her."

He wasn't running from love, damn it. He enjoyed Caitlin, never denied it. He invited himself to her place next month hadn't he? It didn't all have to be marriage and having three kiddies. He had time. He wasn't yet forty years old. He had time and there was nothing wrong with putting his work first.

They shared a taxi to Heathrow, his nephew and sister going one way, he the other.

New York was cold. It had started to snow and Eamon remembered what Caitlin had looked like with her fuzzy hat and coat on. He remembered making love to her slowly, licking every part of her on the rug in front of her fireplace as the golden light caressed her bare skin.

He realized, even as he mixed and smiled at the party his host had invited him to, that he was lonely without her. He could have gone back home or to his hotel with several women he'd met during the evening but he didn't. Briefly, he thought about what his sister had said, knew Caitlin must have been hit on, asked out, crushed on by multiple men all the time. She was beautiful, magnetic, she had a certain something that made a man take notice.

The thought of another man wanting her burned in his gut, even as he smiled and nodded at something someone had said. He wanted to get to Seattle, to bury himself in her, to smell her skin and know she was his, even if just for the time he was there.

Chapter Nine

“There she is! The newest Assistant Attorney General!” He jogged to where she stood at baggage claim and swept her into a hug.

She smiled, so obviously happy and he hugged her tighter, adding a kiss.

“Thank you. It doesn’t seem real. I’m done with school. I have a job offer contingent on bar passage and wow, you’re here. I’ve missed you so much.”

God she felt good, warm and squirmy against him.

“Let’s get my bag and go back to your house. I have other ways to show you how proud I am of you.”

She laughed and he realized his hand had found hers without his even thinking about it.

“I’ve got a huge dinner planned for tomorrow and Anh and Vittorio have invited us for Thanksgiving. I told them I’d see how tired you were.”

“Which is a very adorable way of giving me an out. Thank you.” He kissed the top of her head and grabbed his suitcase when it finally arrived. “Of course we’ll go. You speak of them so often, I’d like to meet them and I’m sure they’ll want to assure themselves I’m not out to rob you of your maidenhood.”

Her laugh was one of a thoroughly debauched woman. So sexy a group of men standing nearby turned to look at her with appreciation.

“Too late for that.”

“Come along now. I have plans to continue your wicked, downward spiral once I get you alone.”

He realized, as they drove back to her building, just how much he loved Seattle. Loved the cool green of it, loved the moisture and the color against all the gray of the sky. There were many comparisons to be made with his beloved Ireland, he had to admit. He found himself relaxing, breathing deep and slow, even in the truly heinous traffic.

Part of that, a large part of that, was being with her again. With having her in his reach. He reached out and curled the softness of that ginger hair around a finger. Her lips curled up into a smile as he did it.

“So it’s all over then? School?”

“I have four finals left to take, but I’m not worried about them. I had a final paper to finish. That’s done. I’ll walk in June with the rest of the class but yes, other than the finals, I’m finished. I’ll start my bar prep class in January. Enough about me! How was Las Vegas?”

He’d just returned from a trade show in Vegas the week before.

“It was warm, colorful, larger than life. I ate a lot of great food. Took some great shots. Missed you. You would love it in Vegas. Maybe after you take the bar we can head down for a weekend or something. You need to lie out by the pool and be waited on a bit.”

“I might just take you up on that. I have some time after the bar where I have absolutely no obligations.”

“How long has it been, then? Since you’ve had no obligations?”

“Eamon, don’t put me on a pedestal. To be honest, most of my life was when I had no obligations. I was spoiled as a child and into my teens and early adulthood. There’s a price to pay to be independent. I’ll gladly pay it. It’s been a hard few years but it’s all worth it.”

“Spoiled,” he nearly growled the word. In reality, he’d pieced together from her comments that while she’d been surrounded by things, she hadn’t been paid much attention to. Children should be adored and cherished. You didn’t need to shove things at them, you needed to give them attention. “I don’t have you on a pedestal. I just know how hard you work.”

She smiled again and he slid the backs of his fingers down the curve of her cheek.

Back at her building they went straight to her apartment.

“I don’t suppose you want a cup of tea first?” she teased.

“After.”

He tossed off his sweater and T-shirt while she turned on the fireplace. The mid-day late autumn sun fell across the surfaces in the room, making pretty shadows but none as alluring as the one tossing off her clothes in front of him.

The high, proud and not-quite-big curves of her breasts, the hardened nipples, the pale, sweeping indent and then flare of belly and hips—all parts of her he dreamed of. Her toes were painted a whimsical shade of purple. It made him smile, that concession to whimsy.

“You look so shy there.” He opened his arms and she stepped into them. Her scent, clean, warm and a bit spicy, greeted him as he lowered his face to her neck, breathing her in.

“I’ve missed you. Missed the way you smell. Come to bed then, so I can show you how much.”

But it was Caitlin who did the showing, pushing him back to the mattress and scrambling over him, kissing him from ankle to the top of his head. His favorite parts were the bits in the middle.

He looked up at her as she rose above him, reaching back to angle his cock. Her face lost its tension as she sank down, surrounding him with her snug heat.

“Ride me then, Cat. Fuck me.”

Her half-lidded eyes lit as she caught her lip between her teeth.

She rose, leaving just the tip of his cock inside her. And then fell with a swivel, nearly blinding him with pleasure.

Her hands gripped his biceps as she leaned forward to adjust his entry. Her nipples swept over his chest and she swallowed his groan as she bent to kiss him.

Home. He was home again.

She padded back into the room, drying her hair, still smiling. Sex, regular, mindblowing sex, was the best tension reliever she knew of. Holy smokes was Eamon hot.

He sauntered out of the bathroom behind her, whistling.

“I’m surprised your mouth works enough to whistle after the way you just used it in there.”

He caught her from behind, hauling her against him. “Your shower head did most of the work, I just licked a bit here and there.”

His breath against her ear sent a shiver through her. “Just when I think there’s no way I’m going to be ready for sex again after you leave me all boneless, you do it again. It’s like magic.”

He laughed and kissed her temple. “You do say the nicest things. A man could get used to the flattery.”

“Mmm. Incentive then.” She moved away, toward the kitchen. “I’m starving. How about something to eat?”

Eamon’s trip to Seattle had come and gone and the year died out and bled into the next. He’d gone home to Ireland for Christmas and had stayed through the New Year, which sort of ruined her fantasies about licking champagne from his belly button at midnight.

Her parents had actually invited her back home for Christmas but she’d refused after thanking them for the invitation.

She needed to prepare, and adding a bunch of emotional beatdowns to her schedule didn’t sound all that appealing. On one hand, she appreciated that they’d called her and asked. The invitation sounded quite genuine. But on the other hand, she knew they still hadn’t accepted her choices and direction.

Instead, she’d spent the holiday with Anh and Vittorio, eating far too much, playing on the Wii with the kids and knowing she was loved and appreciated for who she was. That was far better than what she’d have endured on a trip home.

Still, they were her parents and try as she might otherwise, she still craved their respect. Much to her surprise, they did say they would come out in June for graduation. But it would be on her turf and something like that would be manageable and less laden with all the traps a trip home for Christmas would entail. Maybe they’d even come to a place where they could have some level of communication.

In the meantime, Caitlin’s life had been consumed by the bar exam. She’d had classes at night and she took mock tests during her daylight hours. She spoke to Eamon often and had come to realize she felt far

more than just like for him. He'd become hers in a very real sense. The problem was, she didn't know if she was his. Or if he considered such things at all.

A week or so before the bar exam, Caitlin realized she'd achieved a level of normalcy in her life for the first time in years. Yes, she was busy and studying a lot, but she had actual leisure time. Time to realize the situation with Eamon wasn't going to suit her for much longer. She needed *more* from him. Just how much and when she wasn't sure but she knew this part-time thing simply wasn't enough.

They'd tiptoed around the "what happens after the bar exam" issue. Well, she'd addressed it and he'd tiptoed. He planned to take her to Mexico in just a few days, right after the bar exam. He said it would be a belated Valentine to her as well as a graduation present. Who was she to turn down a trip with the sexiest, most charming man she knew? And she *had* missed the hell out of him. Missed the way he smelled, the feel of his hands on her shoulders as he stood behind her, the way he held her hand—tight, but not too—and kept pace so she didn't have to jog to keep up.

But it wasn't enough. She said it out loud and it was like magic, she couldn't take it back. There was no unsaying it, no unthinking it. There could be no more ignoring the elephant in the room.

As if he'd known she was thinking of him, her phone rang and she rolled across her bed to pick it up.

"Hello there, sexy."

He laughed and her insides warmed.

"And how are you, love? I've been out and about all day and I've wanted to hear your voice. I feel much better now. The only thing that would be better was if I'd come home to see you in person."

"Would it? I'd like that. How can we make it work?"

He paused and her heart pounded. "We'll see each other in a little over a week, how does that work?" He said it lightly but it was clear he was dodging the real question.

"You know what I mean. It's really hard, being apart so much. I want to see you all the time, not just a few times a year."

"After you've settled in with your job and the bar is out of the way, we can visit back and forth much more regularly." Another pause. "It's not that you're worried I'm after other women are you? Because I'm not."

She sighed. "No, I'm not worried about that but I appreciate the reassurance. It's just that—"

He interrupted, "Let's just try out this new thing for a while, all right?"

Anger flashed through her. "I'm not...don't brush me aside, I don't like it. Adam used to do that and I won't have it. You can say you don't want things to change. You can say you need to think. Whatever. But don't fucking brush me aside like what I feel doesn't matter or isn't important enough to speak about. I'm hanging up now."

"Wait, don't you fucking hang up in the middle of an argument! I wasn't brushing you off and I'm insulted you'd compare me to that bastard."

“You interrupted me in the middle of a sentence to make a pronouncement. That’s brushing me off and I don’t like it. Most people don’t like it. I have to go, I’m in a bad mood now and I don’t want to be angry at you.”

“Then don’t hang up on me. Adults can work things through by talking them out.”

“That’s rich when that’s exactly what I was trying to do about our relationship when you blew me off.”

He exhaled sharply and she nearly laughed, imagining the put-upon look on his face.

“Let’s start over, okay? I don’t want us to be angry with each other either. I called you because I missed you. I said we could see each other more often after you got settled with your job. How do you know that won’t work if you haven’t tried it?”

