



SOLDIER'S WOMAN

By

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Chapter One

The troop had been dropped behind enemy lines. As far as the government was concerned, they didn't exist.

Nigel leaned against an old tree for support, being sure to stay low to the ground so that the bushes near the base of the tree mostly obscured him.

Sweat was beginning to stream down his face now. He had to resist the instinct to mop at it, knowing it might take off some of his face paint. He ignored the discomfort of the heat and the mosquitoes whining in his ears. His life and the life of his fellow troops were in jeopardy if things didn't go according to plan.

He heard a bird call, the signal to proceed toward the package. Just as he rose up, though, he heard rapid gun fire and return fire on his left.

Then, all hell broke loose.

The enemy started running from the undergrowth on the other side of the forest opposite his troop, whooping and hollering like maniacs, firing at everything and anything that moved. Men shouted and screamed in agony as they were gunned down. His nostrils stung with the smell of gunpowder as he raced forward from his hiding place toward the package, but it was too late. The enemy was bearing down on it and all the rest of his troop were in mortal combat. Static broke through on his shoulder com, and then he heard his commanding officer yelling for all of them to fall back to the extraction point.

Cursing, he left the package, too heavy for one man alone to carry, and headed for the deep cover of the woods, stopping to fire at the enemy as he ducked behind trees here and there. He kept going, trying to keep up with the rest of the troop, most of which were further ahead. Thankfully, they weren't far from the extraction point.

Firing again at the enemy hot on his trail, he broke away from the protection of a thick tree and made a run for it. He heard the crack of a gun from behind him, heard the sound of it as it continued to fire in his direction. And then he felt the heat of the bullets as they tore through his flesh. He grunted in pain and fell forward, whether from the force of the bullets or the pain he wasn't sure.

He couldn't stop. He had to keep moving. If they caught up with him, he was a dead man. He got to his feet and willed his body to ignore the pain. Thankfully, adrenaline was kicking in and it wasn't too unbearable. He ran as fast as he could through the thick undergrowth of the woods until he stumbled upon another member of his troop on the ground leaning against a tree. He leaned down and pushed the man's head back so that he could see his face. It was Sgt. Wilmont, a good friend.

Wilmont moaned when Nigel pushed his head back.

Nigel could see why. He'd been shot through the neck and there was a massive amount of blood coating his camouflage.

Grabbing Wilmont by one arm, he slung it over the back of his shoulders and helped him to his feet. He was like a dead weight against him, but he wasn't about to

leave him. He set off as quickly as he could, more urgent now that he could see the break in the tree line.

They knew they were fucked, but he wasn't going to let that knowledge stop him.

As he ran from the coverage of the forest, he was almost blinded by the light that met his eyes. His breath left him in short bursts. The pain shooting through his arm and leg from where the bullets had gone through him were almost too much to bear, but still he continued to carry Wilmont. The smaller man had long since passed out from loss of blood from the gunshot through the side of his neck.

Too many had already lost their lives this day, he was determined they wouldn't be among them. He struggled on, willing himself to go faster as he heard the snipers closing in on their group and a few of his fellow soldiers return fire just a few yards behind him. Soldiers rushed past him to the plateau up ahead. He could hear the engine of the helicopter that had come to get them, but it was still out of site. Not long now. He could make it. He could see the swirling of sand up ahead, he could almost feel the buzz of the engine.

A shot whizzed past his ear, and he ducked down behind some rocks close by, dragging Wilmont with him. His lungs were on fire now, and he was covered in sweat and blood. There was so much blood he couldn't tell how much of it was his and how much of it belonged to Wilmont, but he knew they were both bleeding profusely. They didn't have much time. More gun shots rang out, and he could hear return fire from the plateau. The rest of the group had made it to the helicopter. A few seconds later, he saw the chopper fly overhead.

They had left them! A sinking feeling of despair began to fill him.

They must have thought he had been gunned down like the rest of the party. Realizing that he didn't have the luxury for remorse at the moment, he acted quickly. Looking around for some kind of cover, he spotted a small depression in the rock just a few feet from him. He could make it and still be sheltered from view by the jutting rocks he was leaning against.

Picking up Wilmont again, he gritted his teeth against the pain coursing through him. He slowly made his way over to the depression, hoping they would make it inside before they were found. The hole was shallow, but it was large enough for the two men to lay down inside and not be seen. Getting down inside, he laid Wilmont on the floor quickly and quietly.

Turning to see if they had been spotted, he saw that blood had dripped all the way to where he was, creating an easy line to follow. He had to hurry, he had to cover up the trail of blood he had left in his wake before the enemy found them.

Grabbing a handful of sand from the cavern floor, he stood up, exposed from his shoulders up, and tossed the sand over the blood. It wasn't enough. He bent and grabbed two more handfuls twice again, quickly covering the trail.

Rock crunched under the booted feet of the enemy as they approached the outcropping of rock he had leaned against for protection just a few minutes earlier.

As he lay waiting to be captured by the enemy, he pulled his rifle up and gripped it tightly against his chest with both hands. He tried to maintain alertness. He had to be ready. At least, he might be able take some of them with him. But, despite his best efforts, he began to drift toward unconsciousness.

The depression was much cooler than the hot sand he'd been running through. A breeze swept over his hot skin. It felt good. He closed his eyes.

Briefly, he considered trying to bandage his injuries, but he became more lethargic by the second, and his thoughts were a dizzying dark spiral in his mind. Had he covered their tracks well enough? Would the enemy find them anyway?

For what seemed like an eternity, he lay, waiting for something. He couldn't tell how long he'd been there, minutes, hours? But soon, he lost focus, and he thought of his mother and his brothers back home. The life he could have had floated by in his mind's eye, a home of his own, a job outside the military, a family. His mother had so desperately wanted grandchildren, but he had kept putting it off. There was plenty of time to make a family, to have children, he'd told her.

Before he slipped into the black abyss calling him, one thought haunted him. *I will never see my sons.*

* * * *

Sera was really nervous and feeling a little panicky. Trying hard, she resisted the urge to revert to childhood and start gnawing on her fingernails. The doubts and worries she had been carrying weighed heavy on her now, wondering whether or not she should go through with it or even would be able to go through with it. Would being artificially inseminated hurt or just feel mildly uncomfortable? But, the most painful worry of all was whether or not she would be able to carry the baby to full term.

She hated doctors and even worse, she hated needles. During the screening process, they had shown her what they were going to impregnate her with. It wasn't pretty. Never before had she seen a needle so long. It was very daunting. She had nearly fainted then. It was a good thing women were around to have the babies, because she had the distinct feeling that the strongest of men would have shied away from the mammoth needle they had so casually displayed.

Trying to distract herself from her nervous jitters, she looked around at the pictures of babies on the walls. There were many personal photos taken of mothers holding their infants right after birth. One woman in particular caught her attention. She had tears in her eyes and she looked at her little bundle like there was nothing else in the world that mattered. Sera couldn't help but envy the women in the photographs. They had already gone through the process. The hard part was over for them. Now they could enjoy the fruits of their labors.

The strangeness of the situation, to be sitting where she was now, began to dawn on her. It had only been a few weeks earlier that she had seen the ad in the paper advertising for a surrogate mother, an ad the likes of which she had never seen before. In fact, she hadn't known that papers advertised for surrogates, or perhaps it was the first ad of its kind in their local paper.

As she had scanned through the morning paper, sipping her coffee at her desk in her home office, it was the headline that had caught her attention: **Woman seeking surrogate for her soldier son gone MIA**. Curiosity had encouraged her to continue on. And what she had read had brought tears to her eyes. She could feel the woman's heartbreak over the tragic loss of her son, the woman's need to find solace in fulfilling her dream to become a grandmother, in finding the right woman to bring her son's children into the world so that a part of him would live on. The editor from the paper had

written an article about the mother, and, although they were not supposed to be bias, they had insinuated in a not so subtle manner that the woman was trying to replace the child she had lost.

The article had angered Sera. What business was it of theirs anyway? Who were they to judge? Anyone in the woman's situation would be devastated, unless they didn't actually care about their child. She thought she would be hard pressed to say how she would act given the same circumstances. And you really couldn't know without being there. You might think that you would react a certain way, but without the personal experience, it was really up in the air.

Later that day, while working on her laptop, she had thought about what the woman was asking. She had realized it was a lot to ask of someone. Being a surrogate was nothing new, for sure. But how could a woman have a child within her body, feel it moving, know that you are the reason it's alive, and then give it away when it's born? Even if you knew that was what you had planned to do, how could a woman be so impartial to something that was that so much a part of her? That part was hard for her to digest.

But the article and the woman's situation had gotten her thinking about her own life. She had always wanted children, even when she was a little girl playing with baby dolls, dragging them through the yard and protecting them from the neighborhood boys and dogs that were always chasing her and taking them away to tear them up. Somewhere along the way, she had gotten so busy with her life, so consumed with work, she had lost sight of that.

At first, the company she had started when she was only twenty had been a distraction to console her over the loss of her parents when they had died in a plane crash on the way to an important business meeting. But then, she had really delved deep into her work, blotting out everything else, including relationships with men. She hadn't had someone important in her life since, and that had been nearly ten years ago. She supposed it was her own irrational way of staying away from the pain and heartache of losing someone important, but she couldn't live her life that way, she had realized. No matter what she did, if she was alive, she would experience loss, it was a part of life. And she couldn't keep on living the way she had once she had read the woman's words. She realized that something in her life had to change.

Suddenly, it became very important that she meet the woman who had placed the ad, Irene Savage, the woman who had lost so much but was determined to keep on living, to keep the circle of life going. She hadn't known if she would ask to be considered or not when she had made the plan to call the woman and set up a meeting, all she had known was that she had to connect with someone, someone who wanted a baby as much as she did.

It was as if her internal clock had been shut off for a very long time and someone had just turned it back on. She had a new awareness, a new lease on life. It was as if she was starting to see things around her for the very first time and things didn't look good. She was getting older, and, although from an outside point of view, her life might look like it was full of accomplishments, what good was any of that without family, without people to share her life with?

Goosebumps raced down the skin exposed by the shortness of the dowdy white

medical gown the nurse had asked her to don. The sterile atmosphere of the room gave her the chills, along with the low temperature they insisted on keeping. They wouldn't want anyone getting any cozy warm feelings about being at the doctor's office. But it was part of the process if she was going to have a baby. And, really, mild discomfort was worth the end result.

She began to rub her arms in an effort to chase away the cold. That brought her attention back to the cold metal instruments in the room. They were the same instruments that would be using on her. She dreaded having to be probed, and, according to one of the women she'd talked briefly with in the waiting room, there were lots of visits throughout the pregnancy and most of them required probing.

The urge to jump up and run trickled down her spine, making it hard to breathe. Just when she thought she was going to give in to her cowardly impulses, she heard a knock on the door. It startled her. Feeling like a deer caught in headlights, she froze.

Trying to sound calm, she said, "Come in," her voice hitting a high note. She mentally cursed the dead give away that she was afraid, she'd always hated that. She wondered briefly if someone had read her thoughts of flight and come to make sure she wasn't taking off.

The door opened a hair, the hinges squeaking lightly in protest, and she heard the familiar voice of Irene Savage.

"Are you dressed, honey?"

"Yes," Sera said, filled with relief to discover it was not some cold-mannered nurse, not just yet anyway.

Irene opened the door and came fully into the room, shutting it behind her. Her face was warmer than the sun on a summer day. The woman could have lit up the night with the smile on her face. And it was infectious. Sera found herself smiling in return, although she was still very nervous. The woman was so excited that she was finally going to be having the grandchild she had always wanted she was practically beside herself.

Once Irene settled down with a magazine in a chair beside the operation chair, that Sera was sitting in, Sera looked around again at the creepy office equipment that was required for artificial insemination. She had never imagined having her first child this way. She felt a little guilty about it.

She had never tried to have a baby with a man, but she didn't think she would have had any trouble. There were lots of women who couldn't have a baby on their own who would probably resent the fact that she was capable and would probably feel like she was just doing it because she wanted to cut out the middle man. They were partially right about wanting to cut out the middle man part.

Men made everything so much more complicated than it needed to be. With this procedure, she could have the baby she wanted without worrying about how the man would be as a father. Would he stay around? Would the child have issues if they separated? This way, the man was never involved and couldn't cause trouble. The only problem was, since she didn't have a man and she didn't have a family, she didn't have a support team rallying behind her.

She'd always heard that children raised with more adults around did better. So, when Irene had not only volunteered but been thrilled with the idea of playing her

support team, she was relieved. She was a very independent woman and felt that she could have managed fine on her own, but it felt good to have someone backing her, especially someone who was just as happy about the prospect of a baby as she was. Men never seemed to be as happy about babies as the women around them were.

So, it was good that Irene had decided to be a part of the process. She was great moral support, and the mother she didn't have to tell her about all the experiences of motherhood firsthand. And, although the excitement Irene elicited at the moment made her more nervous, it also bolstered her courage. She had gotten through three pregnancies, and she was fit as a fiddle, which led her to believe Sera would be just fine as well, even though she wasn't getting pregnant the traditional way.

It wasn't as if she had any other options, though, besides the one that Irene offered. She had grudgingly admitted to herself that she hadn't had any relationships, serious or otherwise in years. And since answering the newspaper ad and meeting Irene, they had become fast friends. She hadn't realized how much she had missed the company of another person, of another woman. Yes, she had friends, but they were all vested in their family lives, something she didn't have. And Irene had come to treat her like a daughter in law. She tried to tell herself that she wasn't in this alone. Irene was with her. And a woman was much better company than a man anyway. She had been supportive from the beginning, where most men seemed to freak at out the news of an impending baby and a deterrent to their sexual appetites.

She could get through the insemination process because Irene would be her pillar. Things couldn't have been better.

Chapter Two

Two months Later

Irene was over at Sera's house paying her a visit, when the phone rang.

Sera, not expecting any calls, wondered briefly who it was. She made her way over to the table where the phone sat and picked it up.

"Hello."

"Hello," came an unfamiliar woman's voice. "I'm Darlene from Dr. Yules' office. Is this Sera?"

"Yes, this is Sera."

"I was calling to inform you that the results are back. Two of the fetuses are doing just fine."

Sera felt relief rush to her head. She hadn't tried to focus on negative possibilities but it was something she knew she'd have to keep in mind. She hadn't realized how much she'd wanted to hear those words since she'd been inseminated until she'd gotten the good news. "That's fantastic! Thanks for calling."

"You're welcome. Don't forget your next appointment is scheduled for next Monday."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"Have a good day."

"You too."

Sera hung up the phone and turned to Irene.

Irene looked at her expectantly. She'd heard half of the conversation and was sure it had something to do with the pregnancy.

Sera went and sat down beside Irene on the couch and took her hands in her own.

"They said that there two fetuses are doing well."

Irene felt a rush of excitement. She didn't want to display too much of it though, just in case anything happened. There was still a lot of pregnancy left.

"Why don't we celebrate the good news by going shopping?" Irene suggested. "I've been wanting to look at baby things for quite some time now."

Irene was so thrilled, Sera couldn't help be get caught up in her enthusiasm, even though she was still worried that there was the possibility that she wouldn't be able to carry the babies to term. She didn't want to think about that now. Neither one of them ever discussed that possibility, although they both knew it was a very real one. She wasn't a young woman anymore, and artificial insemination wasn't a guarantee.

They got up and grabbed their purses and headed for the door. They stepped outside and got into Irene's car parked out on the street.

Irene drove the two of them to a shopping plaza downtown, and they got out and went into several baby stores. The first store they went into was filled with a variety of toys for boys and girls and some very nice clothing as well.

Irene picked up a soft stuffed fuzzy football from a display that featured various

local and national teams. She turned to Sera, stroking the football.

"I'll just bet you'll have a boy!" She paused, looking down at Sera's stomach. "You look like you're carrying that baby low."

Sera laughed. She was barely pregnant and already Irene was making predictions. And she knew that they both knew she barely had a baby bump. It would be a while before they would be able to tell whether she was carrying the baby low or high. And she thought that determining the sex by how you carried the baby was probably just an old wives tale.

"I don't know, Irene, there's a fifty-fifty chance I'll have a girl."

They both laughed.

She tried to imagine what a baby of hers would look like.

Irene had spent hours showing her photos of the Savage boys when they were babies and toddlers. They had been so adorable. Each of them had been tow-headed until they were about five and then their hair had become darker and darker shades of brown.

