

Julie Skerven

*It Had to
Be You*



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by Julie Skerven

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my husband Glenn. I love you, honey.

Chapter 1

"Look, Greg, that biker chick is here. Remember how she tore through the football field on her Harley, half naked, during graduation? I guess they must have mailed her diploma. Oh, that's right. I guess you were at military school then."

Greg Morris smiled as he pictured Candy speeding by the ceremony wearing only a smile and a string bikini as she shook up the crowd. Thanks to his father's interference, Greg had been cooling his heels at St Sebastian's Military Academy at the time. By the time he'd graduated from that penitentiary, Candy was long gone.

Greg stepped away from his booze-soaked former classmate while he made a mental note to see about getting him into Morris Papers' treatment program. It was one hour into their ten-year high school reunion and Chad Daly, one of his key employees at his subsidiary company, Pinnacle Publishing, was already soused.

Greg's gaze snapped over to the registration table. Candace Blake was sticking a nametag onto her silver evening gown. Sweet Candy with the butterscotch hair and soft, pink lips. Greg had often wondered if she'd taste like butterscotch. Tonight, he hoped to find out. The sight of her made him groan under his breath.

After spending the past three months studying her business proposal and photographs, he already knew that her good looks were all that he remembered and more. Her long, long legs inflamed his imagination. She had the body of a

Botticelli nude, the face of an angel, and most of all, attitude in spades.

He knew that she probably wouldn't recognize him and he was counting on one magical night to make her see him in a new light. The Candy-Wear account would bolster Pinnacle Publishing's bottom line. Pinnacle Publishing was his baby. But Greg didn't just want her business. He wanted her.

The proud tilt of her head said *don't touch me* to any male who might take her sultry appearance as an open invitation. He wasn't deterred by her feisty attitude. On the contrary, he was intrigued by it. This summer he intended to right old wrongs, make a new life for himself, and find out exactly what made Sweet Candy tick.

Greg moved to a secluded corner and pulled out his cell phone, ready to set his plan in motion.

* * * *

Candace Blake took note of surprised expressions on the couple at the registration table as she gave them her name. She recognized Ted Adams and Sandra Burns without having to glance at their nametags. A quick glance at Sandra's nametag told her the two had married. The two were former class officers who'd never given her the time of day back in high school. Not that she cared.

Ted's gaze honed in on her cleavage as she bent to sign in. Winking as she straightened she asked, "did you enjoy the view, Ted?"

Candace enjoyed the dirty look Sandra threw him as she turned away. She heard him yelp as she walked away toward the ballroom. Served him right, the jerk.

She supposed she had to expect that kind of reception. Growing up a dirt-poor foster kid, she'd never fitted in with this crowd. To compensate she'd become a hell-raiser in high school. The fact that she was now a successful lingerie model and designer probably did little to improve her reputation in this morally rigid little town.

Well, successful might be putting too good a spin on her designer status. But if everything went well with her negotiations with Pinnacle Publishing, she had hopes of expanding her fledgling catalog operation into a nationwide firm to rival Victoria's Secret.

Why had she let Ma pester her into attending this reunion as a birthday treat? Some birthday! She would have been perfectly happy never to see any of these snobs ever again.

Little did her curious former classmates know that she was far removed from her wild-child teens. After day-long photo shoots, she went back to her lonely apartment to sketch designs late into the night. All work and no play made Candace a very dull girl indeed. Well, as long as she'd been badgered into coming to this shindig, she might as well try to have fun. Yes sir, it was time for Candace Blake to kick up her heels. And maybe set this little town on its ear again. The thought made her grin.

Candace fidgeted with the silver bracelet on her wrist, then took a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. Taking a fortifying sip, she scanned the crowd, looking for any familiar

faces. All her former classmates seemed to be paired off. She was probably the only one love had passed by.

Her eyes met those of a tall, dark, devastatingly handsome man standing near the bar. He watched her, his interest palpable. He winked at her and a mischievous smile played across his sensual mouth as he raised his glass in a salute.

Who in the heck was he? She certainly would have remembered a hunk like this if he'd been in her class. He began to walk her way.

Butterflies fluttered in Candace's stomach as he drew near. She bit her lip and stepped back a pace. He stopped in front of her, topping her five foot ten by a good six inches. Who could he be? She scanned the front of his tailored black tux but couldn't find a nametag.

"Hello, Candy."

He remembered her, but his smooth baritone voice didn't ring any bells in her memory bank. "You're not wearing a nametag."

"I don't like nametags."

"So I see. But you have me at a disadvantage. You know my name but I don't know yours. Are you here with someone?"

His deep blue eyes glittered with devilish amusement. The crowd seemed to disappear as his magnetic presence filled her senses. Candace felt her pulse speed up in response. What was he up to?

"No, I'm here all alone. How about you?"

"Same here. As a matter of fact, it looks like we may be the only two singles."

"We aren't singles anymore."

His confident statement intrigued her. He wanted to remain a mystery man and the thought appealed to her sense of adventure. It would be nice to have an exciting partner this evening and he definitely fit the bill. Suddenly her birthday was looking up. He smiled a heartbreaker's smile and the cleft in his chin deepened. He clinked his champagne glass against hers, and she drew in a steadying breath, inhaling his crisp woody scent.

"What are we toasting?"

"Us." He gazed into her eyes as he took a sip.

Candace followed suit. "I didn't know there was an us."

"There is tonight. Dance with me."

Candace frowned at what was more a command than an invitation. Obviously, this man was used to issuing orders, but she didn't take them. "I don't think so." She started to turn away.

"Please."

Candace turned back, captivated by his tender plea. As she did, she noticed that they seemed to be the center of attention and frowned up at him. "Will you cool it? People are staring at us and while I could give a rip what they think of me I'm sure you wouldn't like to be the subject of gossip."

"What's the matter? Chicken?"

Candace gaped up at him, startled by the playful taunt. "What did you say?"

"You heard me. Chicken!"

Her eyes narrowed when she saw a small grin kick up the corners of his sensual mouth. Incensed, she spat out, "Nobody calls me chicken."

"Braak..."

"Shut up." Candace cast a glance around. People really were stopping to stare.

"Make me."

Candace rolled her eyes. "Of all the stupid, juvenile ways to act." She wavered when he continued to gaze at her hopefully. Relenting, she started to smile. After all, she had vowed to kick up her heels.

He held his hand out. "Please, dance with me."

"One dance." As his firm, tanned hand took hers she instinctively took a step back, alarmed by the sensuality of the gesture. His smile was soft, tender, and sexy as hell. Entranced, she allowed him to lead her onto the dance floor.

His warm palm slid along her spine, molding her body to his, as the band started a slow number. They fit perfectly. Her breasts nestled against his muscular chest. Her belly pressed against his hard middle, and their thighs brushed together.

Candace clung to him for a moment then and pushed away, embarrassed by her instinctive reaction. "Give me a little space to breathe."

"Why? Tonight we can fulfill all our youthful fantasies, Candy Baby. And I've got to tell you, this is one of my favorites." He waited a moment then said, "Cat got your tongue?"

The hungry look in his blue eyes startled her. She had no idea that she might have had a secret admirer back then. And

the fact that he still apparently carried a flame was unsettling. Ten years was a long time to carry around a crush. "Are you joking?"

"I'm dead serious, sugar."

"But I don't even know you."

"That's what makes it perfect. We start with a clean slate." He bent to brush a brief, burning kiss across her lips.

Candace melted in response, then, coming back to her senses, pulled away. "What about your reputation? Aren't you afraid associating with me will get you into trouble?"

"I don't give a damn about my reputation." He spun her around in a dizzying circle.

Candace laughed, startled by the vehemence of his statement and her heart leapt in response. Her instincts for self-preservation told her to slow things down. But it would be such a liberating experience, to laugh and dance with this man. She wanted to play near the flames for one glorious night and then walk away. As he said, tonight was just a fantasy and she did have a wild reputation to uphold. "Okay, I agree. Tonight is for us."

"And our fantasies."

His hopeful words were so like an excited little boy's, she grinned. "And our fantasies."

When the song ended, he drew her off the dance floor. He snagged two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter and handed her one. "Here's to a night to remember."

She licked the bubbling foam from her top lip, savoring the intoxicating flavor. Watching his hot eyes eat up the action, she felt her blood sizzle as a tremulous breath left her body.

"To tonight." She lightly clinked her glass against the one he held out.

"Why don't you introduce me, Greg?"

Greg, was it? Candace recalled four Gregs in her class. Greg March, a foreign exchange student. Greg Allen, who transferred in from out of state. Greg James, who wound up in juvenile incarceration. And Gregory Morris, the Toad. One glance told her the handsome man beside her could not possibly be the Toad. Relieved that the Toad was eliminated she decided that her mystery date wasn't the foreign exchange student. He didn't have a French accent.

Shortening the list of possibilities, Candace looked at the intruder and sighed. Ten years older, Magi Bains was still easy to recognize even though harsh frown lines now bracketed her mouth. She'd been one of the biggest snobs in school. How would Greg react to her obnoxious demand? She glanced at his handsome face. He was scowling at Magi but then, noting Candace's gaze on him, relaxed.

"Magi, you remember Candy Blake. She was a classmate of ours."

"I didn't recognize you, Candy." Magi's haughty voice was saccharine sweet. "It's quite a surprise to see you looking so well after all these years."

Candace smiled back through gritted teeth. "You probably figured I'd wind up in the slammer like my old man, huh, Margaret?"

Magi gasped, turning pale.

Greg put an arm around Candace's shoulder, drawing her close to his side. "Candy and I would like to be alone, if you get my drift."

Magi stared angrily at their embrace. "The two of you could at least show a little decorum. Neither of you really belong here, after all."

The list narrowed down to Greg James who'd done a stint in juvenile hall for shoplifting. She glanced at Greg, impeccably dressed and every inch the gentleman, and smiled. He'd come a long way and the two of them fit together, both having been outcasts. "Decorum, schmorum," Candace said with a chuckle. "Like Greg said, why don't you blow?"

Magi glared at the two of them and turned away saying, "Low rent gutter trash like you ought to stay where you belong."

Stiffening at the insult, Candace was about to respond when Greg interrupted.

"Oh, Magi, one more thing." Greg said.

Magi stopped and turned around glowering at him. "What is it?"

Candace took a sip of her drink and gazed up at Greg, surprised by his suddenly serious expression. His fingers caressed her arm.

"You might want to spread the word. Candy and I are together. Anyone that insults her will have to deal with me."

Candy choked on her drink.

Magi's jaw dropped.

Candy thought she looked just like one of the carp swimming in the river outside.

Magi seemed to regain her poise and smiled sourly. "You bet I will."

Candace frowned as she watched Magi trot off with the news. So much for keeping a low profile during her stay here. "Why in the world did you tell her that? Magi Burns is the biggest gossip in the world."

He smiled down at her, looking so dashing she found it hard to focus on her protest. She really ought to thank her Sir Galahad for saving her from the awful Magi Dragon.

"Now you won't have to worry about my reputation anymore. Look, you can actually watch the news being spread around the room."

Candace looked at the crowd. It was like watching the game Telephone. One group told another until it ran around the group, and the room was abuzz with it. Candace wanted to fade into the woodwork when, one by one, people turned their way. "Now I know you're crazy."

"Yeah, about you."

Candace gazed up at Greg. He'd been in more trouble than she had back in high school and wound up in juvenile hall. She'd never gotten to know him back then but now she looked forward to making up for lost time.

"Cheer up, Candy Baby. The damage has already been done." He smiled and led her back onto the dance floor. "Let's dance."

Candace stepped into his arms as the song began. The sensual rhythm of the salsa music strummed through her.

Other dancers stepped aside and let them have the floor. Candace knew they made a striking couple. Greg was dark and dashing in his tux, and she was the light to his dark, with her shimmering designer gown and blond hair. They moved together in tandem, enjoying each other's sensuality unabashedly.

Greg dipped her almost to the floor as the music ended. She hung suspended, her breathing rapid, her eyes locked on his. He raised her up slowly and then his lips touched hers, hot and sweet. Electricity sizzled between them. Candace was truly alive for the first time in years.

Time stopped and blood pounded in her ears. No, that was applause. She and Greg broke apart to see the crowd applauding them. She smiled at Greg as he twirled her around and took a bow.

Greg grasped Candace's hand and led her off the floor toward the exit.

Startled by the applause, Candace struggled to catch her breath. Since when had this crowd ever approved of her? "Where are we going?"

Greg turned to look at her, boyish charm enhancing his masculine assurance. "Trust me. We're going someplace special."

"I don't know." Candace stopped in her tracks. Seeing the disappointment on his face, she reconsidered. "Okay, this is our fantasy night."

Greg ushered her out of the building into the starlit night. "Don't worry, I'll take care of everything." He opened the door to a low-slung black sports car. "Your chariot, my lady."

Candace grinned at his playfulness, sliding onto the leather upholstery and inhaling the new-car scent.

Greg got in and started the car, gunning the engine. "Just sit back and relax. We'll be there in ten minutes."

Candace's mind whirled in anticipation. Just what did he have planned? If anything went wrong with this magical night, she'd just die. This was her ultimate teenage dream come true and she'd enjoy it to the hilt. She supposed most people would think the life of a lingerie model was glamorous. Actually, the hard work of trying to compete with fresh-faced eighteen-year-olds left her with a nonexistent social life.

Candace looked at him in surprise when he pulled into the parking lot at Silver Lake. "It's kind of dark for a swim, Greg."

"Not for a skinny dip it's not."

Candace thought he might be joking, but it was too dark to see his expression.

Greg got out of the car and went around to open Candace's door. He held her hand as he led her down toward the beach. The full moon turned the beach into a fairyland, creating frosted silver ripples on the dark water. A soft breeze billowed her skirt around her legs. Near the water's edge was a patch of light.

As they walked toward it, she saw two empty champagne glasses and a big bottle of champagne chilling in an ice bucket on a blanket spread across the sand. Lantern light turned the scene into a romantic candlelit nook. Soft music from a boom box drifted toward them, enhancing the spell.

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Astonished by the elaborate scene, Candace turned to him. "You were pretty sure of me, weren't you? Or could it have been anyone?"

Greg was watching her, his face a shadowed visage concealing his thoughts. "No, it had to be you." Candace heard the sincerity in his voice. He stepped into the light and she saw his soft, intimate smile and felt her heart melt. Tears moistened her eyes, but she fought them back. Tough girls didn't cry. But then he'd probably already guessed that she was a marshmallow inside.

He started to sing along with the song on the boom box, "It Had To Be You." His voice was a smooth baritone. He swung her into his arms and waltzed her across the sand. Candace smiled, tucking her head against his shoulder, his white linen shirt crisp and the ebony studs cool against her cheek. The song resonated through his warm chest as he serenaded her.

It was like something out of an old Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movie, and Candace was a sucker for them. He stopped singing and looked down at her hungrily before claiming her with a kiss. Candace sighed into his mouth as it brushed hotly against hers.

Greg broke off the kiss and grinned at her. "Yum, butterscotch and jasmine."

Candace smiled up at him. "What?"

"That's what you taste like." He bent his head for another quick kiss and then led her toward the blanket. He poured them both a glass of wine, and handed one to her. Then he trailed his finger along her bare arm and shoulder, causing a

delicious tremor inside her and making Candace's heart race. Tomorrow was time enough for regrets; tonight was for her memory scrapbook.

She sipped the champagne and studied Greg. Lantern light highlighted the classic curves and planes of his face. His forehead was long, his nose straight, and the look of blatant desire in his eyes took her breath away. She reached out to run a finger down his smooth cheek. He inhaled a gasping breath, his nostrils flaring. She drew back her finger and smiled. "This is perfect, Greg."

"You're the one who's perfect, Candy Baby." He put down his glass and reached for her. "Come here. We've got ten years to make up for."

Candace fell into his arms with a hunger that surprised her. Nothing else mattered. They kissed and then his mouth slipped down to nuzzle her earlobe. He nipped it and she gasped as heat raced through her. Her hands snaked their way underneath his jacket and she pulled his shirt up in back, aching to touch his skin.

"Hold on, baby, I'll help you." Greg leaned back, peeled off his jacket, and then yanked on the end of his tie, loosening it. She saw his hands shake when he started to unbutton his shirt. Frustrated, she grabbed the edges of his shirt and yanked, trying to help. Ebony studs popped off, flying through the air, but she didn't care.

Candace's hands were on him immediately, pushing the shirt off his shoulders and combing through the rough, dark hair on his chest. He groaned and leaned into her caress. His reaction caused a fission of heat deep inside her.

"My turn," Greg said running his hands through her hair. Greg's grasp tightened as he held her tethered while he claimed her mouth in a deep kiss. He licked her upper lip, smiling. "Definitely butterscotch."

"What?"

Greg smiled. "That's what you taste like."

Candace laughed. "You're crazy."

"Only about you." Greg looked deep into her eyes while he slowly reached behind her and pulled down her zipper. The silky fabric pulled away from her firm, rounded breasts.

Greg groaned at the sight as moonlight bathed their peaks in honey light. He ran a tentative finger along the curved slopes. "Your skin is softer than the finest silk."

Candace gasped as his hands cupped her, and pushed more firmly into his magical touch. She was so sensitive, and his large hands were warm and strong. Her strawberry peaked nipples beaded against his palms and she moaned. All sensation seemed centered on the aching peaks of her breasts. Greg's touch felt so good. She rubbed against him, pleading for his touch. "Please, more."

"Oh, baby. You don't have to ask." He lifted her hand to his lips. Then he met her eyes as he slowly drew her index finger into his mouth and sucked on it.

Candace couldn't look away from the passion in his eyes. She moaned as his mouth tugged on her finger. It caused a tugging deep inside her. He pulled her wet finger from his mouth and brought it to her breast, to circle her nipple. Candace gasped at the naughty caress, wondering what he

was up to. Then he bent down and blew on her damp nipple. Pleasure rocked through her.

Greg bent down to taste the tight, rosy bud and she was lost. Candace arched up from the blanket restlessly as he gave her pleasure and caused an aching tightness in her abdomen. He pushed her dress down and she was covered only by a high cut pair of silver panties. Greg's eyes darkened as his hand moved lower to lovingly cup the damp heat covered by her panties. His talented hand pressed against her mound, rubbing that sensitive area, and she cried out, coming apart in his arms.

Above the thundering beat of Candace's heart, she heard tires crunch in the gravel parking lot. A spotlight suddenly bathed them in its chilling glow. Candace squinted.

Greg spun around to see who it was.

"Okay, you kids, break it up. This is the police," crackled a voice through a bullhorn. "It's after curfew so get dressed and get out your IDs."

Candace sagged behind Greg, mortified.

Greg sat up. "It's okay, officer. It's just me."

"Sorry, Mr. Morris. I didn't know it was you. I thought it was those darned kids partying again."

The Toad! Oh, good grief! Candace gasped and felt Greg stiffen in response. That wasn't the only thing that was stiff; she hoped the officer wouldn't shine the spotlight on that part of Greg's prominent anatomy. How had a creep like the Toad managed to transform himself into this handsome hunk of masculinity? Greg Morris, the Toad, had been a head shorter

than her, skinny as a beanpole, wore thick glasses, and had a case of the hots for her back then in high school.

Greg moved to the side to further shelter Candy from the spotlight. "No harm done, Gus. We'll leave in few minutes."

Candace heard the police car drive away and shivered. She'd almost made love with the Toad. What a disaster!

The Morrisises were her sworn enemies. Her father died of a heart attack in prison when she was eleven. Greg's father had put him there, accusing him of embezzlement at Morris Papers.

Despite the animosity she had for the Morris clan, the Toad had worn her down during their senior year. She'd agreed to go out with him, fully intending to make it such a miserable experience that he'd leave her alone thereafter. But the crumb hadn't shown up.

The next day she learned that her foster brother Mike beat the snot out of him. A week later Greg left town for boarding school. The buzz at school was that his parents were sending him away to keep him away from undesirables. As if she'd have him. Oh, good grief, she almost had. They'd been as close to making love as a couple could be without actually doing the deed.

Rushing to her feet Candace pulled the last vestiges of dignity around her. She tugged her gown up to cover her breasts. Greg still sat on the sand gazing up at her, a calculating gleam in his eyes. She refused to look at him.

"Take me back to get my car."

"First, we need to talk about this."

"No."

"Our evening is ruined, but that doesn't mean we can't put things right. Please give me a chance to explain. I wanted to give you a chance to see the real me before the past muddied the waters."

"I want to go back to my car right now. You can explain tomorrow." She did not intend to see him again but he didn't need to know that if it would help put some breathing space between them.

Greg shot her a humorless smile. "I'm not quite ready to go."

"Why not?" Candace looked down at his rock hard, unquenched desire and gulped. "Oh, I see."

"Maybe you'd better turn your back." Greg stripped off the remainder of his clothes and walked toward the lake.

Candace gave in to the urge to peek in time to see Greg wade into the water. Moonlight highlighted his flanks, giving her a spectacular view of his tight buns. She sighed with regret. The first man she'd been attracted to in years would have to turn out to be the Toad. There was no way in the world she could ever have a relationship with him. He was a Morris. And he'd conned her into this cozy little trap, damn it.

She was fully dressed by the time Greg walked out of the lake. Candace sighed. This was a fantasy evening never to be repeated and now it was blown to smithereens.

Greg tried to take her arm but Candace pulled away. "Trust me, Candy, this is just a minor setback. We can work it out."

Candace reached down to help him gather up the picnic things, not wanting to meet his hope-filled eyes. "Let's just leave."

They drove back to the ballroom in silence. Candace glanced at Greg as he smoothly shifted the powerful sports car and felt a twinge of regret. Too bad he was a Morris. In a different time, a different place they might have been made for each other. But they were who they were and that was that. The Toad may have turned into a prince but he wasn't her prince. As a Blake she had a vendetta to uphold and no scheming, handsome, Morris was going to dim her resolve.

They pulled into the parking lot at the ballroom and Greg switched off the engine. She could feel his gaze on her but she wouldn't look at him. There was nothing more to say. It was over. She reached for the door handle and Greg held her hand, stopping her flight as her irritation went up a notch.

"Please, Candy, let me explain."

"Go to hell, Toad. I have all the explanation I need. You're a lying, stinking, Morris." Candace saw a flash of anger in his eyes before his pillaging mouth came down to claim hers in a deep kiss. She could feel his leashed frustration as he tried to coax a response.

Despite her best intentions, her hungry body remembered his tantalizing touch all too well. Desire was quickly rekindled as his arms encircled her. She clung to Greg, touching his hair, his face, the sexy cleft in his chin, desperately trying to memorize his features. She trembled from the force of wanting him so badly. The need wasn't totally sexual and it scared her. If an abortive attempt at lovemaking touched her

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this deeply, how would she feel if they got involved and he walked away? Just like almost everyone else she'd ever loved had. Panicked, she pulled away reached for the door handle.

Greg kept a restraining hand on her arm, halting her escape.

Candace felt the power in his touch. He wasn't hurting her, but he wasn't letting her run away either. She sat motionless, staring out the car window at the dark parking lot, not daring to look at him. She was too near the fire and about to get burned. "I have to go."

"I'll call you in the morning."

"Don't bother."

"I don't give up that easily."

Candace heard the resolve in Greg's voice and dared a glance at his face. The strength of purpose in his gaze held her spellbound for a moment. She pulled away and climbed out of the car, slamming the door behind her. "Don't say that. Tonight was just a fantasy, remember?"

"I lied."

Chapter 2

Candace placed a small porcelain teapot, filled with herbal tea, on the breakfast tray. She glanced over at Joan Babcock, her friend and foster sister.

Joan sat sideways at the dining room table to accommodate her advanced state of pregnancy as she scanned the morning newspaper, searching for a review of her band's performance at a coffee house the evening before.

Candace tried to soften the blow of a possible bad review. "You know, Joan, I'm not sure Morris Point, Wisconsin is ready for a pregnant punk rocker."

Joan's purple shadowed eyelids fluttered as she frowned and flipped over another page. "I've told you a thousand times, Candy, it's not punk rock, it's alternative rock. There is a difference."

Candace smiled at her friend's exasperation. "If you say so. To me it's all about the same."

Joan's smile was enhanced by gold lip gloss. "Especially to somebody whose musical taste is stuck in a fifties time warp."

Candace recalled Greg's romantic rendition of "It Had To Be You," and felt a pang of disappointment. What had seemed magical last night now in the cold light of day seemed idiotic.

Joan gasped, regaining Candace's attention, as she pointed to an article. "Candy, you'd better look at this."

Candace added a starched napkin to the tray and stepped toward Joan. "Good review?"

Joan shook her head, making her spiky dark hair jiggle and her silver drop earrings clank. "Actually, they said that we stunk."

Candace raised an eyebrow at the impish grin spreading across Joan's expressive face. "Well then, what are you so happy about? What's going on?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Joan eyed Candace inquisitively. "Just what went on last night? I thought you didn't even like Greg Morris. Now it says here you're engaged to marry him! You sure work fast, girl."