She knew because in the few months since she’d finished school she’d understood that she wanted someone in her life full time. Whether it was fair or not, she knew it in a way she hadn’t had time to know before.

“Eamon, I don’t want a part-time boyfriend. You were just here a few weeks ago and in November before that. It’s not enough.”

“We’ll talk about it in Mexico. You need to focus on the bar exam.”

And she let him change the subject because she was afraid of not having him at all if she pushed too hard. And yet, for the first time when she hung up from a call with him, she was more nettled than comforted.

The bar began in three days and she had far more to obsess on than her parents and their messed up dynamic or even what was going to happen between her and Eamon in the future.

It was time to move to the hotel she’d be staying in for the duration of the bar exam. Just blocks away from the exam site so her entire focus would be on the test, studying and resting. To that end, she’d turned off her phone and put an away message on her email. It was time to focus on the test and only the test.

For the first time in over a year, Caitlin had made herself unavailable and Eamon had to admit he hated it. In the wake of the argument they’d had in their last phone call, he felt even more edgy.

Sure, there’d been times when they’d been really busy or had traded voicemails back and forth because he’d been traveling or their schedules hadn’t meshed but she’d never turned off her phone and left an away message on her email. He wanted her to come to him with how her exam was going. Wanted her to need the support from him, which admittedly was selfish but he wanted her to need him. At the same time, he had to admit that being needed by her freaked him out, a conundrum he feared would result in not having her at all.

She'd told him she was going to go offline for the bar, of course. It wasn't as if she'd just done it without telling him. It wasn't in retaliation for their fight and it was for the bar exam after all. He understood she needed to put all her attention there.

He'd be with her on a beach in four days and have her all to himself.

But he wanted her then. Wanted her to want it just as much. Even as her insistence in bringing up their relationship scared him on some level, he wanted her. They'd work it out, he'd see her more, travel up there more. Things would improve and she'd feel better after her exams were finished. He didn't like her being upset.

"What's gotten you in such a bad mood?" Laura asked as he muttered to himself, looking through his proofs.

"Nothing."

She snorted. "The only person with the power to make you feel like this is Cat. How is she anyway?"

"Don't know. She's incommunicado."

"Ah. That's the issue. What did you do to make her so mad she cut you off?"

"Why do you assume she's doing it to punish me? She's taking her bar exam for the next few days and is offline and away from her phone until she's done."

"Regardless, you're in a snit. Which says to me that you should just admit you love her and be done with it."

He turned to her and sat. "And what of it, even it was true? She has a life in Seattle. I have a life here. Now that she's done with school we can see each other more often. She can fly down and I can fly up. It's a two and a half hour flight. We can even meet halfway. It's not like we have to get married. But for now, she's taking a three-day test and I'm going to see her this weekend so there's no reason for me to declare my love or for you to poke at me until I snarl."

She raised a brow. "Fine, lie to yourself then. See if you can repeat it enough to make it true. But, Eamon, I've seen how she looks at you. She's in love. She's an ambitious woman and she's going to come to a point where this week here and there thing isn't going to be enough. Love isn't always enough. Don't lose her because you're being stupid."

"Stop talking to Hannah and mind your own business. Cat and I are *fine*." Not wanting to engage with her any further, Eamon stood and stormed out. Laura didn't know what the fuck she was going on about and moreover, it wasn't any of her damned concern.

Chapter Ten

Caitlin walked into the suite Eamon had reserved for them and let all the stress, the responsibility and the exhaustion simply fall away. He'd be there with her in another hour and then their vacation would start.

Five days with him at her side, on the beach, in bed, in town. Five days when she wouldn't have to share him with anyone. No family, no friends, nothing. Just Eamon and Caitlin. Add some margaritas and the warm breeze and it was as close to heaven as she'd been in years.

She decided to shower off the trip and change before he arrived. They'd decided to fly separately because it was too much of a hassle to try and coordinate, not to mention more expensive. They'd only arrive about ninety minutes apart so it wasn't that big a deal.

And it gave her a little more time to decompress and ready herself.

The bathroom was gargantuan, decorated with gorgeous hand-painted tiles in warm colors. Eamon was going to be in heaven. Caitlin smiled as she stepped into the huge, glassed-in shower stall and turned on all three shower heads. Her man loved water. Loved having sex in the shower or bath too. Not that she was complaining. At all.

When she got out she was significantly more relaxed. Barefoot, she braided her hair back from her face as she walked to her suitcase to grab her bikini. While she thought of it, she called down and ordered a pitcher of margaritas. He'd be arriving very soon and the thought of it made her hands shake a bit.

The bar exam had gone fine. She knew in her gut that she'd passed. She'd come home and slept for twelve hours, eaten and slept again until it was the next day. He'd sent her flowers to congratulate her and they'd traded voicemails because he was out on a job and she went off to dinner with Anh and some of the other AAGs she'd be working with. In fact, she'd start working full time once she got back from vacation. Of course her job was contingent on bar passage but that was normal.

After liberal application of sunscreen and donning her big, but sexily mysterious hat, she headed out to the patio overlooking the ocean with the glasses and the pitcher. She sipped her drink and put her head back to soak in the sun.

She'd done it.

Gone to school, taken the bar and gotten her dream job. Working as an assistant attorney general didn't pay as much as working at a big firm, but it was what she wanted to do with her degree. She loved her co-workers, she knew the job and it was actually real! No more studying nonstop. She'd have job stress,

yes, but she could hit the ground running. She knew the law, knew the job, knew the judges and defense attorneys too.

Caitlin was satisfied and not just a little proud of herself.

Her only hesitation was Eamon and where they would go from here. He said they'd talk but she worried he'd put her off like he had before.

Eamon was harried. Annoyed at the person in front of him on the flight who'd found it necessary to recline back into his lap. Who did that? In this day and age, you'd have to be a moron or an asshole not to know any reclining at all would be severely uncomfortable for the person behind you.

Then the resort shuttle had been packed and they'd asked him to wait for the next one. But damn it, Cat was waiting for him in their room and according to the text she'd left on his phone, in a bikini and drinking a margarita as she waited. So he'd said fuck it and got in a cab he'd thought at the time he was fortunate to share with others going to the resort, only the women had hit on him relentlessly the entire twenty minutes until he'd shoved money at the driver and run to get away from them.

But the sight of her rising, her hat shading her face but her bikini not shading much else, had sent all that annoyance far away. She smiled as she removed the hat and then she was in his arms, laughing, turning her face up to receive his kisses.

"There you are. I've got margaritas for us and a dinner reservation made for later. When I checked to be sure your flight arrived, I also ordered up some snacks. How about I scrub your back? Then we can eat."

"How about you get naked? I need to be inside you. Then we can have some drinks and eat some snacks? Or, I'll have a snack of you first, and then we can have food."

She grinned as she untied her top and tossed it to the side. "Sounds like a fine plan."

Once her taste was on his lips again, he felt much better.

Through his camera lens, Eamon watched her move, the gentle sway of her body, her skirt fluttering around her bare legs. Her hair was held back from her face in a high pony tail and the woman she spoke rapid-fire Spanish with at the stall was the perfect counterpoint to Caitlin's pale beauty.

The woman laughed and nodded. Cat put some money on the counter and took the wrapped bundle, calling her "thank you" out as she turned back to Eamon.

"Should of known you'd be snapping pictures. Come on, I just got some fresh *pan dulce*. I think we can grab some coffee at that little café right back there."

There was so much in her, a quiet ferocity for experience, for knowledge and understanding—it called to him, uncoiled something within his soul and dug in deep. He wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing all her vitality and beauty close as they got settled and ordered coffees.

She unwrapped the sweet breads and broke one in half, handing it his way.

“Perfect.” And he meant far more than the bread and coffee.

“She said they’d only come from the oven an hour before.” Cat ate and sipped her coffee; he wanted her so badly his skin itched with it.

“You look especially lovely just at this moment.” He snapped a few photos of her. She’d apparently gotten used to it and tried her best to ignore him. It amused him.

“So. You said we’d talk in Mexico. Here we are, relaxing with some lovely pan dulce and café con leche. I’ve realized a lot of things over the last few months since school ended. Eamon, I want to be with you.”

He softened at what a tenacious little bird she could be. What man wouldn’t be flattered a woman like her wanted him? But she had him, didn’t she know that?

“We *are* together, Caitlin. I told you, I haven’t seen anyone else in over a year. Since my first trip to Seattle when we re-connected. You have me, love.” He slid his thumb over the flesh of her hand just below her thumb, liking the way her lips opened on a soft sigh of pleasure.

“Nonetheless, Eamon. I think our definitions of being together differ. I want a relationship. I want us to be together all the time.”

“I live in Los Angeles. You live in Seattle. How do you propose we get around that?”

“Clearly this will take some creative problem solving on our parts and some hard choices too. We need to look at our situations and see what needs to be done. I know it’ll take some sacrifices but I think we’re worth it, don’t you?”

“We can talk about it more after the summer. Once you have your graduation ceremony we can re-evaluate if necessary. Come on.” He stood and avoided the hurt in her eyes. “We’re supposed to get massages, remember?”

She stood but didn’t take the hand he held out. “You can’t avoid the topic forever. I won’t wait that long,” she said quietly as she walked past.

Two evenings later, they’d had a lovely late dinner and came back to their room. On their deck, they danced under the stars, his lips on her hair, her body lithe against his. Always, when he was with her, a deep sense of satiation and warmth lived within him. He found himself drawing on it when they weren’t together, pulling the memory around himself when he needed the boost to make it through the day.

Words poised on the tip of his tongue but he didn’t let them go. Words about when he’d come back to Seattle or see her again in LA. Of course he’d see her graduate in June but June was four months away.

“I keep meaning to tell you how wonderful it was that you won the grant. Congratulations,” she said lazily, her lips against the bare skin of his throat.

He'd received a grant to work on a program teaching photography to kids at youth centers based in Seattle, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Chicago, Dallas, Boston and Cincinnati along with seventeen others. All people he'd met when he'd stopped over in New York the year before.

"I bet your father would have been over the moon."

He squeezed her a bit tighter. His da would have been very excited and proud. Mainly that Eamon was doing something to help other people but also that it had been a project Eamon himself was excited over.