Because she was a blonde and Nigel, the baby's father, had been when he was young, she wondered if there was more of a possibility that the baby would be. She didn't actually have a preference for a boy or a girl. She would just be thankful if both babies made it. It would be so ideal to just be pregnant once and have two babies, then she wouldn't have to get pregnant again, if she didn't want to, because they'd have someone to play with. Whatever happened, she was sure she would think her baby was the most beautiful or handsome baby in the world.

That thought made her recall something Irene had said about Nigel. When he was born, because he was her first and her hips hadn't spread enough, the shape of his head was a little strange. Irene hadn't noticed. She saw him and had eyes for no one else. Nigel's father however, couldn't help but notice and made a deal out of pointing it out to Irene. He had told her that the baby looked like he had an alien head. Irene had laughed at such nonsense, she had told her, because there was nothing in the world wrong with Nigel.

She wondered if she would have the same blind adoration of her child as Irene had had for all of hers. She stepped away from the football display that Irene was still admiring to another that was overflowing with yellow flowers, pink ribbons, and little girl's gowns. She picked up a long flowing white christening gown, complete with a cap embroidered with delicate flowers.

"Isn't this precious?" Sera asked Irene.

She stroked the soft ribbon laced through the cap before she laid the garment back where she had found it. Turning to Irene, she became all seriousness.

"You know, I'll be happy whether I have a boy or a girl," Sera admitted truthfully.

The only thing she worried and wanted more than anything, was for the baby to come out complete and healthy. There was nothing more important than being healthy, and she worried about the baby having all of its fingers and toes and everything else in working order. Irene had assured her plenty of times that the constant worries over the baby were what every first time mother experienced. But for Sera, the first time mother, it was hard to let mere words lay her very powerful fears to rest.

Irene beamed at Sera's comment. She wasn't worried about whether the baby was a boy or a girl, either. The only thing she thought about was how she could hardly wait till it arrived. And she knew they were in for a long wait. That was the hard part about knowing exactly when the baby was conceived, you knew it would take about nine months from that date. When she had been young, she had never found out right away, but, of course, their situation was entirely different.

They left the store and strolled down the sidewalk to enter another. They made their way through each and every different baby attire and toy shop that downtown had to offer in a matter of hours.

When they left the last of the baby clothing shops, Sera said, "I don't think I really want to buy anything until I'm sure what I'm going to have."

What she left unsaid was the fact that, at four months, when she would find out the sex of the baby or babies, she would feel more hopeful that they would make it to full term. She was scared of getting attached and then losing them. She tried not to stress about it much, there was no need to be pessimistic, but the fact was never far from her mind, a fact highlighted by the number of eggs the doctor had implanted that already hadn't made it.

"I guess you're right. I'm just so anxious to buy the baby things, it's hard to wait," Irene agreed.

Sera smiled at Irene. She missed her own mother. She was glad Irene was there, she was a wonderful woman, with many admirable qualities including the way she made her feel comfortable, but it hurt that her own parents had never gotten the chance to have grandchildren, although she knew they wouldn't have been thrilled like Irene. The childhood Nigel experienced and the one she'd had were vastly different. He had been very lucky to have a mother that enjoyed motherhood so much.

Her own parents loved her but were more work oriented. They spent most of their time furthering business interests instead of making room for quality family time. To them, that was the most important thing they could do because it was through their hard work that their family flourished. And, they felt like they should lead her by example.

Life was work, and she had better get used to it while she was young. There was no point in spoiling her and then trying to shove her out into the real world. How could they expect her to do well if they didn't start her work ethic from the beginning? It had always been a hard pill to swallow, but, when she was young, she had never realized there was any other way. After she had gotten older, she realized that plenty of people she met had had wonderful childhoods running around doing absolutely nothing in their backyard or laying around and watching TV. during their summer vacations with their friends from school and still managed to grow up to accomplish a great deal.

As they stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the last toy store in the plaza, Irene spotted a maternity store that had a huge sale sign out front, just a short distance away.

"Oh, look at that, Sera. That maternity clothing store, *We're Expecting You*, is having a forty percent off sale for mother's day. We should go take a look around in there."

"Why not," Sera agreed. She hoped she wouldn't get gigantic while she was

pregnant, but she knew that she also couldn't expect to wear all of her normal clothes. She didn't wear everything skin tight, but her jeans wouldn't allow for a lot of growth around her middle. She purposefully wore her clothes fitted so that she wouldn't eat herself into the next pants size.

That made her think about the fact that there were still two eggs. What if both of them made it? She would be so lucky to have two children at one time. Of course, it would be extremely hard at first, not only because she'd never had a child and didn't know anything about taking care of a baby, but because she would have double the trouble.

Since getting pregnant, she had begun to notice other women with infants and small children and the way they interacted together. It was nothing like how her parents had treated her. She had never really been allowed to go out with her parents very much. Most of their outings had been business related. But when they did go out together as a family, she had been expected to be very quiet and composed, the perfect little lady. She looked back on it now and wondered if she had been the unknowing example of their iron will to strangers that met them. Here, do you see my daughter? Do you see how well I trained her?

They passed a woman who had her daughter in a contraption that looked like a chest harness with a leash attached. She tried not to stare, but she couldn't help turning back after a few minutes and trying to get another look.

She stopped Irene in the street and discreetly brought her attention to the woman and child that had kept going down the street behind them.

"What in the world would make someone want to put something on their child like that?" she whispered.

Irene's face scrunched in displeasure.

"I don't really approve of those myself, but, until you have a child, honey, you don't really know what it is like. Sure, you can ask questions, and people can tell you about their experiences, but you don't really know. Yes, you can imagine yourself in someone else's shoes, but until you fill them, there's no true knowing.

When Nigel was young, I went shopping in a department store for a new outfit for a wedding that was coming up. He was very young, only about two years old. He was a very active boy but very quiet.

I only looked away for a moment to check a price tag, and when I looked back he was gone. I became frantic. I began to run through the store. I stopped other customers and asked them if they had seen my son. I called his name over and over again, my voice cracking with the fear that was beginning to overwhelm me.

You can't really know the worry, the horrible things that ran through my mind when I realized he wasn't beside me, that he was gone. I felt like the worst mother in the world. All sorts of scenarios ran through my mind. Where could he have gone? How could he have gotten away from me so quickly without me even seeing him? Why didn't he answer when I called him? Was he even in the store anymore? Should I run outside of the store and look for him there? What if someone had taken him? What if someone had snatched my baby, taken him away to do lord only knows what to him? I would never see him again. And I would have to live with the fact that I had let it happen, that something horrible had happened to my child because of me.

And, slowly, as I kept calling out his name and scouring the racks of clothing looking for him, I began to feel my heart sink until I thought I wouldn't be able to breathe anymore, the tears coming so fast I could hardly see.

It was when I made my way back to where I had lost him and looked around at the store at the other people who didn't care a thing in the world about my son and whether he was gone forever that I became so weak that I fell to the floor in my despair.

Seconds later, Nigel jumped out of a clothing rack behind me yelling 'Boo. I scared you Mommy'.

I wanted to beat him within an inch of his life, but all I had the strength to do was hold him tightly to my chest and cry.

I thought I had lost him that day. And when he was back in my arms, I knew that I never wanted to feel that way again."

* * * *

Nigel couldn't believe the relief he felt to finally be back in town. It was like a great weight had been lifted off of his shoulders. As his train neared the station in his hometown, he thought about how he and Sgt. Wilmont had barely escaped the last mission with their lives. Looking death straight in the eyes was a very sobering thing.

And, they would be dead, both of them, if not for the sympathetic farmer that had found them dehydrated and half dead from blood loss in that shallow depression they had taken shelter in. Well, it had been the farmer's dog that had found them, but, nevertheless, the farmer had taken pity on them when he found his dog trying to eat them. He had taken them into his home and nursed them back to health, quite a feat considering the living conditions in that territory. He would never be able to repay the kindness the man had shown them. He had tried to repay him with money, but it had seemed like such an empty gift, so petty next to what he had been given, life.

Time had passed so slowly when he had been recovering. Every day had seemed like an eternity. And as he and Wilmont had gotten better, well enough to sit up in their sick beds, it had been agonizing waiting for the day that they would recover enough to make it out of there. It had felt like it would last forever. He had felt guilty that he had resented being there so much, but he couldn't help wanting to get back home. It was all he had thought about, and he'd had plenty of time for thinking while he'd lain in a bed for months on end.

Had the enemy found them, though, they would've killed them immediately or died under torture in a filthy prison. Facts like those had given him a lot to think about. He had always thought he had a charmed life, been fatalistic about the possibility of dying in service. That wasn't something he was alright with anymore.

Trying to dispel the negative turn his thoughts had taken, he shifted his focus. He had been given a second chance, and now he was going to live life to the fullest. Taking a deep breath, he relished the sweet air, like the first taste of freedom for a wrongly imprisoned man. It didn't stink of gunpowder and death. He didn't hear men screaming in agony. He didn't have to sleep with one eye open. He was back, back in the United States, back in his hometown. There was nothing he could have been more thankful for. And, with debriefing behind him, he could now start a new life.

Stepping off of the train and onto the platform, he quickly spotted the rental car he had reserved. After getting the keys from the rental car attendant, he made his way to

the car. Opening the driver's side door, he tossed his one piece of luggage into the passenger seat and got in to drive. He smiled for the first time since leaving home so long ago.

Needless to say, when he had showed up back at Fort Braggs, his commanding officers had been surprised to see him alive. During debriefing, they had informed him that a funeral service had been held in his memory and for the rest of the troop that had died that day.

Realizing that not only the military but his entire family thought he was dead, he was wracked with guilt at what his mother must have gone through. But, now that he was home, he would make it up to her because now that his term of service was over, he had decided not to re-enlist. The duty he had felt that he owed to his country was paid in full. He was going to settle down, find a woman to love and marry, and give his mother those grandchildren she had always wanted.

While driving downtown on his way to his mother's house, he saw a car that looked like his mother's parked on the side of the street. Searching the sidewalks, he spotted his mother walking with a foxy looking younger woman. What was his mother doing downtown? Who was that amazing woman she was with? He only caught a glimpse of his mother's companion, but what he saw intrigued him, long blonde hair, long legs, and a sexy sway of hips.

He had been headed to the house to surprise his mother, but since he had spotted her, he didn't think he could go to her house and wait for her there. He decided to stop and surprise her there. He was far too excited to wait. He had to see her immediately, and, besides, if he stopped now, he would get the chance to meet the lovely woman in her company. After all, it had been a long time since he had seen a beautiful woman. He'd had to stare at Sgt. Wilmont's mug for months.

Going around the block, he parked and headed for the shop he'd seen his mother and the woman with her enter, the one with the big mother's day sale sign out front.

As he entered the shop, he didn't notice what kind of shop it was, figuring it was just some kind of women's clothing store.

Chapter Three

The two women didn't notice Nigel when he walked in. It gave him the chance to get a better look at the woman who had accompanied his mother into the store. He was floored. When he'd driven by in his rental, he'd only caught a glimpse. He was immediately thankful he'd decided to stop.

His libido instantly went into hyper-drive as he took in the delicate features of her heart shaped face. Her lips were a soft pink, her skin pale but slightly flushed. Her hair was a golden blonde and long enough it touched her shoulders. His breath caught in his throat when she turned more fully in his direction, talking to his mother. Her eyes were a sea green. He imagined himself getting lost in those depths or lost in that luscious body of hers. She wasn't skinny, she was curvy, her pert breasts the perfect size for his hands. He wondered how it would feel to test the weight of them in his hands.

But then he saw his mother as she turned in his direction to inspect some merchandise. Even from a distance he could tell that his absence had taken a toll on her. She was thinner, and she looked tired, as if she had stayed up nights. He shook off the feelings the woman had elicited. He had more serious matters to attend to.

He made his way quietly through the racks, making sure to go unnoticed. He managed to get over to the clothes rack the two women were looking at without his mother or the woman spotting him.

As he came up behind his mother, the woman she was with looked straight at him. He put his finger over his lips to warn her to be quiet and then grabbed his mother and nuzzled her neck.

Irene screamed with alarm when someone grabbed her from behind and started on her neck. She started swatting at her attacker with her hands.

"What . . . in . . . the . . . world . . . ?" she said through her struggle.

Sera stood with her mouth agape, not sure of what to do. Just when she thought she should help fight the man off of Irene, he spoke.

"Sweetheart! Is that any way to treat your main man?" he asked teasingly.

Irene turned in his arms and screamed.

The store clerk jumped up from her chair at the payment counter and looked in their direction, looking as if she was ready to come running. "Is everything okay!" she shouted.

"Everything is fine," Nigel told the woman. He turned back to his mother but still spoke loud enough for the clerk to hear him, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "I just surprised her."

The clerk didn't look so convinced and continued to keep an eye on them.

"Oh, sweetheart . . .," Irene began, her voice cracking with emotion. She was unable to continue to speak as tears began to stream down her cheeks.

Nigel pulled her close. Laying his head on the top of her head, he stroked her hair tenderly.

"There's no need to cry. I'm here now."

Sera didn't know what in the world was going on. Irene looked like she'd seen a ghost and then she had begun to cry uncontrollably. The two were now hugging, and Irene pulled out of his embrace and began to kiss him all over his face. She looked at the young man up and down, over and over, as if she couldn't believe her eyes.

She was surprised at how handsome the man was. He was wearing a tank top tucked in at his narrow waist into camouflage pants that fit his well-sculpted physique. The way he kept brushing his ear length dark hair out of his eyes made her think that it was longer than he normally kept it. She felt warm all over when he looked away from his mother and at her for a brief moment. His dark blue eyes combined with a few days worth of dark stubble on his square jaw sent delicious currents of awareness through her being. She suddenly wondered if she looked an awful mess, which was strange since she didn't normally care what she looked like.

After a few moments, she realized that he must be one of Irene's sons. As they stood together talking, she noticed the resemblance between him and the pictures of the young men in Irene's living room she had studied so many times when she had come to visit her since her pregnancy began.

Having noticed that his mother had become overwhelmed by emotion, Nigel decided to walk her out of the store and down the sidewalk to her car. He grabbed her arm and entwined it with his own, continuing to talk to her soothingly as he lead her from the store.

It appeared to Sera as if Irene's son was going to take her home. She didn't know what to do, but she didn't feel comfortable about intruding, especially when the two obviously needed some time alone.

Nigel helped his mother into the passenger seat of her car. Before he shut the door, she stopped him.

Suddenly coming to her senses, Irene realized that as soon as she'd seen Nigel, she'd been so overwhelmed that she had completely forgotten about Sera.

"Sera, where's Sera? We can't leave Sera. We have to give her a ride back to the house. She can't drive."

Nigel noticed that the woman who was with his mother, Sera, stood on the sidewalk, looking uncomfortable with the situation. He walked around the car and opened the back door on the driver's side for her.

"Thank you, but I don't know if I should. You two have some catching up to do." Sera said, feeling extremely reluctant to intrude in their reunion. "I can just walk."

Irene turned to look back at her. "Nonsense. You are not going to walk home, you could get mugged. And it's the middle of the day, he could get heat stroke. And we're already headed in that direction, you might as well come with us. Besides, there's a lot for all of us to discuss."

Her last comment struck Sera as odd. She couldn't imagine what Irene had meant by that.

* * * *

On the drive back home, Nigel felt uncomfortable talking in front of, Sera, the woman he still hadn't had a chance to be formally introduced to. But his mother obviously didn't feel the least bit uncomfortable about pumping him for details on what

had happened in front of her.

Tears still glistening in her eyes, Irene looked over at her son driving her car. He was here! He was alive! And boy wasn't he going to be surprised at what all had transpired while he was MIA. But first, she wanted to know what had happened.

Irene sniffed back tears, trying desperately to hold them at bay. She didn't want her son to see her upset. "What happened?"

Nigel glanced at his mother and then glanced at the rear view mirror to see if the attractive woman who was accompanying them was paying any attention to the conversation. For some reason, although he had never thought much about what other people thought, revealing details about what had happened, making himself vulnerable in front of the woman, made him decidedly uncomfortable.

Raking a hand through his dark hair, which was getting on his nerves now that it was longer than what he was used to, he took a deep steadying breath. What could he tell her? What wouldn't upset her? All of it would upset her, she was his mother. Images of fallen soldiers and the enemy hot on his tail came back with a vengeance. He'd had many nights haunted by them. It had only been since he'd come back to the states that his tormented nights had abated somewhat, and then only marginally.

He decided he should give her the short version of the events, glossing over the more gory details.

"You know we were sent in to locate a package and bring it out?"

"Yes, I recall."