Candace gripped the back of a chair, as her world tilted on its axis. "Oh good grief, we're not engaged! Greg told Magi we were a couple to get her to back off. He was just kidding around. It was all a joke."

Joan's long carmine fingernail pointed to the headline. "'*GREGORY MORRIS TO WED LINGERIE MODEL.*' Some joke. It's plastered all over the society page, for heaven's sake. There's even a picture of you from your latest catalogue, in that blue nightgown I liked so much."

Candace felt herself blush, knowing that Joan's perceptive gaze wouldn't miss the dark circles under her eyes. They were caused by a restless night spent having sweet dreams about Greg. Joan could read her like a book.

Candace snatched the paper out of her hands. Last night she'd vowed to put her lapse of common sense behind her. But one way or another Gregory Morris kept intruding into her life. She ran a horrified gaze over their wedding announcement. *Mr. & Mrs. Gregory Morris, Senior, announce the engagement of their son, Gregory Morris, Junior, to Miss*

Candace Blake. The accompanying photo showed Candace clad in an aqua satin peignoir set and draped across a chaise lounge in a sultry pose. Sleepy little Morris Point would be in a bigger uproar than they had been when she streaked through her graduation ceremony.

Candace sank into a chair. "How could they reprint this photo without my release?"

"Maybe your agent thought he was doing you a favor."

"Some favor. After I serve Ma breakfast, I'll give Mark a call and find out. He might have provided the picture but a local has to be behind this bogus announcement. Whoever is responsible for this travesty is dead meat. Greg and I spent part of the evening together, but that does not constitute an engagement."

"Spent the evening, huh?"

Candace recalled Officer Gray interrupting their make-out session and frowned. "Not the entire evening."

"My, my, you and the Toad." Joan let out a surprised chuckle. "Will wonders never cease? Want me to get our old foster brother Mike to beat him up like he did after prom?"

"This is no laughing matter. I just hope Ma doesn't get wind of this. It might drive her into a relapse."

"Speaking of Ma, weren't you about to carry her breakfast up to her?"

Candace swatted at Joan's hand as she reached for a wedge of toast. "Yes, if you don't eat it all first."

Joan withdrew her hand with a pout. "Ouch, that hurt. I'm eating for two you know."

Candace gazed at her eight-month-pregnant friend and smiled. "You big baby. If you're eating for two, one of you must be a bull moose."

Joan struggled to get up. "Just for that crack, I'm leaving. I don't have to stay here and be insulted. I can go home and be insulted."

Candace hurried around the table to help Joan up. "I take it back. You're gorgeous and you know it. Get insulted at home, my Aunt Fanny. Jerry is crazy about you and thrilled about being a new dad."

Joan smiled and rubbed her expanded tummy. "I know. It's kind of nice to have a man think you're terrific. You should try it sometime."

Candace saw Joan's scheming smile and frowned. She remembered how Joan had goaded her into accepting the Toad's invitation to the prom back in high school.

"You've got to go to the prom, sis," Joan had said. "Ma's got the dress all picked out for you. So what if your only invitation came from the Toad. You can ditch him after you get there." She caved to the pressure and her secret desire to fit in with the popular crowd. She wouldn't ditch him. Instead she'd make the date a dud so in the future he'd leave her alone. So on prom night she'd sat on the porch all decked out in the pink net gown Ma had bought her, waiting for Greg to pick her up. And to her utter mortification, he stood her up.

Oh no, Greg Morris was not the man for her. Intending to nip any future attempts at matchmaking in the bud, she hastened to add. "Greg was wrong for me back in high school

and he still is. We travel in different worlds and I intend to keep it that way."

Joan smiled ruefully. "You can't blame a girl for trying. Just remember that you're just as good as the snooty Morris clan, Candy. Don't let anyone, including yourself, tell you differently."

Candace picked up the breakfast tray and walked with her into the foyer. "Thanks for the pep talk, sis. Last night was just a fantasy. It would never work."

Joan tilted her head. "A fantasy, huh? That sounds intriguing."

Candace looked away, unable to talk about last night's disaster without falling apart. It would take a long time before she would recover her objectivity where Greg Morris was concerned. "I can't talk about it right now, okay?"

Joan placed a comforting hand on Candace's shoulder and sighed. "Okay, I'll stop pushing. It's just that I want you to be happy."

Candace saw the glint of concern in Joan's eyes and smiled softly to reassure her. "I know you do, and believe me, I appreciate your concern, but I'll be fine."

Joan turned toward the door. "That's okay. Ma's kids have to stick together. Even if Greg isn't the man of your dreams, I know there's someone out there who's right for you." She looked back and grinned. "Speaking of fantasies, maybe after I have the baby you can design some lingerie to help me fulfill a few of my own."

Relieved to move onto a safer subject, Candace felt her tension subside. "I'm way ahead of you, little sister. I've

already started a few sketches. Although from what I've seen, the fire between you and Jerry doesn't need much fanning."

"Gee, thanks for noticing," Joan said and laughed. The doorbell rang and she glanced down at her watch. "Who could be calling at quarter to eight in the morning?"

Candace headed toward the stairs. "Who knows? You answer it. I'm not dressed."

Joan called out, "Candy, you have company."

Candace stopped part way up the stairs and turned to look at the door, as two well-dressed ladies stepped inside the foyer. "Yes, may I help you?"

The older lady moved forward, looking as if she'd stepped out of a fashion magazine in her tailored, ecru colored suit. Her dark hair was swept up into an elegant twist. Her smile was cool, her expression reserved, as she slowly looked Candace up and down. "Perhaps. I'm Gregory's mother and this is my daughter, Kathleen."

Candace noticed that Kathleen was a carbon copy of her mother right down to the strand of pearls around her neck. Mrs. Morris's eyes were the same shade as Greg's. She'd spent a restless night conjuring up sweet dreams of those midnight blue eyes and every other part of his anatomy too. They were dreams she knew would never come true.

Mrs. Morris's disdainful gaze incensed Candace. She must have been out of her mind to dream of a future in Greg's arms. She tamped down her outrage, not wanting to make a scene. "Joan, I know you have an appointment to keep. Why don't you run along? I'll take care of this."

Joan pinned her with an anxious gaze. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." She saw Joan's wrinkled brow as she walked out the door. She'd make a point of calling her later to reassure her after she got through this ghastly showdown. Focusing her attention on the intruders, she met Mrs. Morris's intense gaze with a steady one of her own.

Mrs. Morris nodded, acknowledging that the gauntlet was thrown down. "We're here to discuss my son's alleged engagement to you."

Candace smiled ruefully. Greg was too chicken to do his own dirty work. He probably thought that she changed her mind and decided to go after him for his money. "This is between Greg and me. It's really none of your business."

"Nonsense," Mrs. Morris said. "Gregory's home in bed and I'm not going to let him be bothered by this."

So he hadn't sent the disdainful duo. Candace had known that the shit would hit the fan, but she hadn't counted on it happening so soon. "Well as you can see, ladies, at the moment I'm not prepared to receive you. If you'd care to make an appointment for this afternoon..."

Mrs. Morris frowned up at her. "Young woman, this is important. I'll wait."

"Suit yourself." Candace turned away from the dragon lady and her cub, and continued up the stairs. She tapped on Ma's door when she got to the top.

Her foster mother's weak voice called out. "Come in."

Candace entered the bedroom. Ma Brown, a petite lady with iron-gray hair and a will to match, sat up in bed, her merry gray eyes twinkling. Candace smiled, recalling how she

used to tell herself that the similar eye color made them look more like a real mother and daughter.

Candace's mother had died giving birth to her. Father and daughter had lived a nomadic but happy life, while he flitted from job to job, until he'd been unjustly arrested for embezzlement while working in the accounting department of Morris Papers. Candace was eleven years old. He died of a heart attack in jail while awaiting trial, never getting the opportunity to prove his innocence. She spent her teens being shuttled from one foster home to another, finally ending up with Ma when she was sixteen.

Ma usually wound up with the hard cases that were on the borderline of entering the juvenile justice system. Ma's strict but loving home had turned her life around. She'd straightened out, finished school, and left on graduation day to seek her fortune.

Over the years, Candace had kept in touch with the lady she considered to be her real mother, but she resisted coming back to Morris Point. Instead, she'd take Ma on vacation every summer.

But this summer was different. A few months ago, her summer bookings suddenly dried up. Pinnacle Publishing, a company with headquarters in a nearby town, offered a sweet deal to launch her Candy-Wear catalog. Ma had heart surgery and needed help at home while she went through rehab.

Candace knew it was time to return and face her demons. The summer off would give her time to complete the designs for the fall launch of her catalog. Pinnacle Publishing was in a

city only an hour's drive from here, which would give her ample opportunity to oversee its production.

Getting back home to small town America should be restful too. But the memory of Greg's scintillating touch had haunted her dreams. Squelching the memory, she set the tray down on the dresser and fluffed Ma's pillows.

Ma smiled and patted her hand. "Honey, you shouldn't go to this trouble for me."

Candace smiled down at her. "I'm happy to finally be back here to help you out."

Ma smiled. "So, did you have a good time at your reunion last night?" She leaned against freshly plumped pillows as Candace placed the tray over her lap.

Candace knew that Ma would keep on pumping her for information unless she nipped the inquisition in the bud. She meant well, but now her good intentions rubbed against Candace's bruised emotions like sandpaper. She avoided Ma's curious gaze as she poured her a cup of herbal tea. "It was fine. It was nice to see the old faces."

Ma lifted the napkin off the tray and spread it over her chest. She looked at Candy patiently as if waiting for more. When Candace remained silent, she asked, "So did you see anyone special?"

Candace refused to rise to the bait. "I had a nice time."

Ma let out a frustrated harrumph as she stirred her tea.

"I'll come back for the tray. Be sure you eat it all. We want to make you strong again."

"I thought I heard the doorbell. Do we have company?"

Candace sighed, thinking of the upcoming skirmish. "It's just a little unfinished business I have to take care of. I'll see you later, Ma."

Ma waved her out of the room. "I'm sure you're tired from your big night. Don't worry about me. I have everything I need. So relax and enjoy your day off."

Candace closed the door. It was a good thing Ma didn't know the source of her exhaustion. Fevered dreams of Greg hadn't left much time for slumber. Now she had to face the aftermath alone.

Like a knight preparing for battle, she slipped into the armor of well-worn sweats and running shoes and swept her hair back in a ponytail. She frowned as she glimpsed her fatigued reflection in the vanity mirror. She looked like hell. It wasn't fair. But then she, of all people, ought to know that life wasn't fair.

She jogged down the stairs. The twin dragons had to be dealt with before she could go for her morning run. Running cleared her mind and focused her thoughts, and boy, did they ever need focusing this morning. She strode into the living room, prepared to get this over with quickly.

Kathleen was seated, stiff backed, on the sofa. Mrs. Morris was prowling the confines of the room. She looked ill at ease. No, she was probably just annoyed at being made to wait.

Candace could just picture a mental calculator whirring in Mrs. Morris's mind, assessing the value of Ma's homey possessions. Annoyed, she watched Greg's mother's gaze at the cut glass fruit bowl and then move on to scrutinize the senior photos of Ma's kids perched atop the spinet piano. She

stopped to frown at the one that featured Candace astride the battered old Harley she used to ride.

That bike had been Candace's pride and joy. She'd bought the motorcycle with money she'd earned doing alterations in the back of Ma's dress shop every day after school, and worked on it until it hummed. Feeling the powerful machine vibrating between her legs gave her a feeling of control and freedom. It was her first step toward independence.

Unfortunately, she had to sell it for money to live on after she got to New York. She still missed it. She could only think of one thing more stimulating, and that was the feel of Greg between her thighs last night. Candace flushed at the errant thought and cleared her throat. The twin dragons turned her way. "Well, ladies, I don't want to keep you long. I'm sure we can clear this matter up quickly."

Mrs. Morris flicked an appalled glance over Candace's grungy running shoes and baggy sweats. "I hope so. I have a schedule to keep." She walked to the sofa, and sat beside her daughter.

Candace perched on the arm of an easy chair across from them, and returned Mrs. Morris's thorough appraisal. Kathleen's glare was mean enough to kill but when Candace resolutely met her gaze, she looked away. Mrs. Morris let a small reserved smile curve her lips, but the smile didn't reach her eyes, which remained cool and watchful.

Well, why didn't the woman say something? Candace would be more comfortable with a shouting match than this lady's cool, detached manner. Instead, Greg's mother

continued to quietly assess her, as if she were trying to make up her mind about something.

Candace suppressed the urge to squirm. She felt like a specimen under a microscope as if every flaw was being zeroed in on and exposed. Instead, she leaned back, crossed her legs, and said, "You said you had some business you wanted to discuss."

Mrs. Morris nodded. "Yes, I came here to talk about the engagement. To be frank, you're not the kind of woman I pictured my son marrying."

Kathleen scowled and leaned forward, her voice mocking. "It was rather sudden, wasn't it?"

Candace grinned, feeling the sting of battle. This was more like it; open antagonism was something she knew how to deal with. "Yeah, it surprised the heck out of me too."

"Sure it did," Kathleen snapped.

"Ladies, this is getting us nowhere," Mrs. Morris said. She snapped open her purse and pulled out her checkbook saying, "How much?"

Candace merely raised an eyebrow. The witch was actually trying to buy her off. It was an astounding move in this day and age. Fine, she could play hardball too. Just how far would the dragon lady actually go? "How much what?"

Mrs. Morris fixed Candace with an impatient glare. She tapped her expensive gold pen on the check pad. "How much do you want?"

Candace felt the steam rising inside. She flashed a ready smile to hide her irritation, an old habit from her years of modeling. "For what?" It was obvious from the lady's

assessing glance that she now thought Candace was stupid, as well as a gold digger.

Mrs. Morris began to write. "Why, to call this ridiculous farce off, of course. How does fifty thousand sound?"

"But if I married him I could have half of his wealth." Candace heard Kathleen gasp but ignored her, focusing all her attention on Greg's mother.

Mrs. Morris stopped writing and glanced up at her shrewdly. "Very well, how does one hundred thousand sound?"

Candace curved her lips into a frigid smile. "It's an interesting number." Her stomach twisted as she watched her fill in the amount. It was a classic Morris tactic—quick, concise, and ruthless.

"Fine," Mrs. Morris nodded solemnly. "I'm glad we understand each other." She tore the check from the book and thrust it at Candace.

Candace managed to keep her hand steady as she took the check. She gazed at it, appalled, noting its art deco border and Mrs. Morris's elegant script. Everything about Greg's mother was picture perfect, right down to her neat penmanship. Looking up, she met Mrs. Morris's eyes just as her outrage boiled over. "I understand you perfectly, Mrs. Morris. You're a snobbish, narrow-minded prig."

Mrs. Morris raised a startled eyebrow.

Kathleen gasped and stood up. "Well, I never."

Candace fixed her irate gaze on Greg's sister. "The same goes for you, little dragon."

Kathleen scowled. "Listen to me, you money grubbing little witch. If you think I'm going to stand still and let you marry my brother you are sadly mistaken."

"Quite right," Mrs. Morris said as she stood up. "Gregory has had enough heartache in his life without you adding to it."

Candace remained seated, wondering what kind of heartache Mrs. Morris was referring to. It had been ten years; he was bound to have a past. For all she knew he could have a dozen ex-wives and sweethearts. He had the looks, charm, and money to be a babe magnet. Shaking off the speculation, she stood up and tore the check into confetti. "This is what I think of your son, and this phony marriage announcement. I can assure you that it didn't come from me. I wouldn't marry him on a bet."

Mrs. Morris frowned at her. "Do you really expect me to believe that? Magi Bain already filled me in on the scandalous way you behaved last night, tricking him into making some rash statements. You always were a bad influence on him."

Meddling Magi was working overtime. She must have called Greg's mother at sunrise. No wonder she and Kathleen were so riled up. But that was no excuse for their high-handed behavior. "It's the truth." She ushered them to the door. "You'll have to excuse me. I have other business to take care of."

Mrs. Morris lingered in the doorway and gazed at Candace with a speculative look in her eye. "Just see to it that you don't break my boy's heart."

Candace was shocked by Greg's mother's unexpected statement. "I plan to keep well away from him for the rest of

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by Julie Skerven

the summer." At the lady's continued look of doubt she said,
"Honest, there is absolutely nothing going on between us."

Chapter 3

Candy shut the front door behind her and walked onto the grass to do a few stretches. Good lord, she felt as if she was held together with baling wire. As she worked out the kinks, she felt her body relax. The battle with Greg's mother had disturbed her. She wasn't as adept at rebuffing attacks as she used to be.

She started at a slow jog down the front walk and then turned left at the sidewalk, gradually picking up speed.

The first step to squelch this sham engagement announcement would be a retraction in the newspaper. After that, she would avoid Greg and keep a very low profile while Ma finished rehab. At the end of the summer, she would quietly slip out of town. It was the only solution she could envision. It would have to work.

Based on Mrs. Morris's statement, Greg was equally surprised to see their names in print. One of their overeager, newshound classmates must have thought he was printing the scoop of the year.

Greg would just have to tolerate the local rumor mill. On the bright side, this experience would undoubtedly kill his interest in her. Fate, in the form of a meddling classmate, had taken control of the risky situation, pulling her onto safe ground.

There weren't many people stirring on this Saturday morning. Most of her former classmates were probably home sleeping off their celebration. She ran past Daley's Drug

Store, Haley's Hardware, and the front door of the Morris Point Daily Journal.

Screeching to a halt, she hesitated a moment, catching her breath. She hadn't intended to end up here, but subconsciously her footsteps must have taken her here.

Glancing down at her sweaty, rumpled, attire, she debated the wisdom of going in. She wasn't properly dressed for a business call, but there was no time like the present. They could run the retraction in tomorrow morning's paper. She pushed open the door and entered the building.

A young dark haired girl perched on a stool behind the front counter looked up. She popped her chewing gum and smiled. "What can I do for you, ma'am?"

Candy frowned. Ma'am, was it? She must really be showing her age today. "I'd like to speak to the society editor."

The girl arched a perfectly penciled eyebrow, as she looked Candy up and down. "I'm sorry, ma'am. She's not in right now."

Candy stifled her growing exasperation. At that age she probably would have reacted the same way with a sweaty, bedraggled, woman who asked to see the society editor. "Well, who can I speak to about a retraction?"

The girl shrugged and went back to the crossword puzzle she'd been working. "How about Mike? He's the reporter in charge around here on the weekends."

"That would be fine." Candy waited but the girl seemed to have forgotten her. Irrked, she leaned forward over the counter. "Could you point me in the right direction?"

The girl gestured toward the stairway. "Up the stairs, first door on your right."

Candace sighed. So much for friendly service. Turning on her heel she jogged up the stairs. If she had any luck, the reporter would be more professional.

She stopped at the open door the girl had indicated. A red headed teenage boy with a prominent Adam's apple sat at a desk typing on a computer keyboard. As he glanced up, his eyes, shielded by thick glasses, held a distracted look.

"May I help you?" he asked in a squeaky voice.

"I hope so." Candace entered the room, surprised to see a boy this young working as a reporter. Was the whole place run by teenagers on the weekend? "I need to get a retraction printed in tomorrow morning's paper."

He sighed and glanced back at the screen, dejectedly. "What section?"

"The society section." She saw his shoulders slump. Obviously, he didn't consider the society section to be big news. "The Morris Blake engagement announcement."

He clicked a few keys and glanced up at her. "What's the problem?"

Irritation flared when she saw his bored expression. It might be deadly dull to him, but it was of paramount importance to her. "It's not true. We're not engaged."

His eyes widened and he did a double take from the screen to her. "Wow, this is you?"

She rolled her eyes, realizing he was looking at the cheesecake photo. He leaned around the screen to stare at her. She saw him trying to make out her form under the

baggy sweats and fumed. Her toe tapped impatiently while she waited for him to stop gawking at her.

He reached for a notepad and thrust it at her. "Can I get your autograph, Miss Blake?"

Instead of taking the pad, she glanced pointedly at the screen. "Maybe later. Let's get my business done first."

He gave her a final lingering once-over. "Okay, what were you saying?"

She leaned over the desk to get a better view of the screen. "This engagement announcement needs to be retracted. We're not engaged."

He kept his gaze focused on her breasts as he said, "I'm sorry, Miss Blake. I'm not authorized to print retractions."

Candace straightened up, annoyed by his negative answer. She was darned if she'd be thwarted by a pubescent cub reporter. "Then who is authorized?"

"The society editor, Margaret Bain. I can give you her number."

"No thanks, I've already got it." So Magi Bain was the society editor. Meddling Magi had struck again. She'd undoubtedly done it all for spite. Finding out that Magi was the troublemaker didn't make this predicament any easier to take. From bitter past experience she knew that Magi could be dangerous. You could never be quite sure when she would strike.

The likelihood of getting her to print a retraction was about nil. She'd be forced to rely on Greg's help after all. "But it was just a joke."

The boy clicked his mouse and brought up a different screen. "It says here the story was called in by Gregory Morris himself. So he ought to know whether he's engaged or not. Congratulations, Miss Blake you're engaged." He grinned, picked up the pad and thrust it at her. "Now can I have my autograph?"

Candace's jaw dropped in disbelief. She'd planned to seek Greg's help and he was the source of all her trouble. "That Toad! How could he humiliate me like this? Just wait till I get my hands on him. He'll be sorry."

Candace jogged down the stairs, and sprinted out of the building. She was going to have a showdown with the Toad. Why did he do it? What possible motive could he have? Revenge? It didn't make sense. He'd be just as tainted by the scandal.

Her muscles were screaming for relief when she crested the top of the hill and caught sight of the Morris Mansion. That was what the locals called it in reverent tones. The house was huge and perched on the top of a hill, giving it beautiful vistas.

It was a favorite trick-or-treat stop among the local kids, because the Morris servants always gave out caramel apples and big candy bars.

Candy stifled the pleasant memory. This was no social call. It was going to be down and dirty. She was going to knock him down a few pegs and dirty his handsome face before she left.

She marched up the cobblestone front drive, past the wrought iron gate, and the fragrant rose bushes surrounding the front porch.

She tensed at the thought of the upcoming battle. She'd long ago made a practice of not giving in to her fears, developing a cool facade that most people never got beyond. But Greg had touched the soft, vulnerable side of her last night. It was going to make dealing with his betrayal even more difficult.

Candace felt dwarfed standing in front of the imposing, double doors. She reached for the brass lion's head knocker and pounded it against the mahogany paneled door. The deep sound resonated through the wood, making her hand tingle.

The door opened silently on well-oiled hinges. A tall gray haired lady, dressed in a black maid's uniform, stood behind it. Her light blue eyes were cautious, her mouth held in a dignified line. "May I help you?"

Candace recognized Mildred, the Morris's maid, right off. She was a long time customer at Ma's dress shop and very hard to please. Mildred always seemed to view the world with a critical eye. She cringed when Mildred gave her sweaty running attire a sniff of blatant disapproval.

She should have cleaned up and changed before coming. It would have given her a more confident edge, but it was too late now. She had to see this skirmish through before she lost her nerve. Candace held her head high and straightened her spine. "I'm here to see Greg."

Mildred frowned, stepping forward blocking the entrance. "Do you have an appointment?"

Mildred's cool voice told Candace she didn't think it likely. This forbidding gatekeeper wasn't going to keep her from giving her employer a piece of her mind. "No, I don't."

Mildred frowned. "Young Mr. Morris is resting now. Why don't you come back later?" She started to close the door.

Candace wedged one foot inside the door, stopping it from closing. Mildred stepped back a pace with a startled look on her face. "I'll wait for him to wake up. My business is important." Nothing short of being bodily thrown out was going to keep her from doing what she came for.

Mildred's annoyed gaze lingered on Candace's face for a moment. Finally, she gave a stiff nod and stepped out of the way. "Very well, follow me."

Chalking up the small victory of gaining admittance to the inner sanctum, Candace grinned and followed the maid through the foyer and into the sitting room. She glanced around the dark paneled walls and vaulted ceiling. Despite its size, it was an amazingly comfortable room, and the furnishings were done in cool creamy colors.

Mildred watched Candace with a narrowed eye as she looked around the room. "Whom shall I say is calling?"

Refusing to be intimidated, she flashed the maid a cocky grin. "Tell Greg his fiancée is here. That should get him down here in a hurry."

Mildred squinted at her and glanced from Candace to the copy of the Daily Journal lying on the sofa table.

Candace realized that she was unfavorably comparing her sweaty appearance to the alluring photo in this morning's paper. She didn't look that bad, did she? Candace caught a

glimpse of herself in a wall mirror and grimaced. She looked like a wild woman. Her hair was falling out of the ponytail and rivulets of perspiration ran down her flushed face. She brushed away the dampness with her sweatshirt sleeve.

Mildred cleared her throat. "I'll tell Mr. Morris you're here." Her tone was still cool, but her expression was now intrigued.