She got him. She understood him in ways no one ever had.

Their last day was tomorrow and then he'd head back to LA and she to Seattle and her job. The last three days had been so very good. He wasn't sure he'd feel that good again until the next time he had her with him. And that wasn't something he really knew what to make of.

"You feel good. I'm going to miss this after Wednesday." He heard it in her voice, knew the topic would come up again and panic swelled. Why did she want things to change? They were perfect as it was.

"We'll see each other again soon. You don't live that far from me, you know."

"Far enough that this seems a luxury. I don't want time with you to be a luxury. A treat, yes, but not a rarity."

"How about a swim? The moon is full and I haven't seen you wet at night. Well, outside the bedroom anyway."

She laughed but it was laced with sadness as she held her hand out toward him. "You know, you're working so hard to avoid talking about the future. You're probably twisted into a pretzel by now."

"I'm not avoiding talking about the future. I wanted to go for a swim under the moon with my beautiful girlfriend. Is that so wrong?"

She rolled her eyes but they quickly changed into swimsuits and headed down the manicured path to the beach.

Cat was a strong swimmer, confident even at night. He was content to float and watch her move, effortless, graceful, sexy.

The water was warm and the waterfall decorating the edge of the pool they were in sent relaxing white noise into the evening air. She was beautiful in an otherworldly way, the moon sliding over her wet, pale skin.

"Enough swimming. I need to be in you."

His mouth cruised leisurely down her throat. He paused to flick his tongue against her thundering pulse, sucking just a bit before his teeth caught that sensitive skin around the tendon there.

Caitlin couldn't stop the gasp, laden with pleasure and pleas, from escaping her mouth and his chuckle in response sent shivers through her system. He'd made love to her when they'd come back in from the swim, after they'd showered. It had been hard and fast, nearly frenzied on his part. But this time, this time he'd awoken her sometime after two in the morning with slow, lazy kisses, touring her body just how he wanted and she'd opened herself to it.

She shifted, arching into his body, his touch, wanting more. The dark softness of his hair tickled her chin as he sent his kisses down her neck to her chest. Once his tongue danced around her nipple she was lost. Ha! She'd been lost since she heard his voice at that nightclub over a year before. Now she simply fell further, past any place where she felt safe and straight into the kind of love, a depth of need for him she knew she couldn't be silent about anymore.

The weight of his body, heavy, warm, familiar and aching absent until that moment, anchored her with delicious friction. His hands were everywhere at once, caressing, kneading, pressing thighs open and then delving, fingertips swirling around her clit, making her even more wet, making her even more desperate for his cock.

"Please," she gasped out.

He paused for just a moment, his lips leaving a brand against her hip bone, before replacing those questing fingers with his mouth.

Helplessly, she writhed, her hips churning against him, her fingertips scrabbling through the blankets to hold on as orgasm shot through her so hard she felt bruised by it.

His entry into her body was deliciously slow and when she opened her eyes, he was staring at her with such intensity it was nearly magnetic. She wanted to plaster herself to him, skin to skin, heart to heart.

He didn't speak but he didn't need to. She saw it in his eyes, saw that this thing between them was so much more than either of them had bargained for. Desire, longing, a sense of home all tinged with a bit of fear at how fast it had become so very much.

This was nearly too much and yet, not quite enough all at once.

He broke his gaze and dipped his head to taste her mouth again. The kiss tasted of her as his tongue invaded in time with his thrusts.

On it went, Eamon making love to her slowly, kissing her like she was the best-tasting thing in the world. Neither of them made a sound other than a soft gasp or moan.

And when he came at last, as his lashes fell and he looked at her through them, she knew without a doubt. She was in love with Eamon and things could not go on the way they had.

"I love you."

It hadn't hurt to say it. She didn't feel afraid or even worried he'd say it back. It was true no matter what he felt and she'd lived long enough being afraid of what people might think of her feelings. No more being put off. No more fear about what he'd do or say. It couldn't continue this way.

His breathing changed, quickened, and he sat up. She turned on the lamp and sat as well. His normally open features had blanked and her heart dropped. Still she soldiered on because she'd let him put her off enough.

"I can't do this anymore, Eamon."

"What? You just told me you loved me. You have to give me a moment to process." He took her hand, kissing the palm and she allowed herself a moment, eyes closed, to love the gesture, to receive it as his way of responding even if he didn't acknowledge it verbally.

"Process what? This has been between us for over a year. We speak nearly daily. I've shared my hopes and dreams with you. It's not just sex between us. It's not just friendship. We're not dating. It's more than that for me. I love you," she repeated. "I want to be in a relationship with you."

"This is a relationship. Of sorts. Whatever it is, it's good. Why do you want to change it?"

She nodded, trying very hard to stay calm and rational when she wanted to demand he pony up and make a damned decision. "Of sorts is a good way to put it, I suppose. I thought I could keep on rather than let go. I was scared to push so I let you put me off over and over. But in truth, I need more than just a few days here and there. I want to see you more than three times a year."

"I'm not ready for this discussion. For this step, Caitlin. I feel very deeply for you. There's no other woman in my life. There hasn't been since December before last. But I have a condo and a business in Los Angeles and you have a job in Seattle. What do you propose we do about that?"

"Not ready? You can't claim you didn't know this was coming. I've brought it up multiple times. As for what I propose to do about our different situations? Nothing if you're not ready to think about it. Which you clearly aren't. I can't be the source of panic in your life. I don't *want* to be a responsibility or a burden and I don't want to be a decision you make rather than a choice."

"What the feck does that mean? Decision is the same as choice."

It settled into her with horrible and yet certain reality. She had to take a stand here, no matter the outcome. Once she'd finally said the words there was no going back.

"No it isn't. I want you to choose to make your life work to be with me. I'm asking you to make a move to Seattle work. I'm asking *you* to be the one who makes the sacrifice and moves. That's choice. A decision is what you do when you have to take care of an ailing parent. It's borne from responsibility and duty. I want to be a choice. I want you to want to be with me and to make it happen."

"But you want me to do all the work. Because some asshole fucked you over, you won't move for anyone now."

She shook her head, shoving back her frustration, wanting him to hear her. To *understand*. "That's not it and you know it. It may have been at another time. It may have been even a few months ago. I'm willing to make many sacrifices for you. But being reasonable here, let's lay it out. We can *both* have dreams in Seattle. Your business has you traveling all around as it is. I did some research on Seattle's environment for

a small business like yours. It's just as good as Los Angeles considering how international you are anyway. My job is specialized. There aren't a lot of openings for what I do. Add to it the fact that Washington doesn't have reciprocity, meaning I'd have to go through the bar prep all over and essentially start from zero in another state without contacts when I have my dream job here. When you weigh that, my staying and you moving makes sense."

"So now you're making a spreadsheet about my life? So you can have me in Seattle? Because you think you love me?"

She touched his face. "Don't. Don't minimize it. I *know* I love you. I've known for months. But love isn't everything, Eamon. It's not enough." She leaned in and kissed him softly.

"What does that mean?"

"After tomorrow, once we get back home it's over. This isn't enough for me. I need more. I deserve a man who'll choose to be with me."

"What? This is ridiculous. You say you love me and then you break up with me? All because I won't give up my life to be with you? You knew from the beginning that I was based in LA."

"I did." She slid back down into the bed. "If you think moving to Seattle would be giving up your life I really don't want to be with you. I've felt that way and I never want to be the source of anyone else feeling it. Especially you. We can still be friends. I don't want to lose that. I can't imagine you not in my life in some way. But just friends. We'll have one last, lovely day and then we'll both move on."

He got up and began to pace. She desperately wanted to cry but wouldn't. She didn't want him to feel guilty nor did she want to feel like her tears would manipulate him.

"How can you just spring this on me now?"

"Spring it on you? Eamon, that's not fair. I've tried to talk to you about this multiple times over the last few months. You said yourself we'd talk here and then you changed the subject over and over. Would you rather I did it on the phone? Via email? At the airport tomorrow? When is the right time to risk yourself and tell someone you love them and want more?"

"You're giving me an ultimatum. That's fucked up."

She nodded. "I am and yes, it's not fair. I'm sorry. I wish I could keep on this way but I realized as you were inside me just now, when I felt like I'd never been closer to any other person, that I can't. I want all of you and I had to demand it since you wouldn't just talk to me. I don't want a *hey let's get together in two months and have sex for a week* sort of relationship. Not with you. I love you. I want to be with you. I'm not trying to be unfair or unreasonable and yet, I can see why you think I am."

"So you'll let this go? Let us go on? Because I care about you. Deeply. More than I've ever felt for another woman and I don't want to lose what we have."

"No. I mean that part."

He turned, his face plainly wearing the anger and frustration he felt. She *knew* he loved her, he didn't need to say it back for her to know. But there had to be more.

She held her hand out. "Come back to bed. We'll have this last day and when we go home, it'll be as friends. Always that."

"This is wrong, Cat."

She sighed. "I'm sorry you feel that way. I don't want to hurt you. We did this before and we came out just fine. We can do it again."

"Five years ago I didn't feel for you what I do now. You're part of my life. I don't want this." He stalked back to the bed and grabbed her, hauling her against him and inside she broke at the knowledge this would be over in a day. He'd go back to his life, she to hers and there would be nothing else. For a moment, she considered relenting but she had to be strong.

His mouth was on hers, stealing her breath. His hands against her hips, fingers splayed, held her tight to his body as he continued to take from her with sweet, drugging kisses. She drowned in him and didn't bother to try to save herself. She was already lost.

He kissed down her neck, slowly, his hands sliding over her skin, leaving gooseflesh in their wake. They weren't just kisses, he was tasting her, committing her to memory. He wanted to burn himself into her skin, into her soul, blurring out any other man who'd follow.

Eamon wasn't ready to walk away but he couldn't follow either. All it left him with was a desperate need for her, a need for her to know she was his, even if she was with another man.

No other woman would taste this good. He knew it as he drew the flat of his tongue along the seam between her thigh and her body. No other woman's gasp and throaty moan would bring him to his knees the way this one did when his mouth found the sweetness of the folds of her pussy. No other woman would give herself to him this way, opening her thighs, her fingers sliding through his hair, holding him to her.