"We found the package, but the enemy had found it first. They obviously were expecting soldiers to come looking for it. They set up around it. When we arrived to carry it out, we were ambushed. We lit out of there without the payday, since we couldn't extract it, and rushed back to our rendezvous point. I fell behind the rest of the troop because," he paused for a moment, remembering how he had been shot, but he didn't want his mother to hear that, not now. "I found Sgt. Wilmont slumped against a tree on my way to the extraction point. He'd been shot. I couldn't leave him behind, so I picked him up and dragged him out of there."

"He's that good friend of yours you mentioned before in your letters?" Irene asked.

"Yes. You might remember he saved my life on the first mission we ever had together, so, like I said, I couldn't leave him behind. Not after he had put his life in jeopardy for me when we hardly even knew each other. And I would never have been able to forgive myself if I didn't do something for him when I knew he had two little girls at home waiting for his safe return.

Well, because I wasn't moving as fast as the rest of the troop and the enemy was closing in, the chopper left before I managed to get us to it. I guess they figured they had everyone that had made it. I had taken Sgt. Wilmont to a small hiding place to take cover, so the men on the chopper wouldn't have seen us if they'd been looking down to search for more soldiers as they took off. The cover that I had taken Wilmont and myself to was a small depression in the ground beside an outcropping of rock. Later, a farmer found us and took us back to his home and nursed us back to health."

Feeling like he'd told her all of the important details, he looked over at his mother to gauge her reaction. He could see the tears she was struggling with brimming beneath

her lashes. He reached over and grabbed her now shaky hands and squeezed them reassuringly.

"I'm home now," he said with a quiet confidence.

He wanted to reassure her that she would never have to worry about him being injured or killed in the line of duty again. He'd had enough of the military. But, he would wait until later, until they were alone. There was so much to tell her, so much that he wanted to do.

Irene smiled at him. "Yes, son, you're home now." She could hardly believe it herself. She'd never thought she'd utter those words. But, somehow, someone had looked out for her son. She wanted to meet the man that had saved his life, to thank him from the bottom of her heart for saving her son. She would never be able to thank him enough. She'd have to get details about the man later. For now, she had another dilemma. How was she going to tell Nigel about Sera?

A few minutes later, before Irene could figure out a solution to her problem, Nigel drove up to her home and parked in her one car garage.

He stepped out and opened the back door for Sera, who had been seated behind him and who he'd noticed in the rearview mirror had been looking a little green, before walking around the car and opening the door for his mother. He took her hand and entwined her arm with his, escorting her through the garage and into the house.

Sera made her way to the opening of the garage, thinking that now would be a good time to go home.

Just as Irene and her son were entering her house, though, Irene noticed Sera wasn't with them. She turned to find her leaving.

"Sera, honey, don't leave."

Still feeling uncomfortable about the situation, Sera was reluctant to stay. She'd never met any of Irene's sons. She knew they were all in the military, which must have created an intense amount of stress for their mother. It was obvious she had been worried about him and that they needed time to talk. She didn't know why Irene wanted her to stay. Yes, they were technically becoming a family, but it had been so long since she had had a family, a close relationship like that, she just didn't feel right staying. It was like she was intruding, like she was that extra wheel getting in the way. She felt like she was almost snooping on their personal lives. She suddenly felt odd and out of place, even though Irene had always made her feel warm and welcome. It just didn't feel right staying when they had to catch up. It was like she was pushing her way into their personal affairs and it didn't sit right with her. But when she looked at the way Irene was pleading her with her eyes, she decided she should stay. For some odd reason, Irene wanted her there. They had become close since she'd become pregnant. Maybe she wanted her to feel like a part of her family. It was just so tough, since she'd tried so hard not to become that close to anyone in so long. But it was why she'd decided to become pregnant in the first place. Yes, she had friends, but they couldn't fill that void in her life. The only thing that could was a family.

Sera grudgingly followed Irene and her son inside as they walked to the living room.

Irene settled down on her couch and patted the seat next to her, smiling up at Nigel.

Now that she was in the comfort of her own home, having heard the conditions of Nigel's disappearance, she realized she was in a mess.

Sera sat down in a wing back chair next to the sofa, only a foot away from the Irene and her son. She was distracted from her discomfort about the situation by how hot he was. He was so intense with his darkly handsome good looks, his rugged manliness just oozing sexuality. He was a force to be reckoned with. She had a feeling he probably saw plenty of action that wasn't the dangerous kind in the military. There were most likely flocks of female soldiers pining for him. And he probably left a broken heart in every port. He looked like that type. He was just too handsome to be the kind of guy to want to stick with one woman. All of the intensely good looking ones were that way, why have one cookie when I can have a new cookie every night? And he was that handsome.

Nigel looked at Sera and then at his mother, waiting for an introduction to the woman she'd insisted on bringing home.

Irene saw Nigel looking at her. Obviously he was curious about Sera. She couldn't think of what to say. For a moment, she looked at one then the other. She began to worry her bottom lip with her teeth, wondering how to broach the situation. She couldn't be more thrilled that her son was alive. She had thought that his baby would be the only thing she had to remember him by. It was such a relief that he was home. But now, what would she say to him? What could she possibly say to Sera who'd been so happy with their situation?

Before Irene could find a way to put things tactfully, Nigel took it upon himself to make the introductions and leaned forward from his seat on the couch. Smiling at Sera, he extended his hand to her.

"Hi! I'm Nigel. I'm Irene's oldest."

Sera almost fainted at Nigel's words. She didn't think she'd misunderstood him. He was the oldest son? That wasn't right, he couldn't be Nigel. Nigel was gone. Irene had told her so, told her about how awful the funeral had been. She'd seen Irene cry every time she'd looked at the flag they had given her at the funeral. What was going on? Had this all been some kind of twisted plot? Were they playing some sick joke? That couldn't be. That wasn't like Irene at all. Sure she'd been a stranger to her at first, but in the last few months, she'd gotten to know her. They'd become quite close. It just wasn't in her nature to deceive. Then she recalled how upset Irene had been when she'd seen her son in the store, her face had been ashen as if she'd seen a ghost.

That was why, she had. She had seen a ghost. The son she had believed to be dead, the one whose body had never been located, was here . . . alive. Then the gravity of the situation hit her like a ton of boulders.

What was she going to do now? This wasn't part of the plan. She had decided to have a baby because there was no man involved, no man to cause trouble, no man to tell her what to do or how to raise her child, no man to get attached to so that he could leave one day and rip a hole in her family. Men messed everything up. And the women who put their faith in them were always left holding an empty bag. It had all made perfect sense. Irene wanted grandchildren. She wanted babies. It was the perfect arrangement. There was no man in the picture . . . until now. The careful plan that she and Irene had constructed was beginning to slowly crumble. Strangely enough, the world around her

seemed to also be slowly careening.

Both Irene and Nigel leapt up from the couch to catch Sera. Nigel caught Sera in his arms before she could melt onto the floor. He lifted her off of her feet effortlessly, as if she was a child instead of a pregnant woman, and carried her the short distance to the couch where he laid her down.

Irene stood over her, fanning her face, fussing over her, and then went to get her a glass of cold water from the kitchen. When she got back, she found both Nigel and Sera looking at her and decided then and there that there wasn't much point in putting off the inevitable. She was going to have to tell them and now.

"Nigel, this is Sera, the mother of your children! You know I always wanted grandbabies . . ."

Nigel didn't hear anything else his mother said. It was like her voice became some strange sort of droning in his ears. He knew she was rambling on about the situation, probably trying to maintain the calm, but the words weren't registering. All he could think about was Sera and . . . his child. She was carrying his child. He looked down at the beautiful woman he'd been holding, shock evident in his features. He looked further down her body that he'd been admiring so much before to her belly where his child was. His child. She was carrying his child. But wait, his mother had said children. Was it possible that she was carrying more than one?

Gingerly, as if worried that just the sheer force of his touch might eject the baby, he put a hand on her stomach. It was small, but it was a bump, just big enough to fit in his hand.

Nigel looked at Sera again, a warm smile spreading over his face.

Sera couldn't reciprocate the sentiment. It was all she could do not to throw up at the moment, and she felt the blood drain from her face. She just hoped she wasn't going to pass out. Or worse, puke and then pass out.

"No. This can't be right," she said in denial then looked over at Irene accusingly. "It was just supposed to be you, me, and my babies!"

"*Your* babies?" Nigel said a little irritably, his dark brow furrowing.

Sera looked back at Nigel.

"Yes, *my* babies. You weren't there for conception, even if it was your sperm. These are my babies."

"Look, those babies are just as much mine as they are yours. So, since that's settled, the only thing left is when we're going to set the date."

Sera looked at him quizzically. "What date? The doctor already told me when the babies were due . . ."

"No, not that date, the babies will come when they're ready. What I mean is, where I come from, when a man and a woman are going to have a baby, they get married. It's the right thing to do. I'm not going to insist on it right away, but we need to make arrangements."

"Well, that's mighty gracious of you. I suppose next you'll tell me I have no choice in the matter. Did it occur to you to ask? Or are you just used to imposing your iron will? "

"I just did," he said with a smile, a dimple in his cheek coming out to play.

"Well, I've never had a man propose, but I'm pretty sure a question starts with

who, what, where, why, or when.”

“I guess that means you want me to be old-fashioned and get down on one knee? I know how you women like that kind of show, I can oblige you.”

He slid her off of his lap and made a move to get down on one knee before her, taking her now very pale hand in his.

“Sera,” he paused, smiling at her with a smile that made her kegel's clap, “what's your last name?”

Sera huffed in irritation, irritated at her body's traitorous attraction to him, irritated at his blithe disregard for the fact that she didn't want a proposal. “Anderson.”

“Sera Anderson,” he said, his face all mock-seriousness, “will you be my wife?”

Sera tapped a finger on her cheek, a contemplative look on her face. “Let me think. Right now I have a normal life in which I plan to raise my children on my own, without interference. On the other hand, I could marry a total stranger.” She pretended to think it over.

“I know, it's not that hard a decision. But if you feel uncomfortable saying yes in front of my mother I completely understand.” His smile widened and he wriggled his brows at her.

Sera looked at him open-mouthed in awe of his audacity. He perfectly expected her to jump at the opportunity to become Mrs. Savage and this was their first conversation. They were complete strangers for god's sake! She had known when she saw him that he was the kind of man that go exactly what he wanted. Well, he was in for a surprise. “Actually, you're right. I was thinking that it was an easy decision. It's very easy for me to say *no thank you*. I don't need a man to raise a baby.”

Chapter Four

A week later, Sera arrived at Irene's house for her next doctor's appointment. She always enjoyed the walks over to Irene's, the scenery was beautiful, and the exercise and fresh air made her feel great. A few months ago, Irene had started taking her to her doctor's appointments. She considered it very thoughtful of Irene. They had talked at length about the severe morning sickness and motion sickness Sera was dealing with that was so bad that it had become extremely hard for her to drive through her bouts of illness. She could make it, but she was always running late because she had to make so many stops along the way.

As she walked the last few steps to Irene's front door, she sincerely hoped that the seemingly constant nausea wouldn't last the entire pregnancy, she was getting sick of crackers and soda, but at least she wasn't gaining any weight. Of course, she'd much rather gain weight than be sick.

She wasn't too worried about weight gain. She didn't have anyone to impress. She didn't want to become a cow though, that would make it hard to keep up with her babies. However, she got plenty of exercise on the long walks to Irene's house. It was the exercise she needed to keep in decent shape, which was really important. In fact, since her and Irene had gotten to be such good friends, she had started walking over to Irene's several times a week just to visit, since her rental home was located just a few streets away.

Sera rang the doorbell on Irene's house and waited.

Nigel answered the door.

Sera couldn't help the look of surprise that stole over her face. She really hadn't expected to see Nigel again, *wishful thinking*, especially not so soon. She really hadn't known what he would do once he arrived, but she supposed it was only natural that he would want to spend time with his family after what he had endured. She knew she would have. She had to admit, even though she wasn't happy to see him, he looked amazing. Even after a near death experience, he still had a healthy glow to him. His long lean muscles were very hard to miss, especially in the tank top he was wearing, which showcased his broad shoulders and defined arms. It would be great if the babies were as fit and strong as their daddy. She couldn't wish for any more than that.

But as she finished her examination of him from his strong thighs exposed in his mid-thigh shorts to his strong well built chest to his angular face, she couldn't help the catch in her breath. It was probably just the hormones talking but the long black hair around his face next to a few days of black stubble on his jaw was looking seriously hot. Too bad he was so damn aggravating and stubborn. He hadn't stopped saying that the babies were his since he'd found out about them. The world was stock full of men who could care less about the children they'd fathered. She just happened to get the donation from the one man in the world that actually wanted to be involved. Her brow furrowed in irritation at that thought. She sincerely hoped the babies didn't inherit extreme

hardheadedness from their father.

"Come in," Nigel said, holding the door open wide for Sera to enter.

As Sera entered the house, Nigel followed her with his gaze. She was wearing a light t-shirt without a bra. His gaze had been riveted to her nipples tenting the fabric when he'd opened the door. Thankfully she hadn't been looking at his face when he'd noticed.

As she entered the house, he shut the door behind him and followed her in. He couldn't help but watch the gentle sway of her hips as she walked. There was something so sultry and seductive about it. He could just imagine clutching those hips in his grasp and putting his seed in her himself.

Feeling the sneaking suspicion that Nigel was watching her every move, Sera stepped inside, confused by him and his behavior. He'd been downright possessive of the children-which was down-right amazing because he hadn't know about them for five minutes when he had started feeling that way. But, for some odd reason, she was a little disappointed that he wasn't as interested in her as the mother. She couldn't imagine why though. She tried to put it down to irrational thoughts driven haywire by hormones. That was surely it.

"My mother is in the living room," he informed her.

When he spoke he had surprised her. He was much closer than she'd thought and his voice had sounded husky to her ears. Perhaps it was just her imagination.

Trying to brush off the strange electric currents that Nigel seemed to ignite in her, Sera went in search of Irene. But before Irene was even in sight, though, she could hear her.

"Oh, *oh*. Oh, my head hurts *so* bad," Irene gushed.

Sera walked into the living room to find Irene holding her head and talking in a die away air. She couldn't help but feel that Irene was displaying some poor acting skills. The question was, why.

"It appears my mother has come down with a terrible headache," Nigel said, trying ineffectually to hide a half-smile behind a hand.

He was so close to Sera and she was so focused on the noise Irene was making, that when he spoke he surprised her, and she jumped a little.

He didn't try to hide his enjoyment at her reaction. Had he surprised her or was he affecting her more than she'd like to admit?

Sera looked at Nigel a little irritably. What did he think was so humorous about their situation? His mother wasn't feeling well, apparently, and she had a doctor's appointment. Now she would have to walk all the way back home and drive herself, and she was going to be terribly late. And that meant she would have to wait forever in the doctor's office to get seen. She was not the least bit pleased by the turn of events.

Nigel noticed that Sera looked acutely displeased by his smile. Perversely, it pleased him. Normally, it would have bothered him that a woman didn't reciprocate his feelings. But for some reason, he liked it when she got angry with him. Perhaps it was because it really brought out a light in her pretty sea green eyes, or perhaps it was the way it made her cheeks flush lightly, but, either way, it was very attractive.

"Nigel, sweetheart, can you drive Sera to her appointment?" Irene said, clutching her head as if each syllable in each word caused her more agony.

"Of course, mother. It would be no trouble at all. You just stay laying down and get some rest."

He would be more than happy to drive the little hot-headed independent woman to her appointment. He had a lot of unanswered questions that his mother hadn't addressed satisfactorily. And he wanted to get to know the mother of his child. The drive to the doctor's office posed the perfect opportunity to push the idea of marriage to Sera as well.

Sera knew she looked crestfallen, but she couldn't help it. She didn't want him to take her. She didn't really know him and she was a little uncomfortable with the idea of him accompanying her to the doctor since it was so personal, and Irene was always her pillar of strength at her appointments. She also didn't want him to take her because she usually ended up puking several times before they actually made it there.

Who wanted to throw up in front of complete stranger, especially when that stranger just happened to be the one who unknowingly donated the sperm that got you pregnant and also happened to be an extremely hot guy who also happened to want the baby and her? Well, take that back. He only wanted to marry her because he was old-fashioned. She didn't want to get married and she definitely wouldn't say yes to someone who was only proposing because it was the right thing to do. She didn't feel that men should propose if they weren't truly in love with the woman. They damn well shouldn't if they felt pressured to or if the woman inconveniently got pregnant.