"Thank you." She glanced away from Mildred's speculative gaze, uncomfortable with the attention. Damn Magi Bain for an interfering fool. She never could keep her mouth shut, even in high school, running to the cops every time Candace even so much as jaywalked.

"There's a powder room through that door, if you'd like to freshen up." Mildred pointed to the door on the far end of the room.

Candace took the hint and walked in toward the powder room, feeling Mildred's curious gaze follow her all the way. She probably didn't want her dripping sweat onto the oriental carpet or the Chippendale settees.

Candace shut the powder room door behind her and walked over to the white pedestal sink. She ran cool water on her wrists to calm her racing pulse. This little episode was nothing compared to what was to come. She had to get her emotions under control.

She noticed a wicker basket containing a rainbow of rolled up plush washcloths and decorative soap on the counter. She helped herself, washing her hands and using a washcloth to scrub her face clean. Then she pulled off the ponytail holder and finger combed her hair, putting it in some semblance of order.

She glanced at herself in the mirror. Now, instead of looking like a wild woman she looked like a fresh-faced kid. A light sprinkling of freckles ran across the bridge of her nose, and her eyes were wide with a nervous gleam.

She practiced a stern look, and realized it made her look as bad tempered as Mildred. She stuck out her tongue at the reflection. As long as she could remember to keep her distance from Greg's captivating presence, she'd be okay. With that thought in mind, she opened the door.

Greg stood near the door wearing only a tight pair of jeans and a smile. He looked like he'd just tumbled out of bed. His jaw was shadowed with stubble, and his eyes carried a sleepy-eyed sexiness that made her catch her breath. His mouth slowly curved into a dangerous grin as he straightened away from the wall and sauntered her way.

He put a hand on the door jam and leaned toward her, his voice a husky bedroom rumble. "Hello there, beautiful. I didn't expect to see you so soon."

Candace saw the predatory gleam in his midnight blue eyes and was transported back to the beach. Last night's encounter was imprinted on her senses, never to be erased. She was close enough to reach out and touch his bare chest. Her intrigued gaze focused on the soft thatch of hair on his chest and followed it down to where it curved around his navel and disappeared into the waistband of his jeans.

She remembered all too well what those jeans concealed. But this wasn't the time for fantasizing. She had important business to take care of, if only she could recall what it was.

Stepping back to put some breathing room between them, she regained her equilibrium. He continued to smile as if he didn't have a care in the world. She put her hands on her hips as her irritation returned. "How could you do this to me?"

Greg reached out to cup her cheek with his hand. "Do what?"

Candace pulled away, devastated by the gentle touch of his hand. Why did he have such power over her? It wasn't fair, not when she now knew him to be a master at playing games. Maybe this face-to-face confrontation wasn't such a good idea. "I didn't come here to be manhandled." She stepped past him and into the parlor seeking some breathing space, but heard his footsteps close behind.

Greg took hold of her arm, stopping her flight. "What's wrong?"

Candace was aggravated by his puzzled tone. His warm hand rubbed her arm, creating chaos in her senses. She kept her back turned not daring to look at him. "You know damned well what's wrong."

"No, I don't."

She bristled at the patent falsehood. "Bull. I know a setup when I see it. I also know a come-on when I feel it." She jerked her arm away. "There isn't going to be any more of that kind of activity between us."

Greg leaned into her space. "What kind of activity?" His voice was a suggestive rumble.

Candace knew he was talking about their rendezvous. She couldn't risk being drawn in by his sensual tricks again.

Determined to keep this impersonal she said, "You know precisely what kind of activity I'm talking about."

Greg's grip tightened on her shoulder, holding her fast. "We almost made love, Candy Baby. I'm not ashamed to say it." Greg's voice lowered to a sensual rumble. "You came all over my hand."

Candace froze, humiliated by the reminder of her needy response to his touch. "I did not."

"Yes, you did. I've experienced enough of the fake ones to know a genuine orgasm when I feel it. It was the most mind-blowing experience of my life and I'm ready to finish what we started any time. That is, after you tell me what's wrong." His grip on her shoulders tightened as he spun her around.

Candace dug in her heels, even though it was hopeless. He was much stronger. Her running shoes squeaked on the parquet floor. She looked in his eyes, and the genuine concern she saw there shook her to the core. Could he be innocent? "I'm not here to discuss last night."

Greg studied her face. "Tell me what's wrong. Has Magi been bothering you again?"

Candace bit her lip, hearing his sympathetic tone. Did she owe him an apology? There was only one way to find out. "Did you put our engagement announcement in today's paper?"

"What?" Greg stood up straight, paling slightly.

"It's right here in black and white." Candace picked the paper off the table and thrust it at him. "I tried to get them to print a retraction and they told me you called in the story."

Greg's jaw tightened as he read the story. "Shit."

His short muttered curse startled her. She watched his shoulders sag.

"I didn't call this in."

His denial sounded sincere. In fact, he appeared to be totally off balance for the moment. Then after a moment of studying her photo he smiled, looking like a beefcake pinup with his bare chest and unsnapped jeans. All it would take was a zipper pulled down and he'd be naked. "You don't have to look so happy. This is a total disaster. Meddling Magi has struck again and it's going to take a concerted effort for us fix this mess."

Greg studied her heated reaction. "I was hoping to take things slowly this summer. I wanted you to get to know me and see me as something other than a Toad. But Magi seems to have forced my hand."

She chose to ignore the part about getting to know each other better. "You should never have told Magi that we were a couple. I could have handled Magi just fine on my own. You didn't need to come to my rescue."

Greg shrugged. "The damage is done. But it may turn out to be to our advantage."

Greg's new practical tone and it made her uneasy. He sounded far too confident. "To our advantage—exactly what do you mean by that?"

"I own Pinnacle Publishing."

Her jaw dropped. "What? That's impossible. I've been negotiating with Chad Daley."

"He works for me." Greg folded his arms across his chest as he studied her reaction. "You signed a contract with my firm for the Candy-Wear Catalogs."

Candace gazed at his resolute expression, appalled. If she'd had any inkling that a Morris was connected with Pinnacle, she never would have signed with them. Damn it all, she'd jumped at the offer he'd dangled like a hungry trout. "You lied to me."

"You didn't ask and I didn't tell. It'll be a good deal for both our companies. I know a good deal when I see it, and I go for it." A nerve pulsed in Greg's jaw as he added, "I knew you'd go to the ends of the earth to avoid doing business with the Toad."

Candace felt herself blush as he so easily read her feelings. "I want out."

Greg shook his head. "No."

She was shaken by his sharp refusal and the thought that followed. Was last night just business? "So last night was just a little fringe benefit of doing business together?"

Greg scowled. "You should know better than that. What we have goes beyond business."

She watched the flare of masculine outrage on his face and had the satisfaction of confirming that last night was based on passion. "Not anymore. You can go to hell, Morris. I'm tearing up my fraudulent contract."

"You can't. A community will be affected if this blows up and my stockholders get wind of it. I don't want to be forced to lay people off. I'll be forced to sue you for breach of contract."

"I see." Candace gazed at him, stunned, wondering if this was what a hostile takeover felt like, feeling a rush of sympathy for the people whose jobs could be in jeopardy. "I may have to do business with you but we still need to hush up this false engagement announcement. It certainly isn't advantageous."

Greg shrugged. "Magi probably sent this story national. It's likely to come out along side the promos for Candy-Wear. People will be intrigued by the sweetheart deal. If you publicly dump me the negative press will hurt you."

"So what. I can handle it." Candace frowned at his harsh expression.

"No, you can't. Your fledgling company will crash and burn and Pinnacle's stock will nosedive. For both our sakes we need to play this through."

Candace was well and truly trapped. Greg had left her with very few options other than to go along with him. "If I agree to play along, what's to stop Magi from making more trouble?"

Greg scowled. "I can handle Magi. She must have thought the story and picture would have you heading for the hills. Instead, you're going to stay here and hold your head high and pretend to be in love with me. We have to make the engagement look real."

Candace blinked up at him. His intense gaze seemed to will her to go along with the deception and maybe more. "That's all it's going to be—just a pretense. When I leave town at the end of the summer we'll break up." She held out her hand. "Agreed?"

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Greg shook her hand. "Agreed, but let's seal the agreement properly." He pulled her off balance and into his arms.

Candace tumbled against him. Her lashes swept shut as his mouth came down to claim hers. Greg's bare chest was hot against her hands as she braced them against him. For the briefest second she let her fingers curl into his resilient strength.

His lips brushed hotly against hers, once, twice, and then they were gone. She gazed up into his handsome face, her head swimming with conflicting emotions. This steamy kiss did not bode well for the rest of the summer.

Chapter 4

Greg pulled his Lexus up in front of Ma Brown's house and let the motor idle. He turned to glance at Candy. She sat stiffly by his side, not daring to glance his way. She was quiet seemingly stunned by the rapid change of events. Good. It suited him to keep her off balance. He'd take any advantage he could get to keep her by his side. "I'll pick you up at seven."

She slanted a resentful glance his way. "If you insist, but I still think this is a mistake." She reached for the door handle.

Greg placed a restraining hand on her arm. He could feel her strained tension under his palm. "Dinner with my parents at the country club will prove that our engagement is real."

She pulled away scowling up at him. "You may have the power to get me there but I very much doubt that your family will come. After the showdown with your mother this morning I know that your family would rather face a firing squad than have dinner with me."

He understood her apprehension but after he talked things over with his mother, he knew that she'd come around. His mother wanted him to be happy and Candy made him happy. He felt a vitality he hadn't known for years. "Cheer up, Candy Baby. Being engaged to me isn't a fate worse than death."

"We're not really engaged, Gregory Morris." Her eyes narrowed. "Make sure you keep that in mind."

Greg tensed at her icy response. He remembered the way she'd exploded in his arms last night, coming apart at his touch. He could still feel the ripples of her passion. Hell, he

ought to; he'd done nothing but dream about it all night long. She wanted the mystery lover from last night, not the Toad from this morning. He skimmed a finger down her arm feeling her lean into his touch. "We could have a lot of fun together this summer."

She jerked her arm away and got out of the car saying, "I'm not interested in that kind of fun with you. Mind your manners, Greg Morris, and I'll go through with my part of this farce. Remember, you have just as much to lose this summer as I do."

He watched her stride down her front walk, head held high. She had claws, he had to give her that. What she didn't know was that his future was in danger too. The Candy-Wear account was the last link in his five-year independence plan. He'd leave Pinnacle in the competent hands of a board of directors after his father retired, with only a token group of the Morris family involved. The way he saw it, it was a win-win situation, to have people with a passion for papermaking at the helm.

Greg slipped the Lexus into gear and drove away. He needed to confront Magi Bain about the bogus engagement announcement in this morning's paper. The revealing photograph of Candy had Magi's spiteful tone. And she had the means to pull it off, being an editor.

A few minutes later Greg strode up the walk to Magi's townhouse. He glanced down the empty street as he leaned on the doorbell. It wouldn't do to have any speculation about his early morning visit. He and Magi were once an item, but

that was long ago. He was an engaged man now and he didn't want to risk fouling that up.

"All right, all right, I'm coming," Magi, muttered, as she jerked the door open. "Well, well, well, if it isn't the soon-to-be-married Greg Morris."

He frowned at her smirk as she stepped back into the foyer and waved him in. She was dressed in a pink chenille bathrobe. Greg stood fast, irritated by her triumphant expression. "Why did you do the hatchet job on Candy?"

She chuckled and turned away. "The picture added a bit of spice to the story, don't you think?"

"No." Greg held his outrage in check as he stepped into the foyer.

"I'm going to get some coffee. You can have some too if you want."

Greg shut the door and followed her. He intended to make sure that Candy wouldn't feel Magi's sting again. He stopped in the doorway to the kitchen and watched Magi pour herself a cup of coffee.

She leaned against the counter and flashed an icy smile his way. "If the slut can't take the heat she shouldn't pose for those explicit pictures. As soon as you made that announcement at the party last night she became fair game, lover boy."

Greg frowned at the derisive endearment. "Don't call me that. You and I are ancient history."

Magi smirked. "Why not? I've got more right than her to call you that. Or did you get what you wanted last night?"

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He bristled at her mocking tone but refused to be baited. He and Magi had gone on three dates four years ago. They were both on the rebound. Greg was in mourning for his wife and Magi's marriage was over. They'd both needed the comfort of their brief intimate relationship and in the end had gone their own ways. He'd thought the end of their breakup was amicable. Obviously, he'd thought wrong. "We both decided our liaison was a mistake and went our separate ways."

Magi thumped her coffee mug down on the counter. "I didn't decide jack shit. You were the one that dumped me. Well, now you'll know how it feels to be rejected. I hope she stomps all over your heart, you rat."

Greg was stunned by her outburst. What could he say? He'd never given Magi any idea that they were more than casual friends since their breakup. Anything else had been cooked up in her scheming little mind.

They'd turned to each other when they were at low points in their lives. But it was over. Whatever attraction he might have felt for her faded long ago.

He studied Magi's disgruntled expression, doubting that she still had romantic feelings for him. She was dating Tim Marshall owner of the Daily Herald for Pete's sake. Why did she begrudge him a little happiness? Did her animosity stem from feeling that she was losing out to a woman whom she considered a lower class than her?

At the risk of escalating her ire, he resolved to set Magi straight. He refused to let Candy to be hurt by her venom.

"Just for your information, Magi, she didn't dump me. We're still engaged."

"What?" Magi's jaw dropped.

"Candy didn't dump me. We're engaged, so I guess in a way you did me a favor." He was satisfied by the stunned look on her face.

After a moment of dismayed silence, Magi spat out, "Get the hell out of my house."

He stayed put. Knowing Magi, she wouldn't stay down for long. "Not until we get this settled. If Candy gets any more bad press I'm going to have your hide."

She glared at him. "I'm not the only reporter on the Daily Herald. Your trashy little fiancée is sure to generate plenty of bad press without my assistance."

Greg was prepared for this flanking tactic; no doubt, she'd instigate a campaign of scandal just to get back at him. "I'll know that you're behind it, even if it carries another reporter's byline. I don't take libel lightly and the Herald won't take a lawsuit well. You'll lose your job, even if you are cozy with Tim Marshall." He softened his tone. "Be reasonable, Magi. I thought we were friends."

Magi's lips thinned as she crossed her arms over her chest. "And I thought we were more than friends. I guess we both were wrong. As for that tramp, Candy Blake, I hope she takes the next broom out of town. If there's anything I can do to speed her along, I'm going to do it."

Greg was rapidly losing his patience. "What's behind this? You can drop the lovelorn act because I know you never loved me."

Magi pursed her lips and looked away. Her nose was raised high in the air as she said proudly. "She doesn't deserve the Morris name and she's not going to get it. I split you two up back in high school, and I'm going to do it again."

Greg froze. He remembered the prom night from Hell all too well. His car wouldn't start that night and as he was tinkering with it some friends had driven up and offered him a beer. Nervous about the date, Greg had downed it in one pull. The next morning he'd woken up slumped in the back seat of his car, his tux as messed up as his head. Candy's foster brother, Mike, added a few lumps and bruises to his misery a day later. And his father hustled him out of town the next week. His jaw tightened as it all became clear. "You had me drugged."

Magi's grin was brittle. "Got it in one, lover boy. You ought to thank us. We did it to keep you from being tainted by the tramp. Your family's reputation was at risk. If you think with your head instead of your dick, you'll realize I'm right. She's not in our class."

"You bet she's not. She's ten times better." Magi hadn't acted alone. He had a vague memory of his sister tending him through the night; come to think of it, her formal gown was just as messed up as his tux the next morning. Magi's sputtered curse words bounced off him as he mulled things over. He ignored her; it would be a cold day in hell before he let her affect his life again. "Just stay out of our way. You've been warned."

He turned and headed toward the door. At least now he knew what had Magi's back up. His dear sister. There was going to be hell to pay.

Greg knew right where to find her. She was hosting a luncheon at her house for the Junior League. And Kathleen, being a control freak, would be there now overseeing the smallest details. He pulled up in front of his sister's estate, walked his way past her carefully trimmed juniper bushes, and made his way to the back door. He gave a brief knock, then let himself in.

Joe Barnes, his brother-in-law, looked up from the morning paper he was reading at the breakfast nook and smiled. "Hey bro, I guess congratulations are in order. Or on second thought, looking at your frowning face, condolences. Maybe giving up the single life won't suit you."

Greg schooled his savage expression into a civilized smile. He looked over Joe's shoulder and glanced down at the copy of the Daily Herald spread out on the table.

Their engagement announcement took center stage. He thought that Candy looked like an angel in the picture, but he knew that most of Morris Point would condemn her for posing for it. He reached down to run his finger over her image. He wanted her and he was going to fight for her. Looking up, he saw Joe's sympathetic gaze. His sister was damned lucky to have found the love of her life. Why couldn't he have the same opportunity himself? "What'd she do, run you out of the dining room?"

"You know how your sister likes to take care of every little detail. I figured it would be safer to stay out of her way. So, what are you doing here?"

Greg frowned as he thought of Kathleen's interference. He could understand his mother's worries, but this was none of his sister's business. "I've got a little bone to pick with your wife."

Joe leaned back in the chair and sighed. "What's she done now?"

Greg gritted his teeth as he gave Joe a savage smile. "She and Mother made a surprise visit on my bride-to-be this morning."

Joe's chair crashed back down. "Uh oh."

Greg nodded. "Kathleen and I are going to have a knock down, drag out fight. Any objections?"

He shook his head. "Not as long you keep it polite. I don't blame you for being ticked off. I know she can be abrasive, but keep in mind that she was probably trying to help. Kathy cares about you."

Greg rolled his eyes at Joe's patience. Maybe that's why they got along so well. Kathleen was aggressive and Joe was laid back. "I don't know how you can stand being married to that she-devil."

Joe frowned and gave an expansive sigh. "The trouble is most people don't understand her. Kathy isn't mean; she's just frustrated."

Greg snorted and walked toward the kitchen door. "Frustrated? The woman runs every charity in town, she and

my mother to a lesser extent rule the Morris Point female society with an iron glove."

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe the reason she gets so involved is that she doesn't have any direction in life?"

Greg thought about Joe's statement as he walked into the dining room. He saw his sister laying out the place settings. She frowned when she saw him coming, then turned back to what she was doing, placing the elaborately folded napkins at the proper angle. "Don't you have people to do that for you?"

She snapped, "I prefer to do it myself. That way I know it's done right."

Greg noticed the way she avoided his gaze. Maybe she was actually feeling some remorse for her sneak attack this morning, but he doubted it. "We need to talk."

"She ran right to you didn't she?" she snapped. "That lying, conniving, little tramp. She claimed it was all a misunderstanding and that you weren't stupid enough to propose to her. I didn't believe her and it turns out I was right."

He tightened his jaw reigning in his temper. "Why'd you do it?"

Kathleen glared up at him. "Mother and I were only trying to avoid a scandal. I told her that golddigger, Candy Blake, had tricked you. It was just a bizarre coincidence, you running into each other last night. A chance encounter is nothing to build your future on, Greg."

Greg studied her defiant, but guilty, expression. Maybe she did feel remorse. "It wasn't a chance encounter. It was a

carefully planned, logical campaign, and you damn near ruined it. I'm not going to give you a second warning, Kathy. Back off."

She plopped down into a chair her eyes widening. "What do you mean by a well planned campaign? You're talking crazy."

Greg slipped his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "I knew damned well Candy would be there. I arranged it. Pinnacle Publishing just signed a five-year contract to publish her Candy-Wear catalog. I arranged for her to have a summer off, and I conspired with her foster mother to have her needed at home. I finally managed to get her back in my arms and you and Magi came along to try to ruin everything again."

Kathleen's mouth was agape. "Me and Magi. Oh god, she ratted me out, didn't she? I had no idea you were still interested in Candy. We figured that you just wanted to get her into bed back then. Magi sympathized with my embarrassment at your foolish behavior and came up with a solution."

"Some solution. You two idiots could have killed me. I understand your motivation, but what about Magi's?"

"She's my friend. She was only doing it to help me out."

Greg shook his head. "Wake up little sister. She wasn't your friend then, and she certainly isn't now. Candy and I didn't place that announcement in this morning's paper. If we had, it wouldn't have contained the photograph. She did it to humiliate Candy."

Kathleen gasped. "If what you say is true, she didn't care who her graphic announcement hurt. How are you two going to handle it?"

"Candy has agreed to play along for the summer for the sake of our businesses." Greg watched his sister's startled reaction.

"Then Candy did lie to Mother when she said that it wasn't true."

Greg shook his head. "No. It took a bit of coercion to persuade her to keep up the illusion. Pinnacle Publishing needs her account to grow to the next level. But more importantly, this bogus engagement will give me some time to win her over. Like I said, I won't allow you or Magi to interfere."

Kathleen looked away. "I did it for your own good."

"Bull. I cared for her and you knew it."

She turned to glare at him. "All right, fine. I couldn't stand the talk. You had no business going out with such trash. For god's sake, her father embezzled money from our family business. You should have avoided her, not wanted to take her to the prom."

Greg gritted his teeth, aggravated by his sister's snobbish attitude but not really surprised by it. "You always were overly proud of our social standing."

Kathleen glared back at him. "Overly proud. That's nice, coming from you. This social standing is what I've built my life on. I couldn't just step into Dad's shoes like you did. I had to carve out a niche for myself."

Greg stepped back a pace, stunned by his sister's vehemence. "I had no idea you felt like this. But try to understand, I haven't had it so easy either. There are a lot of responsibilities to running a mill, with a lot of people counting on me."

She looked away and said quietly, "I wouldn't know about that now, would I?"

He had to get through to her somehow. Frustrated, he blurted out, "I still want Candy. That much hasn't changed. I need to give us a chance."

Kathleen turned to look at him, frowning. "But you were just kids back then. You've dated lots of women since; heck, you were even married. Jill was a much more appropriate mate."

Greg felt a pang deep inside at the mention of his late wife's name, but her memory didn't crush him anymore. Candy had made him want to live again. "I can't live in the past, Kathy. Can't you see that Candy's good for me? Furthermore, she doesn't give two figs about my wealth or social position, unlike every other woman I've dated. When her business proposal hit my desk six months ago it rekindled my interest."

Kathleen sniffed. "This isn't going to go over too well with Mom and Dad."

"That's not your problem. I'll smooth things over with them today." Greg gazed at his sister, hoping she'd gotten the message. She was cooperative now, but what about later? He needed to reinforce the idea that Candy was in his life to

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stay. "Have dinner with us tonight at the club. We're going to celebrate our engagement."

Kathleen shook her head. "I don't think I can ever accept her as your fiancée even if it is just a pretense."

Greg stood firm. "All I'm asking is that you don't interfere."

She sighed. "Okay. Joe and I will be there. I guess we'd better make the best of a bad situation."

* * * *

Candy knocked on Ma's door. She was hoping she would still be asleep so she could put this off a little longer. How would Ma take to the fact that their engagement announcement was splashed all over the morning paper?

"Come in," Ma called out.

Candy poked her head around the door. "I don't want to disturb you if you're taking a nap."

"Nonsense. I'm wide awake."

Candy walked into the room and helped Ma sit up in bed. What should she tell Ma? She didn't want to cause any shocks. Ma had seemed so delicate since she'd been home. Much more fragile than she'd remembered her being. So much so that Candy had agreed to stay for the summer to give Ma plenty of time to recuperate from surgery. She'd have to break it to her gently. "Ma, there's something I've got to tell you."

Ma put her hand up to her chest. "It's not bad news, is it?"

Candy bit her lip. This mock engagement was a friggin' disaster, but she couldn't say that. Yes, but it means a

sensual summer spent with the man of your dreams, an errant part of her mind shouted. "Not exactly."

Ma pursed her lips. "What does that mean?"

Candy shrugged, then held the morning paper out. "My engagement to Greg Morris was announced in this morning's paper but..."

Ma shrieked then grabbed Candy with a bear hug. "Oh honey, I'm so happy for you."

Candy gasped for air in the tight embrace. Ma suddenly seemed to have gained a lot of strength. She pulled away and looked into Ma's twinkling eyes. "Yes, but, as I was saying..."

Ma beamed. "This has made me feel better than I have in ages."

Candy bit her lip. This wasn't going as planned. But she couldn't bear to burst Ma's happy bubble. "Yes, well, we're going out tonight to celebrate. I get to meet the whole family, including Greg's father."

"Don't worry, honey, they're going to love you."

"That's not what I'm worried about. I don't give a rip what they think about me. I don't think I can stand to spend time with the man who killed my father."

Ma shook her head. "Now, honey, Mr. Morris did no such thing."

Candy looked away. "He might as well have. My father died in jail after Greg's dad sent him there, didn't he?"

"But you can't blame the man for that. Your dad was arrested for embezzlement. It was his fault, I'm sorry to say. His heart attack could have happened at any time."

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Candy sniffed. "He told me he didn't do it, before they sent him away, and I believe him."

"Now, now, I know you have strong feelings about this but it doesn't mean that your dad couldn't have told you a lie to spare your feelings."