He loved that she took what she wanted. Loved that she wasn't ashamed with him. He loved that in bed, she was as much a match for him as outside it and he would miss her. God would he miss her. But he didn't give in to ultimatums and he wasn't ready for the next step. As angry as he was, he understood her perspective too.

For now, as the bundle of her clit slid beneath his tongue, as her thighs began to tremble and she cried out his name when she came, for now, she was his and there was nothing else.

He rolled her over, drawing his tongue down her spine, kneading her muscles, making her even more boneless before putting a pillow beneath her hips and entering her in one stroke.

The sheen of sweat on her pale skin shimmered in the light coming through the drawn curtains. Her hair covered her face as she arched back to meet his thrusts. Their timing was perfect. They'd been together so many times, the connection between them was so intense and deep that they were simply in synch.

Her inner walls hugged him, not wanting to let go as he pressed deep and pulled nearly all the way out and then pushed back again. So damned beautiful, so sexy and full of life, she was one of a kind.

And she whispered her “I love you” as he came deep within her.

Their last day was bittersweet. She seemed determined to put on a happy face and pretend nothing was wrong but damn it, his life was crashing down around his ears and he didn’t want to pretend.

He sat across from her in one of the resort restaurants and greedily took in the way she held her glass, the way the breeze caught a loose tendril of her hair and dragged it over her face.

“We don’t have to do this. We can put off deciding until after June when you’re graduated and everything.”

“I’m graduated now. I just haven’t walked in the ceremony. Besides, what difference will it make? I’ll just lose my heart in four months instead of tomorrow. The thing is, no matter how much it hurts for me to admit it, you’re not ready or willing to choose me. And that’s, well it is what it is. I’d say I didn’t blame you, but that’s a lie. I want to be enough for you. But I really, really don’t want to rehash this now unless you have something different to say. This is our last dinner together and I don’t want it spoiled by beating this dead horse any more dead.”

If he didn’t know her any better, he’d think she was so remarkably cool and calm, but he saw the faint tremble in her lips as she spoke, the sheen of unspent tears in her eyes and he couldn’t take it.

“Damn it, if it hurts you so much to do this, why are you doing it?” He stood, tossing his napkin aside. “I don’t want to break up. You clearly don’t want to leave me either. Tell me why we’re doing this!”

“Because I can’t go on living half a life. I’ve reached a place where I can live a full life and when I was with you last night I realized how alive I am when I’m with you and I compared it to how I feel as if I’m living half a life when we’re apart. I just admitted to myself that I can’t go on this way.” She took her glasses off and wiped her eyes. “I’m telling you that I love you enough to let you choose to not be with me. And I respect myself enough to want more than a long-distance relationship with a man who can’t even tell me he loves me out loud when he obviously does.”

“This is bullshit.” He tossed some money down and stalked away from the table. “I’m not playing this game with you!” he called out as he walked away.

She watched his retreating back and finally gave over to the tears she’d only shed in the shower. She put her head down on the table and wept.

And by the time she got back to the room, he’d packed his things and gone.

She read his note, his scrawl familiar and painful to see. He couldn’t stay and face the situation. He didn’t think there was anything left to say. He’d gone back home early and he hoped they could speak again in a month or so. As friends.

Anh opened her door and took one look at Caitlin before simply opening her arms and hugging her tight.

After Vittorio made her cocoa laced liberally with Kahlua, she tucked up on their couch and spilled the entire story.

"I know it was sudden. I feel like a bitch. But it just, I love him so much and it felt like a lie every time I tried to talk to him about the future and he evaded me. It hurt to leave him every time, more each time. Maybe I'm asking too much. Maybe he's right and I should move. Maybe this is all about Adam and me not wanting to move."

"In the first place, when is the right time to have that discussion? You've tried to bring it up multiple times over the last months. He's put you off over and over. In the second place, he fucking *left* you in Mexico? I ought to fly down to LA and kick his ass. What sort of man does that?" Vittorio fumed. He never fumed! He rarely said much of anything about Caitlin's personal life, leaving it to Anh to say what needed saying. "And lastly, *cara*, this might have some roots with Adam, after all, you do know what it feels like to give up everything for someone. But he's not giving up everything. Much of his work *is* portable whereas yours is not. This new project will have him traveling even more you said. He can take wedding pictures in Seattle as easily as in Los Angeles. He can fly to New York from Sea Tac just as easily as he can from LAX. Being with someone means you give things up when they can't as easily, so the next time *they* make the sacrifice."

Anh butted in. "And why is it always the woman who has to move? Who has to give up her job for the man? That's what you'd be doing. You'd be less than a 1L law student if you gave up this job now. You'd have to start over in California. Sure, the law is comparable in many ways for abuse and neglect. But they've got their own interns grooming for those spots. And you'd have to take the bar there, which means more time off. You'd be set back years for this move; conversely, he's got contacts here and all over the damned world. Adam was a powerful object lesson but this is not about Adam. This is about you and Eamon. I'm sorry. I am. You're amazing and wonderful and why on earth he's not running to you, I don't know."

"He didn't abandon me," Caitlin said, her voice thick with tears. "He left a note. He's hurting and he didn't feel like there was anything else to be said. I had a way to the airport. He knew that. I just don't want either of you to think he'd harm me or endanger me in any way. He's not like that. He's a good man."

"He's a moron." Anh stood. "Come on. Guest room with you. Tomorrow Vittorio will make waffles and bacon and we'll go shopping. You don't need to be alone."

Vittorio caught her looking at the front door. "Don't even think about it. Let us be here for you."

She let Anh lead her into the guest room while Vittorio got her suitcase from her trunk. She thought she'd be awake all night but after the way she'd cried pretty much for the last twenty-four hours and the Kahlua in the cocoa, she was out once she snuggled down under the blankets and closed her eyes.

"You did what?" Laura demanded, mouth hanging open. "You left Mexico early? You left the best thing that's ever happened to you in a foreign country on her own? You just let her go? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Why are you taking her side? You were on my side a few months back, remember? You said she should move here! Anyway, I told you, she gave me an ultimatum that I had to move there. I have a business here and I don't like ultimatums. Plus, who the fuck says I want to be in a permanent relationship? No, it's better this way. I called the resort to be sure she had a shuttle to the airport. I just checked and her flight arrived in Seattle without incident last night. I didn't leave her on her own anywhere. She got there on her own and she's a big girl, quite capable of getting home."

Laura shook her head at him. "I've never taken you for stupid. But Eamon, this is stupid. Beyond stupid. She's perfect for you. Smart, beautiful, independent. You'd never have a dependent, you'd have a partner. You love her. I know you do."

"She wants me to move up there! She refuses to come down here. How much does she love me?"

"I know I was on your side. At first. But I've gotten to know her and know her situation over the last year and a half. Michael moved to an entirely different country for me because he could do his job anywhere and my parents needed my attention. Look, I love you and Michael and I love having you here with us. But you can be a photographer in Seattle just as easily as here. I know contacts are hard to come by, but, well, your contacts are nationwide anyway. You can move there and have your business. You expect her to move here? To start over where she was three years ago and build contacts all over again? Retake the bar here? Get a new job when she's got her dream job there? The question is, if you love her, why would you want her to throw all that away when you moving would be the simplest thing? You love Seattle, you told me that many times."

"I'm done having this discussion. No one gives me ultimatums." He got up and left the room. He would get over her.

Chapter Eleven

Caitlin settled into her new life the best she could. Her job kept her busy enough and now that she had time, she allowed herself to build a social life.

She and Amy had just had dinner and Caitlin had walked home from a very lively table, still drinking, when her phone rang and she noted the area code.

Taking a deep breath, she sat and picked up.

“Hello?” She knew it was him but she couldn’t bear to act that way.

“Hi. I’ve missed talking to you and I’m sorry I didn’t call you back. I was pouting.”

She’d called him two weeks before, a month after they’d returned from Mexico and had left a message. It had killed her each day when he hadn’t called back. She felt the slap of that inattention more than when he’d left Mexico earlier.

She licked her lips, not quite knowing what to say.

“I’m sorry. I was an asshole. We’re friends.”

“I’m sorry you were hurt.”

“How’s work?”

“Good. I have an office now.” She laughed and began to relax as she told him about her job, about her cases and her day-to-day life.

Something was missing, she realized. That spark between them, the easy give and take they’d had and she wondered, sadly, if they’d ever truly be the kind of friends they’d been before.

“How’s your work?”

“I just got back from visiting two of the program sites for the grant. It was good, you know? These kids, some of them have nothing but they protect the cameras the program loans them. They’re more careful with their equipment than most people who photograph professionally. I’m impressed. By them and the instructors.”

“Good, kids need that. I’m proud of you for doing it. How are Michael and Laura?”

“They’re fine, they send their love and ask after you. Laura frowns at me a lot.”

“How are you?”

“I’m all right. I went on a date the other day.”

Well, that was unexpected. Well, not entirely, she knew he’d start seeing other women eventually but Christ, it had only been six weeks.

“Oh.”

“It wasn’t...nothing happened. It was stupid. I thought I could get past things. But. Anyway.”

“I have to go. I’m glad you called. I’ll talk to you later.” She couldn’t deal. Her heart was breaking and she just couldn’t hear his voice another moment. Tears pricked her eyes, swelling her throat.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I told you that. It wasn’t anything, I swear to you.”

“Have a good night, Eamon.” She hung up and sobbed, ignoring the phone when it rang moments later.

That was fucking clever. Eamon put the phone down after he left another apology on her voice mail. Why had he told her about the date? The tears in her voice were unmistakable and he was an asshole because for one brief moment, he’d been satisfied that she was in as much emotional turmoil as he’d been.

He scrubbed his hands through hair that was far too long. He needed a haircut and probably a shave too. He’d been utterly and completely miserable since he’d come back from Mexico.

In a moment of loneliness, he’d let a mutual friend fix him up with a woman he’d have gone for before Caitlin. But their date had been pure hell. She’d been one dimensional. Nice, pretty, great breasts, but shallow and silly and...not Caitlin.

His problem was that no one but Caitlin was Caitlin. No other women could be her. Could he live with that?

He grabbed his wallet and his phone and headed over to Laura and Michael’s.