Talk about a tense situation. She didn't like conflict. She didn't like drama, another reason to avoid all types of relationships. Things would be much easier if she just stayed the independent person she was and did things by herself from here on out.

"Really, Irene, that isn't necessary. I don't want to put anyone out. I'm sure Nigel has better things to do than accompany me to a routine doctor's appointment. I'll just go back home and drive myself. It'll be just fine."

Irene looked really worried by that comment and stopped moaning for a minute.

The comment only deepened Nigel's desire to take her himself. Stubborn woman, if he didn't know any better, he might get the impression that she was trying to avoid him.

Taking Sera by surprise yet again, he stepped closer to her, wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her against his solid build. His member jumped to attention as he felt the swell of her breast against his chest through the thin material of his tank top. He gritted his teeth and inhaled deeply for a moment, trying to will it down, to no avail, because when he'd taken a deep breath, her sweet scent had filled his nostrils and it was intoxicating his senses. It took him a second to collect himself enough to talk without giving himself away.

"I'll make sure she gets there in one piece. You just lay still like I said and get to feeling better. We'll be back before you know it, and we'll let you know how it went."

Sera wasn't sure how she felt about having Nigel behave so intimately with her, about having him so close. It made it hard for her to focus on the fact that she didn't want him around. That he was butting his way into her life where she'd already said she didn't need or want him. His making the decisions without consulting her was exactly the kind of male behavior she had been looking to avoid.

He turned her away from the living room, and she quickly stepped out of his

grasp.

He couldn't help but smile as she snatched herself away from him. He could only hope that the contact between them was as much a firebrand for her as it was for him. He walked behind her, thoroughly examining her all the way to the car.

He opened the passenger side door for her and shut it behind her once she had seated herself. Going over to the driver's side, he got in.

"What doctor are you seeing?" he asked, not looking at her as he backed out of the driveway and took off down the road.

"Dr. Yules," she said. "Do you know where his office is?"

"Yes," he said, and took off in the direction of the doctor's office. The drive to the doctor's office was a good fifteen minutes. This was the perfect opportunity to press her about marriage so that his boys could have his name he decided.

Just as they rounded the first turn in the trip, Nigel prepared to ask some really tough questions, but he never got the chance.

Sera began to wave a hand in the air.

Nigel, trying to focus on the road and figure out what she was doing at the same time, turned his head to look at Sera. Her cheeks were puffed out like a chipmunk that had gotten too greedy.

"Pull over, pull over now!" she said through gritted teeth, trying desperately not to throw up all over the dash board in front of her.

Nigel pulled the car over so fast that the tires squealed, rocking Sera violently in her seat. She was thankful she hadn't unbuckled yet.

Before the car was even stopped good, she had the door open, her seatbelt off, and she was clutching onto the door like it was her only lifeline as she spilled her guts onto the pavement below.

Nigel leaned over and pulled Sera's hair back so that it wouldn't get dirty. He rubbed her back in what he hoped felt like a reassuring gesture.

"I'm sorry I didn't understand what you wanted back there. Are you okay?"

Through fits of heaving, Sera said, "Do . . . I . . . look . . . like . . . I'm . . . okay!"

That put Nigel in his place. He only vaguely remembered his mother being pregnant with his youngest brother, but he knew from experience that pregnant women were not to be taken lightly.

After Sera thought she'd puked her brains out, she decided there was nothing left to throw up but her stomach and that it would be safe to resume the rest of the ride to the doctor's office. However, they wound up making four more 'pit' stops before they finally made it to their destination.

Nigel had never been more thankful to get to a doctor's office in his life, not even when he'd been recovering from a bayonet wound to the stomach a few years before. Nothing could compare to hearing a pregnant woman get sick over and over again.

Weakened from the constant upheaval process, Sera had trouble getting out of the car.

Nigel, ready to get her inside to see the doctor, swept her up in his arms and carried her inside as if she weighed no more than a feather.

If she had felt well, she might have appreciated the gesture more, but as it was, she could hardly acknowledge it. Of course, if she had felt better, she probably would

have resented him treating her like a child. As it was, she felt bad about having put him through it, but surely he would understand. But the damned stubborn ass had asked for it by insisting on taking her. It served him right. She supposed she was glad now, though, that he hadn't given her a choice on driving. After the brief trip, she was hardly in any condition to see the doctor, let alone do anything else. She supposed, just this once, she needed him.

He sat her down gently in a chair in the waiting room.

"I'll go sign you in," he informed her.

He went to the front desk and noticed that all the nurses stationed behind the counter were smiling at him.

"That was so romantic," one nurse told him. "It's so nice to see a couple so in love. I wish my man had treated me like that when I was carrying our children."

Nigel realized she was talking about how he had carried Sera in. If only she had known the torment he had just endured driving the woman to the office, she wouldn't have thought anything about why he'd been in such a hurry for her to get some medical attention. Or if she knew how much Sera resented his company, she wouldn't have thought it was so sweet.

He signed Sera in and then went and sat down beside her.

He felt relieved to see that she seemed to be getting some of the color back in her cheeks. He was also glad to see that more heaving fits were not imminent. He hadn't been sure if he could handle anymore without losing some of his own dignity.

After about ten minutes in the waiting room, a nurse finally called Sera's name.

Nigel didn't wait for Sera's permission, he got up with her and went to where the nurse stood at an open door that led to a different part of the building.

"We are ready to take some vitals and then you can see the doctor."

Nigel followed the two women to a row of chairs, patients, and nurses lined up in front of some sinks and bathrooms.

The nurse took Sera's blood pressure and weighed her, writing down all of the information.

It wasn't long before the nurse was leading them further back in the building to one of the waiting rooms.

"Now, Sera, you know I need you to put on one of the gowns so that the doctor can check you and then we'll do the sonogram and check on the babies and everything.

Nigel hesitated at the door. It wasn't that he didn't want to see Sera naked, but he didn't want her to make a big scene about not letting him in. Of course, the staff might just put it down to relationship trouble.

The nurse smiled at Nigel. "Would the father like to come in?"

Sera answered for him before he could. "No, the father would not like to come in. The father would like to remain in the hallway while I get dressed," she said to Nigel with a look in her eyes that dared him to say otherwise.

The nurse shrugged her shoulders and walked away to check on more patients.

Nigel stood outside and waited for the okay to enter the room with Sera.

A few minutes later, he heard her voice through the door.

"Okay, Nigel, you can come in now. I'm decent."

Nigel entered the room.

"And I'm disappointed," he said with a wink as he entered. Finding a small round stool, he sat down.

"Well, you shouldn't be. Pregnancy isn't used by models to enhance their looks."

He looked her deep in the eyes before he spoke again. "It's true that I didn't know you before you were pregnant, but you couldn't be more beautiful or radiant."

Sera blushed at the compliment, looking away, feeling a little uncomfortable. He was probably just saying that because he knew she was carrying his child. In some way that was like complimenting himself, she was certain. *Of course you look good, it's because of my sperm, you know.* Men always thought their sperm had super powers. Typical, alpha male behavior. But, if she'd been a lioness, he would definitely have been the perfect mate. He was all male pride and superiority, strength and testosterone.

He took that opportunity to really examine her again. She was sitting on an examination table wearing a medical gown they had provided. It did nothing to damper her looks. It appeared pregnancy agreed with her. Or perhaps she had always had that glow about her, after all, he hadn't met her before she'd gotten pregnant. Or, if it didn't sound like down right conceit, perhaps it was his child that made her glow so, perhaps it was the knowledge that it was his.

It wasn't long before the doctor came knocking on the door, effectively ending the awkward silence that had stretched between the two.

"Yes, come in," Sera said, trying not to look at Nigel. The only other person she'd ever brought with her to the doctor was Irene. She had felt fine with her because she never stayed in the room during the examination process, which was really dehumanizing. Nigel either didn't know what happened next or didn't feel the need to leave. He was such a man!

As the doctor entered the room, he beamed at both of them and spoke to Nigel, "This must be your husband!"

Nigel responded before Sera could. "We're not married."

Dr. Yules looked appropriately apologetic. "I'm sorry, your fiancé."

"She's not my fiancé," he corrected the man again.

"Oh . . .," the doctor looked a little confused and more uncomfortable, "your girlfriend."

Nigel decided to leave it at that since it was getting more and more uncomfortable by the minute, and he was afraid he would be booted out.

The doctor began the process of checking Sera, and Nigel turned away to give her some privacy.

When the doctor left so that the nurse could come in and perform the sonogram, Nigel followed him out.

"Listen, doc," he said, catching the man's attention before he could get away. He needed to talk to him. He was almost entirely certain, but he needed to be sure.

"Yes," Dr. Yules replied, turning around.

"I've been overseas for months."

Before he let his heart get completely involved, he had to be sure.

For a minute, the doctor looked at him blankly, but then recalled that Sera was one of the few patients he had that had been artificially inseminated.

"Sir, I assure you that the insemination for Sera was performed here by my

partner, who has had years of experience in that field. He used a specimen from you that we received from storage. There is no room for error, we do not make mistakes—the babies she is carrying are yours.” With that said, he turned to get back to work.

He had felt certain before, but now the doctor had confirmed it. Sera was carrying his children. As the doctor had said, there was no room for error. He’d been in shock before, but now it was very real to him that he was going to be a father. The doctor and the visit to his office had only driven the idea home for him.

He went back into the examination room.

The medical gown that Sera had donned was pushed up to her breasts, and a sheet was covering her below her belly, effectively exposing her stomach and little else.

The nurse had already applied the necessary gel to Sera’s stomach and was pressing a white wand into it, looking at a black and green screen beside her. She found what she was looking for and pressed a button to put the heartbeats on the speaker.

Nigel was sweating bullets—he could hear it—the sound of his child. Was it possible? The child’s heart beat so fast. He sounded more nervous than he was.

The nurse smiled. “There. Do you hear that? That’s the second heart beat. They sound just fine,” the nurse told them, smiling warmly at Sera and Nigel.

Two? There were two? Two strong heartbeats, two strong babies. He was a father.

Chapter Five

Nigel stared at the computer screen. He'd been searching through news archives and articles for hours. He had been conducting some research on Sera through news and public records on the internet, since she hadn't been very forthcoming with any information about herself in the few encounters they had had.

The last article he had found was really surprising. It was an article about small women owned businesses in their area. The article revealed that Sera wasn't only an heiress to a comfortable estate but she owned her own business, she was an entrepreneur, with a very lucrative company, which she maintained from the comfort of her own home. The information about her confused him. It didn't sound like she would have trouble finding a man, let alone a man who was just as financially well off as she was, which was why he couldn't figure out why she had decided to get artificially inseminated. She was attractive and a catch financially. She could have any man. Why was she single? Why hadn't she had children with a man? He remembered what she had said about men complicating things and how she hadn't wanted that. Every woman said that but he was sure they didn't really mean it. They wanted male companionship. They said that all the time too.

He left his mother's home office and sought out his mother. She had mentioned before that an arrangement had been reached between her and Sera regarding the surrogate process.

He found his mother was in the kitchen preparing supper.

She smiled at him when he entered.

"Supper will be ready in about thirty minutes."

Nigel looked at the meal. It smelled wonderful. "That wasn't what I came to talk about."

"Oh?" Irene said, all innocence.

Nigel scowled at his mother. She wasn't fooling him. He knew she was trying to getting at something. "I came to ask about the details of the arrangement you made with Sera. You told me you put an ad in the paper looking for a surrogate and that she was the only one you had considered because of what she wanted."

"Well, honey, I talked to Sera about what I wanted extensively before we both came to an agreement. She doesn't have any family. So she doesn't have anyone to watch after the children while she works, and she doesn't want to take her baby to a daycare. She works a lot because she runs her own company. But she did really want to have a baby, to start a family. We agreed that I would watch the children while she worked, and they would spend early mornings and nights with her."

"But what would make a woman agree to such an arrangement?" Nigel asked, still confused.

He just didn't understand Sera. And, if he didn't understand her, how was he ever going to convince her to be with him? He thought at first that she was irritated for

several reasons. His appearance had been a shock, that was true. She had already made plans and, by showing up, he was disrupting those. That's why, although he hadn't really liked it, he'd been more understanding with how irritated she'd been with him at first. She had her life planned out and he was making chaos of everything that she was convinced before his arrival was so neat and orderly. She was irritated that he demanded to be a part of her life and the life of his children because he wasn't there from the beginning. He was a stranger to her. She didn't know him and didn't trust him. But, surely, if she saw that he was being honest when he said that he wanted to be involved that she would relent and agree to be with him after a while. Right now, though, it looked as if it was going to be a long while. It was going to take some serious convincing with this woman.

"Sweetheart. If an opportunity had come along like that when I was young and having babies, I would have jumped at it. It's not like the mother doesn't care if she plans ahead for someone to watch her children while she works. I call that being responsible. She doesn't have anyone else to watch the babies and she realizes it would also be giving me what I want, time with my grandbabies. She doesn't want to have children only to have to take them to a daycare where, although the people are paid to take care of your child, they really don't honestly care about your child's welfare. And there's no way to adequately provide for them and take care of them at the same time. The arrangement couldn't have been more perfect." She paused. "Well, that was until you came along, dear. I'm afraid you've gone and put a wrench in our gears."

"You make it sound like you regret the fact that I came back," he said, a scowl darkening his brow.

Irene turned to look at him and laughed at the sullen look on her son's face.

"Oh, no, sweetheart. That is the furthest thing from my mind. What I mean is, Sera didn't have any intentions of falling in love."

Nigel gave his mother a look. He had the sneaky suspicion she was trying to play matchmaker. It wasn't enough that she was getting grandbabies, it seemed she wanted much more.

* * * *

"You are so beautiful," he murmured, his voice a hot caress against the shell of her ear. He let his large rough hands roam her body before they settled on her breasts, cupping them and kneading them gently.

"These are my babies," he said as he laid his hand gently on her stomach.

"You are my woman," he murmured in her ear, sending shivers of awareness through her as he nibbled the side of her neck.

She supposed his possessiveness of her was slightly archaic, but she found it appealed to her somehow. It didn't sound like he was treating her like a piece of his property when he said it. It made her feel ... beautiful and desirable. No one had ever made her feel like that before.

When he said nothing more, she settled back against him. She felt his breath within his chest as it moved against her back, felt his warmth. She felt his breath against her skin, his mouth.

"You don't know the burning lust you stir in me, Sera," he said in a husky growl that seemed equal parts frustration and desire as he turned her in his embrace, fisted one

hand in her hair to tip her head back, and lowered his head to cover her mouth with his.

She felt the heat and pressure of his mouth, the faintly rough texture of his tongue as he explored it, ravished it with his possessiveness. Closing her mind to her doubts, she reveled in the heated cloud of pleasure that enveloped her.

Her palms and fingertips tingled with sensation as she lifted her hands and skimmed them lightly along his defined arms, across his broad shoulders, and then downward over his muscular chest. She felt his heart pounding against her palm as she cupped his bulging pecs and when she traced a path downward past his narrow waist, she curled her fingers around his hot throbbing cock, reveling in pleasure as it jerked to attention within her grasp.

Nothing had ever felt more right.

She rose up and guided his cock into her pussy.

Watching her movements, his hands caught her buttocks to help stabilize her.

She lowered herself onto his heated flesh, engulfing the head of his cock within the mouth of her sex.

The pleasure was too much, he couldn't hold back, and he surged upward.

The moisture-slick walls of her passage fisted around him in need as he bore down on her hips to slip deeply inside of her.

He nibbled along her throat as she threw her head back in ecstatic pleasure at feeling him thrusting deeply inside of her.

She felt the nip of his teeth, the soothing warm wetness of his tongue as he explored her throat and the side of her neck and her ear.

She turned, seeking his lips once more as he slowly thrust and retreated into her pussy, massaging her deeply as he ground his groin against her nether lips. He thrust into her with a ravenous need that was contagious, all consuming. Heat surged through her at the urgency of his kiss. She felt her body climbing toward its zenith with dizzying speed. She struggled against it, struggled to hold on to the pleasure only a little bit longer, but there was no use, she was already too far gone.

Her body shuttered with the first quakes of release.

The alarm clock went off with a blaring buzz. With a start, Sera woke up. She cussed, loudly, swatting at the alarm clock. "Dammit!"

Horror at the fact that Nigel was the star of her dream flitted over her. It couldn't dull the awareness of her body though. Her cheeks were flushed. Her skin was sensitive, and her pussy throbbed with need. She couldn't believe she'd been fantasizing about that stubborn ass man, no matter how good looking he was.