Candy looked away. She could vividly recall the moments before the police arrested her father. They'd both known it was coming. He'd proclaimed his innocence and she'd believed him then. She still did, didn't she? Of course she did. It would be disloyal to think otherwise.

Ma sighed. "It's all water under the bridge, honey. Your father is dead and gone. You've got to look to the future now. And I couldn't be happier."

Candy wasn't so sure. The past and the future were all inextricably woven together. There could be no future with Greg Morris, she was sure of it.

Chapter 5

Fastening the clasp on her silver ankle bracelet, Candy gazed at her reflection in the mirror. She'd dressed to kill, and it showed. The red satin party dress she wore clung to her figure, held up by gossamer thin spaghetti straps. Twirling, the multi-layered skirt fluttered around her legs.

She fastened matching silver hoop earrings on her earlobes and reached for the perfume bottle on her dresser to apply scent to her pulse points. If Greg was determined to show her off, she was going to make him pay for the privilege. Hopefully, this sexy dress would help her to assert her independence, and at the same time, keep future family get-togethers down to a minimum.

When Greg's father got a look at her, she hoped he'd run in the other direction. His mother and sister she could handle, but the thought of meeting his father again shook her to the core.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Years had passed since she'd been that frightened girl, alone in the police station. The prospect of seeing him again made her feel almost as insecure. She fastened her evening wrap around her. There was no need to give Greg a preview of her sexy dress.

Grabbing her red beaded evening bag off the dresser table, she turned and headed out her bedroom door. She stopped at Ma's room to say goodnight, but the bed was empty. Had she gone downstairs? If so, it would be the first time since her heart surgery. Candy hoped she hadn't overdone it.

Candy ran down the stairs and hearing the sound of the television in the living room. She poked her head in the room to see Ma, comfortably ensconced in her favorite chair watching Wheel of Fortune.

Ma looked up and smiled. "You look nice, dear."

"Thanks." Candy hugged her wrap close around her, thankful that Ma didn't have the full view. Would Ma approve of her tactics if she knew the truth? "I'm surprised to see you out of your room."

"I was feeling stronger, dear. Must be the good news about your engagement bucking me up."

Candy bit her lip as she took in the fresh rosy glow on Ma's cheeks. She did look better. So much for denying her fake engagement here at home. She couldn't risk throwing Ma into a relapse. And besides, it might be nice to keep her dream lover for the summer. If Greg could use her for business reasons, she could use him for personal ones.

She'd been toying with the idea since he'd dropped her off this morning. The thought had hit her after her initial shock had subsided. There'd be no friends trying to set her up with blind dates, so she'd be safe from Joyce and Joan's matchmaking attempts. And she'd finally get to see what she'd missed out on all those years ago. It was an irresistible prospect.

"I'll be leaving soon. Greg should be here any minute. You've got my cell phone number if you need me."

"Don't you worry about me, dear. I've got a friend coming over to play a few rounds of Canasta. You and Greg have a good time."

Candy flashed Ma a bright and hopefully reassuring smile as she heard a car drive up. "That must be him now."

"Well. Off with you then, dear."

"Right. Call if you need me." She turned and hurried toward the door, her tension building. Maybe she'd get lucky and Greg's father wouldn't show up. She brightened at the thought.

Opening the door, she almost tripped over Greg on the doorstep.

He smiled at the sight of her. "You look lovely, Candy."

Candy warmed at the compliment. "Thanks. That's pretty much what Ma said."

"Ready?"

"Sure am. Let's go." She tried to slip out the door.

"Let me say hello first." He stepped around her and headed into the foyer.

Candy chased after him. "That's not needed." She skidded to a halt beside him.

"Hello, Mrs. Brown."

"Well, hello there, Gregory. It's good to see you. I couldn't be happier about your and Candy's engagement."

Greg reached out to take Candy's hand, drawing her close. "We appreciate it. Don't we, Candy?"

"Um, yeah. Of course we do. Well, we're off to the country club."

"I'm sorry you can't join us."

"Me too. But the doctor wants me to take it easy. Give my regards to your parents."

"We will." Greg escorted Candy out the door.

Candy looked at the old red pickup truck parked in the driveway. It was a far cry from the Lexus this morning.

Greg noted Candy glancing at the tattered upholstery in his old pickup truck and grinned. He'd chosen it because of the bench seat. It was much more conducive for making out; that is, if he ever got the chance again. She sat as far away from him as she could get, hugging the door.

He knew the prospect of dining with his family had her on edge, but was there something else? Was she trying to find a way to break their agreement? He cast an assessing glance her way. "Why didn't you ask Ma Brown to come with us?"

She hesitated. "She's not strong enough to go out. Besides, I don't want her to get hurt. She's going to be crushed when she finds out this is all a sham."

So it was just nerves. He felt his stress level back off. "You're the one who's going to make people doubt us with your prickly ways. Engaged couples don't normally have three feet of space between them in the car. Slide over, Candy Baby."

She frowned and inched over a few inches. "Stop calling me that."

He grinned. "Pet names go with the territory. You can call me honey."

She let out a sigh and slouched down in her seat, muttering, "Honey. You don't look like a honey to me."

He shrugged, pleased that the hated nickname at least took her mind off his family. "I'm easy. Dear, sweetheart, honey, pick one you like." He heard her gasp as he turned into the parking lot of Silver Lake.

She slanted a wary glance his way. "What are we doing here?"

"We've got some unfinished business to take care of. I thought this place would give us some privacy."

She inched away from him. "And I told you we aren't going to do any more of that; at least not until I decide the time is right."

He smiled, hearing the softening in her tone. She was so beautiful. The sight of her, bathed in the sunset's glow, made his mouth go dry. He ran a finger down her arm. She leaned into his touch, her gaze locked with his. Heat sizzled between them as the air became charged with unfulfilled desire. He leaned forward to brush a whisper soft kiss across her sweet lips.

Her eyes swept shut as she kissed him back, running her hand up his arm while her other arm wrapped around his neck.

Greg unclasped her seat belt, drawing her to him as he deepened the kiss.

Her arms tightened around him as she melted into his embrace.

Greg groaned deep in his throat as her hands found their way under his suit jacket. He palmed her breast, fanning his finger over her nipple until it peaked.

She moaned pressing against him, then pulled away as if burned. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. I'm not trying to be a tease, but I'm not ready for this yet."

He knew she had mixed emotions. Hell, he had them too. Instead of being able to romance her properly, he had to do it the hard way. "I know."

Damn Magi all to hell. She'd laughed in his face when he'd confronted her this morning. Then he'd informed her that the engagement was true and she'd been speechless.

Without a word, he pulled a jeweler's box out of the glove compartment, flipped it open to reveal an engagement ring, and reached for Candy's hand.

She tried to tug her hand away. "Why?"

"Engaged people wear rings." He slipped the ring on her finger. It was a beautiful round solitaire diamond, encircled with deep blue sapphires. "Now it's official. You're mine."

"Temporarily," she murmured, gazing at the ring on her finger. "What did you tell your family?"

"Kathleen knows the truth."

"Why?"

"Sorry, she badgered it out of me."

Candy walked into the Morris Point Country Club feeling edgy. Greg's ring was heavy on her finger, making her feel like he'd staked a claim on her. She unclasped her cape, handed it to the coat check girl, and turned an expectant glance his way. What would he think of her dress?

He let out a low whistle. "You look good enough to eat, Candy Baby."

"Gee, thanks, I think." She frowned up at him. He was supposed to be outraged, not turned on.

He smiled. "You're hoping to have my family heading for the hills, I see."

"Got it in one, honey."

He winked. "It won't work. We Morrisises don't scare that easily. Besides, I'd take you in there naked if I had to."

She scowled up at him. "Shut up."

He took her arm and steered her toward the dining room adding, "or better yet, I'll borrow one of the tablecloths and swath you in it toga style."

She slanted an annoyed glance his way. "Try it, Toad, and you'll draw back a bloody stump."

She noticed a hush fall over the dining room as they entered. The engagement had probably been the chief item of gossip around town today. She slanted a wary glance Greg's way to see how he was taking it and was startled by his sympathetic smile in return. He folded her hand in his and she clung to him like a lifeline.

They approached the table and she was shocked to see Greg's family sitting there as promised. He must have done some fast talking to get them here. Mrs. Morris's smile was a bit too bright and Mr. Morris looked stiff and grouchy as they caught sight of her. Kathleen, on the other hand, just sat and scowled. Of course she knew it was all a sham. Joe stood up as Candy approached, and Kathleen tugged him down. He slanted an apologetic glance their way.

They drew to a halt and Greg pulled out her chair. She slid into it, staring at Mr. Morris as she would a cobra. Just being at the same table with him had her tied up in knots.

Greg slid into the chair next to her. "I hope we didn't keep you waiting too long." He reached for Candy's hand. "We had

some unfinished business to take care of didn't we, Candy Baby?"

"Candy Baby?" Kathleen asked dryly, her voice slightly slurred.

"That's right," Greg said, watching her down her cocktail. He flashed his sister a tight smile, "and she calls me honey."

"Isn't that nice," Mrs. Morris said, a bit too brightly.

"Right," his father said, grimly.

"That's some dress you're almost wearing," Kathleen snipped.

Candy flashed her an icy smile. "One of my designs. I can get you one wholesale if you like."

"No thanks. I don't think it's up to my standards."

Greg's father cleared his throat, drawing everyone's attention. He picked up his champagne glass. "The occasion calls for a toast. To Gregory and Candy."

Greg smiled and raised his glass.

Candy clinked her glass with his, feeling like a total fraud.

Mrs. Morris sipped her champagne and smiled. "I thought you were going to bring Mrs. Brown. It would be nice to include your family in the celebration."

Candy shook her head. "She's still recovering from surgery and too weak to go out."

"Well, then. You must have some other family to include, dear. Do you have any relatives I should consult on our pre-wedding planning with?"

Slanting a stricken look Mrs. Morris's way, she tried to come up with an excuse. Family? She had none, other than her foster family. Her mother died when she was born, and

her father had died in prison for embezzlement. Not much of a family pedigree. "My mother died when I was born." She hoped to leave it at that.

Mrs. Morris nodded. "There must be someone else."

Couldn't the lady take a hint? Candy's patience at an end, she stated flatly, "My only family was my daddy, and he died in jail, if you'll recall. It was in all the papers."

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Morris said plaintively, casting a panicked look at her husband.

"Young woman, I'll thank you to lower your voice," Mr. Morris grumbled.

"You can take my manners and—"

Greg pulled her up before she could finish the statement. "Dance with me."

As they started to dance, she stood stiffly in his arms, still stinging from Mr. Morris's rebuke. She trembled in Greg's arms.

"Calm down, honey." Greg slicked a gentle caress down her back. "You're safe with me."

Settling into his arms with a sigh, she murmured, "I'm sorry, but I had to say it or burst. If you want to rethink this summer engagement, go right ahead. I don't think it's going to work. Your father and I can't be in the same room for ten minutes before we're at war."

Gazing down at her, he gave her a little smile. "It'll all work out."

"Easy for you to say." Her chin raised a defiant notch.

His jaw tightened. "Just remember, I'm on your side."

"Are you really?" She gazed up at him, uncertain.

"For the long haul," he said, smoothing a gentling hand down her bared back.

"Thanks. It's just that mention of my dad reminds me of that time. He'd said he was innocent and I believed him. And then he died of a massive heart attack in jail while awaiting trial. It was all so horrible."

"I could do some digging and see what I can find out about your father's case."

Candy sighed and leaned her head against his shoulder. "What's the point? It happened. My father's gone. It's over. But thanks for the offer."

"You're welcome. Just remember, if anyone else bothers you this summer, I've got your back."

His thoughtful tone soothed her hurt feelings as much as his words. She smiled up at Greg, seeing the promise in his eyes. He really was on her side. "I'm starting to see you in a whole new light, honey."

Leading her off the dance floor, he flashed her a warm smile. "Honey, is it? Hallelujah, the Toad is dead." As they walked back to the table, he bent to whisper, "Remember, I'm here for you in all sorts of ways this summer, Candy Baby."

Feeling herself blush as they reached the table, she snatched up her evening bag, saying, "I'm going to go powder my nose."

Candy stood in front of the vanity mirror reapplying her lipstick. The ladies' room door opened. Glancing at Kathleen's somber reflection in the mirror, she felt her tension renew. Had she deliberately followed her here?

Brow wrinkling as she frowned, Kathleen glided over and slid into a vanity chair. "I thought we should talk."

Braced for an attack, Candy turned to smile wryly. "They send you in here to beat me up?" She couldn't help recalling being the victim of pranks and dirty tricks in high school. She'd been the butt of lots of them, but she'd dished out a few of her own, too. Of course, she and Joan were usually the ones who got in trouble for them. The preppie crowd could do no wrong according to the local authorities.

Kathleen shrugged. "I think we've grown beyond those days, don't you?"

"Sometimes I wonder."

"I came in here for one reason; to tell you to behave with a little decorum. I'm putting you on notice now. All I have in this town is my family and my social position, and I'm not about to let you ruin either of them."

The woman had been born with a silver spoon in her mouth, for heaven's sake. How could she think little old Candy Blake could upset her life? "For starters, I have no intention of ruining anything for you. The world doesn't revolve around you, and believe it or not, this town doesn't either. You've got a lot more than I started out with. You've got the mill."

"No, I don't." Kathleen looked away, her frown deepening. "Daddy doesn't approve of women from our family getting involved in the family business."

Stunned, Candy's jaw dropped. How old fashioned could the man get? Why hadn't Kathleen stood up for herself?

Maybe she needed a shove in the right direction. "And do you always do what Daddy says?"

"Don't you?" Kathleen sneered. "You've spent your life as an outcast just like your father. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree from what I've seen."

Taken aback by the accusation, Candy went quiet. She had spent her life as an outsider fighting against an unjust system. She supposed she did have a chip on her shoulder.

Rising to her feet, Kathleen walked to the door.

Finding her voice, Candy stepped forward, determined to regain control of the situation. "I'll make a deal with you. I promise not to make trouble for you this summer if you'll do the same for me."

Kathleen cast an assessing glance her way. "I agree. But there is one important condition. Take it easy on my big brother. Break his heart, and I'll make you sorry."

It was a ridiculous request. She and Greg shared a slow burning attraction, but he didn't love her. It was purely business. Kathleen knew that but it didn't seem to mollify her. "You don't have to worry about that, Kathy."

Kathleen glanced at the ring on Candy's finger. "That's quite a sparkler. If you were just a gold digger, it would be reason enough for you to play him for a fool. I've noticed the soft way he looks at you. He's head over heels. He hasn't looked at a woman that way since Jill. You've got him good and hooked, and you know it."

Who was Jill? Greg had a past she didn't know about. Maybe a string of broken romances lurked in his past. The thought bothered her, even though she reminded herself this

was just business. Candy watched the door close behind Kathleen. Break his heart, indeed. As if that was possible. She caught sight of the ring on her finger, and her breath caught.

Shaking off the sensation of being claimed once more, she took a deep breath.

When Candy walked back to the table, Kathleen sat alone surrounded by several empty glasses.

Kathleen's grin was crooked. "It seems they've all got other fish to fry."

"So I see." Candy's brow wrinkled as she looked around for Greg. He'd better get back before Kathleen drank herself under the table.

"Don't worry. I'll keep you entertained." Kathleen refilled both their champagne glasses. "The karaoke DJ is here in the back room now. How about we take a stroll up there?" Rising to her feet, Kathleen started walking away.

Picking up her glass, Candy hurried to follow. Maybe some time with Kathleen would give her a chance to find out about Jill. "Right behind you."

Kathleen laughed and reached back to tug her along. "Come on, slow poke."

Skittering behind her on high heels, Candy's champagne sloshed over the side of her glass, spilling on the floor. When they reached the bar, she dug in her heels, bringing Kathleen to an abrupt halt. "I'm pooped, let's take a seat."

Kathleen sat down with a snort. "You sure don't have much stamina for a big-time New York model party girl."

"I'm not the party girl you think I am. I'm a plain old hardworking nine-to-five catalog model."

Tilting her head to the side, Kathleen eyed her quizzically. "Maybe I was wrong about you. Come on, let's sing," Kathleen said with a giggle. "Nothing like a good singsong to bring a family together."

"No, thanks."

"Aw, come on," Kathleen pouted. "How come no one ever wants to sing with me?" Then she grinned, slurring, "What's the matter? Are you a chicken?"

"Jeez, it must run in the family." Candy rolled her eyes.

Kathleen frowned. "Are you bad-mouthing us Morrisises again? I thought we settled all that in the bathroom."

Decorum was flying right out the window as Candy realized the champagne was starting to relax her. She stifled a giggle, saying, "All right, fine. Just shut up."

She reluctantly followed a wobbly Kathleen onto the stage. Greg couldn't blame her for this one.

"What'll it be, ladies?" the DJ asked.

Candy held onto Kathleen so she wouldn't fall over and they started singing along to an off-key rendition of "We Are Family." She gazed out at the sparse crowd to see Greg's parents watching from the doorway, with horrified expressions. At that moment, she wished a hole would open up in the floor that she could hide in.

Greg and Joe wandered in from the bar and stopped in their tracks.

Oh, great! Now the whole family had a ringside seat to her and Kathleen's awful duet. She cringed as Kathleen screeched out a high note.

Greg grinned up at her, and then said something to Joe.

Joe hurried up to the stage, scooped up a sputtering Kathleen and headed for the door.

Sauntering toward the stage, Greg held out his hand to Candy. "Time to go, Candy."

Grateful for the timely, if embarrassing, intervention, she ran off the stage and linked her arm with his.

As they roared out of the parking lot, Candy slanted a glance Greg's way. Was he angry about the evening's end? He was actually smiling. Good! Sighing, she leaned back in the seat and rolled down the window to let the wind whip at her hair. The cool breeze blew away the remnants of champagne as she gazed up at the stars. It really was a special night, and here she was with her dream lover.

It was then she noticed they were driving in the opposite direction of Ma Brown's house. Where was he taking her? She glanced expectantly at the sharp planes of his face in the moonlight. When he turned into the Silver Lake driveway, her hopes were confirmed.

Leaning back against the car door to smile up at him, she asked, "What are we doing here?"

He unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to smile at her. "Guess."

Gazing at his heartbreaker's smile, she wondered once again about his past. She needed some answers before this went any farther. "Who is Jill?"

The flash of pain that crossed his face was unmistakable.

"I see Kathleen's been gossiping." His hand clamped tight on the steering wheel for a moment.

Trying to read his emotions by moonlight, Candy studied the tight set of his mouth. Jill had been important to him—that much was obvious. But did that leave any space in his heart for her? "Not really. She just warned me not to break your heart like Jill. Who is Jill?"

Letting go of the steering wheel with a sigh, Greg murmured, "Jill was my wife."

"Wife?" Candy could barely form the word. An ex-girlfriend she'd expected, an ex-wife she hadn't.

Turning to face her, he looked Candy square in the eyes, unflinching. "We met in college. We were only married six months when she was killed by a hit and run driver seven years ago."

She traced the line of a tear down his rugged face. "Oh my god, Greg. I'm so sorry." Her hand moved down to rub his shoulder, tenderly. "Tell me about her."

"Like I said, we met in college. You met her cousin, Chad—he's the man you've been negotiating with at Pinnacle. He and I attended UW Madison's School of Business together, and he introduced us. Jill was sweet, and loving, with a zest for life. I think you two would have been friends. It still doesn't seem real that she's gone sometimes. She helped me build Pinnacle Publishing from nothing, even going so far as to work in the accounting department free."

Candy was touched that he felt safe enough with her to open up in this way. His heart had been shattered by the loss of his wife. She could see it in his unguarded expression, the glimmer of unshed tears in his eyes. It helped put his aggressive business style in proper perspective. He was

determined to make Pinnacle a success, maybe for Jill as much as for himself. When she digested his words, his statement about leaving his father's firm penetrated. "You're leaving Morris Papers," she realized out loud.

"I'm almost out the door. After I leave, there'll still be a token group of Morris family members on the board."

She thought about Kathleen's statement about being shut out of the family firm. This just might give his sister the opportunity she wanted. "What about Kathleen?"

"What about her?"

Hoping he wouldn't be as close-minded as his father, she said, "It would give her a chance to get involved in the business."

"I've been thinking about that." He shrugged. "Quite honestly, she's never shown any interest in the business before this morning."

Candy could understand his confusion. After all these years, his sister was chafing under the confines of her conservative family role. "Maybe she was afraid to make waves. Ask her. She might surprise you."

"I'll do that."

His reasonable attitude pleased her. She was definitely seeing a new side of him tonight. The sudden need she felt to get close to him had more to do with that than a need to comfort him because of his losses. "So what are we doing here?" She unfastened her seatbelt and inched toward him.

"I thought our place would be a good place to talk." He reached out to trail a finger down her arm.

"About what?" She watched his finger slick down her arm, enjoying the little explosions of fire his touch ignited in her. Talk, indeed. His actions could say so much more than words. All her willpower dissolving, she decided that they were destined to have this summer of love.

"About us." He moved forward, pulling her across the bench seat and into his arms. "About this." His mouth came down to claim hers.

"Umm," Candy groaned, returning his kiss. His lips were so warm, coaxing a response from her. She sighed, melting into his arms. He tugged her onto his lap. Her hands snaked under his jacket, seeking the muscled planes of his back. Her fingers kneaded his hot flesh.

"My little vixen." Greg growled, nuzzling her neck.

She smiled. "I've always wanted to neck in a car."

"Well, I don't want to disappoint you then." He cupped her breast in his hand, slightly squeezing it in his grasp.

Candy gasped, pressing against his palm at the delicious sensation. He smiled, and pinched her nipple through the cloth of her dress. Plucking at the hardening nub, he rolled it between his fingers until she squirmed. Then he moved to the other breast that ached for the same tender torture. "Oh, yes," she sighed. When his hands fell away, she blinked up at him, bereft. Why did he stop? His sultry smile took her breath away.

Greg reached out and flicked first one, and then the other spaghetti strap holding up her dress. They skittered off her shoulders. He reached back and loosened her zipper.

As her bodice fell, Candy shook it loose, baring her breasts for his sweet attention. He bent to take her nipple into his hot mouth, and she cried out with delight. He licked, and sucked until little mewling noises poured out of her throat.

Two could play the teasing game. Tugging his shirt out of his pants, she scratched her nails up his back, so great was her need. Smiling, she reached for his zipper. Finding him, she stroked his semi-hard shaft with her trembling fingers, tickling its velvety head. He was magnificent.

Groaning, Greg's mouth left her breast as he pressed her back against her seat. Lifting her skirts, his hands rubbed up her bare legs, until they reached her satin panties. He tugged her thong panties aside and reached for her hot, creamy center.

She cried out when he touched her clit, pressing it, rubbing it. His fingers teased her, moving in and out of her until she was all but humping his hand.

"You're so wet. Are you ready for me, Candy Baby?" He rubbed her clit.

"Yes." She shrieked and writhed against him. She needed him inside her now.

Sitting back, he smoothed a gold condom over his manhood. Then he picked her up, holding her so she hovered over him.

Straddling him, she spread her legs wide. Tantalized, she burned when he butted against her, teasing the very edges of her femininity with his erect manhood. Why didn't he take her? "Please," she pleaded.

"Open your eyes, Candy," he demanded.

Her eyes popped open, at his command. The heat she saw in his eyes almost made her swoon.

"That's right," he husked. "I want you to be a willing participant. Every inch of the way, together."

"I am," she gasped as she slowly lowered herself onto his rigid manhood. He filled her to tightness until she was sitting on his lap, gasping for breath. Gazing into his deep blue eyes, she murmured, "I think you're too big, Greg."

Beads of sweat sprung up on Greg's brow as he leaned forward to kiss her. "No honey, just give us a moment to adjust." He reached down to rub her clitoris again.

All her senses seemed to be tied into their joining. She ground against him, gasping at the sweet, aching sensation.

"Easy, baby." Greg's hands cupped her bottom, squeezing it as he slowly urged her to ride up and down his shaft.

She didn't want to take it easy. Leaning forward, her mouth found his neck, sucking it as he sped up the pace. She pinched his nipples, and he thrust up into her in reaction, growling. He buried himself to the hilt inside her, as she cried out her delight.

"Little witch." He tightened his grip on her bottom. Holding her still, he thrust into her harder, time and again.

Spasms started deep inside her as Candy ground her clit against him. "Yes, yes, yes," she screamed. Her orgasm took her and her spasms tugged him deeper inside.

Holding her tight, he surged hard into her, groaning as he came.

It Had To Be You
by Julie Skerven

Sagging against his warm chest, she sighed. Come what may, she'd have her dream lover for the summer. She wouldn't let herself think beyond that.

"We need to talk." Greg slicked a hand up and down her bare back.

Candy froze. She wasn't ready to discuss the details of their summer fling. "We'd better get dressed before the police make their patrol. I should hurry home. Ma will be waiting up."