“Caitlin, please don’t take this the wrong way, I don’t want to hurt your feelings. But he’s moving on. He’s dating and he told you about it. *The prick*. You can wallow around or you can move on too. It’s a date. Dinner. With a handsome man who is into you. The drawbacks to this are what exactly?” Anh asked Caitlin over a cup of coffee in the Starbucks down the street from the courthouse. Months had passed since she and Eamon had split but she just didn’t think she could let go.

“I am not ready for a relationship. I’m still in love with Eamon.”

“I didn’t say you were getting married. I said it was dinner. Vittorio’s brother knows you’re on the rebound. He’s going to take it slow. Cat, he’s Italian and hotter than the sun! Come on, he looks a lot like Vittorio only not quite as handsome and he can’t cook. But, so what? It’s dinner. Honey, I don’t want you hurting, but that’s scorched earth. Live your life. You’re beautiful, you have a good job, you’re smart, you have excellent taste in friends. Well, except for Amy, but whatever.”

She sighed. Amy. God, her friend had gone off to Europe to follow Nathan. No good could come of that. She’d tried to say so as diplomatically as she could but Amy didn’t want to hear it. Chances were, Nathan was off fucking Eurotrash and Amy would stumble across it and come home heartbroken. Again.

God. Was Caitlin becoming Amy?

"All right. Give him the okay to call me."

Anh smiled. "Yay!"

Two days later, Angelo called and she agreed to go to dinner with him the following Friday.

And right after she hung up, Eamon called.

"I forgot to thank you," he said without ceremony.

"For what?"

"You sent me a birthday card and a present in March and I never said thank you. I drink from the mug every day. I can't believe you remembered how much I love dragonflies."

She'd seen the ceramic travel mug on one of her many two-hour strolls through the galleries at etsy.com and had bought it for him on a whim. When she'd sent it and he never responded, she let it be one more indicator things were over between them forever.

"I'm glad you like it."

She sort of felt guilty speaking to him just then. But fuck it, he started dating already, why should she feel bad? She was the one who told him she loved him. She was the one who practically begged him to be with her. And he'd walked away.

"What are you up to?"

"Not much. Just got home an hour or so ago. Had some dinner. I was trying to decide between reading and watching a DVD. And you?"

"I'm traveling just now so I'm in a hotel room. I've been thinking about you and thought I should call. I've missed the easiness we had before. I know I didn't help that with the comment I made about the date."

"I have to get used to it. I have to accept it. If we're to be friends, I have to accept that you'll date. I mean, you'll have to accept that too."

"I'm not dating. I had one date. It didn't feel right. And what do you mean I'll have to accept it? Accept what?"

"Me dating too."

He got quiet for long moments and then gave one of those Irish sounds, a cross between a derisive snort and an exhalation of disbelief. It made her smile.

"I don't have to accept anything. Including the idea that we can't be together anymore."

"Which must be why you went on a date. Two weeks ago. Right after I called you and you decided to ignore me." He was seriously pissing her off.

His Irish got up, thickening his accent and it only made him sexier. She wanted to kick him in the balls.

"One date. I told you, you infuriatingly beautiful woman, it was horrible. She was pretty but dumb. You are beautiful and intelligent. Why would I want anything else?"

“Yes, that’s the question, isn’t it?”

“Why is it, even when we’re fighting, you make me smile?”

“It’s a gift.”

A ruckus sounded in the background.

“What’s going on?”

“Fecking fire alarm. I hate hotels. Well, love, I’m going to hang up so I can stand outside for an hour while the fire department shows up and then they tell us it was a false alarm. I’ll be calling you soon.”

“Get the fuck out of there. What if it isn’t a false alarm? Go! People die in hotel fires. If you’re one of them, I’ll dig you up and kill you again.”

He laughed and curse him, her nipples hardened.

“You still care.”

“I love you, you stupid, selfish, dumbass Irishman. Now get the hell out of that building!” She hung up, pissed off and worried. He’d leave now and hopefully take the stairs. Moron.

“I was on my cell phone, you ridiculously gorgeous American,” he said faintly as he walked down the hall toward the stairwell. “And I love you too.”

He had work to do over the next few days and he wasn’t about to let a little thing like a fire alarm get in his way.

Eamon adjusted his tie and headed out of the elevator toward the front desk. The receptionist looked him up and down and smiled.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for Caitlin Moore. She’s with the SHS Division.”

“Just a moment.” She made a call and turned back to him. “She’s not available.”

“How about Anh Mancuso?”

“Let me try. Can I tell her who’s asking for her?”

“Eamon Blake.”

Three minutes later the tiny, and furious, woman burst through a side door.

“What in blue blazes are you doing here?”

“Hello, Anh, it’s lovely to see you. I’m here to talk to Cat but it seems she’s unavailable. I thought you might be able to help me.”

“Why should I give a tinker’s damn what you want, you fucking heartbreaking asshole?”

"I've not heard that phrase in a long time. The tinker's damn one, asshole I'm afraid I hear more often." He bowed. "Begging your pardon but I need to see Caitlin. I have to make amends. I'm here to set things right."

"You're too late! You abandon her in Mexico, tell her you're dating, making her cry again and again. In case you haven't noticed it's May! May! You two broke up in late February. Your statute of limitations has passed."

He sighed. He deserved her anger and more, he knew. But he didn't need to make amends with her, he needed to make them to Caitlin. And he said so.

"Too bad. I'm not telling you shit until you give me a reason."

Hat in hand, teeth clenched, he told her.

She looked him up and down for long, silent moments until the receptionist coughed behind them.

"Come on, Ms. Mancuso, give the guy a break. Caitlin obvs loves him. She's been shuffling around here like a zombie, totally unaware of how many dudes are checking out her goodies." The receptionist looked at him and shook her head. "Caitlin is totally hot. You could lose her. Dudes hit on her all the time. If you make her cry again, I'm going to be totally mad at you and then Ms. Mancuso will make my life hell for making her tell you where Caitlin is right now."

"Obvs?"

Anh shook her head. "Obviously. She's on a date, Eamon. With my brother-in-law who has been hot for her for three years. Oh get that look off your face. You told her you were dating. And, I had to force her by reminding her of that fact. I'm not proud, but she needed to move on." She turned and wrote down the address and name of the restaurant. "They're here. Don't make me hunt you down and remove your penis with a rusty spoon."

He winced and headed back to the elevator.

"Um, thanks. I won't."

Christ, the woman was scary.

Almost as scary as Caitlin on a date. Not with him.

He rushed out onto the street and found a cab a block later.

Caitlin sat looking out the windows over the water of Puget Sound. The restaurant was beautiful. The scenery was beautiful and Angelo was undoubtedly beautiful. Why she felt like crying she didn't know.

She sighed. Okay so she did. She didn't want this. Instead, she wanted a man who didn't want her and that made her such a fool.

"Shall I get the check? It's obvious you're not ready. I thought I could cheer you up but you're still gone for this guy, aren't you?" Angelo took her hand, his face kind.

"I'm sorry. I'm so rude. I feel like a total cliché but it's not you at all. I'm used to feeling in control, I'm used to getting over things and moving on but I can't seem to let go." She wanted to hate Eamon but she didn't. They still had a friendship but it lacked the depth of intimacy they'd enjoyed before.

"This guy is such a fool to not snap you up. But you can't force yourself to be ready to move on. Maybe with some time, he'll figure it out."

"Yeah. It's hopeless. He..."

"Caitlin Moira Moore, what are you doing out with a strange man when your man is right here?"

Her head snapped up and openmouthed, she watched Eamon approach, looking better than she'd ever dreamed. He'd nearly shouted it as he entered so the whole restaurant had come to a complete stop to watch the scene unfold.

She couldn't blame them. He was by far the most breathtaking man she'd ever seen, the light of a mission in his eyes. A shiver went down her spine even as she steeled herself against disappointment.

"I...I had a man but he walked away from me." She swallowed hard.

"I was a fucking idiot. Here." He tossed her...a set of keys? Should she be happy? Mad? What the fuck? When he got to his knees before her, she swayed toward the happy camp. "Cat, darlin', will you marry me?" That did it.

She stared at him, totally speechless.

"Keys?" she squeaked out, dangling the key ring limply in her hand.

"They're a metaphor. Work with me here." He sent her a rueful smile. "I was wrong. Lost without you. Because you have my heart, Cat. You own it." He kissed her hand. "I've sold my condo in LA. I'm here for you. There's nowhere I can be truly at home without you with me. Will you help us find a place here in Seattle? A place we can both work with? Studio space for me, a decent commute for you? Be with me, Caitlin. Be my wife. End the lonely misery I've endured since February when we split. Let's build a life together. Please."

He wasn't asking her to give anything up. He was meeting her more than halfway. He was *choosing* her, choosing a life *with* her and there was nothing in the world she wanted more than to be with him.

She leapt from her seat and into his lap, knocking them both over in the process. She rained kisses all over his face as he laughed, not letting go. Not letting go.

"Is that a yes then?"

"Yes. Yes!"

"Aye, I love you so much, Caitlin. I've loved you for a long time and when you weren't in my life every day, everything went all gray."

"That's really good." She nodded, helping him up.

"This is even better." He pulled a ring from his pocket and slid it on her finger.

“Oh, you’re right.” She turned and remembered Angelo. Mortification swept through her. “Ohmigod, I’m so sorry. Eamon, this is Angelo Mancuso, Anh’s brother-in-law.”

Angelo smiled and stood. “No apologies necessary, Caitlin.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek. Eamon’s grip on her tightened. “I was wondering if this jerk would come to his senses. Vittorio owes me twenty bucks.” He turned to Eamon and gave him the once over. “Do you have her? You’ll get her home safely? If so, I’ll be on my way.”

“I’ll be taking care of her from now on. Thank you.” Some sort of uber secret man language thing passed between them and God help her, she thought it was cute.

“You’d better. Because if you slip up, I’ll be back.” He blew a kiss at Caitlin and turned to leave as Eamon pulled her into a hug again and she didn’t ever want to let go.

“On a date.” He snorted, kissing her soundly, letting her pull back a bit so she could look up at him.

“You went on a date first! Anyway, he wasn’t you.”

“Got that right. Come on back to your place so I can spread you out and show you just how much no one but me is me.”