Trying to shake off some of the after effects of her dream, she got up and got dressed. Looking at the clock, she realized she didn't have that much time before her next doctor's appointment. She decided to have a drinkable breakfast and get over to Irene's before she was late.

She left the house after she had finished 'breakfast', feeling pretty content. She had gotten to the point where she was hardly ever sick, but still felt like it was a good idea to have someone else drive her for safety's sake. Driving and puking your brains out was not something you could multitask.

Although she did still get a little nauseated when she rode in the car, she was beginning to think she would live and she wouldn't have to endure the morning sickness

all the way through her pregnancy. She had another problem, though. Now that she wasn't puking her brains out, she had gotten so horny she almost couldn't stand it. The naughty dream she'd had last night was proof positive of that. The need had become bad enough that she had decided she would get her a dildo on the next trip to town. She'd never bought one before. She needed an experienced woman's know how on this one. Perhaps Irene would be able to help. In fact, she was counting on it.

The dildo dilemma had her so deep in thought, she didn't realize she'd already made it to Irene's when she found herself in the yard. She made her way up to the front door and knocked as usual. She couldn't hold back the smile on her face. Irene would probably think she was a total pervert when she told her what she wanted to get before her appointment today.

Her smile faded when the door opened and Nigel told her to come in.

"Just let me grab the keys and we'll be off."

Sera's face became crestfallen. She'd been counting on Irene to take her. Nigel had taken her to her last visit. She'd thought surely he'd had enough of playing daddy for a while, and that he wouldn't want to drive her anymore, especially after how sick she'd gotten on her last ride with him.

This was going to ruin everything!

"Nigel, are you sure you want to take me? I mean" Before she could finish, Nigel interrupted.

"Yes, I'm sure. I want to be there for my children. I already told you that. I don't want you to think that it's an inconvenience for me. And I don't want you to think it's because I have nothing better to do now that I've left the military. I'm happy to go. And, after all, it's as much my responsibility to take you as it is yours to go," he said, smiling his delectably irritating smile at her.

Sera pursed her lips angrily. Yes, he would be cheerful as a lark volunteering his services when she didn't want them, wouldn't he? Any other man would have to be dragged to the doctor's office, but not Nigel Savage. He was such an excellent Daddy, such a prime cut of man, she couldn't peel him off. She already knew getting Irene to take her now was a lost cause, Nigel obviously wasn't the kind of man that would take no for an answer once he'd made his mind up. That thought suddenly brought the fact that he'd proposed up. He hadn't mentioned it again, though. Perhaps he hadn't been as dead set on the idea as he'd made himself out to be. He didn't let anything else he wanted drop, including the idea that his sons should be named after him and his father. Stubborn man, it would serve him right if the babies turned out to be girls. Men always wanted boys. He probably wouldn't want them so much then. But somehow, that thought didn't make her nearly as happy as she thought it would.

Chapter Six

As the two of them drove together, an awkward silence consumed them. Sera began to fidget with her purse, trying to avoid looking at Nigel. She knew they were getting very close to the store she wanted him to stop at. If she didn't mention that she wanted to stop now, there wouldn't be enough time. She weighed her options. Neither prospect was appealing.

"Nigel, can we make a quick stop before we reach the doctor's office?"

Nigel looked over at Sera, his brow furrowing with unspoken questions.

"Sure, where do you need to stop?"

Sera was thankful that he had decided not to voice any of the questions she could tell he had. But the hard part was not over yet.

"There is a pharmacy just a few blocks from here. You can see it from the road. Do you mind stopping there for just a minute?"

"It's fine with me. Are you sick?"

"No, I'm just fine."

"Are the babies okay?" he asked, his face filled with concern as he looked at her and then her stomach.

Sera blushed with embarrassment. She hadn't thought he'd actually worry about the babies. "The babies are just fine. I just need to pick something up."

Nigel didn't ask any more questions, but he wondered why she hadn't mentioned that she had wanted to stop at the pharmacy before they got in the car.

A few minutes later, he pulled into the pharmacy parking lot and shut off the car.

"I'll only be a minute," she said as she got out.

"Okay, I'll just wait right here for you," he told her.

Sera was filled with relief. She exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. *Thank goodness.* As if this wasn't hard enough, she didn't need him tagging along. This would give her the opportunity to get something without having him see her do it. She just didn't know if she could stand the embarrassment. It was mortifying enough that she had such intense need that she had to go to a store to buy a toy just to assuage it.

Sera got out of the car and headed for the pharmacy, since she'd told him that was where she had wanted to go. Making her way inside, she headed for the section of the store that housed intimacy products. The pharmacy didn't have much in the way of product selection or variety, but she finally decided she needed to make a quick decision or else Nigel might come in the store looking for. She needed proof that she bought something at the pharmacy and she could hide her adult toy in the pharmacy bag after she'd purchased it if it was in a box and too big for her purse so that he wouldn't know she'd gone to the adult store to get something. She browsed the intimacy section and quickly selected a tube of lube, thinking that she would probably need it if she was going to have to play with plastic.

After paying for her lube, she went to the entrance of the pharmacy and placed the pharmacy bag on her arm as she peered out into the parking lot to see if Nigel was looking in the direction of the building. She was surprised to see that he wasn't in the car anymore. Figuring that he had gotten tired of waiting in the car, she decided it was the perfect opportunity to make her way unseen into the sex shop that was located right next door to the pharmacy. Trying not to look like she was sneaking, she walked quickly and as casually as she could to sex shop just a few steps away.

Opening the door, she hurried inside, cursing the bell on the door that announced her presence. Thankfully, no one looked at her like she was the most perverted woman to ever walk the earth as she came in. It was amazing how naughty she felt for just having walked into the store. But she couldn't let that bother her now. She was a woman on a mission. She had a problem that needed attention, and, since she didn't have a man, she was going to have to fix it herself.

Looking around the store, she noticed that there were quite a few male customers inside browsing. A feeling of dread worked its way down her spine as it occurred to her suddenly that Nigel might have entered the store.

Not knowing whether or not he was inside since she didn't see him, she figured it was best to quickly purchase something before she was discovered. With urgency in her step, she walked the short distance to a row of shelves that had all kinds of various plastic toys encased in clear boxes. She grabbed the first thing that looked like a dildo and headed straight for the checkout counter.

Placing her find on the counter, Sera opened her purse and took out her wallet, eager to have the transaction over with.

The female employee behind the counter greeted her with a smile.

"You know, our large butt plugs are on sale this week," she said pointing to the larger butt plugs that were hanging next to the one that she had selected.

Horried beyond belief, her mouth hanging wide open, it was a moment before Sera could collect herself enough to find her voice.

"I don't want a butt plug," she protested in an angry whisper.

The woman behind the counter picked up the product Sera had laid down.

"That's what this is ma'am."

Irritated, Sera leaned forward over the counter and told the clerk, who seemed to want to argue with her, "Look lady, I don't have time for this. I'm pregnant and hormonally challenged. I need *dick*, damn it! I don't want a fucking butt plug!"

Just then she heard movement behind her. To her chagrin, she turned to find Nigel was standing right behind her, a cocky grin on his face. There was no doubt in Sera's mind that he had heard every word of her conversation with the employee. She could feel her temperature rise and a blush creep up her neck and into her cheeks. The look on his face really made her want to knock him in the head.

As she turned to tell the clerk to shove the butt plug up her own ass, she discovered the clerk was finishing lining up dildos all down the counter.

The woman proceeded to launch a spiel she must have given many times.

"This here is our classic line, starting with Black Beauty. As you can see, all the classics we carry our ten inches and up . . ."

Sera gaped at the woman in shock. But as horrified as she was, she was also

awed and a little bit intrigued by the row of dicks on the counter and the features she had never thought of, but she excused herself before the woman could finish her sales pitch and raced past Nigel for the door. Bastard! She was so embarrassed she couldn't stay and buy anything. Now what was she going to do about her problem?

Chapter Seven

She was so pissed off with Nigel all the way to her doctor's appointment that she didn't want to speak to him. Embarrassment might have also played a hand in not wanting to talk to him. She shouldn't feel embarrassed. She tried to tell herself that she was a grown woman, that adults did things like purchase entertainment for themselves, but it was useless. The situation had gotten away with her. And, worse, she felt he had really enjoyed it. It was strange, but even after all the throwing up she'd endured during her pregnancy, she would have never guessed that she would, but she desperately wanted to be sick again so she could throw up all over him, all over that handsome face with his cocky grin. She had a feeling that would wipe that grin right off of his face in a surefire hurry.

Despite the evil glares she gave him the rest of the way to the office, he continued to grin like a jackass. Thankfully, he was wary enough of her temper that he did attempt to hide it, a little, and was smart enough not to mention what he'd witnessed.

When the appointed visit was over, he walked her to the car, but instead of opening the car door for her like he always did, he turned to her and pushed her against the side of the car, his body flush against hers.

"Sera, let's be adult about this," he said, a wickedly handsome grin on his perfect lips.

Sera's temperature began to rise. She could feel her hormones raging, screaming at her to take him up on his offer, anything, anything to assuage the lust that was slowly beginning to drive her crazy. She needed dick and now. She had never wanted sex so much in her life, and feeling his well-sculpted physique pressed so hard against her, feeling the definition of his large cock and the evidence of his arousal, did little to cool her ardor. She was determined to let him believe that she wasn't interested in him though. "You can go to hell."

Shrugging it off, he opened the door for her and then made his way over to the driver's side.

Sera was surprised when he got in the car and started the car and didn't say anything else on the matter. She felt damned indignant about it actually. He was hell bent on playing daddy, but it seemed like he really didn't want any part of her. She didn't even know why he'd offered dick services to begin with. He obviously wasn't attracted to her. Perhaps he thought he was being nice, helping her with her problem. Well, she didn't need sympathy. She didn't want a pity fuck. And she didn't know why it bothered her so much that he seemed so disinterested in her personally. It should have made her happy, but, strangely enough it just kind of depressed her.

She was so deep in thought over his slight, she didn't notice he took her to her place instead of his mother's.

He got out and opened her door for her, another archaic gesture, but one she couldn't say that she minded in the least. It would have been romantic if she'd thought

he cared anything about her.

She got out of the car and realized he was right behind her when she put the key in the lock. She nearly jumped out of her skin when he put his arm around her waist and leaned against her.

With his mouth close to her ear, his hot breath tickled as it caressed the skin of her neck. "Can I come in?"

"No!" She reddened at the tone of voice she'd used. She hadn't meant to practically shout it at him, but he was making her feel so strange, so awkward, so out of her element. She couldn't think straight around him, damnable man. He was so infuriating. One moment, he was all charm and hot, and the next he was all seriousness and possessiveness.

He grabbed her as she opened the door, waltzing her in and shut the door behind them, quickly locking it. The minute he shut the door he hunched her at the wall, slamming his lips against hers in a punishing kiss.

Either he was completely unaware of Sera's feeble attempt to dislodge him or he chose to ignore it.

He speared the fingers of one hand into the hair at the back of her head, holding her when she tried to retreat from the dizzying sensations he was sending through her. He repositioned his mouth more firmly over hers and thrust his tongue more deeply into the moist cavern of her mouth, boldly exploring every inch of it.

She managed to make a sound, but even she wasn't entirely certain if it was a sound of distress or encouragement. And if she was distressed, she wasn't sure if it was because of what he was doing or because of the way it made her feel.

Her back bumped against the wall. She had no idea how he'd pinned her or how he'd managed to maneuver her there. She tried to push him away before all of her will was gone.

Prying her hands from his chest, he manacled her wrists with his large hands and pinned them to the wall on either side of her. His groin made almost painful contact with her pussy as he curled his hips, his thick, throbbing cock sending quakes along the channel of her sex. The feel of his hard body and the evidence of his arousal along with the heat that his mouth and tongue generated made her pussy wet for him.

They made their way awkwardly across the house as he divided his attention between getting her to the couch and focusing on her body, teasing her with nibbling kisses until she wasn't certain if she was so thoroughly disoriented by his kisses or the dizzying movement. Everything stopped spinning as he dragged her onto the couch, pulling her shirt up at the same time.

"Mmm, mine," he murmured, running the tip of his tongue over each taut nipple as he claimed them for himself.

The possessive word was a pleasurable groan against her skin as he explored the soft flesh of her breasts that he now clasped in his hands. She arched her back to press one breast more firmly into his mouth, almost coming off of the couch completely as he finally covered the tip with his mouth, sucking on it until she thought she would surely die of pleasure before he released it and nuzzled his way across her breasts to the other nipple. She clutched at him desperately, threading her fingers through his dark hair one moment and running her hands over the muscular definition of his shoulders and arms the

next.

"You are mine," he said in a husky whisper against her skin, wandering downward until his chin met the waistband of her jeans. He shifted upward again, covering her mouth as he tugged her jeans completely off. He cupped her sex, stroked the outer lips, and then delved the cleft to find her clit.

She gasped as he stroked the sensitive bud, inhaling the intoxicating scent of him. She felt herself falling deeper and deeper into a sea of sensations that were dragging her into a world full of nothing but dark, heated pleasure.

He shoved her legs apart, grinding his thick cock against her pussy lips.

"Nigel," she whispered a little desperately.

She gasped when he shifted slightly away to drag his dick along her cleft and connect his body to hers.

He moaned as he pushed inside of her, feeling her tight flesh enveloping him slowly. He strained to press deeper, thrust in and out of her a few times to coat himself with her moisture. "You're so tight," he muttered breathlessly, "so hot."

Her sex clenched tightly around his cock at his words, milking him.

Sucking in a harsh breath, he felt his face twist with the monumental effort it took just to bury himself another inch.

She tensed all over as he finally drove home, panting for breath.

He tensed, as well, struggling against the need to thrust into her like a wild animal until he came.

She groaned, shaking her head in pleasure, clawing at his shoulders.

The feel of her sex tightening around him again, so tightly it was pushing his cock out, broke his control. Slipping a hand beneath her to tilt her hips up, he began to thrust into her in deep, short bursts, pounding into her.

She groaned, arching her head back, her entire body tensing with culmination.

Grinding his teeth, he struggled to maintain the rhythm she needed to finish until she began to quake all over, moaning.

The quakes of her sex drove him beyond sanity. He increased his pace and the depth of his thrusts, curling his hips to grind them against her when he felt his body begin to yield up his seed, shuttering and gasping when he managed to catch a breath between the hard spasms.

Relief coursed through him when his body finally ceased to convulse. Exhausted, he lay down beside her on the couch, one arm slung over her, and they both passed out.

Chapter Eight

Later that night, Nigel awoke to find himself alone on the couch. The little minx! She had left him! He got up and went to her bedroom in search of her. Sure enough, he spotted her lying in the middle of her bed in nothing but an old t-shirt, looking sexy as hell. He supposed it would have made him feel better if he'd only caught her up taking a shower instead of having discovered that she had snuck off the couch and had purposefully not woken him up. Oddly enough, he felt a little abandoned. But, it had only been the first time they'd had sex. He couldn't expect her to want to snuggle with a man she hardly knew, but he would have to remedy the situation. He would have to fuck her senseless. Fuck her until she couldn't deny that she wanted him and only him, the father of her child. They were meant to be together. She was just going to have to accept that.

He climbed onto the bed and crawled on top of her, careful not to wake her.

She was so beautiful, lying there sleeping, her lips slightly apart, her beautiful breasts rising and falling. He caressed her cheek, amazed that he could be so lucky to have the perfect mother for his children. He'd finally found someone, someone to spend his life with. He'd finally found the one.

Now, if only he could convince her of that.

Warmth stirred in Sera's belly, and she awoke to Nigel's caresses.

He moved closer, bending down to brush his lips against hers in a feather light touch.

Closing her eyes, she met his kiss readily, opening her mouth to him in invitation.

The touch of his lips against hers as he thrust his tongue into her mouth was possessive.

She felt warmth unfold into molten heat as he crushed his body against hers and he deepened the kiss, plundering her mouth in a thorough, leisurely manner that set her blood coursing through her faster and faster. Sighing with pleasure against his lips, she let her hands run through his thick dark hair.

He pulled her t-shirt off and then grabbed her by the hips and lifted her pussy up and toward him, rubbing his erection against it.

She moved back and forth against his throbbing cock, rubbing her naked breasts against his chest. She felt her desire mount as her sensitive nipples brushed against his chest over and over again.

His gaze was as heated with desire as hers, filled with anticipation.

Rolling him off of her, she got on top of him and began an exploration of his beautifully sculpted body, moving her way down from his neck and across his chest with her kisses and nibbles until she reached his lower abdomen. She settled on her knees and took his thick hard cock into her hands, teasing the tip by swirling her tongue around it and sucking on it as if it was the sweetest treat she'd ever had.