Chapter 6

Candy hung a dress on the display stand and winced as the quick motion made her head throb. It was the morning after, and she had a king sized hangover. She'd have to remember not to indulge in six glasses of champagne ever again.

Last night had been a roller coaster of an evening. The lowest low was facing Greg's father, the highest high finding bliss in Greg's arms when they made love. The cliffhanger ... the sober feeling she had later when Greg had wanted to discuss their love affair.

Now she was facing the aftermath alone as she did her morning stint behind the counter at The Golden Peacock. She gave the dress one final adjustment. Walking back behind the counter, she picked up her sketchpad once more.

Working helped take her mind off her headache. She added the final touches to the sketch of a teddy she was designing for Joan. It would be satin and lace with a low sweetheart neckline.

The bell rang, indicating a customer had come in. She looked up and dropped her pencil as she watched Greg's sister come inside. Kathleen was the last person she expected to see today.

Moving swiftly, Kathleen slipped behind a rack of dresses and peered out of the plate glass window.

Was the woman trying to be incognito? Eyeing her dark glasses and floppy wide-brimmed hat, Candy decided the

woman must have flipped her lid. Or maybe she was ashamed to be seen with her. That notion got Candy's back up.

After a moment Kathleen turned, and headed her way.

"Are you wearing a disguise or something?" Candy asked.

"Not so loud," Kathleen said with a groan, then slipped off the glasses and sank down on one of the counter stools.

Gazing at the woman's bloodshot eyes, she winced in sympathy, all thoughts of possible insults fading. "You poor kid. You look worse than I feel. How about a cup of coffee to pick you up?"

"Thanks. I think you'd better pour yourself one too." She slapped the morning's paper on the counter. "You're going to need it after you see this."

A picture of Joe carrying Kathleen off and an accompanying photo of Candy and Kathleen on stage held Candy's appalled attention. Snatching up the paper, she read the caption.

Candy Blake—notorious lingerie model—causes riot at country club. Will her sweetheart deal with Pinnacle Publishing go bust?

"Oh, my God. Meddling Magi has struck again."

"Got it in one. She's managed to turn our local paper into a hotbed of tabloid-style journalism. But we're not going to take this lying down. We're going to fight fire with fire. Dad's gone to the editor-in-chief to get a retraction and try to get Magi fired. And you and I are going to present a united front."

As she gazed at Kathleen's outraged expression, she wondered where Greg was in all this. Why were his father and sister taking charge? And then a horrific thought flashed

through her mind. Was Greg putting space between them, trying to cut his losses business-wise? "What about Greg?"

"He doesn't know about it yet. He's back in Landis Hills attending to business at Pinnacle and we thought it better to keep him out of it for now." Kathleen winced. "Dad was afraid Greg might stir things up more. You see, Magi is kind of hung up on him and it just grinds her jaw that you're the one he picked over her."

She sighed, relieved that Greg wasn't backing away from her. "Oh," she said as Magi's motivation suddenly became clear. There'd been bad blood between them for years. Was her jealousy over Greg behind Magi's spite back in high school? "How long has this been going on?"

"A long, long time. I have a confession to make," Kathleen said softly.

"What?"

"Remember the mix-up on prom night when Greg stood you up?"

"Very well." *Remember it.* It had been a humiliating experience—a turning point in her youth that had sent her packing after graduation.

Kathleen looked down at her hands. "Well, Magi and I were to blame. We drugged Greg so he slept the night away."

"What?" It was the last thing Candy had expected to hear. She gazed at the other woman's shamed expression in amazement. "How could you do that?"

Kathleen met Candy's gaze directly. "I know. It was a stupid thing to do even by teenage standards, and I'm

genuinely sorry. I finally owned up to it with Greg the other day."

Candy nodded as Kathleen's sincerity came through her shock. "Let me guess—Magi instigated the whole thing."

"Most of the blame goes to me." Kathleen shook her head. "I know how stupid it was now, but back then I was embarrassed that Greg wanted to go out with you. Magi provided the means and opportunity to prevent it. I regretted it the minute I did it, but it was too late. He'd already drunk the doctored-up beer Magi brought with her. So, I stayed home, sat up all night with him, and threw up all over both of us. Do you think you can ever forgive me?"

What good would anger do now? "Of course I do. We've both grown up and can look at the past through different eyes now." She poured two cups of coffee for them and placed them on the counter. Then it hit her. "Oh, my God. Mike beat up Greg because he stood me up. Greg must have hated me for that."

"I don't think so. Things happened so fast that Greg didn't have time to react. I do know he tried to see you after he came home from military school, but by then you were gone."

"Thanks for telling me the truth." Even as she said it, Candy felt like a fraud for keeping the secret of her and Greg's false engagement. But she couldn't spill the beans without jeopardizing both their businesses. "It puts a new spin on that episode of my life."

"Thank *you* for being so understanding. It's a big load off my conscience, believe me." Kathleen picked up the sketchpad. "What's this?"

"I was working on some designs for my foster sister, Joan. She and her husband are about to have their first baby, and she wanted something to rekindle their passion afterwards." Candy smiled. "Between you and me, it doesn't need much of a fire to rekindle it, but every woman wants to look sexy for her man."

Kathleen nodded, flipping through the pages slowly. "These are really good, Candy."

"Thanks. I just hope they sell after Greg publishes my catalog. If Magi doesn't sabotage the launch, that is. It was kind of a big step to go out on my own."

"If they're like this, they can't miss." Kathleen smiled up at her saying, "With Greg's promotional expertise and your designs, it's a match made in heaven. And besides, you and I are going to see that Magi goes down. She won't have a chance to hurt you again."

Candy felt some of her stress subside. "Thanks. I appreciate the vote of confidence and the help."

"You're welcome." Kathleen set the pad down and looked up at Candy with a twinkle in her eyes. "Do you think you could design some things for me? I wouldn't mind lighting a little fire under my love life either."

Seeing the other woman's excitement, Candy smiled. She'd been wrong about her being a conservative prig, after all. "Of course. Just as soon as I finish these, I'll get started on yours."

"Good," Kathleen nodded, adding, "in the meantime, about that united front. I would like you to go out for lunch with me at the club."

"Back to the scene of the crime." Candy winced as she glanced at the paper.

Kathleen grinned. "That's right."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

"Sure it is. And we're going to hold our heads high and spit in Magi's face."

Candy gazed at her determined expression. She had as much grit as her brother and clearly was just as single minded. "What time?"

"You only work half a day, right?"

"How did you know that?"

"I called Ma Brown and asked. So how about if I meet you there at twelve-thirty?"

"Fine. I'll be there."

After Kathleen left, Candy phoned Joan. "Hey there, sis," she said when Joan answered.

"What's up?" Joan asked.

Candy curled her finger into the phone cord, as she gazed at the picture in the paper. "Did you see the paper?"

"I really don't have time to talk now, Candy. Call back later, okay?"

Candy hung up the phone with a frown and went back to the designs.

* * * *

Riding up to the country club entrance in the passenger seat of Kathleen's Caddy, Candy steeled herself for the stares she'd probably receive. She was coming back to the scene of

the crime indeed. Getting out of the car, she looked around, expecting Magi to leap out of the rose bushes with a camera.

Seeing that the coast was clear, she walked into the entrance. From the corner of her eye, she did see some open-mouthed gapes. She and Kathleen passed by groups of golfers and well-dressed ladies lunching, with their heads held high.

No doubt they were wondering what kind of ruckus she might cause today. She could cheerfully wring Magi's scrawny neck for all she'd cost her—her home with Ma when she was in her late teens, her romance with Greg back in high school, and now her privacy.

If their prom date had happened, who knows? Maybe it would have blossomed into a friendship or more. Now that she'd gotten close to him she could see he was far from the toad she'd thought him.

She came to a halt at the hostess's podium.

"May I help you ladies?" the hostess asked with a smile.

Kathleen nodded. "We have reservations, under Kathleen Morris."

"Oh yes, the Morris party." The hostess turned, saying, "Follow me please."

Candy trooped along behind her to the end of the room, hearing conversations stop as they passed by towards the dimly lit back end of the room. Good grief, were they putting them back in no man's land to avoid another scene? She cast a sidelong glance at Kathleen, who seemed to be taking the slight in stride. There was a pleasant smile on Greg's sister's face. Well, then, who was she to complain? She dutifully

followed her through the doorway and into an even darker back room. This was going too far. It would spoil Kathleen's plan to present a united front if they sat back here. Just as she was about object, the lights came on.

"Surprise!"

Candy's jaw dropped, her gaze sweeping over the balloons, streamers, and noisy gaggle of women. And then she saw the banner. 'Best wishes Candy and Greg.' Oh no. She realized belatedly that Kathleen was throwing her a surprise bridal shower.

Joan stepped forward with a big smile on her face. "Now you know why I was too busy to talk to you earlier, sis. Kathleen and I had our work cut out for us, arranging this last minute shindig."

The crowd laughed.

She gazed at Joan's and Kathleen's happy faces. "You guys shouldn't have gone to all this trouble." She could understand Joan going to these lengths, but Kathleen knew this was a bogus engagement. Had she gone along with it simply to present a united front?

Joan grinned. "Of course we should, and look who we brought along to help us celebrate." The crowd parted to reveal Ma seated in an armchair.

"Ma, what are you doing here?" Candy asked, startled. She hadn't set foot from the house since her surgery two weeks ago. "You're supposed to be home recuperating."

"You ought to know I wouldn't miss an occasion like this for all the tea in China." Ma sat up straighter. "Don't worry. I didn't try to drive, so you can stop fussing over me like a

mother hen. Mrs. Morris sent a driver to collect me, and he'll drive me home, too."

The crowd chuckled.

"I guess that's okay then," Candy said and smiled. She walked over and gave Ma a hug. "Just see that you don't overdo it, or Dr. Wang will have my head."

"Yes, my darling daughter."

Mrs. Morris stepped up and smiled. "Come along, Candace, and let me introduce you to the rest of Gregory's family."

Candy was swept along, feeling awkward as she was introduced to throngs of Morris family and friends. In the back of her mind, she kept thinking about all the gifts she would have to return.

As they made their way around the room, Candy glanced at Greg's mother. She seemed genuinely pleased about the whole thing. Was the lady really warming up to her? "Thank you for the introductions, Mrs. Morris. I was feeling a bit tense about entering the throng."

Mrs. Morris smiled, her eyes twinkling. "It's no trouble at all. I felt the same way before I married Greg's father. Meeting the group *en masse* can be a bit overwhelming. Forgive me for being so nosy and upsetting you last night when we discussed wedding plans. I meant no offense, dear, I just thought you'd want to share your joy with all your friends and family both, old and new."

Recalling her angry reply to Mrs. Morris' probing her about family last night, she couldn't help but feel chagrined. She'd overreacted, big time. "I realize that now. I'm sorry for

overreacting the way I did. Thank you for being kind enough to introduce me to your family."

"It's been my pleasure, my dear. Some time when we have privacy we'll discuss the past and your father and get everything out into the open."

"I'd like that," Candy agreed, responding to the genuine warmth in Greg's mother's tone. She took her place next to the gift table and started opening the beautifully wrapped gifts. She tore open Ma's first, gasped, and held it up for the girls to see. "A set of hand-embroidered linen."

There were 'oohs' and 'aahs' at the sight.

Candy gazed at the exquisite work in awe. When had Ma had time to complete this? Maybe she had her part all done and was waiting for Candy to snag a man, she thought with a grin. It was the sort of thing Ma would do. "Thanks, Ma. I love it."

"You're welcome, Candy. I hope you'll use them for many years of wedded bliss."

Candy felt a pang deep inside as she put the gift aside and reached for another. The sheets would always be a reminder of what might have been.

Mrs. Morris's gift was next. She unwrapped the gift to find a square, gold velvet jeweler's box inside. She looked up at Greg's mother, who had an expectant look on her face. What could it be? She opened the case to find a lovely pearl necklace inside. "It's beautiful, Mrs. Morris, but far too expensive."

"Call me Madeline or Mom, if you like. The pearls have been passed down the Morris line for generations. I wore

them once, and now I'm giving them to you. I know Gregory will be happy to see you wearing them." She stood, took the necklace, and clasped it around Candy's neck.

Gazing out at the smiling crowd, Candy felt well and truly trapped. Joan's smile was huge and Ma had tears in her eyes. Even Kathleen looked a little misty. Candy wondered again, why she'd gone to all this trouble knowing the truth about the false engagement. It could be all for show but it didn't feel like it. Maybe she was a born romantic just like her mother. It wasn't real, but somehow it felt genuine. She couldn't help feeling like a blushing bride-to-be. A little voice in her head said that maybe their love affair would lead to more.

Shaking off the tender feeling, she reached Kathleen's gift. She ripped open the box, and pulled out the silky garment. A red teddy! "It's one of my designs. But how did you get it this soon?"

"I had to get it air expressed. If you'll look in the card, you'll find a gift certificate for a sweet little bed and breakfast upstate. I thought you two might want to do some rekindling of your own."

Candy blushed, thinking of her and Greg's parking session the night before. "Thanks. I think."

The ladies laughed.

She quickly reached for Joan's gift. She tore open the gift to find peach scented massage oils and some rather scandalous accessories. "Oh my."

"What is it, Candy?" Kathleen piped up.

"To be delicate, I'll call them marital aids. And I don't think I'll pass them around." Candy threw Joan a wry grin as she

held up the massage oils. "Thanks, sis. Only you would give me these."

"You're welcome." Joan grinned and winked at her foster sister.

Twenty minutes later, Candy was surrounded by a sea of gifts, including can openers, cookbooks, and slinky lingerie. Obviously, the ladies thought she might need help in the kitchen and bedroom. They were right about the kitchen part, she thought with a grin. She was the first to admit she wasn't much of a cook. "You're far too generous. I don't know how to thank you."

"Just be happy," Kathleen and Joan said at the same time.

"Amen," Ma chorused, much to everyone's amusement.

"Now for the entertainment," Joan said, getting to her feet toward the stage. "Direct from the Windy City! Mr. Wonderful and The Power Tools Revue."

The lights dimmed and music started to play. Three handsome hunks came strutting out of the wings. They were dressed in flannel shirts, cut-off jeans, and tool belts slung low around their swiveling hips. They started doing a sexy bump-and-grind to 'It's Raining Men' while playfully stripping off their shirts. Grinning, Candy concluded that this had to be Joan's idea. How had she talked Kathleen into it? Oh no, how would Greg's mother and aunts react?

Candy turned to survey the crowd. There were a few dropped jaws, but Greg's mother was clapping along to the music. Go Madeline! Candy glanced over at Ma. Even she was tapping her toe along to the beat. Mildred, who sat next to her, was fishing dollar bills out of her purse.

"Oh, good grief," Candy snapped her gaze back to the stage in time to see the tool belts come off. Next, went the shorts, and then they were down to their g-strings.

Mr. Wonderful, a tall, dark, Latino Adonis strutted up to the front of the stage, grinned, and held out his hand to her. "It's time for the blushing bride to get in on the act."

Candy sat back, stunned. She firmly stuck to the chair. She'd already had one bad experience on that stage.

"Go on," Joan said, giving her a nudge.

"Yeah," Kathleen echoed. "You aren't chicken, are you?"

Candy reluctantly walked up on stage and was instantly flanked by the men.

"Go, Candy, go!" Kathleen shouted.

The dark Adonis sat Candy down on a chair. The two other dancers joined in, forming a wall of muscular, dancing beefcake, around her.

Just then, the door burst open. "This is a raid," a police officer shouted from the back of the room.

He marched up to the stage shouting, "You're all under arrest."

"Oh no," Candy groaned shooting to her feet. She was destined to be humiliated twice on the same stage.

"Freeze, lady," he snapped, quickly cuffing her while other policemen rounded up the strippers.

Shivering as the cold metal circled her wrist she shot a mournful look at Mrs. Morris. It'd been nice while it lasted but the lady was no doubt sorry she'd ever gotten involved with her now. Greg's mom looked angry all right, but she was

glaring at the cop as he jerked Candy's other arm behind her to fasten the other end of the cuffs.

Mrs. Morris stood up. "Don't worry, dear, I'll handle this." She turned to the officer. "What do you mean by this, young man?"

The crowd started to grumble their agreement.

"Mrs. Morris, what are you doing here?" The young patrolman froze, turning to survey the group of angry women.

"I'm here celebrating my son's engagement to Miss Blake—the woman you're arresting."

He gulped. "I'd better call Chief Miller."

"Yes, you'd better. But what about my guests?" She waved a hand to include all the ladies present.

"They'll have to wait a moment. I'm sorry, ma'am. It's regulations."

Candy breathed a sigh of relief when he released one arm and sat her back down in the folding chair, cuffing her to it instead. "Sorry miss." Then he walked to the back of the room to make his call. He came back in looking shamefaced as he walked back to the stage and turned to look at Candy and then Mrs. Morris. "I'm afraid the chief can't be reached. Except for the main parties involved, the rest of you can go."

He turned to look at the dancers. "Go with Officer Gray and get dressed. We don't want to cause a stir. The chief can decide on the charges."

"If you ladies will come with me, we'll see if we can get this cleared up."

"Are you running us in, young man?" Mrs. Morris said with a frown.

"I'm afraid so. The chief will want to take charge of this matter."

Kathleen stepped up. "I'm going too."

"Me, too," Joan piped in. "After all, we arranged this shower entertainment. And I want to remind you there's no law on the books against male strippers."

"You can't come, lady," the cop said, "You're just about to pop."

"That's discrimination against pregnant people."

"I'm going to have to put you all in the paddy wagon then."

"Fine," they all chorused.

"What about me? I demand to go, too," Ma said.

"No, Ma," Candy cried out. "You're not going to the police station."

"Quite right," Mrs. Morris echoed. "Mildred will take you home. Don't worry. I won't let any harm come to Candy."

Mildred stood up. "Don't worry about the two of us. I'll see that she gets home safe and sound. We'll take the gifts with us so they don't go astray."

As Candy bounced along in the back of the paddy wagon, she swept an apologetic glance over the motley group of her accomplices. This fiasco had all the earmarks of a meddling Magi attack. If Magi had her way, her engagement would be over. Greg's father would be furious at having his wife and daughter tainted by scandal. He'd probably try to have her run out of town, pronto.

Chapter 7

Candy paced the confines of the police chief's office while they waited for him to arrive. There had to be some easy painless way out of this mess, but right now, she couldn't envision it. Thank heavens Officer Lewis had shooed them in here rather than book them. It gave her a little more time to think. She could call Greg for assistance but after the way they'd parted last night, the thought rankled.

She frowned at Joan and Kathleen who stood in a far corner of the room talking to each other in hushed tones. What were those two loose cannons plotting now? If she'd been asked, she would have vetoed the bridal shower. She felt like a bit of dandelion fluff being blown wherever the winds chose to send her.

She slanted a worried glance at Greg's mother who was seated behind the Chief's desk, casually using his telephone. Clout did have its perks.

Madeline hung up the phone with a smile. "Don't worry, ladies. My husband is coming down here to straighten this mess out."

Candy groaned. She wasn't in the mood to face his disapproval. "I'm sure that wasn't necessary."

"Trust me, Candy." Madeline stood up. "The Morris name still has a little influence down here in City Hall."

Candy bit her lip, thinking of that agonizing day so long ago. She had a very clear memory of Mr. Morris's influence when she'd remained in jail while Greg was hustled out of

town ten years ago. She'd always suspected Mr. Morris of pulling strings to keep her incarcerated for shoplifting.

There was a tap on the door as it opened. Chief Malone stood in the doorway. He cast a nervous look over the group of irate women, gulped and ventured into the room. He walked to Madeline's side saying, "I'm so very sorry for keeping you waiting, Mrs. Morris. I was busy in a city council meeting and only found out a moment ago that you were here." He escorted her to a chair facing his desk. "I can assure you I'll do my utmost to work this out so there won't be any charges against you."

Madeline frowned as she sat down. "Do you mean to tell me we were hauled down here, embarrassed in front of our friends, only to find out there would be no charges?"

The police chief blanched, hesitating for a second before scurrying behind his desk to take a seat. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience, ma'am. Officer Lewis acted hastily, but there were laws broken and someone must be held accountable. So it actually is a good thing you're here, so we can get this cleared up without undue scandal."

"Laws were broken! Such as what?" Madeline frowned. "He said we were disturbing the peace, and we were doing no such thing."

Chief Malone's apprehensive gaze flitted over Joan for a moment, then homed in on Candy. His face furrowed into deep wrinkles. "Morals, for one. Look on this as a caution, Mrs. Morris, not to get mixed up with the wrong element."

Candy stood up straighter, burning under his harsh inspection. She'd had plenty of nasty encounters with him

during her youth and had never had liked the man. "You're referring to me, I suppose."

Mrs. Morris held up a hand. "I'm sure he wasn't talking about you."

The Chief's eyes narrowed as he continued to study her. "Actually, I was. She and I are no strangers to each other. I ran her in six times for shoplifting before she turned thirteen. Take it from me. She's a bad egg."

Candy stiffened, lifting her chin a little higher in the face of his disapproval. She was damned if she'd let herself be cowed by his obvious distaste for her. That was ancient history. If he couldn't see that, she felt sorry for him. She turned to Greg's mother, expecting to see the same damnation in her eyes. Instead, she met a sympathetic smile.

Madeline turned back to the Chief. "Chief Malone. I'll thank you to speak to my future daughter-in-law with more respect in the future."

Chief Malone went silent. After a moment, he gulped and looked down, nervously shuffling the papers on his desk. "Of course. I didn't mean to offend. I just wanted to make sure you knew the facts."

Madeline stiffened. "I know what I know, and you can..."

"What about those charges?" Candy interrupted. She had to take control of the situation before the Chief and Greg's mother came to blows.

Chief Malone blinked up at her. "Oh yes. The charges."

Candy noted that he almost looked relieved at the interruption and suppressed a smile. At this rate, she and the Chief might become pals. "Yes, the charges."

He picked up a scrap of paper from his desk. "We got a call saying that a group of women were raising hell at the country club. They also claimed there was a drug deal about to go down. That's why my men charged in there like gangbusters."

"Preposterous."

Chief Malone darted an alarmed glance her way. "Of course. I realize you women weren't involved. We searched your bags, and they're clean. However, I can't say the same for one of the dancers. We found some controlled substances in his duffle bag. He claims to have a prescription for them, and we're checking that out now. Also there's a morals charge to answer, Mr. Wonderful's G String was two inches too small."

"What's the meaning of this, Chief Malone?" came an outraged male voice from the doorway.

Candy turned a reluctant gaze in that direction, and groaned.

Mr. Morris cast an apprehensive glance around the room of angry women, stopping to frown at Candy.

She froze, transported to an earlier time. He'd worn the same troubled frown when she'd begged him not to take her daddy away.

"Come in, Mr. Morris." Chief Malone leaned back in his chair. "We're in the process of clearing up a few charges."

Mr. Morris closed the door behind him and walked toward Candy. "What happened?"

Her eyes narrowed. Of course he'd try to pin it all on her. "Don't you mean, what did *I* do? You're ready to act as judge, jury, and executioner again, I see." She saw the flash of hurt

in his eyes, and wished she could call back her hasty words. She knew they weren't true. He wasn't the monster she'd always believed him to be. He'd been a victim of circumstance, just like her.

"Don't you dare put words in my mouth, missy." He heaved a heavy sigh and turned to face the Chief. "Please explain what's going on, Frank."

The chief picked up another piece of paper. "Well, G.W., we brought them in on a charges of lewd and lascivious behavior, disturbing the peace, and possession of a controlled substance."

"What? I don't believe it." His jaw tightened.

Madeline stood and walked over to him. "Hush now, dear. They hauled us all into the pokey because of an anonymous tip, an overzealous detective, and, oh yes, Mr. Wonderful's G-String was too skimpy. Apparently it was two inches too small for the local regulations."

Candy watched Mr. Morris's eyes widen in shock and wished a hole would open up that she could drop into. Now he definitely would think she was a sex-crazed nut.

Chief Malone cleared his throat. "As Mrs. Morris was saying, there is a matter of disturbing the peace. The country club doesn't have the proper permit for that kind of entertainment. As for the lewd and lascivious, Mr. Wonderful's costume was too small by our local regulations. And we found the drugs when we searched Mr. Wonderful and the Power Tools' bags. Mr. Wonderful claims he takes them for a bad back."

Mr. Morris groaned. "Mr. Wonderful and the Power Tools."

"The entertainment at the shower, dear," Madeline said with a smile.

"Shower?"

"Yes, we had a little impromptu bridal shower at the club. I wanted Candy to meet the family, and we thought it would help establish our approval of the match."

Candy all but cringed when Greg's father turned a quizzical glance her way. Of course, he knew the truth behind the fake engagement, and he probably wondered at her involvement. She saw him frown when his gaze focused on the Morris pearls around her neck.

"So, what now?" Mr. Morris turned back to ask the Chief.