Chapter Twelve

Big, fat flakes of pretty white snow drifted softly from the sky. They danced against the panes of glass and Caitlin snuggled into his side, seeking warmth. Her toes were tucked between his feet, warm in those fuzzy socks she always wore.

“You’re awake then?”

“You’re asking so you can have sex?” He felt the upturn of her mouth as she nuzzled his neck.

“I don’t like to have sex with a sleeping woman. Even if she is my wife. I prefer for her to be awake since I like those little sounds she makes.”

“I like you saying I’m your wife.” She turned to her back and looked up at him, those sexy eyes of hers full of emotion. His heart squeezed a moment at the thought of how close he’d come to losing her just months before. And here she wore his ring. Here she lay against him in his old bedroom just above the pub where they first met. Christmas in Dublin as a honeymoon.

He had no complaints.

“I like saying it. Are you warm enough, love?”

She reached down and grabbed his cock, squeezing just hard enough to make her point. “Warm me up then.”

He left the thin, silk long-sleeved shirt on her skin, grazing her nipples through it with his teeth, loving the way she writhed against him, murmuring her appreciation.

Her hands, his wife’s hands, slid up, beneath his own long-sleeved shirt, and caressed the muscles of his back, holding him to her tightly. As if he’d ever let go.

Caitlin scrambled atop his body and guided him to her entrance, barely leashing her impatience to have him inside her. He’d insisted on making her come twice already, once with his mouth, another time with his fingers and while it had been lovely, she’d wanted the closeness of this.

This.

The intimacy of her body harboring his, of the throb of his cock inside her. The pulsebeat in her inner thigh played against the taut, warm skin of his hip as she began to rock against him, keeping him deep.

It had been two years since they’d reconnected and it felt like a lifetime had passed. The highs of falling so deeply he’d become like breathing, and the desperate months when she’d lost him and was alone—all made every moment they shared so much more important.

He was a naughty sight beneath her. His mouth curled into a smile, eyes dancing, his hair mussed up in only the way sex can do. Eamon was so beautifully masculine, so sexy and wicked, she often found herself wandering into his studio attached to their home to just watch him.

He was hers. While he flirted with and teased every woman he came across, there was a light in his eyes that was hers alone. All her life she'd waited for someone to look at her the way Eamon did, to know she was adored and respected, to know a man as incredible as him wanted her and no other.

She belonged. He was her family in a way she'd ached for since her grandmother had died when Caitlin was a young girl. He accepted her, ambition and all, he completed her without leaving her incomplete. She leaned on him but he trusted her ability to stand on her own. No one else had really understood how much she needed that. No one but him.

Eamon looked up at her, her neck gleamed pale and soft in the light from the open window, her head fell back, her spine arched to take him as deeply as she could. Her scent married with his, bringing his senses to life.

His beautiful Caitlin.

He lost his mind every time he got near her, every time he thought of her. He wanted to touch her, to see the way she smiled, to hear her laugh. She occupied the space in their home the way she occupied space in their relationship, she shared with him and he knew how blessed that made him. She didn't have to, she could do just fine without him but she *wanted* him in her life as he'd wanted her.

"That's the way, love," he murmured as his climax approached. She leaned forward, bracing herself with her hands on his biceps, grinding her clit against his pubic bone.

Pleasure spilled between them, around them as her gasped kiss against his mouth took the breath of his groan.

"I love you."

"Aye, me too. I love you too, Cat."

She'd stood in Anh's fine living room and had agreed to be his wife in front of their assorted friends and family. The ceremony had been simple and elegant, just like she was. Her parents had flown out from Boston and had taken an instant dislike to Eamon. The feeling had been entirely mutual but together with Anh and Amy, he'd done all he could to shield Cat from any negativity.

And now, three weeks later she'd said she took him as her husband yet again down at St. Matthew's with his mother looking on, smiling like she'd never been prouder. Caitlin had learned the Gaelic parts just for him, as a sort of gift and he'd had to snuffle back a tear or two when she's surprised him at the ceremony.

Michael and Laura had flown over and were staying across the hall. Laura had announced her pregnancy the night before at dinner. His sister and brother-in-law had come along with the children and his mother and aunts had made a dinner to rival anything he'd seen in many years.

Caitlin fit here too. She wasn't a loud, boisterous woman like his sister was, but she'd pitched in behind the bar pulling pints the first night they'd arrived when it got busy, she'd wiped down tables and had let his mother show her how to knit, even if she'd been an utter failure at it.

She accepted him, loved his drive, loved it when he'd come back from his trips and had shown her what he'd learned and done through his photographs. She made room for his passions, accepted that they would be part of their relationship just as her passions were.

That part he'd discovered she fed and sated, that part within him she'd always satisfied, wanted to purr its satisfaction as she returned from the small bathroom and moved to get dressed.

"Come back to bed."

"Be quiet, you. You promised your family we'd all have breakfast at your gran's, remember? We need to get moving. There's plenty of time for sex when we get back. I like having you here in this room with your football trophies on the shelves. I feel as if I'm debauching you."

He laughed as he rolled from the bed but then sucked in a deep breath at the cooler air. "Damn but it's cold!"

"Good luck on getting any hot water, by the way. Looks like you need a cold one anyway." She indicated his reviving cock with a tip of her chin and a saucy grin. "You'd think a man your age would be slowing down."

She laughed, ducking the pair of pants he tossed at her head with a theatrical growl. "My age indeed. I've got plenty of energy, I'll have you know."

"I do know. I can't wait to test that theory over the next three or four decades." She ducked out, her laughter floating back up the stairs as he headed toward the bathroom.

"Always," he called back to her and knew nothing had ever been more true.

About the Author

To learn more about Lauren Dane, please visit www.laurendane.com. Send an email to Lauren at laurendane@laurendane.com or stop by her messageboard to join in the fun with other readers as well. www.laurendane.com/messageboard

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Just when the darkness seems permanent, fate flips a switch.

Butterfly Tattoo

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Michael Warner has been drifting in a numb haze since his lover was killed by a drunk driver. As the anniversary of the wreck approaches, Michael's grief grows more suffocating. Yet he must find a way through the maze of pain and secrets to live for their troubled young daughter who struggles with guilt that she survived the crash.

Out of the darkness comes a voice, a lifeline he never expected to find—Rebecca O'Neill, a development executive in the studio where Michael works as an electrician.

Rebecca, a former sitcom celebrity left scarred from a crazed fan's attack, has retreated from the limelight and from life in general, certain no man can ever get past her disfigurement. The instant sparks between her and Michael, who arrives to help her during a power outage, come as a complete surprise—and so does her uncanny bond with his daughter.

For the first time, all three feel compelled to examine their inner and outer scars in the light of love. But trust is hard to come by, especially when you're not sure what to believe when you look in the mirror. The scars? Or the truth?

Warning: This title contains a three-hankie redemptive romance, a man with a complicated past, a heroine who's stronger than she knows, and tender, explicit sex scenes that may just break your heart—and make you believe in love once again.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Butterfly Tattoo:

A loud banging sound jars me right out of my seat. For a moment I do nothing, remembering the earlier sensation of someone following me. My heart thunders, causing my chest to rise in quick panting breaths of fear. Nobody should be knocking on the bungalow door on a Saturday. Nobody.

Carefully, I step away from my desk and into the hallway, and glimpse a large stranger there at the door. He's leaning close, shielding his eyes to look inside; I swallow hard to calm the fear, walking toward the intercom with cautious determination.

"Yes?" I say into the speaker, and the man steps back. He sees me and gives an uncertain wave, then hits the exterior intercom button. I don't recognize him, and that he looks a little rough and slouchy only unsettles me all the more.

"Ms. O'Neill?"

"Yes?" I repeat, more firmly this time. *Who is this man? How does he know me?*

"Um, it's Michael Warner." He sounds vaguely apologetic as he removes a baseball cap and mops his brow. "Sorry to bother you." That's when I recognize him as the electrician from yesterday. I sigh in relief,

and open the door a crack, though not all the way. Although he's not a stranger, I'm still jumpy from the adrenaline rush.

"Sorry, I didn't really think about how much of an intrusion this might be." He gives me a slight smile. God, he may be slouchy today, but he's even more beautiful in the shocking daylight, especially his eyes, which are an unusual golden brown color. He has the kind of intense gaze that penetrates you on the molecular level, and I blink beneath it.

"No problem." I swallow hard. "What's up?"

"Just wondering if the power is working okay? Any more trouble?" Now this seems like a thinly veiled excuse to me. All the feelings from yesterday, the sense that some kind of connection was forming between us, well it all comes rushing back, as I lean my head sideways against the doorframe. Maybe that way he won't notice the scars so much.

"You know, it's going great," I answer brightly, forcing myself *not* to smile at him. Instead I hope he'll see enthusiasm flickering in my eyes, even as I wrap my arms around myself protectively.

"You mind?" He gestures over my shoulder, toward the interior of the building. "You know, if I come in? Just for a second."

Without meaning to, I stare back at him. Maybe because I'm surprised at how direct he's being, or even more likely because I'm getting a really strange vibe from him. Like he's interested in me, but not quite sure how to go about it. I wish I'd gotten a clearer answer about his marital status from Andrea yesterday. As sexy as he is, I'm not down with seeing a married man, and if he *is* married, I'm feeling way too much attraction flickering between us.

"Ms. O'Neill?" The brown eyes narrow a bit, as uncertainty flashes across his face.

"Sure, sure, come on in," I rush to say, opening the door wide. "Where's my southern hospitality when I need it most?"

"Back in Georgia?" he says, shoving his hands deep into his jeans pockets as I fasten the lock back in place.

"Let's hope not." I break into a true smile, and I feel the way the muscles pull at the corners of my mouth. God, why does he light me up this way? And he gives me such a glorious smile in return, one that fills his whole face.

"Sorry for being a little cautious," I say in embarrassment. "It kind of weirds me out being here alone on the weekends, that's all. It's creepy quiet."

"You didn't recognize me?" He seems genuinely surprised, and I don't want to admit that he looks a little more ragged than I pictured him being, wearing old jeans and a faded Harley Davidson shirt. Still, he's undeniably handsome, with those keen brown eyes that transmit so much energy.

"Well, it was dark yesterday, you know." I lead him into my office.