A deep guttural sound of pleasure escaped his lips as he reached for her, spearing

his fingers into her hair and cupping the base of her skull as she stroked and sucked him, traced the sensitive ridge around the head of his cock with her tongue.

The sudden urge came over her to make him cum with just her mouth. The idea aroused her more even more than she already was, and she began to stroke the thick flesh of his cock more fervently with her mouth and hands, sucking feverishly each time she thrust him deeply into her mouth. She caressed his balls also, alternating between stroking his cock and his balls. When she moved down to suck his balls into her mouth, he shook with pleasure, his restless hands stroking her flesh. His breath came in short, harsh bursts as his own desires escalated.

He broke away from her abruptly and pulled her to her feet

She was disappointed at first, but only briefly.

As he pulled her upward, he pressed her firmly into the bed and kissed her with a fierce hunger, running his hands all over her body with feverish need.

Weak with the weight of her own needs, all she could do anymore was stroke her hands over his muscular body encouragingly as he worshipped her body with his hands and mouth, paying specific attention to every inch as to leave none of her wanting for attention.

When he'd teased her until she felt as if she would cum without him ever having entered her at all, she gasped breathlessly, "Now. I need you inside of me."

He ignored her plea as he moved from her breasts to her belly and then lower, nibbling along the sensitive inside of first one thigh and then the other. She knew where he was going and struggled against it. Yes, she wanted to feel his hot mouth on her pussy, but at the same time she was so close to climax she didn't want to give up the chance to cum with him deeply inside of her.

He didn't give her a choice in the matter, though. He shoved her thighs apart and covered the lips of her pussy with his mouth, parting the folds with his tongue. He dragged it along her cleft until she thought she would lose all control. Pleasurable tremors went through her when he found her clit at last and began to suck it, latched it with the tip of his tongue until she thought she would surely beg him for more.

She arched against him, writhed beneath him with the fires burning her up from the inside out, gasping for breath. Her body had become so tight with need until she ached all over. From one second to the next she struggled to keep at bay the release she could feel growing and struggled toward it. She wanted it, needed it. She wanted him inside of her more, all of him.

He ceased abruptly, shifting over her to thrust his cock into her opening with a feverish haste that spoke of his own imminent release.

She moaned as she felt him ram his engorged flesh inside of her, pushing her over the edge almost the minute he filled her completely. She dug her nails into his arms as the first shock wave hit her, screaming in rapture.

He ground his teeth together as he struggled for control, consumed with tremors as he sought the pace and rhythm he needed for his own completion. A groan that sounded half torture, half pleasure escaped him. He shuddered as he drove deeply inside of her.

She felt his cock jerk inside of her with the spasms of his release.

Pleasure filled her as her own climax reached its zenith and began to dispel in

warm shimmery waves of repletion. She clung to him as the tension abandoned her body along with her strength, gasping for breath.

She felt the tension go out of him, felt him begin to weigh more and more heavily against her.

Finally, he moved off of her and took in a deep, shuddering breath.

Deprived abruptly of his heat and closeness, she rolled toward him to drape herself limply across him.

She tilted her head back and looked up at him.

He met her gaze.

"Woman, if you had any idea what you do to me"

A knot of emotion forced her throat closed at the look in his eyes.

"What?" she asked a little breathlessly, needing to hear more.

He grasped her hand, carrying it to the front of his erection, curling her fingers around his around it, and guiding her hand to stroke him for several moments.

"So this is what I do to you? Here I thought it was something more serious," she said teasingly, closing her eyes in a slumberous bliss.

His gaze remained serious. "It is ... every time I look at you, get close to you, inhale that sweet scent that's all your own, or hear the sound of your beautiful voice."

He craned his head toward her slowly, snaring her lower lip in his mouth, he sucked at it playfully. "No woman has ever taken the toll on my heart the way you have," he murmured, pausing to nip at her upper lip. "I'm quite sure no other woman ever will."

He kissed her lips almost teasingly, alternately brushing his lips along hers and then plucking at them with his teeth. He lifted his head slightly after a moment to look down at her.

Sensing that he was watching her, she opened her eyes with monumental effort and looked back at him.

He took her hand and guided it to his cock.

She wrapped her fingers around his thick cock as it began to thrum with renewed vigor, exploring it from root to tip.

His eyes slid closed, his brow furrowing.

She watched his face, fascinated by the play of emotions on it as she stroked him, reaching down after a bit to cup and cradle his balls in her other hand as she had before.

His breath caught in his throat.

"Baby, that feels so good," he murmured in a darkly husky whisper that only served to increase the arousal burgeoning to life inside of her, causing a cascade of goose bumps to heighten her awareness of every inch where their bodies touched.

Placing a finger beneath her chin, he nudged it upward and caught her lips in a kiss that set off a conflagration within.

It wasn't a tentative kiss but one full of passion and hunger. He opened his mouth over hers and plunged his tongue past the delicate barrier of her lips, in one movement laying claim to the heated pool of her mouth.

His scent filled her like a mind altering drug as he raked his tongue along hers, producing both an instant euphoria and a weakening of every muscle in her body at the simultaneously.

She sucked greedily at his tongue, desperate for more of the taste of him.

A shudder coursed through his big body that served to excite her even more. Grabbing one thigh to move it out of his way, he slid on top of her and wedged his narrow hips between her thighs.

The brush of his cock against the lips of her pussy as he rocked his hips added another stimulating facet to the sensations pelting her—the hard, silk sheathed root of his manhood, the tickle of the hair that surrounded it, and the press of his bare belly and chest against hers.

Lifting her arms, she explored his back with her palms and fingertips, enjoying the smoothness of his skin and the hard muscles beneath it. His weight felt good against her, right in a way she didn't take the time to explore. She didn't want to think about anything except the way he made her feel and the comfort and excitement she derived from his just having him near. The fervor of his touch made her feel wanted, desired, needed. The solid strength of his large frame made her feel feminine and desirable and protected all at the same time.

Wanting every inch of contact she could get her hands on, she curled one leg around his narrow hips and stroked her foot along his long legs.

She didn't know if it was his nimble touch and practiced kisses or something more fundamental to him—an unexpected chemical reaction between the two of them—but the only doubt that flickered through her mind at the moment was whether she could stand to wait any longer for the deep connection with Nigel that her body yearned for. She spread her thighs wider to accommodate him at the thought, rubbing against his sex with her own, arching against him in encouragement.

He ignored the bait, breaking their kiss to explore her body further. The pull of his mouth on her nipple nearly took her breath away, stroked the fire inside of her higher and higher until she was tossing beneath him restlessly, gasping for breath, too weak with desperation and need for rational thought of any kind.

He guided the head of his cock into the mouth of her sex.

Her focus shifted abruptly to the feel of his thick flesh entering her, spreading her in a way that made her yearn sharply for more. She curled her hips eagerly to receive, braced herself to counter his thrust and hold herself still until he'd thrust deeply, withdrew and thrust again.

Her heart felt as if it had leapt into her throat to throttle her. She stroked his silky hair. "Nigel, it's amazing," she whispered.

A tremor coursed through him. He pushed himself up on one elbow to look at her, moving shallowly in and out along her channel, titillating her with each stroke that barely grazed her g-spot.

She opened her eyes to look at him, and the expression on his face halted the air in her lungs.

Maintaining his hold on her gaze, he curled his hips, slowly pressing deeper until she could feel him rubbing his belly against hers, could feel the tip of his cock pressing against her womb. He lowered his upper body, resting his weight on his elbows, and slipped his arms beneath her shoulders.

"It's so much more than that," he said in a voice gone suddenly hoarse with emotion, lowering his head to meet her lips once more as he slowly pulled out of her sex

and then set a pace that he mirrored with the thrust of his tongue.

Heat radiated all over her. She adhered tightly to him, opening herself merely to receive initially, to wallow in the exquisite feel of his penetration, of the deep connection that made her ache for completion. The moment came when she couldn't remain immobile any longer, when she felt her body sprinting toward fruition and demanding her to move with him.

Panting for breath when he broke the kiss, he tunneled his face against her neck. She countered his nearly possessed thrusts with the same desperation until, abruptly, the tension seized her body, making her arch against him, dragging a sharp cry from her lips.

He bit down on her shoulder in that same moment. The sharp pain, rather than diverting her attention, sent her soaring over the precipice she'd been teetering on in hard spasms that made her feel as if she was exploding into a million pieces. She writhed against him discordantly, too mindless to maintain any sort of rhythm. He lifted his head, ground his teeth together, and then uttered a primal roar of pleasure as his body claimed hers, convulsed with her, yielding up his seed to bathe her womb.

The next morning Sera woke up and felt like she had a lead weight on her chest. She looked down at her body to realize that Nigel had an arm thrown possessively across her. The events of the night before came rushing back to her, flooding her cheeks with color. They'd had fantastic sex, but what would the morning bring? Would he pass it off as nothing but assuaging each other's needs? Or would he now want more? She had already told him she didn't want a man in her life.

Throwing his arm off, she got out of bed. She had things to do. She had to get to work, and she didn't need this distraction. She had never lived with anybody and she wasn't comfortable with being around him when she had to tinkle and puke her guts out. She needed to pee-bad. He had to leave.

She pushed on him till he woke up.

"Yes, baby? Does that mean you want more? Just give me a minute to wake up."

Sera's brow furrowed in irritation. Yes, it had been good sex, but she wasn't the kind of woman that wanted it so damn badly she couldn't wait until the man woke up to get it. God he was so full of himself! "No, you need to leave."

That comment woke him up.

"Leave? Why?" It took him a little bit to get fully awake and aware in the mornings. So he was a little confused, but after last night, he figured they had gotten something started. "I thought . . ."

"Nope. I don't know what you thought and I don't want to hear it. You need to leave right now. When I come out of the bathroom, I want you gone."

Sera went to the bathroom, quickly shutting and locking the door behind her. She turned on the shower to let it start getting warm.

Nigel went to the door. He knocked on it. When he heard nothing, he tried the knob and realized she'd locked him out. "Sera, we need to talk."

Through the door, Sera said, "Look, Nigel, there's nothing to talk about. I already told you how I wanted my life. Last night was great and all that, but that doesn't change anything. I want you to leave."

Nigel didn't say anything else, and a few minutes later she heard her front door

shut. She swallowed hard past emotion that suddenly was making it hard to breathe. This was what she wanted, she assured herself. Men only complicated things. She couldn't let him wear down her defenses. She was going to have a good day. She wasn't going to let anything ruin it because her friend Patricia had called the day before to remind her that she was supposed to come to the bar with them for a girls' night out today, a sort of bachelorette party for their mutual friend Nicole who was finally tying the knot. Of course, she couldn't drink because she was pregnant, but she planned on dancing her ass off. It would probably be the last time she went out to the bar in a long time since she was going to be a mom in just a few short months.

* * * *

Irene picked up the phone and dialed Sera's home phone number. When she got the answering machine, she decided to dial Sera's cell phone number. She had cooked one of Sera's favorite meals and really wanted her to come over and enjoy it. Perhaps it would help her to feel more like she was a part of their family. And maybe she could see herself getting used to seeing Nigel over the supper table.

Nigel watched his mother from across the living room. He knew who she was calling. He also knew what she was up to. She was still trying to play matchmaker. He knew she had every intention of asking Sera to supper, he knew it as soon as she'd said she was fixing something that Sera really enjoyed. He couldn't complain. This way at least it didn't appear that he would have anything to do with it, and he would have more time with her, which was exactly what he needed.

He leaned back against the couch and pretended to read the newspaper employment ads that he'd already read and re-read while he waited to hear what his mother said. As soon as he heard her start talking he didn't even pretend like he was reading the paper anymore, though. His mother wouldn't notice since she was involved in conversation.

"Hey, Sera."

"Hey, Irene. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm just fine." Irene noticed that Sera was talking really loud, as if she couldn't really hear herself. She also heard a booming noise in the background that sounded like music.

"Did you call to chat?"

"Well, yes and no. I called to invite you to dinner also."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Irene. I already had plans for tonight to meet with some girlfriends at a club."

"What club are you going to?"

"Fantasia."

"Fantasia? What kind of club is that?"

"It's a dance club. My friend Nicole is getting married so we decided to go to the club to celebrate with a few friends. I haven't really seen any of them very much since I got pregnant, and I won't be seeing them much when the baby first gets here, so I decided I wanted to go with them tonight. Actually, I guess you can tell, I'm at the club right now."

"Are you sure you feel up to it in your condition?"

"I'm fine. A little loud music and dancing won't hurt the babies. It'll be good

exercise. And, it'll be good for me to do something with my girlfriends since I never do anything but work."

"Alright. You have fun and be careful. Call me if you need anything."

Irene hung up the phone. It was then that she noticed her son was pacing the living room like a caged lion. He looked about as ferocious as one as well. He had a fierce scowl when he looked at her.

"She's going to a club? What is she thinking?"

Irene tried not to smile. "Apparently she's already at the club with some friends celebrating an impending marriage. I guess it's like a bach" She didn't get to finish her sentence. Nigel had already grabbed the car keys and was out the door.

Nigel knew exactly where Fantasia was located. Thankfully, it was only about fifteen minutes from the house. He was surprised he didn't have a cop stop him and give him a speeding ticket on the way over. He probably would have led the cops on a high speed chase to the club, because he didn't have any intention of stopping until he found Sera.

* * * *

Sera hung up her cell phone and grabbed the drinks she'd ordered for her friends and her non-alcoholic one from the bartender. She made her way through the crowded club back to the table where her friends were sitting, whooping and hollering like teenagers. She couldn't help but smile at their enthusiasm. It was good to see them all together, like the old days when they were young, before she'd lost her parents.

She was really glad that after all of the bad relationships that Nicole had had she had finally found someone that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with, someone dependable and worthy of her adoration. She felt a sudden pang in her heart. She tried to ignore it, but it continued to bother her as she set down the drinks she'd brought. All of her friends were having such a good time, she couldn't possibly be jealous. But, perversely, she was.

After all the talk about not needing a man, about them creating such turmoil in a woman's life, it was hard to ignore how happy her friends were. All of them were in serious relationships, the only ones not married now were her and Nicole. And in a few short weeks, it would be just her. She tried to shake off her negative thoughts. Her friends had just been lucky. She herself had never managed to find a decent man, a man that, no matter what, would love her unconditionally forever. She had resigned herself to life with just the love of her children, and that would be more than enough. She didn't need a man.

A few minutes later, a man approached their table, eyeing her appreciatively. Her girlfriends, all taken, all fully aware that she was the only single one among them, were giggling like school girls at the way the man was eyeing her.

She blushed with embarrassment when the man stood staring at her for a minute without saying anything. *He must be so drunk he can't talk*, she thought.

"Would you like to dance?"

Surprised that he was staring that hard and could still speak, she took a minute to examine the man. She supposed he was attractive enough. He was tall, well-built, he had a full head of blonde-hair, and he had brown eyes, but for some odd reason she thought she preferred dark hair and dark blue eyes.

Nicole elbowed her under the table when she didn't say anything.

Sera looked at her friend, giving her a scowl for digging her elbow into the tender flesh of her abdomen and then looked back at the man.

He was still waiting on an answer.

Well, she'd said she'd come to dance. What she'd really meant was that she'd planned on dancing with her friends not a man, but it wouldn't hurt.

"Alright."

"What's your name?"

"Sera. What's yours?"

"Tom."

She got down off of her stool and tried not to smile as her friends cheered her on.

Tom put an arm around her waist and led her to the crowded dance floor.

Even though the song that was playing was a faster paced dance song, Tom moved in close as if it was a slow dance.

Sera immediately felt uncomfortable.

Tom continued to pull Sera closer and then he began to rub himself on her hip.

At that point, Sera decided she'd had enough. She hadn't agreed to a dance so the man could rub himself off on her body. As if feeling some stranger's penis through his clothing was going to whip her into a sexual frenzy! Before she could get loose from him, though, she heard a familiar voice that sent currents of awareness coursing through her body.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Sera was certain the comment had been directed at her, but when she looked at Nigel, she could see that his attention was focused on Tom.

"Hmm?" Tom said, too absorbed in trying to molest Sera to have heard what Nigel said.

"I said, what the hell do you think you're doing? That's the mother of my child, and it's obvious she doesn't want you rubbing yourself all over her. Can't you tell she's trying to pry you loose? Beat it before I kick your ass," he said in a low growling voice that brooked no argument.