"I can see my way clear to drop the charges against the ladies but it'll come down to cash or time in jail for the entertainers. If you want to avoid any publicity, I'd advise you to pay up, because the entertainers say they're strapped for cash."

He sighed. "I'll pay the fine for them. I'll do whatever it takes to keep this quiet."

Mr. Morris took Candy by the elbow, walking her out of the Chief's office. "Stop a minute so we can talk."

"About what?" Candy hesitated, turning to gaze at him. What was wrong now? They'd seemed to reach some kind of pact earlier, but had it been all for show on his part? Was he going to lay into her about the shower now? He probably thought she'd grown to like the idea of being Greg's wife and was doing her best to make it a permanent role. "Listen, if this is about the shower, it wasn't my idea."

He drew her into an alcove with Joan, Kathleen, and Madeline in hot pursuit. "No it's not that. Given the way things have been going lately, I think it's best to keep you out of sight until the launch party next week."

Candy felt some of her tension slip away, gazing at his earnest expression to the nodding heads of the ladies. Obviously, they agreed with him. She had to admit she couldn't seem to put a foot right lately. The last thing she and Greg needed was to have bad press cast a shadow over the launch gala. "I can hole up at Ma's until then."

Greg's father shook his head. "I don't think that will do the trick. Not until we make sure Magi's friends at the paper have been mollified."

"He's right, Candy," Kathleen chimed in. "Remember, I know how vindictive Magi can be. If she catches wind of this incident we're all in trouble."

Candy looked at their expectant faces. This meant a lot to all of them, but she couldn't just walk out on Ma. "I can't leave Ma alone for a whole week. She's just recovering from surgery and needs help."

"I'll look in on her, Candy," Joan volunteered.

Madeline smiled. "And I'll send Mildred to stay with her. They're old pals, and they'll have a great time."

Feeling totally outnumbered, Candy mumbled, "Well, where do you suggest I go?"

"She can go down to Greg's place in Landis Falls, Dad," Kathleen said.

"No." Candy shook her head. There was no way she could go there. Not after the way they'd parted last night. His

parting comment still rang in her ears. "Fine. You'll have to ask me for it next time, sweet cakes. Your white knight is ready for you any time, any place, and any way you want me. I'll wait for you to make the next move." She got anxious just thinking about it.

"Why can't you go?" Joan asked with a frown.

Candy hesitated. She couldn't tell them the truth. Greg's mother would probably have a case of the vapors. "I can't barge in on him like that. It would be too rude."

"Nonsense. Gregory will be glad to have you," Madeline said.

"Right," Candy said wryly, thinking that Greg's mother didn't know how right she was. He'd be glad to have her in his bed. "I still don't think it's a good idea."

She patted Candy's shoulder. "Don't worry about a thing, Candace. He'll take very good care of you."

"But..."

"It's settled then," G.W. proclaimed.

* * * *

Candy packed only one suitcase, deliberately leaving most of her things behind. She wasn't going to give Greg the idea she was moving in with him. This was only a temporary arrangement until the gala. If it weren't for Magi and her venom, she wouldn't have to run away. It stuck in her craw to be chased out of town like this. But she knew Greg's dad was right. Not all publicity was good publicity.

She glanced around her childhood room, still decorated with posters and art she and Joan had hung during their

teens. It touched her that Ma had left it. She'd just gotten settled in and now she was being uprooted, but that wasn't what worried her. Would Greg be happy to see her? There was only one way to find out.

Pulling out her cell phone, she punched in his number. It rang busy, again. Who could he be talking to all this time? Pocketing the phone, she reached for her bag. She'd stalled long enough. It was time to get moving. Greg would just have to put up with an unexpected houseguest.

She ran down the stairs, eager to get it over with. The sound of the television drew her to the parlor. Ma and Mildred sat at the card table playing rummy. They looked up and smiled at her.

"All ready?" Ma asked.

"I sure am." Candy pasted on a smile to hide a sudden attack of nerves. It wouldn't do to worry Ma, and she wasn't sure she could trust Mildred not to gossip if she relayed her fears. It wasn't as if Greg was a stranger, for goodness' sake. They knew each other in the most intimate way possible. That was what was worrying her. Would he take her arrival as an open invitation to carry on as they had before? Her resolve to keep her independence was wavering.

Ma looked her up and down, skeptical. "Hmm. You look a bit on edge, my girl."

"Who, me?"

Mildred nodded. "Pre-wedding jitters. That's what it is. Take it from me, young lady. You've got nothing to worry about. Gregory is a perfect gentleman."

"Right." That was what worried her. Greg was perfect in all sorts of ways, but that didn't mean she fit into his life. Candy smiled at them both and kissed Ma's cheek. "Are you still sure you want me to take your car, Ma?"

"Of course. You heard my doctor. I won't be doing any driving for the time being. The Fairlane will get you there in style."

Candy grinned. Ma loved her powder blue Ford Fairlane. She'd babied the classic car over the years. It was a reflection of their close relationship that she'd even allow Candy to drive it. "Don't worry. I'll take good care of your baby. I hate to leave you in the lurch like this."

Ma shook her head. "Nonsense. Mildred's going to stay with me, and Joan will check in from time to time."

Candy nodded, but couldn't help feeling guilty about abandoning Ma. She glanced at the neat room, wavering. "Is there anything I can do for you before I leave?"

"Not a thing."

Her gaze hit on the pile of library books on the hall table. "Would you like me to return your library books on my way out of town?"

"Wonderful idea."

Mildred nodded. "It'll save me a trip later."

"Good. I'll get going then." She scooped up the books and headed for the door.

"Call me later," Ma said.

Candy carefully placed her suitcase and the books in the car's backseat. She slid behind the steering wheel and started

it up, enjoying the roar of the engine. With its V-8 engine and stylish chrome work, she could see why Ma loved it.

Cruising toward the library, her spirits started to lift. It was a lovely day, and she rolled down the window to get the breeze. This getaway might be a good thing. It was an opportunity to put her relationship with Greg on a different footing. Slowing things down would help them delve deeper, see if there was anything they could hang onto after the summer was over.

She parked in the lot and got out. Scooping up the books, she sprinted inside. Maybe she'd check out a few books to read. A few juicy mystery novels would keep her occupied. She nodded at the librarian as she walked past the checkout desk, stopping to drop Ma's books in the return slot.

There were a few patrons in the library, but she didn't see a familiar face. She headed to the adult fiction section. She was walking backwards, perusing the aisle from J to S when she bumped into someone. "Oh, excuse me," she murmured and turned, then froze.

Magi stood there scowling, as she blocked the aisle. She clutched a book to her chest. "So, we meet again, Candy."

Trembling, Candy took a steadying breath. Was it possible she was being stalked? No matter where she went, Magi always showed up in one way or another. "Have you been following me?"

Sniffing, Magi looked away. "Don't flatter yourself."

"Oh, grow up, Magi." Candy's irritation ratcheted up. "I'm tired of playing these childish games with you. I'm warning you. Stay away from me."

Magi's eyes glittered with anger, as she smirked. "Read any good stories lately?"

"No. They were pure trash."

"Takes one to know one," Magi yelled.

"Shh," said a man passing by.

Candy stifled a groan. "Listen, this is spinning out of control..."

"Yeah, and it's your fault," Magi interrupted, hissing, "You made it impossible for me to stay at my job, slut. I'll get even if it's the last thing I do."

"I'm genuinely sorry that it had to come to that, Magi. But you left us with no other choice. Maybe if we..."

"Don't do me any favors, bitch." Magi spun on her heel and stomped away.

Candy stood there stunned, the desire for a juicy mystery gone. She shivered, recalling Magi's vindictive words. She'd have to watch her back. Magi seemed completely unhinged. Turning, she headed out of the library. It was time to get going. And she was eager to get out of the line of fire.

She got back into Ma's Ford Fairlane, feeling depressed. The sun still shone, but there was a shadow over her formerly high spirits. Magi, fired. She deserved it after the stunts she'd pulled, but Candy didn't like to see anyone crushed like that. She'd lost enough jobs to know how devastating it could be. Maybe she could get Mr. Morris to smooth things over.

Chapter 8

Candy drove east out of town, pointing the Fairlane towards Landis Falls. She'd let herself be badgered into this move, but she was determined to keep things on a business-like footing for her stay. It wouldn't do to let proximity goad her into making a big mistake.

Even so, it would be interesting to see Greg on his home turf, away from Morris Point. Had he and Jill lived there? Strangely enough, she didn't feel like an invader. Greg had said she and Jill would have liked each other. And they sure enough cared for the same man. But, how did he really feel about her? She was falling for him but she wasn't sure her feelings were reciprocated. What would he think of her showing up unannounced? He'd think she was there to collect her White Knight, as he'd said last night.

She shook off the thought and snapped on the radio to drown out her worries. He'd have to help her. Together they would survive this summer.

As she drove down the county highway with cornfields whizzing by on either side of the car, tension began to build in her spine. It was ridiculous, but she couldn't hold back a feeling of impending doom. Greg would just have to lump it if he didn't like her decision to slow things down.

Squinting into the dazzling setting sun, she kept going. A moment later, a dark SUV zoomed up on her tail, its big headlights flashing on bright. What an ass, she thought, shielding her eyes with her hand. She looked down to grab her sunglasses. Wham.

The SUV slammed into her, sending her car hurtling forward. Clamping onto the steering wheel with a death grip, her nails digging into the vinyl, she fought for control of her fishtailing car.

Oh my God. Candy gasped, trying to pull to the side of the road. As she started to regain control, the SUV shot past her. It crunched against her front fender with a glancing blow. She screamed, her car spinning in a dizzying circle. Skidding sideways into the ditch and cornfield beyond, she squeezed her eyes shut.

Coming to a shuddering halt, she heard the tinkle of broken glass. The shards rained down on her, like little shards of popcorn. She winced as they stung her arm. Opening her eyes, she saw a tangle of broken cornstalks on the hood of her car, as she drew in gasps of air. She was still in one piece. Her seatbelt had saved her.

Who the hell had just tried to kill her? One name sprung to mind. Magi Bains. She'd acted unhinged at the library, but would she really do something this violent? That answer would have to come later.

Candy turned off the engine and, on shaking legs, got out of the car. Cringing, she surveyed the damage. Ma's poor old Ford Fairlane was a goner. Its front bumper was bent and torn off the car at a horrible angle, and its side door and the powder blue fender were dented. The broken glass from the driver's side window crunched underfoot as she walked around the car to survey the damage. Rounding the back to look at the crumpled trunk, she saw that it was a total shambles. Some road rage asshole was in big trouble. The

jerk, of course, was nowhere in sight, and neither was anyone else. She looked up and down the empty highway with dismay. If she were going to get out of this, she'd have to do it herself.

She shivered. The sun was going down, and she felt very vulnerable all of a sudden. She sniffed but didn't detect any spilled gas. Maybe the car was still drivable. She had to try. It was either that, or walk the rest of the way to Landis Falls.

Sliding back behind the wheel, she buckled her seatbelt, and turned the key. The motor sputtered to life. Halleluiah! She shifted into reverse and slowly started extricating the car from the corn maze. That done, she cautiously started driving toward Greg's place. She needed sanctuary. She needed him.

* * * *

"Okay, Ben, give me a call the minute you get a lead on his whereabouts." Greg hung up the phone and frowned. Chad Daley was still nowhere to be found. He glanced at the stack of unanswered messages he'd brought home with him and sighed. He'd have his work cut out for him fixing this mess.

Only a disaster the size of the Titanic could have torn him away from Morris Point and sweet Candy this morning. Hopefully, when he'd had a chance to talk to her, she'd understand his desertion. Maybe if he got lucky, he'd be able to convince her to come here. They still had some finishing touches to put on the launch bash. That would give him the excuse he needed.

Damn Chad Daley—wherever he was. Probably out on the bender to end all benders. He'd taken two weeks off, ostensibly to seek treatment for his drinking problem. Instead of going to the treatment facility, he'd vanished. Nobody had informed Greg he was missing until he'd been gone a week.

Greg had rushed down here early that morning to assess the situation. In short order, he'd found the sales department in a shambles. He had a stack of complaint calls from buyers two inches thick. Orders were either missing, late, or wrong. It was going to take a concerted effort on his part to smooth things over. He could only hope the audit he'd just ordered wouldn't reveal anything worse.

The doorbell rang, and he went to answer it. With the way, his luck was going today, it was probably more bad news. He opened the door and was startled to see Candy on his doorstep. She looked pale and a bit teary-eyed. "What's wrong?"

Candy fell into his arms with a sob. "I'm so glad you're home."

The girl was chilled to the bone, despite the warm temperatures outside. Greg closed his arms around her, feeling her tremble. What had her so shaken? He scooped her up in his arms and carried her inside, kicking the door shut behind him. "Tell me what's wrong."

She nestled her head against his shoulder, clinging to him. "I was in an accident."

"What?" Greg felt his gut tighten. Stopping in his tracks, he looked down at her. There were scratches on her arm, caked with trickles of dried blood. Her fingernails were

broken. He could see the embers of fear still haunting her troubled gray eyes.

"Some nut ran me off the road." She blinked back tears.

"My God, are you okay?"

"I'm a little nicked up, but I'm all in one piece. Too bad I can't say the same for Ma's car. I think it's a lost cause, but maybe Jerry's garage can patch it up."

"Let's take care of you first, okay? You're more important than any old car." He carried her into the den, stopping to switch on the gas fireplace. Then, he sank down on the brown leather sofa with her on his lap. "First, we need to warm you up." He pulled a soft throw off the arm of the sofa and draped it over her. "Better?"

She snuggled under the throw, clinging to him. "Yes."

"Okay. Now tell me what happened." He stifled a groan as she innocently rubbed her bottom against his crotch.

"I was driving along and some road rage idiot in a big SUV forced me off the road. Thank heaven the cornfield cushioned the blow. Of course, the jerk took off. I thought at first it was Magi, but the driver seemed bigger than her. He probably doesn't have any insurance."

He ran a hand down her body, looking for other injuries. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I guess I overreacted." Looking around her, she blinked, and started to move off his lap.

He groaned aloud when she ground her bottom against him again. Clamping an arm around her waist to hold her fast, he murmured, "Easy, baby."

"Sorry."

He had to smile at her embarrassed fluster. It gave him hope to know she was just as powerfully aware of him. "Sit tight while I go put on a pot of coffee to warm you. Then I'll call and report this to the police."

"Okay." Candy pulled the throw up around her.

Five minutes later, Greg came back carrying a tray with two mugs of aromatic coffee and some chocolate chip cookies, made by Mrs. Olsen, his motherly neighbor from two doors down. The sugar buzz would probably help keep her going.

Candy was curled up on the sofa, fast asleep. He set down the tray and stopped to gaze down at her. Her long closed lashes looked like angel's wings against her pale cheeks. No doubt, the aftermath of her adrenaline rush had wiped her out. He tucked the throw around her.

He'd let her sleep while he called the police. He walked to the desk and picked up the phone. After that, he made another call, this time to the P.I. he had on retainer. "Yeah. Ben. This is Greg Morris again. No, this isn't about Chad Daly. Something more important has cropped up. My fiancée was just a victim of a hit-and-run. I want you to do a little deeper nosing around than the cops will. I want the bastard who did this caught. First name on your list should be Magi Bains and her associates."

Hanging up, he heard Candy stirring. Greg walked over to the sofa, touching her shoulder to wake her. "Wake up, sweet cakes. The police are on their way here."

Sitting up with a sigh, Candy murmured, "I'm not too thrilled about talking to the police twice in one day."

"Twice?" He raised an eyebrow at her wry expression. What other surprises did she have up her sleeve?

"Oh, that's right. You don't know. Kathleen and Joan threw me a surprise shower. We're going to have lots of presents to return, by the way." She bit her lip, hesitating. "And we were all arrested."

"Arrested?" He grinned, picturing his sister terrorizing the cops.

"The cops would have been satisfied just to haul me in, but Kathleen and Joan insisted on tagging along and so did your mother."

He started to chuckle. His mother being arrested was mind-boggling. "I can just picture it."

"It's not funny," Candy muttered. "Your father didn't find it amusing, I can tell you that."

"I'll bet." Greg laughed harder.

"He had to pay fines for Mr. Wonderful and the Power Tools."

"Mr. Wonderful and the Power Tools?"

She smiled. "The entertainment. Male strippers."

The surge of jealousy he felt was stupid, but he felt it just the same. "Strippers?"

"Joan does not throw your ordinary everyday shower. You should see some of the presents they gave me." She grinned. "Quite scandalous, I can tell you."

He grinned back at her words and raised his eyebrow. "Did you bring any samples?"

"Behave yourself. That's why I'm here. Your father banished me from town until the party. He says we need to

start acting with more decorum. He figured I'd keep out of trouble that way."

The doorbell rang.

"I guess I showed him. Trouble seems to have followed me." She sighed. "You'd better go let them in so I can get this over with."

"Sit tight, and have a sip of this." He handed her a mug. "I'll bring them in here to interview you. There are some cookies, too. Try them. My neighbor lady is always baking, and I get the overflow."

The warmth from the coffee mug seeped into her cold hands as she watched him go. She inhaled the coffee's tantalizing aroma and braced herself for the upcoming interview. Hopefully, this officer wouldn't be as cranky as Chief Malone had been. There probably wasn't much chance of catching the guy who'd hit her. He was probably long gone.

A minute later, a middle-aged man in a dark suit entered the den and approached her. "I'm Detective Ronald March, Miss Blake. I'm sorry we're meeting under such bad circumstances. I'm here to take your statement."

"Okay." She smiled when Greg entered the room. It felt good to have someone she could count on.

Detective March sat down on a wing chair facing her and pulled a pen and paper out of his pocket. Loosening his tie, he glanced at the roaring fire. "Isn't it a little warm to run the fireplace?"

"Candy was cold," Greg said. Looking at her, he asked, "How about it? Are you still cold?"

Buoyed by Greg's thoughtfulness, she smiled. "I'm all warmed up now, thank you. You can switch it off."

The detective nodded. "Shock can make you cold. Okay, tell me what happened, ma'am."

Candy took a deep breath. "I was driving here from Morris Point around six pm. I was kind of daydreaming, and the sun was in my eyes. I didn't notice the vehicle drive up behind me. All of a sudden, some bright lights—combined with the setting sun—blinded me. And then thump. The jerk bumped right into me. I hardly had time to react as I skidded forward and to the right."

"You didn't just run off the road and hit some mailboxes?" He studied her carefully. "After all, you did say you were daydreaming."

"I'm positive that someone hit me," she said, feeling her despair return.

"Have you looked at her car, Ron?" Greg walked up to stand next to Candy. "Surely you can see the impact of another vehicle."

"Our people are taking samples now, Greg. We'll run some tests to see if we can match it up with a make and model. In the meantime I have to get as clear a picture as possible." He turned to say to Candy. "Don't take it personally, ma'am. I have to ask these kinds of questions. It's just an effort to gather all the facts. Please go on. Can you describe the vehicle that hit you?"

She sighed. "Sorry. It was a black older SUV. It looked beat up but it all happened so fast I can't be sure. Like I was saying, he slammed into the back of me, then roared past me

and caught my front fender. I spun off the road and wound up facing the opposite direction. Thank God the cornfield slowed me down and cushioned the blow."

"You keep saying he. Did you see who did it?"

"Not really. It all happened so fast. I thought at first it was a woman. But the driver was too big to be a woman. And he was wearing a baseball cap pulled low on his head."

"Unless, she was wearing a disguise," Greg said.

Candy bit her lip considering that possibility. "She wouldn't do something that stupid."

Greg shook his head. "We can't assume that."

The detective cleared his throat. "Who?"

She started to tremble at the memory of their encounter at the library.

"Magi Bains. She's been harassing Candy."

"Were there any witnesses?"

"I was all alone on the road and nobody passed by."

Greg gently squeezed her shoulder.

Candy raised her chin a notch and slanted a grateful smile his way.

"One more thing, ma'am. I see you've got a few scratches. Do you need medical treatment?"

"No. I have everything I need here." She smiled up at Greg, knowing in her heart she meant it. Right now, he was all she needed.

"Okay, Miss Blake. I'll file this report, and we'll go try to locate the crime scene and interview the Bains woman. We'll also be checking the local garages for a dark SUV with body damage."

While Greg showed the detective out, Candy finally took a deep, relaxing breath and glanced around Greg's den. It looked very masculine with a sense of fun—just like him. The leather sofa was soft and smooth under her hand, and the pillows and throw were a riot of primary colors.

Greg walked back into the room. "Let's take care of those scratches."

"Okay." Candy followed him into the bathroom. Wincing as she sat down at on the vanity bench he drew out for her, she realized she was starting to stiffen up. No doubt by morning she'd be hard as a statue.

Greg glanced at her. "Feeling kind of sore?"

She rolled her shoulders. "I think I tensed and strained every muscle in my body."

"These pain relievers should help." He handed her two tablets. "But if it gets any worse, let me know."

"Will do," she agreed.

He turned on the whirlpool tub's tap and sprinkled some bath salts into the water. "I think a soak in the whirlpool will help."

"Sounds like heaven," she said with a smile as the scent of jasmine filled the air. "It smells real pretty, too."

"It isn't mine," he said with a wry grin. "Kathleen left them here last time she stayed overnight." He pulled first aid and manicure kits out of the medicine cabinet. After putting some antibacterial wash on a gauze pad, he reached for her arm. "Let's take care of those cuts."

She wasn't used to being taken care of by a man. A girl could get used to this kind of thing, if she wasn't careful.

"Ouch," she yelped, the antiseptic's sting penetrating her musings.

"Don't be such a baby." He bent to blow on the stinging area.

Candy's heart did a flip-flop, recalling him doing something similar that first night on the beach. She pulled her arm away. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," he said, smiling at her.

He was recalling that evening, too. She could see it in the darkening of his eyes. "I'm not here to collect my White Knight," she said firmly, hoping to disabuse him of any such notion.

"Are you sure?" he said in an intimate rumble, leaning forward to kiss her.

Candy kissed him back and, just as she started to reach for him, he pulled away. She opened her eyes, feeling bereft as he stepped away from her. Oh so tempted to give in to temptation, she instead firmed her resolve. She needed time to think. This steamy, jasmine scented space was no place to make a rash decision. "Positive."

"I'll wait. I'll go bring in your bags and you can hang your things in my closet later."

Watching him walk to the door, she snapped back into focus. "Make sure you put my bags in the guest room," she insisted.

He shut the door behind him, saying, "You can't blame a guy for trying."

Opening the manicure kit, she pared back her broken nails. Gazing at her reflection in the mirror, she decided that she

looked like a lovesick kid. Mooning over a man wouldn't make him permanently hers. Shaking off the thought, she quickly stripped off her clothes and stepped into the tub. *Ah, bliss*, she thought as the fragrant water swirled around her. Bless Katherine for leaving the bath salts here.

Candy soaked until her toes got pruneey and the water started to cool, loosening the kinks in her body. Getting out and toweling off, she faced the dilemma of not having any clean clothes to put on. Then she spied Greg's robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door. It would do until she got to her suitcase.

Cinching the big robe's belt, she detected the aroma of Greg's woodsy cologne. She sighed, inhaling a lungful of the stuff and told herself to stop mooning. She was worse than Gidget on the beach pining after Moondoggy.

Renewing her resolve, she walked out of the bathroom with her head held high and padded down the hall. She stopped by the first open door. It had to be the guest room because her bag was laying on the double bed. She gazed at the lovely stenciled walls and sleigh bed and was taken by an overwhelming urge to snoop.

It wouldn't hurt to peek at Greg's room just to see what she was missing. She softly trekked the rest of the way down the hall and poked her head in the open door. This had to be the master bedroom. A king sized four-poster bed, covered in what looked like a red velvet throw, stood front and center.

She tiptoed inside to get a closer look, stopping by the side of the bed. Running her palms over the soft surface. The feel of this under her back would drive her to distraction, just like

Greg did. Feeling her cheeks flame at the wanton thought, she sat down on the bed.

The sound of a throat being cleared caused her to turn her head toward the doorway. Greg stood there watching her, and she couldn't help noting the wicked twinkle in his eye. She popped up so fast, she stumbled and had to catch herself on a bedpost. "I got lost and decided to sit down for a minute." The excuse sounded lame even to her ears, but she was determined to brazen it out.

"Right," he said with a small chuckle.

She marched past him and into the hall, feeling her blush intensify.

"I was coming to tell you that dinner will be ready in half an hour," he rumbled behind her.

"Okay." She hurried down to the guest room and firmly shut the door behind her, then sagged back against it. This was not a good way to start their all-business two weeks together.

Thirty minutes later, Candy made her way down the hall toward the kitchen. She'd taken pains to dress with more decorum, wearing some tan slacks and a matching striped silk blouse buttoned all the way up.

She walked into the kitchen in time to see Greg, wearing oven mitts, pull a cookie sheet with two TV dinners out of the oven.

"You're just in time. Dinner is ready." Greg turned to smile at her. "Sorry for the limited selection. I'm not much of a cook. I usually subsist on these things."