His voice gets softer, fuller. “But I recognized *you*.” I don’t know how to respond to that, so I nod, my ponytail bobbing rhythmically. I feel him behind me, his presence; am aware of his body and how tall he is, as he shadows me all the way into my office.

“Please, sit down.” I make my way to the other side of my desk. Maybe if I stick to my usual professional role, I can regain my composure here. I run a smoothing palm down the front of my khakis as I primly take my seat. Then, folding my hands in front of me, sitting very upright, I meet his magnetic, golden-eyed gaze. Oh, yes, he’s too beautiful for me—by many long miles. Plus, he’s got to be married.

Surreptitiously, I glance at his hand, but it’s obscured behind the stack of manuscripts on my desk. Okay, no answer to the Big Question yet.

“So.” I clear my throat. “What’re you doing here on a Saturday? Don’t tell me you’re this dedicated to keeping my lights on.” As soon as the double entendre is out of my mouth, I regret its accidental escape. Thank God Michael doesn’t even seem to notice.

“Oh,” is all he says, like he hadn’t thought about it before now. “Just forgot my paycheck, that’s all.”

He reaches absently for a paperweight on the corner of my desk, moving it from hand to hand, which is when I begin to wonder precisely why he’s come to visit me. He looks down at the domed glass, studying the picture within. “Your family?”

I wince because it’s an old picture of me, one that predates my attack. No scars, just me—as beautiful, I suppose, as I once used to be. “Yeah, me and my parents.”

He squints down at the magnified image, studying it intently. I notice the way the edges of his eyes crinkle into smile lines.

“Horse farm?” He turns the picture toward me, although I know the image by heart.

“I was raised on one, yes.” I’m not sure why, but I don’t want to reveal anything personal—at least not anything more than he’s already gotten out of me. Certainly not that my retired parents live just a few miles away, over in Santa Monica, or that they came here three years ago to nurse me back from the brink.

He returns my paperweight to my desk guiltily, giving it a reassuring pat. Again, I wonder precisely why Michael Warner has come to see me, why he keeps fidgeting this way. I try a new tack. “Andrea is a precious girl. We had a really good time yesterday.”

“That’s what I heard. Can’t tell you how much I appreciate what you did.”

“It was nothing.”

He looks intensely at me. “No, that’s not true. It was really important to her.” His voice grows quieter. “And me.”

“Well, your stepdaughter was an angel.”

“My stepdaughter,” he repeats, frowning.

“Well isn’t she? That’s what she told me.”

His whole expression darkens like a storm cloud. “Actually Andrea’s why I wanted to see you today. Don’t know how to ask this, so I’ll just do it.” Those words always seem to pave the way for bad news, and I tense immediately. “Did Andie mention her scar?”

I relax again, relieved to know what’s on his mind. “A little, yeah.”

“What about the accident? Did she talk any about that?”

I shake my head no, and it hurts me the way his face kind of falls. “Oh, okay.” He nods thoughtfully, the thick dark brows knitting together into a melancholy scowl. “I had hoped maybe so.”

“What happened to her?”

His gaze tracks back to me. “She was in a bad car accident. Something she doesn’t talk about much,” he admits. “Hasn’t talked to anyone about it, honestly. It was pretty traumatic.”

“I see.” I’m starting to understand now. I’m also starting to understand why it was so hard for him to come to me, the awkwardness in his approach. Without even trying, I apparently did what nobody else has been able to do. “You wanted to know what she said to me.”

“That’s right, Ms. O’Neill.”

“Rebecca.”

I see him studying my scars: it’s in the slight, unobtrusive way the eyes shift sideways, then dart back again. I see it every day, especially around here. Nobody has the courage to ask, yet they all wonder what happened to leave me looking this way.

Michael rises unexpectedly to his feet, sliding his baseball cap onto his head decisively. “Want to go grab some coffee?”

“Now?”

“I’m going over to Borders on La Cienega. We can get some there.” Again the winning smile, accented by a single dimple that I hadn’t noticed before, and I completely cave. He’s got me in the palm of his hand already, damn it. I can’t believe that he’s seen the visible scars, but he’s just asked me out anyway.

“I’ll follow you there.”

The trouble is, if I’m not careful, I know I just might follow him anywhere. Oh, please, please, don’t be married, Michael Warner.

"Heard this one's interesting." From the shelf, he removes a face-out copy of Julian Kingsley's recent novel *Beautiful, But Me*. What editorial genius thought *that* title was a good idea?

“I don’t care for the guy.”

He turns to me in clear surprise. “You know him?”

“Well.” I sigh, taking the book out of his hand, studying the expensively designed dust jacket, inlaid with gold foil. “Let’s just say he broke my best friend’s heart.”

“Guess she hates him, huh?”

“Actually, *he* doesn’t.” I flip over the book to reveal Julian’s disgustingly perfect author photo on the back of the cover. Another good reason to loathe him: no man should be so absolutely gorgeous. Who knows? Maybe this latest title’s directed to the world at large as a form of honest apology.

“Oooh, he does look like a heartbreaker.” He gives a strange kind of laugh that I don’t quite know how to read. I think of Trevor’s first assessment of Michael, that he was gay. Because I can’t imagine that most straight guys would describe Julian as a “heartbreaker”.

Once again, I cast a covert glance at his ring finger, curious. Only this time I don’t like what I see—a silver band glinting beneath the streamlined bookstore lights. “Would your wife think so, too?”

“I’m sorry?” The bushy dark eyebrows draw together in genuine confusion.

“Your wife,” I repeat firmly, this time gesturing toward his hand. “You are married, right?” I ask, folding my arms across my chest. No guy’s going to play me, no sir. “You’ve got a wedding band on, after all.”

He stares down at his hand, extending his fingers as if he’s never noticed the ring before, and I’m cool as possible, proud of myself for having been a smart girl, until he answers softly, “Uh, widowed. Actually.”

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry,” I blurt, feeling embarrassed and sad all at once. Sad because of the dark pain that fills his eyes. It’s so obvious, only a fool could miss it.

“No, I’m glad you asked.” He picks up another copy of Julian’s book absently. “Wouldn’t want you to think I was playing around or anything.”

“I didn’t.”

“‘Cause I’m not that kind of guy,” he presses, offering me a gentle smile. The thing is, I don’t know precisely what kind of guy he is. A melancholy one. A beautiful one. My kind of guy... maybe. With that quiet realization, I give my ponytail an anxious tug as he leans close, lowering his voice. “But that doesn’t explain what *you’re* doing, Rebecca O’Neill.”

“Me?”

He gestures toward the floor, at my sandal-clad feet. “You’re clearly off the market.” I stare down, confused, until I realize he’s pointing at my silver toe ring, a series of hearts knit together, circling my second digit. “You’re wearing a band, yet you’re talking to me in a bookstore.” He laughs low and throatily. “Unchaperoned, at that.”

“We’re downright risqué.”

“So that is your ring toe?” he asks, studying me closely. “Like your ring *finger*?”

“Oh, the same general rules apply for feet.” I giggle, staring at the floor. “My foot is happily spoken for, thank you very much.”

“Who’s the lucky guy? He wearing a band inside his loafer? Did the pair of you *run* off to Vegas together?”

“Who says it’s a wedding ring?” I tease, avoiding his gaze. “Maybe Foot is only engaged.”

“True,” he observes. “Foot is very sexy, so I can’t blame the guy, but I do think she’s worthy of true commitment.”

I haven’t felt this beautiful in years.

I glance upward shyly. Lord, he’s tall, too—I hadn’t realized just how tall until now, when I find myself craning upward to meet his dark gaze. “Truth is,” I say, rising to my full five feet two inches of height. “Toe thinks she’s Cinderella, and she’s still searching for her glass slipper.”

“It’s good to dream,” he says, but sadness veils his eyes again despite our repartee. I wonder if his wife loved fairy tales. I wonder if she believed in happily-ever-after, like I used to once upon a time.

And I wonder if it’s still good for me to dream. Because standing here with Michael Warner, some lost part of me thinks that maybe it is.

“Do you?” I ask, surprising even myself with my directness. “Dream, I mean?”

A scowl forms on his face as he considers my question in silence. Moments spread out, long and eternal, until I wonder if he’ll ever reply.

He removes his baseball cap, slapping it again into his palm with a sigh. “I used to, yeah,” he answers thoughtfully. “But not anymore.” It’s all he says, and then he walks away from me, ambling toward the coffee bar, and I’m not sure I’ve ever seen such heaviness on anyone’s shoulders before.

For some reason, watching his retreat makes me recall a bit of wisdom my daddy’s always quoted to me. *Hope deferred makes the heart sick.*

Daddy would say we’re two virtual strangers with the exact same disease.

An injured horse. A wary woman. Healing them could cost his heart.

Second Hope

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Nat Jackson knows what she's good at: healing horses. Relationships? She learned about the price of those from her mother. When Cole Masterson shows up at her Second Hope ranch with a bad shoulder and a lame horse, she's more than willing to treat the animal. But his money comes with a catch—he insists on staying at the ranch while his horse undergoes treatment.

The horse, she can handle. Resisting the man...that's a complication she doesn't need.

Money is no object when it comes to his horses, and Cole knows Second Hope offers the best in equine rehab. He hadn't counted on Nat's fractured heart awakening his desire to mend it. Her skills have his horse on the fast track to health, though. There's not much time to work his way through her defenses before it's time to leave.

Nat has no intention of getting her hopes up only to have them dashed. Cole's already thrown his heart over the fence—and he has no choice but to follow it in pursuit of the woman of his dreams.

Warning: This book contains hunky cowboys, gorgeous horses, awesome cowgirls, lots of tight Levi's, and heartbreaking injuries. Oh, yeah, and m/f sex.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Second Hope:

Cole's gaze landed on her. She was looking about as if seeing a treasured friend, gaze light with joy. The filtered sunshine poured over her, making sweat-damp skin glow, creating soft shadows in the curves of her body, the planes of her stomach. Her tank top was snug, outlining the heavy curve of her breasts and the long lines of muscle down her torso. Jeans hung low on her waist, a leather belt with a silver buckle accentuating the swell of her hips.

Streaks of dirt smeared one arm and shavings pooled near her ankles, in the folds of her jeans. Her scuffed boots had mud caked on the heels. Her nails were dirty, and her black hair had escaped from its braid, clinging to the long line of her neck.