Tom immediately let go, evidence of the cowardice in him. He obviously didn't want a fight, or just realized that Nigel was raring for one. He slinked away into the pulsating crowd, leaving Sera facing Nigel alone.

Nigel didn't say anything, but his scowl was intense.

Sera swallowed hard past a knot that had suddenly formed in her throat. He was so angry, but why? He couldn't really be that angry with that man, could he? Was he just mad because she was carrying his children and he'd found her in the club or was he mad because he actually wanted her for himself?

Nigel pulled Sera close as the next song started, a slow song. The lights dimmed.

Sera breathed in the intoxicating male scent of him. She couldn't help the pleasurable sigh that escaped her lips. He was so damn hot. He didn't even try. But, then again, her raging hormones wouldn't let her ignore the intense pheromones he was putting off. She tried to tell herself that if she wasn't inhibited by her now crazed sexual state, she wouldn't have been nearly as attracted to him as she was, but she knew she was lying to herself.

She wanted this man as she had never wanted any before, and she knew she'd never want another man the way she wanted him. If only he felt the same way. If only he wasn't so damned full of his honor that made him blind to her as a woman and made her just the mother of his children. She knew that was the only reason he was involving himself with her. And, after she had the babies, he would only want them. He wouldn't want anything to do with her. It was terrible of her to be irritated about that. She should be deliriously happy he wanted to be there for the babies. If he wasn't that interested in her, it shouldn't matter. They could have a civilized relationship where they both supported the children, an arrangement that suited both of them in a completely non-intimate couple sort of way. But, she realized, that wasn't what she wanted anymore. She wanted more, much more.

The song ended. She was immediately disappointed. She'd been enjoying having him hold her so close. It felt almost like he wanted her, like he needed her in his arms. It felt so right to be there, pressed tight against his chest, right next to his heart. She thought she could dance with him all night. But he'd broken the spell by moving away. She looked at his face. He wasn't nearly the raging beast he'd been minutes before. That was a relief at least.

"We're leaving."

Sera was more than a little irritated that he hadn't asked, he merely said it like she didn't have a choice in the matter. She planted her feet and crossed her arms, giving him her fiercest look.

Nigel took one look at her and smiled.

"Do you think I can't take you by force?"

Sera didn't say anything, she simply dared him to try it with her eyes.

"So be it," Nigel said right before he bent down and scooped her into his arms.

Sera started beating him on the chest.

"Put me down. I'm not ready to leave."

"I'm taking you home."

Realizing that beating on him was not affecting him at all and that it was a lost cause, she looked back at the table where her friends were still seated and waved goodbye. She could see that they were all wildly excited that Nigel was carrying her away. She'd told them about her situation with Nigel, about how she'd met his mother and decided to be the surrogate for his child and then he'd shown up and thrown all her plans for a loop. They'd thought it was so romantic the way he wanted to be a father to the babies, the way he wanted her. She tried to tell them that he was only interested in her because she was pregnant with his children, but they'd given each other looks as if they knew better. It had irritated her. She knew the truth. He'd never claimed to love her. He'd only proposed because he'd felt duty bound to do it.

Nigel carried her out into the parking lot and then set her on her feet.

"Now, are you going to walk or am I going to have to take you to the car myself?"

Sera gave him another scowl but relented.

"I can manage on my own two feet, thank you."

Just then, they both heard the clink of beer bottles behind them, as if they'd been kicked together and had rolled over the gravel in the parking lot. It drew their attention.

From out of the shadows of the building behind them came Tom.

"Big man, are you? Think you can just take what you want? Well, we'll just see about that."

Tom came up to Sera so fast she didn't have time to react. He grabbed her and twisted her around so that her back was pressed against his chest. He had one arm tight around her, effectively pinning her arms to her sides.

Nigel moved to grab Tom but stopped when he saw him pull a switchblade out of his pocket. Cowardly bastard! He'd been waiting for them in the parking lot. And instead of taking his quarrel out with him, he'd been a snake and grabbed Sera. He couldn't let anything happen to her. He had to get that bastard off of her before she got hurt. He was going to have to distract him. But how?

Sera struggled to get free until she felt cold metal pressed against her throat. She went perfectly still, scared that if she moved Tom might pierce the skin of her neck by accident, afraid that if she put up any resistance he might slit her throat in a rage. The man was obviously drunk and more than dangerous.

Sera looked at Nigel. She knew that fear was written all over her face. She could hardly breathe she was so scared. She didn't know what to do. She was pregnant. If something happened to her, then she didn't want to think about what would happen to the babies. But, if Nigel tried to save her, he could get hurt, and she didn't want that either.

"Let her go," Nigel said in a menacing voice.

"Now why would I want to do that?" Tom said, sliding the flat part of the blade up and down Sera's throat. "I have the upper hand here. I have the woman. I have the knife. No, I don't think I'll let her go. I think I'm going to fuck her right here and now in front of you while you watch. And, if you try to stop me, I'm going to cut her."

Sera was horrified. She was going to get raped. And she couldn't do anything about it. She couldn't believe she was in this situation. Her mind raced as she tried to think of what to do, how she might possibly get away from this maniac. But with the knife at her throat, she knew that she had no choice at all, she couldn't do anything without endangering her life.

"You don't want to do that?" Nigel growled.

"Sure I do. And I'm going to love every minute of it." He pulled Sera over to a car and pushed her front down hard against the hood of it, effectively bending her over to that his hips were positioned at her ass. "Don't worry, sweetheart, I'm not going to be too fast. I'm going to take my time. And you're going to love every minute of it."

Sera couldn't help the whimper of fear that escaped as she felt the knife tight against her throat, as she felt his other hand pulling up the hem of her dress.

But then, she heard a grunt and she didn't feel Tom or the knife anymore.

She turned her head to the side and saw that Nigel had tackled Tom and was wrestling with him for the knife on the ground. Tom slashed at the exposed skin of Nigel's arm.

Sera screamed when she saw that Nigel had been cut and blood was racing down his arm. She started crying. "Oh my god. Nigel! Please. I don't want you to die!"

Nigel finally wrenched the knife out of Tom's sweaty grasp and threw it in the parking lot. He started punching Tom in the face, over and over again until Tom finally went quiet. He got up and dusted off his pants. He was covered with sweat, blood, and dirt, but he didn't care. All that mattered was that Sera was okay.

He turned to find her and she ran into his arms, holding him tight around the waist, sobbing uncontrollably now.

"Shh. Shh. Everything's okay," he said reassuringly, stroking her hair. "You're safe now. You're alright. I wasn't going to let him hurt you."

Sera cried even harder. She'd been so afraid, afraid for herself, afraid for the babies, afraid that Nigel might get killed and never see his children. She pulled away and examined the cut on his arm that was still bleeding profusely.

"You're cut! We need to stop the bleeding!"

Nigel looked down at his arm. "I'm just fine. It's just a scratch. But, there is something I need to do. First," he bent down and kissed her hard on the lips, effectively halting her tears. He pulled away and smiled down at her, wiping away the streams of tears from her pale cheeks. "Now," he said and moved away from her to where Tom was still lying on the dirt and gravel of the parking lot. He took off his tank top and then rolled Tom onto his belly. He pulled his arms behind his back and tied them together with his shirt. "That ought to hold him until the cops get here."

He got up and turned to Sera, "Give me your cell so I can call the cops."

Sera reached for her belt purse, which was only big enough to hold her phone a little bit of cash. She unsnapped it and took out her phone, handing it to Nigel.

Nigel immediately dialed 911.

"Yes, my name is Nigel Savage, and I'm a former marine. Me and my woman were just attacked by a man in the parking lot of Fantasia. He pulled a knife on her, but I took it away, and we fought for a little while before I managed to subdue him. I've tied him up with a shirt. He's still unconscious, but it probably won't be for long. There's security cameras monitoring the lot if you need any evidence against him." With that said, he hung up the phone and handed it back to Sera. "The cops will be here in a minute to pick him up. Let's go." He grabbed her and pulled her tight against him for another second in a reassuring hug before walking her to her side of the car and opening the door for her.

Sera was glad that her friends had come by and picked her up instead of her driving herself to the club. She didn't think after the night's ordeal that she could have driven herself anywhere. She looked over at Nigel as he got into the driver's seat. He was so calm and cool and collect. Of course, he'd probably seen a lot of action in the military. Fighting was nothing new to him. He'd probably reacted just out of instinct rather than out of the urge to protect her.

He drove her to her house. Getting out, he went over to the passenger's side of the car and took her out, throwing her up into his arms.

She didn't say anything, just put her arms around his neck and held tightly to his chest. She needed this. She needed the comfort he could provide tonight. She'd been through something traumatic, and she needed reassurance that everything was going to be alright. Nigel could give her that.

She took out the key and handed it to him when he reached her front door.

In seconds, they were inside. He shut and locked the door and carried her swiftly to her bedroom where he placed her on the bed and immediately undressed them.

Her awareness of his hungry gaze sent a little thrill of excitement through her. It jolted her pulse up a notch higher even before her reached out and placed a hand on the

upper slope of one breast and traced a slow path downward, over her breast, along her rib cage and belly, down one thigh and then up again to cup her sex. She was already damp when he insinuated his hand between her thighs and traced her cleft with one fingertip.

His hands were big, hard, rough from being in the military so long. The faint abrasion of his touch along her body brought every nerve ending in her skin tingling to life.

Placing her hands on his shoulders to keep her balance, she closed her eyes, focusing on his touch.

He shifted, moving a little closer to the foot of the bed where she stood on her knees, still too far away for their flesh to brush together, but close enough the heat radiating from his body covered her like a foggy haze, raising her own temperature.

The scent of soap assailed her nostrils as he moved closer. Heated by his body, his own personal scent emerged from his pores to mingle with the smell of soap. The combination of smells that created a scent that was distinctly him and no other sent a fresh rush of pleasure along her olfactory senses to mingle with the sensations gathering from his touch.

Her heart sped, began to drum in her ears. She heard the rasp of her breath, little gasps each time he touched a particularly sensitive point, little pants of anticipation as his exploration continued in search of others.

With an effort, she lifted her eyelids a fraction, succumbing to the need to explore his body, to feel him beneath her own palms. His skin was warm, smooth. Her palms skated from his shoulders to the swell of his pecs. Taut muscle lay just beneath the surface, adding yet another pleasing dimension. His nipples grew taut beneath her palms as she rubbed her palms over them. Curling her fingers, she flicked the tight little buds with her nails, and then lightly raked her nails over the ridges of muscle between his pecs and his abdomen.

The spackling of hair on the curves of his pectoral muscles flowed together above his breast bone, forming a trail that collected and formed a pool below his navel. His cock jutted from that little tide pool of wavy, dark hair, long, so thick that when she curled her fingers around it they failed to meet. It bucked in her hand as she closed her fingers around it, like a wild stallion daring her to ride it, and she smiled a pleased smile at the erotic picture that formed in her mind's eye. Lifting her gaze to meet his, she stroked his length, enjoying the silkiness of the skin that sheathed the engorged flesh beneath.

His eyes were closed, his face contorted in an agony of pleasure, but as if he sensed her gaze, he opened his eyes slowly, shifted closer, slipping his hands around her waist, to cup a buttock in each palm, kneading them in a way that sent shivers of delight through her.

Her fingers tightened around him, kneading his cock. She swayed slightly. The movement brushed her distended nipples against his chest and the abrasion sent tiny shock waves of pleasurable sensation through her breasts, making her belly clench.

Releasing his cock, she slipped her arms around him to cup his taut, round buttocks.

Abruptly, he caught her shoulders and gave her a shove that overbalanced her. She fell back onto the bed with a slight bounce, looking up at him in surprise.

Smiling faintly, he grasped her ankles and dragged her toward him until the bottom curve of her buttocks bumped his thighs. He leaned over her then, grasping a wrist in each hand, manacling them to the bed on either side of her head as he leaned closer still. Nuzzling her neck, he lifted his head to nip the tip of her nose, and then nibble her lips, sucking first the upper lip, then the lower before he covered her mouth with his and thrust his tongue into her mouth.

The heat that had been seeping slowly, insidiously through her with his leisurely caresses, became a conflagration the moment his tongue breached her, washing over her in a tidal wave of sensation as his heat, taste, scent enveloped her. Her clit and her nipples began to throb almost painfully now for with need, sending little quakes through her. She struggled to free her wrists and, when he released her, ran her fingers along his back, cupped his buttocks.

His cock nestled in her cleft, bumping the bud of her clitoris, slipping away, nudging her again. She lifted her legs, hooking her heels on the foot of the bed, lifting up to rub that aching part of herself along his hard length. She was panting for breath when he released her lips at last.

Gasping hoarsely, he nudged her throat again, moved down, caught one nipple in his mouth and sucked it so hard her back came off the bed. She whimpered with need, thrust her other breast at him as he released the first. He ran his tongue around the swollen bud teasingly and finally covered it with his mouth.

No longer satisfied with rubbing her clitoris against his shaft, she reached for it blindly, caught hold of his cock, massaging it, guiding it. He nudged her opening, pulled back, gliding through her cleft once more and spread her creamy need along her cleft, coating his shaft with it before he forced the head of his cock into her opening once more.

Groaning, she lifted up, tried to push her body downward over his cock. His position prevented more than teasing contact, minimal penetration.

Frustrated, she grasped his shoulders, digging her nails into his flesh sharply enough to penetrate his haze of lust. Grasping her hips, he lifted her high enough to implant the head of his cock firmly in her opening then shoved her up the bed, following her. Catching a calf in either hand, he bent her almost double and pumped his hips, working his cock a little deeper with each thrust, gaining ground inch by agonizing inch until his cock was fully sheathed in her hot, moist passage.

Sweat dampened their skin from the struggle. He leaned over her, gasping, gathering himself. She waited in heart thundering anticipation, feeling the muscles of her passage adjust to him, clinging wetly.

He pulled away slowly, his cock rubbing the length of her sensitive passage. Sensation vibrated through her as he pushed inside her again, withdrew, pressed into her, slowly building momentum, friction, heat, sensation.

The movement of his cock along her channel built a delightful tension inside of her that tightened with each stroke until finally it reached snapping point. Pleasure ballooned inside of her, expanding outward even to her fingertips. Her groan of release reached crescendo in a high pitched cry of delight as her body spasmed with ecstasy, tightening convulsively around his cock as it jerked, bucked and spewed his seed inside of her in a hot tide with his own release.

Afterwards, when their bodies had cooled down, Sera realized it was time to ask

Nigel to leave. She wasn't entirely certain how she should put it, but she decided being delicate and skirting the issue wouldn't work.

"Well, I really enjoyed that, Nigel. Now I've got to be getting some sleep. Lock the door on the way out, please."

Nigel, who'd been thoroughly enjoying his post-coital bliss, suddenly became pissed off. They'd only just finished having sex and she was already asking him to leave. Had it meant nothing to her? Obviously she felt it meant nothing to him, judging by her attitude. Thoroughly frustrated, he didn't know what he was going to have to do to convince her that they should be together. If nothing else, she should want to be together because the sex was so mind blowing. But then worry began to set in. Perhaps it wasn't as good for her as it was for him? That couldn't be right. He knew she'd enjoyed it just as much as he had. If she hadn't, she wouldn't make all of those noises that drove him crazy.

Instead of arguing with her, he got up and threw on his clothes and left.

Sera breathed a sigh of relief when she heard Nigel lock and then shut her front door. This was how it had to be. She couldn't let herself get attached. It would all work out better this way. She'd already made the mistake of having sex with him, over and over again. She couldn't let herself become more vulnerable, she couldn't let him tear down all the defenses she'd worked so hard erect. She was going to have to stay strong, independent, and stick to her original plan.

Chapter Nine

The next day, pissed off, Nigel decided to head over to his mother's house for breakfast and a sulk.

Irene was practically singing when she answered the door.

"Oh, honey, it's you. Did you come to talk about anything that happened last night?"

Nigel was not happy to see that his mother was in a such fine mood. He knew what was going on in her head. She thought that he'd spent the past few nights with Sera because he'd headed out after her when he'd overheard that she was at Fantasia and he hadn't been back since. Although they had wound up sleeping together, he had decided to let her cool off for a few days before he went to see her again.

Irene tried to probe for information.

"How's Sera?"

Nigel sat down at his mother's breakfast nook and started digging in to the plate of eggs and bacon she handed him.

"I wish I knew. I haven't talked to her in a few days."

Irene tried not to give away any emotion on her face.

"Does that mean you didn't go to Fantasia looking for her?"