"They smell great." She took an appreciative sniff and her stomach gave a hungry rumble in anticipation.

"Thanks. We're having Salisbury steak, one of my favorites." He picked up the dinners with hot pads and turned. "I've got us set up in the dining room, if you'd care to lead the way."

She walked into the dining room and smiled. He'd made quite an effort to set a beautiful table. There were matching place mats, cloth napkins in silver rings, and wine in two crystal goblets. A haphazard bunch of pansies, petunias, and marigolds stuffed in another goblet were the centerpiece.

"The table looks lovely, Greg."

"Thanks." He put the dinners on the table, and then walked forward to pull out her chair. "Milady."

She slid into the chair. "Thank you, kind sir." She leaned forward to sniff the centerpiece. "What pretty flowers. Did you pick them from your flowerbed?"

He looked sheepish. "Nope, I sneaked them out of Mrs. Olsen's flowerbed."

"You didn't."

He shrugged. "I did. When I put the dinners in the oven, I glanced over at her lawn and thought of you." He grinned, adding wryly, "It'll be your fault if she stops baking me cookies. But I think you're worth the risk."

* * * *

Later that evening, Candy climbed into the guest room bed all alone and pulled up the covers. She'd emerged from this evening's battle of the sexes unscathed. And alone, she

added to herself morosely. But it was for her own good, she reaffirmed, tugging up the covers.

She fell into a restless slumber, tossing and turning, and then she began to dream. She was in a dark and misty place full of shadows that were deep and daunting. The beast pursuing her was relentless. She wove her way in and out of the shadows, but she couldn't shake him. And then he pounced, going for her throat. She screamed, trying to fight him off. The arms reached out to grabbed at her anew as she came awake. Oh, my God, it was real, she realized. Shrieking, she pushed him away.

"Hush, Candy baby. It's only me."

Greg's voice gradually penetrated her fog. "Greg?" She blinked up at his moon-washed shape.

"Yes, it's me. You were dreaming, sweet cakes."

"It was horrible." Curling her arms around him, she pulled him down next to her, shuddering in his arms.

He settled next to her and cuddled her. "It was just a dream, sweet cakes. It's only to be expected since your accident."

Snuggling her head on his chest, she was comforted by the reassuring beat of his heart. "I'm sorry if I woke you."

"I was already up, going over some paperwork."

Lying against him she was suddenly was struck by the realization that this was meant to be. She ran her hand up his chest, petting him and feeling his pulse speed up. There was another connection between them. A primordial connection that couldn't be denied any longer. Even if he was using her

for business purposes, it didn't matter. Come what may she would claim her White Knight. She wriggled up to kiss him.

He went still for a moment, and then kissed her back. Wrapping his arms around her, he drew her closer, totally claiming her mouth. When they broke apart, he murmured, "Don't play with me, Candy. You know where this will lead."

"I know exactly where it will lead." She grinned, noting his startled expression. "I'm ready to claim my White Knight."

Bending to kiss her, his hand moved to cup her breast.

She squiggled out from under him and was pleased to see the startled, uneasy look on his face. Good, let him be the one on edge tonight. "Not here. Let's go to your room."

"Next time," he murmured, reaching for her.

"No. Now." Hopping out of bed, she took off toward the door with a giggle. She sprinted toward the master bedroom, hearing his feet thunder down the hall behind her. So, this was what it felt like to have the power. She kind of liked it.

Greg raced into the room and skidded to a halt beside her. "Okay, we're here. Let's get going."

"Not yet." Taking a half step back, she grinned up at his glowering expression. He didn't look like a man in the throes of bliss. "You did say I could set the pace, and I quote. 'Any time, any way, anywhere.'"

"Get on with it then," he said with a repressive frown.

Laughing, she reached for the top button on his shirt. "First, you're wearing too many clothes." She slowly unbuttoned the shirt and tugged it out of his pants. Brushing against him as she slowly peeled it off him, her nipples beaded. She let out a little gasp.

Greg groaned and reached for her.

"Not so fast, buster." She eluded his grasp. "Next come the pants."

His hand balled into fists at his side as he flashed her a dangerous smile. "Didn't anyone ever tell you it's not nice to tease the beast?"

"Ooooh, Mr. Tough Guy," she teased, unbuckling his belt and unsnapping his pants.

"You'll find out."

"Promises, promises." She tugged down his pants and briefs, sinking down on her knees before him. "You're magnificent," she murmured, reaching out to touch the rock-hard length of him, then flicked her tongue out to taste him.

"Enough." He tugged her up to her feet. Scooping her into his arms, he flung her onto the bed, as she let out a startled squeak. He stepped out of his pants and shoes, coming down on top of her with a growl.

Candy pulled him close, her mouth opening under his. Hot enough to melt into the velvet spread. Squirming, she realized she'd been right. The red velvet spread was incredibly sensual under her back.

Greg's big hands cupped her breasts, rubbing his palms against her pebbled nipples.

Sighing, she leaned into his exquisite touch, moving restlessly against him. She needed more. "Please."

He continued to tease her. "Please, what?"

"Please, take me." She gasped when his fingers went to her wet, slick flesh.

"Not yet." He grinned, probing her gently.

She writhed against him, only to have her legs trapped by his. "Now who's teasing?"

He settled between her thighs, his pulsing manhood touching but not taking. "I'm not playing, Candy. I'm totally serious."

She went still hearing his serious tone. Her body was trembling, craving him, and needing him badly.

"Ask me, Candy." He moved against her. "I want no more subterfuge between us."

Candy blinked up at him overcome by sensation, and knew he wasn't playing games. She saw a bead of sweat trickle down his brow as he held himself in check. "I want you. Please take me."

"You're mine." His gaze locked with hers as he entered her.

Candy moaned as he drove into her, setting a steady pace. This meant a lot more to him than a brief affair, even if he didn't say it. She met his demanding thrusts, rocking against him as he drove her out of her mind. Suddenly, an earth shattering orgasm rippled through her as she convulsed in his arms.

Chapter 9

Candy walked, picnic basket in hand, down the hall of Pinnacle Publishing toward Greg's office. He'd left for work early this morning, mumbling something about long hours and problems at work. Even her offer to take him out for lunch had been turned down. So, consequently, lunch was coming to him. If he was bogged down like he'd claimed, he could probably use the break.

Turning right, she entered the door to his office suite. She stopped in the outer office, at his secretary's desk. A nameplate on the desk read Mrs. Mavis Floyd.

Mrs. Floyd looked up from her file cabinet. "May I help you?"

Candy smiled at the friendly, middle-aged lady. "Hi. I'm here to see Greg."

Pushing her glasses back on her nose, the secretary glanced at her calendar. "I'm afraid he's rather busy today. Do you have an appointment?"

"Not exactly. I brought him sustenance." She held up the picnic basket.

"And your name would be?" The secretary looked at her curiously.

"Candy Blake."

"Well, hello, Miss Blake. He told me to put you right through if you called, so I'm sure he wouldn't mind an interruption from you."

"That's nice to hear." Candy grinned at the curious glint in the secretary's eye.

"No problem. He hasn't had lunch yet and he sure could use a break." She smiled. "Go ahead. I'll hold his calls to give him time to eat."

"Thanks." Candy tapped on his door and entered.

"What is it, Mavis?" Greg asked without looking up.

"It isn't Mavis," she said making him look up. "I brought you some lunch." Candy carried the basket to his desk.

"You didn't need to do that. I'm sorry I couldn't take you out some place fancy," he said ruefully.

"Don't give it a second thought. From what you said this morning, I knew you'd be too busy to go out. So I came in." She opened the basket and took out the sandwiches and salad she'd made and pulled up a chair for herself. "Mavis is going to hold your calls while you eat."

Greg took the sandwich she handed him and took a bite. "This is great. You take such good care of me, Candy."

"It works both ways." She grinned, watching him wolfed down the sandwich and reached for the second one she'd made him. The poor guy was starving. "I'm glad you approve."

She opened up the veggies and dip. "So, what's been keeping you so busy?"

He sighed and put down his sandwich. "I need to level with you, Candy. Chad Daly ran out on me and left things in a bit of a mess."

No wonder he was working overtime. "Why didn't you say so?"

He shrugged. "I didn't want to bother you. After all, you've had enough problems of your own lately. So, as much as I'd

like to squire you around town, I've got my work cut out for me here."

She glanced at the stack of receipts on his desk. "How can I help?"

He reached out to take her hand. "Thanks for the offer, but you don't need to help. I'll take care of everything."

She entwined her fingers with his. He was determined to be the big, strong, protective man. It was probably a throwback to being raised by his sexist, old-fashioned father. What he needed to learn, if they were going to build any kind of future together, was that she was equally determined to demonstrate just how able she was. "I've got all this free time since I came here. I'd like to have something to do. And anyway, I'm involved in the business because you're handling my launch party and fashion show next week."

A reluctant grin curved his mouth. "You win. For starters, you could place a call to your modeling agency and make sure things are square there. I was going to do that this afternoon."

"Good. I'd intended to touch base with my agent, Mark, anyway."

He stood up. "Go ahead and use my phone. I've got a few details to check over in the plant. I'll be back soon."

Candy watched him walk out the door, and then she walked around his desk to slip into the chair. She punched in Mark's cell phone number and waited for him to pick up. He'd volunteered to assist her with the opening a few months back. He was her booking agent and long time friend.

"Hello."

"Hello, Mark. Candy Blake here."

"Hi, Candy, how are things in the wilds of Wisconsin?"

"Fine. I'm just calling to make sure everything is set for the opening show Saturday night."

"Next Saturday?"

"Yes." She was alarmed by his hesitation. She knew her show was small potatoes in comparison to his usual projects, but Mark had been so encouraging about her branching off on her own. Had he changed his mind for some reason?

"I'm not ready. I didn't know we'd firmed up the date."

"What!" Candy gasped.

"Your publisher had talked about some tentative dates, but we hadn't set one."

"Oh no." It was a total disaster. She couldn't put on a fashion show without models. Hanging garments on static hangers just wouldn't be the same. The critics would cut her business to shreds before she even got started. She'd been counting on positive buzz, to get it launched properly. And what about Pinnacle? Greg's business would suffer too. Her shoulders sagged.

"I'm sorry, Candy. Chad told me you were having a few problems there. I figured you must have run into a few extra snags there and were temporarily putting the show on hold. I was going to call you if I hadn't heard from you pretty soon."

Chad? It figured. He was an affable guy, a real charmer when she'd signed her contract with him, but he'd ruined her future with his carelessness. From what Greg had said, she knew he had a drinking problem. "Can you still send the models?"

"Only a few. The rest are booked, just like those at every agency worth its salt in the country."

Candy took a deep breath as her originally planned fashion show started to vaporize before her eyes. She'd have to come up with plan B. "Go ahead and send as many girls as you can. We'll have to make do."

"I should be able to scrounge up three girls. I'm sorry it can't be more, Candy."

"Me too, but as the saying goes, if you get lemons make lemonade. The three girls will be fine. I'll come up with something else to fill in the gaps."

"I'll bet you will. You've always been the Creative One."

She laughed, hearing his nickname for her and felt some of her tension slip away. If she walked the runway and she recruited a few willing amateurs, things might still work. "So, will you be here?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

As she hung up the phone, Greg came back into the room. She turned to glance at him. "Chad Daly has struck again."

He stopped in his tracks. "How?"

"Chad never booked the models for my fashion show. Mark will come with a skeleton crew, and we'll have to make do."

"Will you be able to pull it off?"

"I think so. I've come up with a few ideas. If I come out of retirement, recruit a few local ladies, and put some other items on display it just might work."

"I don't know how I ever got along without you, Candy."

* * * *

Two nights later, Candy added her homemade creamy salad dressing and tossed the salad for dinner. She and Greg had fallen into a comfy routine in the past week. Kind of like an old married couple, she thought warmly. Greg was enjoying her cooking and she was tingling from his prowess in bed. The thought made her smile.

Greg wandered in from the den and came up behind her. He snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. "Hey there, sweet cakes. What's for dinner?"

"Chicken parmesan." She nestled against him for a moment. Set the table, please. It'll be ready in a minute."

"Later," he promised with a kiss to her nape.

As she pulled the garlic bread out of the oven, she acknowledged that she was looking forward to later. Smiling, she mused that he was turning her into a wanton woman.

She carried the salad and bread into the dining room and placed them on the table. Then she slipped into the chair Greg pulled out for her. "So how are the launch plans going?"

"So far so good, thanks to your help. The modeling agency, caterer, hall, and promo calendars are ready." He leaned over to kiss her. "We make a good team, Candy. Thanks for everything."

Warmed by the compliment, she felt herself blush. "You're welcome. Thank goodness you came back before Chad Daley could ruin things. I wonder where he got to?"

Greg gave a mirthless chuckle. "I'm of two minds on that subject. Either he's on a helluva long bender, or, he's defected to one of my competitors. I still can't believe it. He, Jill, and I started Pinnacle from nothing. How could he

torpedo it like this? I want to thank you again for being so understanding about the launch foul-up."

"I didn't do all that much."

"Yes, you did. Your smooth touch with the vendors and your modeling connections made all the difference." He reached out to take her hand. "Like I said, we make a good team." Looking deep into her eyes, he murmured, "Maybe we should think about..."

The doorbell rang.

"I wonder who that can be? Maybe it's my secretary with those missing invoices." Greg reluctantly let go of her hand, and got to his feet. "We'll talk about this later."

Candy took a sip of her iced tea while he went to the door. It had been a hectic three days, but she and Greg were finally on top of the situation.

"Dad. I'm surprised to see you here."

Candy put down her glass. Mr. Morris, here. Ma, she thought suddenly. There might be something wrong with Ma. She stood up just as Greg walked back into the dining room with his father behind him.

"Good evening, Miss Blake." Mr. Morris eyed her apprehensively.

His gentle tone alarmed her even more. Why was he being so polite all of a sudden? "What are you doing here?"

Mr. Morris frowned and looked down at his shoes. "No special reason. I felt like taking a ride."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound so rude." Candy bit her lip. "I thought maybe something was wrong back home. With Ma, you know."

Looking at her with a slight smile, he said. "She's fine. Beating the pants off Mildred in gin rummy, from what I understand."

Greg stepped forward. "Won't you sit down, Dad?"

Candy cast Greg a grateful smile for taking the focus off her for a moment so she could regain her composure. "Yes, as a matter of fact, why don't you join us for dinner? Greg can set another place while I bring in the entrée. I'll be right back." She fled the room before he could object.

She pulled the chicken parmesan out of the oven and sprinkled it with freshly grated cheese and parsley. It wasn't exactly company food, but it would do. All of a sudden, she felt like a bride giving her first dinner party. She put the casserole in a serving basket and carried it to the table. Mr. Morris was already wolfing down his salad, she noted with a smile.

Mr. Morris put down his fork. "I didn't want to be any trouble."

"It's no trouble at all. I always cook enough for an army. Greg will tell you that. It's an old habit from my modeling days. That way I only had to cook on the weekends and had leftovers to warm up all week long."

Greg took an appreciative sniff of the casserole. "It smells great, Candy."

"I agree," Mr. Morris echoed. "Confidentially, I've been fading away since Mildred moved over to Ma Brown's house. Madeline isn't much in the kitchen."

Candy grinned at the revelation. It seemed he was opening up to her. "I'm glad you like my cooking. So have there been any more scandal stories in the paper since I left town?"

He scooped up a large serving of chicken parmesan. "Well?"

Why the hesitation? She gazed directly at him. "Tell me."

"There was a big splash about the raid at the country club, then nothing."

"I was afraid of that."

"Now Magi Barnes seems to have gone to ground."

She let out a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear it."

Greg shook his head. "The police are looking for her."

"What?" Candy looked at him surprised.

"I didn't want to shake you up. They want to talk to her concerning your hit-and-run."

"I know she's angry but I don't think she's crazy enough to try to kill me. I'm hoping she'll let things lie."

Mr. Morris stopped in mid-bite. "She's left town since leaving the paper."

Candy still felt bad about that even though Magi deserved it, she didn't want to ruin the woman's career. In fact, she kind of felt sorry for her. "I only hope that she finds peace of mind."

"Hopefully she will. I heard that she went off to write that novel she's been talking about. So, don't feel bad. Anyway, her kind of yellow journalism had no place in our town. If she wanted to do that she should go get a job with a tabloid."

"I had a long talk with Tom and he was plenty steamed. It seems he'd given her an ultimatum and she'd pushed her luck too far this time."

"Well, maybe it's stupid of me, but I wish her well. I hope she finds happiness and stops living in the past."

Greg lifted his glass. "Amen to that."

Mr. Morris put down his fork. "Greg told me about your accident. Are you feeling okay?"

Candy rolled her neck. "I'm still a little sore, but I'm fine."

He watched her movement, then looked over at Greg. "Did they find the guy that hit her?"

Greg's jaw tightened. "No, they've been checking with local garages for a dark SUV with body damage, but so far they've come up empty. I put my PI firm on the job, and they haven't had much success either."

She went still. What PI firm? It was the first she'd heard about it. After Mr. Morris left, she'd ask Greg about it. She passed the breadbasket to Mr. Morris. "Jerry came to tow the car back, and he's trying to put it back together."

Mr. Morris helped himself to a roll and passed the basket on to Greg. "So is everything set for the opening next Saturday, son?"

"We think we've got all the bases covered."

She knew Greg hadn't let his father in on the mess they were clearing up. He didn't need pressure from his father now. "Greg's been working overtime to put it across. He's doing the best that he can."

Mr. Morris's eyes widened. "Of course he is. I didn't mean to sound like I doubted him."

It Had To Be You
by Julie Skerven

"Sweet cakes, I can defend myself."

"I know."

"It's nice to see you kids present a united front. It gives an old man hope for the future."

Chapter 10

Candy pressed the pleats on the cotton lace dressing gown and handed it to Kathleen. Luckily, with the help of her friends, this show would come off without a hitch. Switching off the iron, she turned to smile at Greg's sister. "Thanks again for all your help."

Kathleen added the garment to the long rolling rack that already held a rainbow of Candy-Wear Lingerie. "I'm glad to help. It adds a little excitement to my humdrum day."

"Humdrum? From what I hear, you're turning that dusty old mill on its ear. A female in the executive suite! I'm sure the old boys are buzzing."

"Actually, I was meaning to thank you for stirring things up a bit. Thanks to your influence, Dad has really loosened up. He's starting to see those business classes I took in college weren't a waste of time."

"I'm glad to hear it. But I really didn't do that much. I just told Greg I thought his father should drag himself out of the dark ages. I didn't realize he'd actually agree with me."

Kathleen nodded. "You've got a lot more influence over Greg than you realize. We were all stuck in a rut before you came home. I know I haven't said it before, but my opinion of you has totally changed. I heartily approve of my brother's choice of a wife."

Candy felt herself blush at the unexpected vote of approval. It touched her that Kathleen had come to accept her as one of the family. But she knew it was all an act. Or was it? Since Greg had slipped this ring on her finger, neither

of them had broached the subject of the end of the summer. It was as if they didn't want to spoil their magic interlude.

She knew she'd changed just as much as Greg had. She realized now that she'd been in the same kind of rut, living life with blinders on. Greg had freed her from the past and opened up a limitless future. She hoped she added a new dimension to his life as well. It gave her hope that this temporary alliance might morph into something more.

Jerry walked in carrying a mannequin under his arm. He plunked it down in front of her. "Where do you want this?"

"Take it out front and be careful. They're only rented. Mark will show you where to set them up. We're going to have them flanking the sides of the runway to make up for the lack of models."

"Will do," he said picking the mannequin up again, and gently holding it, headed toward the front. He stopped by the table where Joan was folding programs and dropped a kiss on her head. He turned to grin at Candy. "By the way, don't let Joan overdo it, will ya?"

"Don't worry. I gave her a sit-down job. I think between the two of us, we can make her behave."

"You two don't need to talk about me like I'm fragile china," Joan chimed in with a scowl. "I told Candy I could do more than this, but she's being bossy, as usual. And as for you, husband of mine, you're being way too overprotective."

"Tough." Jerry hoisted the mannequin once more and headed for the stage.

Candy grinned at their affectionate exchange. "I don't want my future niece or nephew to be distressed, so humor me."

Joan huffed out a frustrated breath. "Okay. At least I can get in on the act tonight."

"That's right. You're the perfect model for my maternity line. Now I won't have to have a model wear a pillow on her middle."

Greg walked in carrying a box and sat it on the table. "Catalogs, hot off the presses."

"Ooh, let's see." Kathleen rushed over to rip open the box. She lifted out a stack and spread them out on the table. "Nice work, big brother."

Candy picked one up and gazed at it almost disbelievingly. Years of blood, sweat, and tears had brought her to this point. She owed a great deal to Greg. In honesty, she knew he'd given her company a better deal than anyone else would. And this catalog was first class. She reached out to take his hand. "She's right. It's beautiful, Greg. Thank you."

He leaned over to kiss her. "You're welcome. This is only the start of our dreams coming true."

* * * *

Candy paced the backstage area, clipboard in hand, checking off models as they lined up. Ann, Sue, and Molly—three friends from her agency—were in red, white, and blue teddies. Kathleen stepped up behind them, looking regal in a jewel-toned caftan. And Joan looked like an angelic punk rocker in her white lace, maternity penoir set. Candy turned

to check the rack one more time, then handed the clipboard to Madeline. She'd been shocked but pleased when Greg's mother had agreed to act as stage manager. With her experience in local dramatic societies, Candy had eagerly taken her up on the offer. "Thank you, Mrs. Morris."

"Break a leg," she said with a smile. "And you might as well get used to calling me Mom."

She felt a pang of longing deep inside, but kept a smile on her face. "Thanks, Mom." Candy took her place at the end of the line, feeling like her head was swimming. The idea that Greg's family was pulling for her took some getting used to. She gazed down at her baby pink satin tap pant and bra set she was wearing, and felt a bit weak in the knees. Was it good enough? Would the critics like her designs? So much was riding on this fashion show.

She heard the music start up and the emcee start his patter, and turned to her models. "Okay, ladies. Here's to a good show. Follow the planned routine and we can't go wrong. And thanks for everything."

"I just hope I do the turn right." Kathleen said.

"You practiced for two hours, and you looked great," Candy rushed to reassure her. "I'm sure you'll do fine."

"Thanks for the pep talk. I'm a little bit nervous." Kathleen smoothed out a fold in the caftan.

Candy watched her fidgeting, and then glanced at Joan, who was nibbling at her lower lip. It was probably too much for them. "For you two civilians, I know this is outside your comfort zone. If you don't want to go through with it, I'll understand."

"No way," Joan said with a grin. "How often do I get to parade around in my undies in public?"

"I'm with her." Kathleen's lips curved up in a reluctant grin.

Nodding, Candy let out a sigh of relief. "I owe you both big time. I want you both to know how much appreciate your help. I couldn't have pulled the show off without your help."

"For family, it's worth it." Joan said.

"Right," Kathleen said. "And besides, how often do I get to turn Morris Point on its ear?"

The curtains parted, and the first model started out to the strains of *She's A Lady*.

Candy heard a smattering of applause and flash bulbs pop as Molly started out. She felt herself blush with pride. Her own fashion show! It was her dream come true.

* * * *

Greg poured two glasses of champagne and carried them out to the hot tub on the terrace. He stopped still when he caught sight of Candy. God, she was beautiful, and she was his. Moonlight highlighted her blond hair and caressed the sweet curve of her face.

She turned to see him then. "I wondered where you'd gotten to."

"I thought we needed something to celebrate the start of a beautiful collaboration." He walked up to her and handed her a flute of champagne. "Here you go, sweetheart."

"Thanks." She reached up to take the glass. Her breasts lifted in the swirling water.

Greg's hungry gaze ate up the action, knowing she was naked in the water. Even after two weeks of sharing a bed, he was just as insatiable as he'd been that first night on the beach. The good thing was that he thought she felt the same way. She'd had him every which way, just as she'd vowed the first night. He'd taught her the ways of love and she'd taught him a thing or two along the way as well.

He put his glass of champagne down on the table and untied his robe, letting it drop to the floor. He saw her eyeing his semi-erect hard-on and stifled a smile. He was horny as a teenager these days, and she was to blame. "See anything you like?"

She smiled up at him and leaned back in the water. "One or two things." She took a sip of bubbly, licked the foam off her lip, and looked pointedly at his manhood. "From the state you're in, I can see that you got started without me."

He flashed her a wry grin. "Are you kidding? A look at you wet and naked in the moonlight is all it takes. And seeing you model that lingerie earlier gave me plenty of things to fantasize about, too."

"So you liked my designs?" Her eyes twinkled.

"I sure did. That black garter belt get-up has definite possibilities. But the clothes weren't all I liked. Confidentially, I've got the hots for one of the models."

"Which one?"

"Guess." He slid into the tub, took the glass from her hand, and set it on the table. Then he reached for her, pulling her to him, feeling her wet, slick body slide against him. "Let me see if I can convince you of my devotion."