"It's beautiful." Cole smiled softly.

Nat glanced at him. The moment of realization when she knew he'd been watching her was plain. She laughed quietly and looked away, wandering off toward the nearest oak. "I've always liked this place. When I first started the ranch I'd come out here just to get away. Clear my head. See something alive and growing, rather than the horses that needed so much help. Out here, nothing needed me like that." She glanced back, one hand spread on the trunk. "We got a lot of wrecks, in those days. We couldn't afford the best of anything yet, and a lot of the horses were rescues. A lot of them couldn't be saved."

He didn't know what to say, so he simply remained quiet.

She looked at the tree, head tipping back as she gazed upward into its branches, chin tucking as she lowered her face, tracing the line of the trunk back down to her hand. Her thumb rubbed over a scar in the bark, and she smiled faintly. "This was the first horse we managed to pull through. Just Aaron and I then—he was a snot-nosed little punk trying to get as far from his family as he could without leaving the horse world. Blue mohawk and stoned every night. And then we healed King, and something about that healed Aaron." Her smile grew, blooming across her face. "He called his parents that night. He'd run away when he was sixteen, and it was the first time he'd spoken to them in five years."

"Maybe he just needed to know he could do something good without them." Cole could remember the first time he'd succeeded at a job without standing on his father's or brother's shoulders. It had been liberating. For the first time, he'd felt grown up.

He wondered, suddenly, if Nat had ever been a child in that way. If she'd ever had shoulders to stand on. "Your grandmother helped you with this place, didn't she?"

Nat shrugged. "She gave me the money. When she died, she left me the rest. I think she was trying to keep my mother from having it. They never spoke. My grandmother didn't approve of my father, whether or not he was a doctor." Her smile was bitter. "She had more sense than my mother did."

Cole wandered closer, lifting his good hand to brush it over the wooden scar she kept fingering. The bark was paler here, and there was a line of smaller scratches, a few inked lines from a marker, some dates. "Are these all the horses you've helped?"

"The ones we saved, that first year." Nat pointed to one of the red lines. "These are the ones we lost."

There were more than a few, but they didn't outnumber the scars. "You did well."

Nat chuckled, shifting to lean against the tree, shoulder pressed to wood. "Considering what we had? We did all right. The cases got tougher as time went on, but we got a lot more rich people too."

"Like me." He grinned.

Her mouth tipped, echoing his expression. "Like you. Only most people just send their horses. Not sure how good I'm gonna be at mending rotator cuffs."

He laughed at her teasing. "Well, you have to start somewhere, Doctor Nat."

She just shook her head and chuckled in return, but her eyes were lighter now, the sadness gone. "Does it hurt much?"

"Not much. I think it's healing pretty well." He stretched his neck, rubbing at where the sling dug into his shoulder. "I think this is giving me more pain than the tendon, anymore."

"You could adjust it?" She stepped closer and he went still, turning his head slightly so she could get a better look.

Her touch was featherlight, her scent intoxicating. Like blueberries and cream, rich and sweet without being sickly.

"Is this any better?"

He couldn't tell any difference, but he could feel her body heat. His gaze caught hers, and fire rippled between them. "Yeah." His voice dropped into its deepest registers, coming out husky.

Nat's tongue flicked out, dampening her lips. Dark pupils dilated to spill black across her irises. "You didn't even pay attention."

Cole smiled. It stretched over his face, slow and seductive. "No. I didn't." He didn't think she cared, from the way her eyes flickered to his mouth, following his lips as he spoke. His hand rose as if of its own volition, rubbing away a smear of dust along her jawbone. She had a delicate jaw, for all that she was strong. Like a razorblade, sharp and fine. It narrowed down to a perfect little chin under a full mouth. He remembered that mouth from the night before. Remembered how her lips had parted under his, the tiny exhale he doubted she'd been aware of. The way her tongue had stroked his, the way she'd tasted, felt, smelled.

He wanted to taste her again, feel her under him, smell arousal and sex build. Moving slowly, remembering how she'd taken the lead before, he slid his fingers around the nape of her neck. Her skin was chilled despite the warm weather. When he fitted his mouth to hers she shivered, the finest tremble of skin and muscle, so faint he almost didn't feel it.

She wavered, seemingly caught between stepping closer and stepping away. He kept the kiss light, gentle, fingertips and soft brushes of his mouth, nothing more. He didn't want to push.

She stepped closer, fitting her body to his. He nearly groaned with relief, pressing tightly against her. One slender hand wrapped around his neck and her mouth opened, deepening the kiss. Her tongue slid against his and he responded, exploring her mouth, the way she tasted. His pulse beat thick and heavy under his skin, in his groin. He shifted his thigh to press between her legs. She caught her balance, opening for him slightly, pressing back.

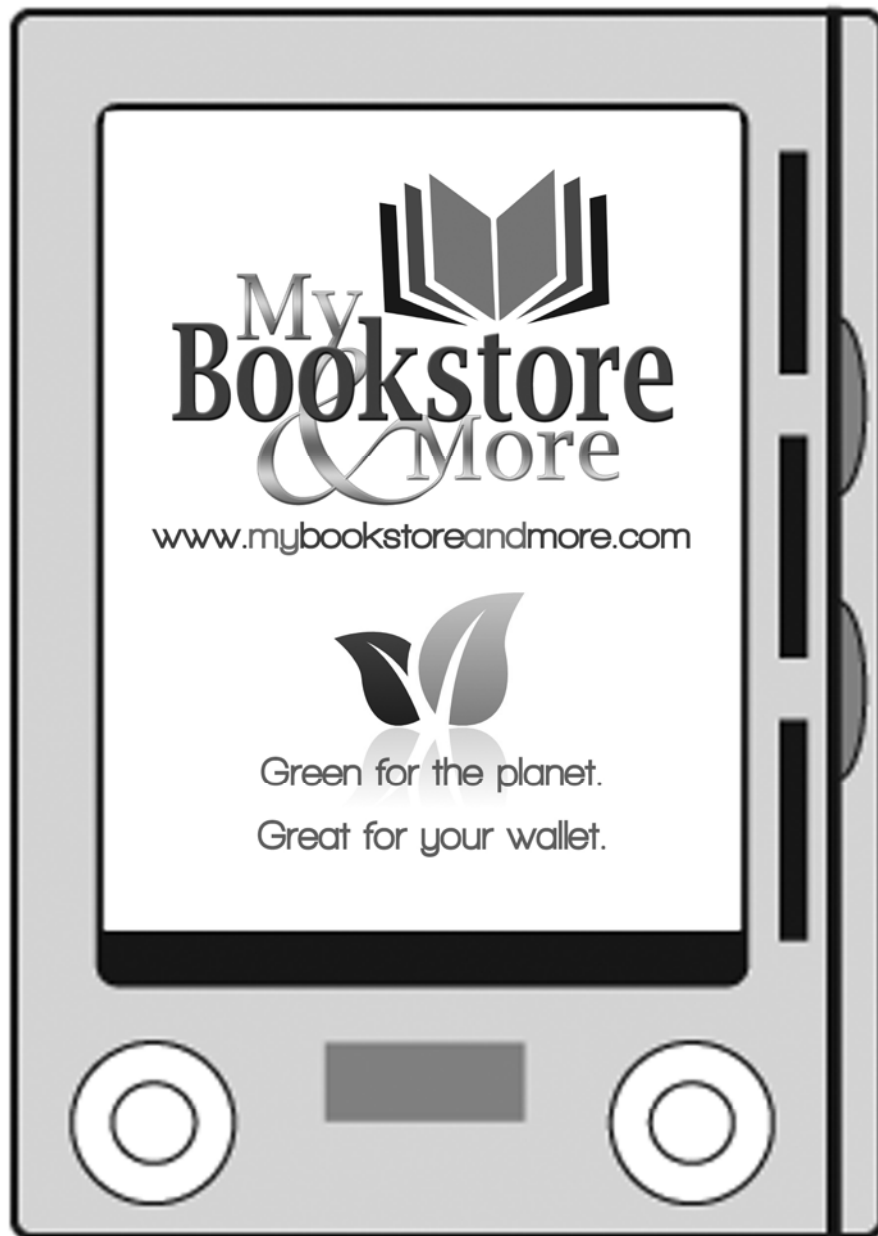
The temptation was to push harder, to pin her against the tree and keep things moving along fast until they both came. He fought it, keeping his movements slow and gentle. Once you'd won over a skittish horse, you didn't mess it up by asking for too much, too soon. Still, his good hand skimmed over her jaw, under it, tipping her head up so he could duck his face into her neck, nibble on the slim line of her throat. Her skin was warm, a little salty, and he could feel the beat of her heart in her jugular.

She exhaled, breath soft and shivering. Cole did it again, teeth scraping gently over flesh, pulling that exact little tremble from her that was so thoroughly intoxicating. His fingertips slid over her skin, down one of the slim tendons that framed her throat, and lit on her collarbones. He brushed over them, marveling over how tiny the bones were, like bird wings arcing in from the points of her shoulders.

Her hands moved firmly over his rib cage, over the heavy pads of muscle, pulling him closer. His fingertips glided downward, touch featherlight against the edge of a perfect breast clothed in the thin material of a tank top and bra. A shiver crept through her, her hand stuttering on his ribs.

Cole smiled against her before placing a careful kiss on her neck, another on her throat, opening his mouth and flicking his tongue across her flesh. Her hands tightened in his shirt, curling into small, demanding fists. With his good hand he grazed her arm, trailing down, feeling the tiny soft hairs and the firmness of muscle under skin. Then he found her waist, kept moving down until he felt the edge of her jeans. He tugged at her tank top, pulling it free to find warm, elastic flesh.

His kissed her again as his fingertips skimmed over abdomen muscle, teasing at the edge of her rib cage. Her mouth opened, tongue brushing against his lips. She tasted like warm summer sunshine and lazy mornings, long rides and slow laughter. Tongues tangled and slid together, tasting, exploring, growing bolder and more heated. He slid his hand up under her shirt, following the line of her rib cage to the edge of her bra. There he hesitated, giving her a moment to pull back, to slow things down. Instead, she pressed into him with a tiny sound almost caught in her throat.



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