He slanted a kiss across her lips. Her mouth opened under his, and he tasted her honeyed sweetness. His hand sought her breast under the water. Cupping it, he reveled in the sweet, sexy weight of it as he held in his palm. He pinched the nipple, and she whimpered into his mouth. Her nipple puckered into a tight bud.

Candy's breathing quickened, and she sucked on his tongue. Her hands reached for his growing erection in the water, capturing him in a confident grip.

She knew just the right touch to drive him wild, the little minx. He groaned, pushing himself harder into her hand and reached for the hot, creamy woman-flesh between her thighs. He pressed against her clitoris, and she moaned, gripping him even tighter.

He knew what she was doing—trying to control the pace. But this time, he wouldn't be rushed. He wanted to savor their intimacy like the fine wine they'd been sipping. He slid one, then two fingers into her, teasing her, testing her readiness. His digits moved in and out of her as she clenched around him, then he withdrew his fingers.

She shuddered, crying out her protest, clinging to him.

He picked her up, leaned back, and swung her around to face him. Lifting her high so her breasts dangled like ripe fruit for his tasting, he suckled one and then the other nipple until they were wet and hard. He drew hungrily at the sweet, strawberry peaked globes.

Squirming against him, as she hovered over him brushing tantalizingly against his manhood, she cried out.

Slowly lowering her onto his rock hard erection, he restrained his own violent need. Burying his aching member inside her hot velvet sheath, he felt beads of sweat break out on his forehead.

She ground against him. He wrapped an arm around her back, restraining her movements. She stilled for a second, but her internal ripples tugged at him, making him jerk inside her when he wanted to savor the moment.

Her breathing was quick as she bent nibble at his ear. "What are you waiting for, Morris? An engraved invitation?" She nipped at his shoulder, wriggling against him.

"Be patient." He cupped her shapely bottom with his hands, laughing as he surged up to meet her, pulling her down onto him. He set a slow deliberate pace that gradually grew faster and faster.

Bouncing up and down on him, Candy clung to him. Sucking on his neck, she shrieked out his name as she came, her rippling spasms tugged him deeper inside her.

Greg erupted, pounding into her two more times, holding her to him as he buried himself to the hilt.

Sagging against him, Candy laid her head on his shoulder.

Smoothing a hand down her back, Greg petted her. And then it hit him. This was the first time they'd done it without protection. He'd been so deep in a fever for her he hadn't even thought about it. Maybe deep down he wanted to get her pregnant. Then she might not leave at the end of the summer. Was he that damned desperate? Yes, he was.

Chapter 11

Candy turned over in bed, her hand coming down on an empty, cold pillow. She opened her eyes, blinking at the bright sunshine streaming through the bedroom window. Then it dawned on her. Greg must have gone to the office.

He'd mentioned last night that pressing duties might keep him busy all day. Maybe she'd surprise him with another picnic lunch. They'd be all alone in his big office. Maybe she'd wear the black garter belt set.

Grinning at the thought of his response, she stretched, feeling a few twinges from their fierce lovemaking the night before. It had been a night to remember in more ways than one. She loved him, plain and simple, and she had reason to believe he cared for her.

The phone rang.

She leaned over, reaching for the receiver on Greg's nightstand. "Hello."

"Hello, beautiful," Greg said. "Did I wake you?"

Candy nestled into the soft pillow, his deep baritone sending a heat wave up her spine. "No, I just woke up." Her voice dropped to a sensual tone. "I miss you. Wish you were here beside me right now so I could demonstrate how much."

Greg groaned. "You'll be the death of me yet, Candy Baby. All I need is a little phone sex to keep me off my game." He chuckled, adding, "I'm going to have to pop some Viagra if you keep it up."

She laughed. "You don't need Viagra to keep it up. Have you forgotten last night?"

"Don't get me started, or I'll never get any work done. The reason I called was to tell you there was a review of your fashion show in this morning's paper. It was glowing, by the way. You're on your way, Candy."

Candy smiled. "Thanks. What a wonderful way to wake up. Work fast so you can come home and help me celebrate."

"Will do," he promised, adding in a sexy rumble, "I'll make up for lost time when I see you later. Wear the black garter belt."

* * * *

Candy brought in the paper from the front steps and took it into Greg's den. She sat at his desk and read the rave review twice, breaking into a huge grin. *'The Candy-Wear line is new and innovative—A sure winner in the growing lingerie market. Look out, Victoria's Secret.'* Greg was right. If this was anything to go by, she was on her way. She glanced at the smooth mahogany desktop, hunting for scissors to clip the article. His caddy contained pens, pencils, post-its—but no scissors.

Undeterred, she pulled open a drawer and spotted the scissors wedged beside a stack of files. When she reached for them, she noticed a file poking out from under some papers. The first two letters on the cover were BL.

She went still. It could be Blake. Greg couldn't have had her investigated, could he? No, he wasn't capable of such deceit. On the other hand, it might be her father's file. But why would Greg have it? Telling herself all this speculation

was stupid; she stared at the file as if it was a snake. Plenty of names started with BL.

There was only one way to find out. Shaking off her feeling of unease, she reached for the file. Unearthing the file, she laid it on the desk. Tears sprang to her eyes as she looked at the files full name Harry L. Blake—her father. Why would Greg have this? It didn't make any sense unless—had Greg had the case reopened? He'd once offered to do it and she'd turned him down for personal reasons. Dredging up past wounds wouldn't make them any better. Did her feelings mean so little to him?

The file's cover was faded and old, which told her it was probably her father's original employment record. Greg shouldn't even have access to this. And then a stinging thought hit. If she looked hard enough, would she find a corresponding file on her? Greg could have had his P.I. do a little background check on her as well. He'd said that he kept a P.I. firm on retainer.

Horried by the direction of her thoughts, she got a grip on her emotions. It was no good jumping to conclusions. Emotions had gotten her into trouble. It was time to start using her head. First, she'd read her father's file. She opened the folder. Clipped to the inside was a letter from the P.I. dated two weeks ago. Greg had this for two weeks and hadn't said anything. Why? She read the letter, her stomach clenching. "My new investigation of the facts in this case has turned up nothing new. Harry Blake was responsible for the thefts. He was a compulsive gambler and needed the cash to

pay his bookie. Do you want me to break the news to your lady, old buddy?"

Her father was guilty. Why hadn't Greg told her? Candy brushed tears away as years of uncertainty and denial washed away. Denial and anger that had colored every part of her life that she now knew was based on a lie. She read through the aged documents inside. The proof was irrefutable—forged documents, in her father's handwriting. But why had her dad lied? Anger surged through her and then she hung her head. What good would anger do now? He'd probably done it to spare her feelings at the time. No doubt, he thought he'd have time to make it up to her. But fate had stepped in the way. She had to forgive her father if she was going to move on.

This summer with Greg had taught her the futility of carrying around old grudges. Her father had probably let her think he was innocent to protect her.

Why had Greg reopened the case? Did he want to investigate her background before making a commitment to her? No, he'd never said one word about her staying after the summer was over. Or was it to be a goodbye gift? The summer was almost over. If only she'd told him how she felt. But it was too late. She couldn't stand to say a calm and civil goodbye. She needed to go home.

Tears did flow then, tears of chances lost, and sweet remembrance. She slowly got to her feet, the urge to run overtaking her. No way could she face Greg and not break down. She was going home. It would be up to him to make the next move.

She reached for the phone and called for a taxi, swallowing the lump in her throat. Then, getting to her feet, she turned and fled to the master bedroom to pack. If Greg had more to say to her, he could find her at Ma's. Retrieving her suitcase from the closet, she laid it on the bed and gazed at the bed, grief stricken. They'd shared such sweet nights here, as well as their hearts. Or at least she'd shared her heart with him. She couldn't let herself waver.

She'd walk away on her terms. Pulling her clothes from the dresser, she tossed them in the bag in a heap. There wasn't time to worry about being neat. She had to get out before Greg came back because she didn't think she could face him.

She closed her bag, and then glanced at the engagement ring on her finger. Tugging it off, she laid it on his pillow. There could be no false ties to bind him to her. The catalog was launched, he'd done his part, and now she'd do hers and walk away. There was no reason to linger. It would only make the parting harder.

Crying, she picked up the bag and walked out the bedroom door. Turning to take one last lingering look at their love-nest, she blinked away tears of regret. Renewing her determination, she turned and headed down the hall. Tears blurring her eyes, she ran directly into a hard body.

Oh God, not Greg. She couldn't face him right now. Not like this. She blinked up at him, her vision clearing, gasping as Chad Daley came into focus. He was scowling down at her.

Shocked, she blurted out, "Chad, you scared the hell out of me. Greg's been looking everywhere for you. What are you doing here?"

"Damn," he muttered, "just my rotten luck."

Candy watched the beads of sweat on his brow and noted his disheveled appearance.

His scowl deepened as he cast a frantic look around. "So Greg isn't here?"

"No, he's out attending to business." Then it hit her—all the doors were locked. He must have broken in. But how had he done it? More importantly, why was he here? The burglar alarm hadn't gone off. Growing nervous, she backed away. "How did you get in here?"

"Jill gave me a key. I used to come and water the plants when they were traveling," he said distractedly, pulling a gun out of the waistband of his jeans. He aimed the gun straight at her heart.

"You've got to be kidding."

"I'm dead serious. So shut the hell up." He nudged her forward. "Get moving toward the den, and I won't shoot you."

She stood frozen, staring at the gun he held in his trembling hand.

Chad screeched, "I said move."

"Okay." It wouldn't take much to set him off. Gone was the genial guy she'd dealt with in the past and a nervous wreck stood in his place. She led the way into the den and stepped back as he rushed past her to the desk. Seeing an opportunity to escape, she stepped back.

Chad whirled, leveling the gun on her. "Don't even think about it. Sit on the sofa where I can see you."

Candy reluctantly complied, feeling his eyes on her every step of the way. What the hell was he doing here? She sank

down on the sofa, setting her bag down beside her, and watched him.

Chad pulled a key out of his pocket and opened Greg's bottom drawer.

She frowned. "Where'd you get the key?"

He grinned. "I stole it. What else?"

She watched him rifle through the files, sweat dripping off his face. "What are you looking for?"

"Proof," he said with a cold smile. "Aha," he said, lifting out a thick file. He got to his feet, cradling it in his arm like it was a baby. He picked up the gun and pointed it at her again. "Come on."

Candy scowled up at him, thinking about balking, but he was just crazy enough to shoot her. She slowly rose to her feet.

"Bring them," he said, glancing at her bags.

She frowned and picked them up. He didn't want to leave any evidence, she thought sickly. She walked past him with her head held high, making up her mind to get out of this some way. Her cell phone was in her purse. Of course, that was her ace in the hole. She had to play it cool until she could use it. Keeping a firm grip on her purse, she walked out the front door. A black SUV was parked in the driveway. She got chills looking at its dented front fender. "You're the one who hit me."

"Yup. That's two for two for old Betsy. Although, to keep the score even, you shouldn't still be walking around."

He killed another person? Two for two—Jill. Had he been responsible for Greg's wife's death? It seemed unthinkable. She gasped at the casual admission. "You killed Jill."

"I had to. She would have ruined everything with the audit she was going to do. I needed more time; I don't mind telling you. I did it neatly. She didn't have time to feel a thing. You, on the other hand, have really have put me to a lot of trouble. Too bad you didn't take the hint and leave. Pinnacle would have gone down the drain, Greg would have gone back to the paper mill, and I'd be in the clear. But we're going to rectify the situation, now." He nudged her toward the back of the SUV. "Get in the cargo bay. Fast."

Three houses down, Candy noticed Mrs. Olson weeding her flowerbed. Should she yell? She glanced at Chad. His nervous twitch made her hesitate.

"Don't try it," he muttered.

She frowned. He'd probably pull the trigger if she startled him. No, she'd have to bide her time.

"Move," he hissed, yanking her bag out of her hand, and tossing it into the open cargo bay. He reached for her next.

Candy eluded his grasp and clambered in after her bag, keeping her purse tight in her hand. She moved as far away from him as she could and pulled her knees up, making as small a target as possible of herself.

Chad slammed the hatch shut and sprinted around the vehicle. He got in, gunned the engine and drove away.

Candy crouched, shivering in the back. They drove down the block, and she looked at Mrs. Olsen.

Mrs. Olsen noticed her and waved.

Candy mouthed the words "help me" and watched her puzzled look. If only the message got through. But she couldn't count on it. She quietly opened her purse.

They turned onto the highway, and she noticed Greg's car driving toward home. She surreptitiously fished around the purse for her cell phone.

"What are you up to back there?" Chad snapped.
She froze. "Nothing."

* * * *

Greg pulled into his driveway and smiled at the thought of a little afternoon delight with Candy. He'd wrapped up his business early to hurry home to her.

He got out of the car and walked up to the house. The front door was ajar. That was odd. Candy probably failed to latch it when she went out to retrieve the paper. No doubt, she was glowing over the good review.

Greg smiled and entered the house, shutting the door behind him. "Candy Baby, I'm home."

There was no reply.

Greg frowned, unsettled by the silence. Maybe she was napping. He walked by the den and skidded to a halt. The Harry Blake file lay on top of his desk. "Shit." He should have told her about it right away. He'd sat on the bad report, not wanting to dim her excitement for the opening.

She was probably madder than hell. After all, he was a lying, stinking no good Morris. He went toward the bedroom with a sinking feeling in the pit of his gut.

The bedroom was empty. He stalked over to the dresser and jerked open the drawer. Damn, her clothes were gone. She'd left him. Then he noticed her engagement ring lying on his pillow, and his whole world imploded. The business, his life, meant nothing without her to share it with. Damn, why hadn't he told her he loved her? *Because you didn't want to scare her off, schmuck.* Well, he'd sure as shooting fucked this one up.

He sagged down on the bed, groaning. She was gone, and he'd never dared to ask her to stay. He'd been too scared of spooking her by talking about forever, and now she was gone.

He gritted his teeth and stood, slipping the ring into his shirt pocket. He wouldn't give her up without a fight.

A car horn honked.

Greg hurried toward the door. What now?

A taxi idled in the driveway.

The driver rolled down his window. "You the fare I'm supposed to pick up?"

Greg's jaw tightened. So, she was running away by taxi. But where was she? "No. She's not here."

The cabbie frowned.

Greg walked up to him, pulling a hundred dollar bill out his wallet. "I'll make up for your lost fare—for some information."

"Yeah, what do you want to know?" the cabbie said, eyeing the bill.

"What time did she call? And where was she going?"

"Let's see." He looked down at a clipboard on the passenger seat. "She called half an hour ago and it says here she was going to the bus station."

Greg handed him the money. So where was she? He went back in the house to look for a note. Her father's file was still sitting on his desk. But there was no note from Candy. Then he noticed something odd. His locked file cabinet was ajar. Had she broken into it? He shook his head. That wasn't her style. Which meant someone else had. Had she encountered a burglar?

The front doorbell rang. Maybe she was back. He sprinted through the house, tore open the door, and scowled when he saw Mrs. Olsen on his doorstep.

Mrs. Olson stepped back a pace, her eyes going wide. "Whatever's wrong, Gregory? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Sorry, Mrs. Olson. I don't have time to chat."

"You're going after Miss Blake, aren't you?"

Greg's jaw dropped. "How did you know that?"

"Well, the look on your face for one thing, and the fact that I saw her leave a while back. It struck me as odd she was sitting in the back of that big black monstrosity. That's why I came over."

Greg shuddered. It sounded like the hit-and-run vehicle. "Was she riding in a black SUV?"

"I guess that's what they call them. It took me a while to figure out what she was trying to tell me. It looked like she was mouthing the words 'help me' on the sly."

"Was a man or woman driving?"

"It was a young man about your age."

Greg rubbed his face. That left out Magi, but it put Candy in the clutches of some guy.

"He was thin and sandy haired, as a matter of fact. I think I saw him at your barbeque last year."

"Chad Daley," Greg muttered as the list of suspects narrowed. What in the hell was Daley after? "Thanks, Mrs. Olson. I owe you a big favor."

Mrs. Olson smiled. "Go get her."

Greg went into the house to call the police. He was talking to the officer when he felt his cell phone vibrate. "Hold on, Steve. I've got a call on my cell."

Greg answered his cell cautiously, "Hello."

There was dead air on the other end. Greg listened hard.

"So where are you taking me?" Candy yelled. "Is it the same place where you killed Jill?"

Greg's knees buckled. He slid down the wall onto the bench. Chad had killed Jill. And now Candy was in his clutches.

"I told you to shut up," Chad snapped.

"How could you do something like that to your own cousin?"

"Like I said, it was quick. She didn't have time to feel a thing. Besides, they deserved it. Always lording their wealth around me. I deserved more, and I'm going to get it."

Greg felt sick, listening to Chad brag. The man that he'd counted his close friend, who'd been his best man at his wedding, had betrayed him. A cold resolution filled him, driving out his grief. Chad would not kill Candy. The police could follow the signal. He hurried inside to pick up the phone in the study where the police were on hold. "Steve, I've got

Candy on my cell phone. She has hers with her and managed to sneak a call to me."

"Did she say where she is?"

"No. She's not saying anything directly to me, but I'm able to hear their conversation. She's left the line open. It's Chad Daley. I recognized his voice. And what's more, she got him to admit he killed Jill."

"That bastard. Keep listening. We'll get the cell company to break in on the conversation and track the signal."

Greg put the cell phone back to his ear.

"I just thought you might like to tell me why," Candy prompted.

"What does it matter?" Chad asked.

"It matters to you."

"For money. What else?"

"Is that all?"

"Maybe I liked putting one over on the high and mighty Gregory Morris." Chad chuckled. "You of all people should understand that."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you." He grew agitated. "Hell, your old man found himself in the same position."

"Don't you dare compare yourself with my father!" Candy snapped. "He might have been a thief, but he never tried to hurt anyone."

"Shut up, bitch," Chad bit out.

"No," Candy snapped back, adding in a gentler tone, "Will you at least tell me where we're going?"

"Sure. Why not? We're going to the Farm."

Greg scowled. It was an old abandoned farm where he and his friends had held their beer parties during high school. It was an isolated place where Daley could do heaven knows what to Candy.

Greg told the police where they were heading and sped off. He had to save his woman. Greg pulled off the lonely country road and parked a few drives down. There was no need to tip Daley off to his presence. He ran toward the farm.

Parked by the barn, was the black SUV, with a dented right fender. Greg rushed toward it. It was empty, but Candy's suitcase lay in the back. The police hadn't gotten there yet, but Greg couldn't wait for them.

He inched toward the barn, hearing Chad's angry voice.

"You should have kept your nose out of it, Candy. I tried to scare you off, but you couldn't take the hint."

Candy stood frozen, watching Daley with horror. "Please, you don't have to do this, Chad."

"It's too late to turn back now. I can't afford to leave any loose ends. The Morrisises play hardball. You should have learned that by the way Greg tricked you into doing business with him."

Candy frowned, knowing Greg was listening in. It might be her only chance to tell him how she felt. "He's changed. Heck, times have changed a lot since my dad was arrested."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not going to jail. I'll dispose of you, get rid of the files and disappear. Greg will be so nuts about you running out on him, he won't even know what happened."

"You don't have to do this. I won't say anything. I was leaving him, as a matter of fact."

He sneered. "Like you'd walk away from the Morris money." He raised the gun in his shaky hand and stepped forward menacingly.

Greg jumped out of the shadows, bringing Daley down with a flying tackle. Chad let out a screech and the gun went off. Candy screamed at the loud report. Greg grunted, feeling a sting on his arm. Outraged, he knocked the gun out of Daley's hand and landed a solid punch to his jaw. Chad groaned, his head snapping back, and fell unconscious. Greg bit his lip against the searing pain in his arm and rolled to his feet. He had to make sure Candy was okay.

Sirens wailed outside the barn as the police arrived.

Greg looked at Candy, noting the stricken expression on her pale face. "Are you okay?"

She glanced at his bleeding arm and winced, tears pooling in her eye. "I'm fine. It's you who's been hurt." She choked back a sob.

Lieutenant Sinclair charged into the barn, gun drawn. He frowned, taking in the whole scene. "You kill him?" He gestured toward Chad.

"God, I hope so," Greg bit out.

"Is she okay?" Sinclair nodded at Candy.

"I'm fine," Candy said, feeling weak in the knees. She sagged down on a bale of hay. "You'd better get an ambulance here for Greg. He's hit."

Sinclair nodded. "They should be here in a second. That was smart thinking, young lady, using your cell phone. We tracked the signal all the way."

Daley moaned, waking up.

The police swarmed the area, handcuffing Chad and placing him in the back of a squad car.

"Damn you, Morris," he shouted.

The ambulance arrived and the paramedics immediately began treating Greg. He tried to shrug them off and step toward Candy, but she stepped back and blinked up at him, tears shimmering in her eyes. He bit out a curse, telling himself he should give her some space, and waited for Sinclair to wander over. "Would you mind giving Candy a ride home? I think this has all been too much for her."

Sinclair glanced at Candy's pale face. "Sure, no problem. She does look all done in."

Greg let the paramedics load him into the ambulance. "Go back to the house, Candy," he called out. "We'll talk when I get home."

Candy slipped into the squad car. "I just want to go home. Would you mind taking me all the way back to Morris Point?"

Chapter 12

Candy paced the parlor at Ma's house the next day. Her packed suitcases waited by the door. She glanced at Ma's downfallen expression and winced. She didn't mean to distress her, but she had to leave. She didn't want to be a painful reminder to Greg.

Ma looked up at her sadly. "Are you sure you can't stay a bit longer?"

Candy shook her head, and smiled down at her, willing her to understand. "No, it's time I got back to the real world. It's been a nice summer, but it's time to move on."

Ma sighed. "But Joan is going to have her baby any day now. You'll miss all the excitement."

"I'm sure she'll send me lots of pictures. They'll have to do."

Ma shook her head. "Why can't you and Greg work things out? Isn't it worth one more try? You look so sad, baby."

Candy flashed her a small smile. "Sadder, but wiser. That's what I get for getting mixed up with a Morris."

"You love him, girl. Why don't you just admit it?"

"You're right. I love him, but he doesn't love me. The engagement is over." She patted Ma's arm. "It's better this way. Trust me."

The roar of a motorcycle pulling into the driveway distracted her. Candy looked out the window, and her jaw dropped. It looked like Greg astride the battered old Harley. It was identical to the one she used to ride as a teenager.

"Here he is. Right on time," Ma chirped.

"It can't be," Candy muttered. "Greg, a biker. No way." She walked outside to get a closer look. It was Greg. She watched him dismount. Reluctantly, her steps took her to the bike. She ran her hand over the sleek black Harley Davidson; complete with the silver pinstripe she'd added her senior year. It wasn't a replica; this was her old bike. She gaped up at him. "How?"

Greg took a step toward her. "Yeah, it's your old bike. I tracked it down the day we got engaged and had it restored. I was planning to give it to you as a wedding present."

His words penetrated, and she blinked up at him. "Wedding present. But our engagement was fake."

Greg's eyes narrowed. "Not to me. It was very real to me. Why did you run off? Was it because of your father's file?"

She bit her lip. "That started it. I jumped to the conclusion that it was a goodbye gift. But mostly I left because you never asked me to stay. I was upholding my part of the bargain. And then, on my way out, I bumped into Chad Daley. He'd broken into your house. And you know the rest. You deserve a woman who can fit into your life, not a flaky lingerie designer."

He shook his head. "What a pair we are. I never asked you to stay because I was afraid of scaring you off. Well, I've got news for you. I'm not scared any more. I love you with all my heart and soul, and I don't want you to go. As a matter of fact, if you run away this time I'm going with you."

Candy heard the sincerity in his voice. She'd been a fool to run away. She glanced at his bedroll tied to the back of the bike and grinned. "You'd really run off with me?"

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Greg nodded and pulled the engagement ring out of his pocket. He reached out and took her hand. Slipping the ring on her finger he vowed, "I'd follow you wherever you ran. Life isn't worth living without you."

Candy smiled up at him. "You're crazy."

He grinned and picked her up. "I know. About you, Candy Baby."

It Had To Be You
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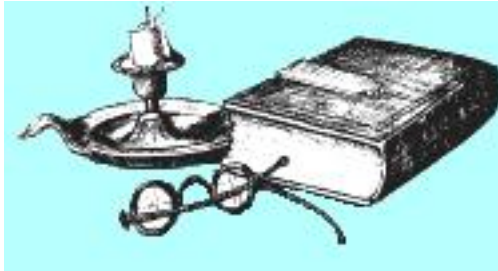
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hello, readers. My name is Julie Skerven. I live in a small, scenic community in picturesque central Wisconsin. I am happily married to a great guy, and I have two grown children of whom I am very proud. I'm a charter member of the Jewels of the Quill, and I belong to the Romance Writers of America, Outreach, and EPIC. I came to writing gradually, starting out as a voracious reader. I love to read all sorts of fiction, but my favorite is romance. I hope that you enjoy reading my work.

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