"Oh, I went alright, and I dragged her out of that damn club." He thought about the man who'd accosted them in the parking lot. He decided not to tell her about that. It would only upset her. Nothing had happened. Neither one of them had gotten hurt. There was no need to tell her. "I drove her home and then I went back to my place."

He could see that she wanted to know more details. At the moment, he didn't really feel up to going over everything that happened. He was still trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong himself.

He changed the subject. "What's with the big brown box on your front steps?"

"Sera made went through several online stores and made a list of things she wanted to get for her babies. When I found her registry online, I ordered the crib she wanted." She paused, an idea suddenly formulating. "You know, I've got a lot of things to do around town today, so I'm going to be kinda busy. I don't suppose you can be a dear and drop it by her house, could you? It would be really nice if you went over dropped it off and put it together. I'll be that would really make her happy."

Nigel looked at his mother in disbelief. He was beginning to think he wasn't capable of making Sera happy.

"Trust me. She's in her nesting mode. She wants to get things ready for when the babies get here. She might not even realize that she's stressing about it. I'm telling you, it will make her happy."

He decided his mother had a good idea. Bringing over the crib would be a good excuse to show up at her door and putting it together would be a surefire way of being let in the house. He could also take food as a bribe.

He finished up what was left on his plate.

"Thank you for brunch. You really didn't have to."

"I know, honey."

"It was really good."

"I'm glad you liked it."

"I guess I'm going to take that crib over to Sera's."

"Alright. I'll see you later."

Nigel put his dish in the sink and kissed his mother on the forehead before going out the front door. He stooped down and picked up the crib and hauled it to the garage. After he got it in the car, he got in and headed to the nearest pizza joint, which was right around the block. It wasn't long before he had his order and was back on his way to Sera's.

Sera was surprised when she heard a knock at her door. She stopped typing and saved her work before getting up from her computer desk. She pushed her chair back and got up. There was another knock at the door.

"Coming. Just a minute," she called as she made her way out of her home office, located in her living room, and to her front door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Nigel."

She really shouldn't have been surprised. Although she had told him to leave right after they'd had sex the last time, she hadn't expected him to leave her alone for days. Was it just pregnancy that was making her so crazy or was it him? She debated on whether or not to let him in.

"I have something for you."

"What is it?" she asked through the door.

"I'm not going to tell you unless you let me in."

She grimaced at his blackmail but finally relented and opened the door to let him in. Nigel was standing with a big box by the steps and a pizza box in his hands.

"Hungry?"

Sera's stomach growled. She always got so involved in her work she forgot to feed herself.

"What kind is it?"

"I didn't know what you liked so I got a cheese."

She grabbed the pizza he offered and carried it inside to the bar that separated her kitchen from her living room, sitting down to dig in while he brought the box in.

She was glad he'd brought food. She was a terrible cook.

Nigel didn't say anything as he brought the box in and laid it down in the middle of Sera's living room. He went back outside to his rental car and came in again with tools.

Seeing that the box that Nigel had brought in had a crib that needed assembling, Sera decided to get closer for a better look. She grabbed the pizza box, which she'd been eating out of, and walked with it over to her coffee table and settled down on her couch to watch him work.

He opened the box and pulled everything out. As soon as he had everything out of the box, he started sorting the parts.

Sera grabbed the directions he had tossed to one side when he opened the box and started reading the assembly instructions out loud.

"Please be sure to read all instructions first. Begin by finding part A."

Nigel was a little irritated. He didn't need instructions to put a crib together. It wasn't rocket science. But instead of complaining, he decided to placate her by not saying anything.

After putting a few pieces together, he began to feel increasingly hot.

"What's your air set on? It's a little hot in here."

"Listen, Nigel. I'm pregnant. I go from hot to cold and back constantly. Right now, I'm cold, and this is my house. If I want it as hot as Hades, then I'll make it that way. I didn't ask you to come over." She paused and decided that she had sounded a little too harsh and ungracious. How often did men put things together without being asked? "I'm sorry for sounding so grouchy. I'm not the most amiable pregnant woman. And, I didn't say it, but thank you for bringing the crib over and putting it together. It would probably have taken me forever. I'm challenged when it comes to that sort of thing."

"My mother bought it. I just thought I'd help by putting it together." He looked at her belly. "It's the least I could do."

He studied her for a moment more and then stripped out of his shirt.

Although they'd had sex, she hadn't actually gotten the chance to really admire him without his clothes. She forgot about reading the instructions and eating the pizza he'd brought and stared at his gorgeous rippling abs. As he turned this way and that, she studied the muscles of his body that were straining with the effort to construct the crib. Before long, she was getting hotter and hotter.

He realized when he didn't hear her reading the instructions anymore that she was staring. His cock suddenly came to attention.

She noticed him noticing her, suddenly feeling uncomfortable with his scrutiny, she focused on the crib again.

"You know, I believe you're putting that together wrong."

"What?"

He looked down at the crib and examined it carefully. He didn't see anything wrong. Then he looked at the box he'd propped beside him on the wall and saw the picture of the completed crib on the front of it.

"Dammit!" He'd already spent at least thirty minutes putting it together. Now he was going to have to take most of it back apart. Too irritated to admit she was right, he came back on the defensive. "Well, if you hadn't been staring a hole in me I might have been able to focus better on what I was doing."

"I wasn't staring a hole in you. I was watching the crib come together."

"Oh, I know what you were imagining coming together."

Sera looked at Nigel in stunned open-mouthed disbelief. Of all the nerve! He acted as if the only thing she had on her mind was sex!

"I wasn't thinking about any such thing. If I had been so focused on your damn penis I wouldn't have noticed how you are fucking up the crib."

"Since you know what I did wrong, why don't you come over here and show me."

Sera hopped up to show him exactly what she was talking about, but when she

did, she got a cramp that ran all the way down the back of one leg.

"Ahh!" she yelped in agony, grabbing the back of her leg as she flopped back on the couch. She immediately started trying to muscle the knotted muscle until it relaxed.

"What's wrong?" Nigel asked, unsure of what had happened.

"My leg. I'm having a muscle cramp."

Nigel went over to massage it for her, pushing her hands away. He massaged her leg until the pain was gone.

By that time both of them were really turned on. He lifted her foot and sucked her toes experimentally.

She giggled at first, but as he continued, she realized it was really sensual, and then the next thing she knew he was on top of her.

He wedged a leg between her thighs, nudging her knees apart as he stripped her and himself of clothes. He parted the lips of her sex with the tip of his cock and began rubbing against her clit, making the muscles in her belly clench in a spasm of pleasure.

She felt a moan straining against her chest, felt sleep drifting beyond her grasp. She lay perfectly still, enjoying the pleasure that seeped through her lethargy, making her heart beat faster, the blood rush through her veins, as warmth and pleasure.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

Nigel was kneeling beside the couch.

Still groggy to a state of near drunkenness, she pushed herself up on the couch, turning to face him. Still uncertain whether she was dreaming or awake, she watched him through half closed eyes as he caught her ankles. Spreading them wide, he bent her knees and hooked her heels on the edge of the couch.

She blinked at him, still dazed with sleep and desire. When she looked at him again, she saw that he was staring at her genitals.

He lifted a hand, brushed the curls of her bush, ran a shaking finger gently over the parted petals of flesh.

She inhaled on a gasp as he rubbed his finger lightly over her clit and he looked up at her, his face taut, his eyes glittering.

Scooping a butt cheek into each hand, he lifted her hips, lowered his head and opened his mouth over her.

The heat went through her like a shock wave. She cried out, no longer caught between dream and reality, no longer simmering on the edge of desire, but on fire from it. She caught his head with both hands, trying to push him away, but felt desire lance every ounce of strength from her muscles as he sucked her clit.

"Oh God!" she gasped shakily.

"You want me to stop?" he asked hoarsely.

She nodded, swallowed. "Yes."

He lowered his head again, ran his tongue along her cleft and teased her clit.

"Are you sure about that?" he murmured.

"NO! I mean, yes!" she stammered.

He leaned down and sucked her clit again for several moments, sending sharp arrows of pleasure knifing through her.

She felt her belly spasm, felt her body escalating toward release.

He lifted his head and sat back on his heels.

Panting, almost sobbing for breath, she stared at him in confusion.

"I wanted to taste you."

At his words, a shock wave of pleasure went through her. The muscles in the walls of her sex clenched, aching for the feel of him. He was waiting, she finally realized, allowing her to decide—forcing her to. It was unfair. Her body was humming for his touch, reeling from the caresses he'd already bestowed, aching for the feel of him filling her. He'd taken unfair advantage, caught her while she was sleeping and vulnerable.

She could almost hate him for that ... but she wanted him.

She was going to have a hard time living with herself if she gave in to his underhanded ploy.

She was afraid she would deeply regret it if she didn't.

She slipped off the couch, straddling his thighs. "You're a sneaky asshole, you know that?" she murmured, wrapping her arms around his neck and staring him dead in the eyes.

He caught the back of her head. "No, I didn't know that," he growled in response, opening his mouth over hers and kissing her with an almost angry, savage intensity that boiled the blood in her veins.

Her head swam dizzily as he twisted, laying her back against the carpet and following her down. She ran her hand down his bare chest, slipped her fingers beneath the waistband of his jeans and cupped his sex.

He pulled away and his cock landed heavily in her palm.

She glanced down at it, a little alarmed.

He pushed her back onto the floor, kneading her breasts, tugging at her nipples with his lips, sucking them.

Gasping, she reached blindly for his cock, stretching, trying to capture it in her hand once more.

He shifted upward, pushing her thighs apart.

She caught hold of him at last, rubbing the head of his cock against her clit, searching a little frantically for her opening.

Pushing her hand away, he aligned their bodies and thrust, his cock slipping in the juices of their bodies.

She gasped, digging her fingers into his shoulders as she felt herself slipping along the carpet.

He cursed, grasped her waist and thrust again.

She locked her legs around his waist, pushing in counter to his short thrusts as he slipped slowly inside of her.

They lay panting for a moment when he had sunk his cock fully inside of her. After a moment, he lifted his head. Sweat beaded his brow. His teeth were clenched.

"Baby, you're so tight."

The desire in his expression and his words sent an echo through her. She swallowed convulsively against her dry throat, feeling the muscles of her passage clench around him, feeling every muscle in her body tense as if she were gathering herself to leap.

He groaned, ground his teeth and began moving, striving for a rhythm that yielded the most exquisite sensations.

She released her grip on his waist, dropping her feet to the floor and thrust in counter to the ram of his cock, leaning up to kiss nibbling bites along his chest, then tilting her head back to reach his throat.

He twisted, leaning down to cover her mouth with his own, plunging his tongue and retreating in like rhythm to the thrusts of his cock. After a moment, groaning in frustration at the difficulty in reaching her, he scooped an arm beneath her shoulders and held her to him as he rolled up onto his knees once more.

She gasped as he slipped an arm around her buttocks, pulling her close, settling his cock more deeply inside her. Sensual delight seemed to arc inside her like an electric current, fusing her pleasure centers together, building toward release. She gripped his shoulders as he bent his head and sucked love bites along her throat and along her collar bone and shoulder. She arched her back as he moved lower, offering her breasts. The impetuous of his mouth suckling her nipple ripped her climax from her in an explosion of warmth that flooded her sex. The muscles inside of her convulsed, massaging his cock.

He released her breast with a groan, his arms tightening around her almost painfully as his own release jolted through him, his cock jerking against the mouth of her sex as his hot seed erupted inside of her.

Chapter Ten

Waking up and going into the living room to start working, Sera realized that the crib was still in pieces. She'd forgotten all about it after he'd started rubbing her leg.

She heard Nigel stirring in bed. He would probably get up any minute. She decided she should burn him some eggs while he finished the crib.

Nigel was reluctant to get out of bed. He'd had such a wonderful night holding Sera next to him. But he had things to do, and if he didn't get up and leave on his own, Sera was sure to come in and wake him up and tell him to get the hell out. He was actually surprised she'd let him stay as long as she had. He got up and got dressed and went into the living room. He could smell that something was cooking. He saw that Sera was cooking.

She smiled at him when she saw him. He had bed head, and it was absolutely the sexiest thing she'd ever seen on him. It could have just been because she knew how he'd gotten it though.

Nigel started back on the crib, being sure to grab up the directions to have them handy.

The kitchen began to fill up with smoke, and Sera turned off her eggs. She put them on a plate and set them on her breakfast nook for Nigel and then went over to her computer to get to work. She didn't need to watch him, she'd never get anything done.

Nigel had thought it was wonderful that Sera had taken it upon herself to cook him something to eat while he worked, that was until he saw the blackened eggs she'd concocted. He wasn't about to attempt to eat those. He decided rather than risk getting into another argument with Sera that he would leave as soon as he had finished the crib.

"That's it. I'm done," he announced.

"Where do you want it?"

Sera stopped working on her computer and turned around to see the crib. It was beautiful! She couldn't contain her excitement. She rushed over to it and lovingly stroked the dark wood finish.

"Oh, Nigel, you did such a great job! I'm so glad it's done before the babies get here. It's one less thing for me to worry about." She continued to admire it for a minute and then she remembered he'd asked her where to put it. "My spare bedroom is too far away from my room to be a nursery, so I'd like to have the bed put in my room."

Nigel picked up the crib and walked it into her room.

Sera followed right behind him.

"Right over here by the wall by the bed. This way I won't have to go very far to get them. Irene tells me I won't get much sleep if they're not close by."

Nigel put the crib right where she'd indicated.

"Well, I have to go. I'll talk to you later." Before she could object, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her swiftly on the mouth.

It warmed Sera all over, making her cheeks burn with the excited blush that crept

into them.

Nigel released her and headed for the door and left.

She was a little a little disappointed that he left so suddenly. And he hadn't even eaten his eggs. Poor thing, he was probably starving. He'd been so busy he'd forgotten to eat.

She got to working, trying not to think about him instead of work, which was hard because he was constantly on her mind now, but finally she put him out of her mind.

He didn't come over that night.

Sera couldn't help but feel abandoned. She had known where his priorities lay. He wanted his children, and her, he just wanted to fuck her. It was hard, but she tried again to convince herself she should be happy. This was what she had wanted all of the time. It wasn't really a good idea to get involved with him anyway. He was likely to re-enlist for the military and stay gone on tours or lose his life in battle. She'd already lost so much in life, she didn't think her heart could take anymore. She didn't think she could handle pining over him, hoping against hope that he didn't get himself killed in some foreign country, surrounded by the enemy, when he should have been home with a family that loved him.

Love. Yes, love. She loved him. She couldn't believe she'd been stupid enough to do it, to allow herself to be vulnerable to his charm, but she had. She'd gone and made the biggest mistake, she'd fallen head over heels for him, and there was nothing she could do to change that now.

* * * *

Nigel drove to the place he'd been renting since he'd gotten back in town. Even though he finally realized that more than anything he wanted to be with Sera and be a proper father to their children, he realized that he'd been too pushy from the beginning with her. She was an independent woman, and she didn't want to be pressured into anything, and she didn't appreciate over possessiveness.

He decided to lay low for a few days. That wouldn't be hard since he had to find a job now that he wasn't in the service anymore. He'd already begun applying for jobs in the security field. He had several interviews throughout the day. He hoped it wouldn't take long to land a good job. He didn't want to spend too much time away from Sera and give her the wrong idea.

* * * *

Nigel was on cloud nine when he learned he'd landed a job as head of security at a huge corporation, well, at least for a minute he was. He got tied up with his new job immediately. He had to learn the ropes and he had to thoroughly check out their security measures and systems for weaknesses.

Realizing he couldn't make it to Sera's next doctor's appointment, he called his mother.

"Mom."

"Yes, honey."

"I'm sorry to call you like this out of the blue, but do you think you can take Sera to her next doctor's appointment?"

Irene's face scrunched up with worry. "You can't make it?"

"No, I have some things I have to do. Can you make my apologies to Sera? Tell

her that I really want to be there and that I'll see her soon. I don't want her to think that I've suddenly abandoned her, but I can't explain anything right now. I will soon though."

After he got off the phone with his mother, he called a nursery and arranged to have flowers sent to Sera with a note attached.

* * * *

Sera heard a knock on her door. Sure it was Nigel, she got up from her computer desk and raced over to the door.

"Who is it?" she said, unable to contain the excitement in her voice.

"Delivery ma'am."

Sera checked out her window to be sure the man outside had a delivery. She was he had a vase of roses. She quickly opened the door.

"Are you Sera Anderson?"

"Yes."

"These are for you."

Sera was disappointed that it wasn't Nigel. She hadn't seen him for days and she was going through withdrawal symptoms. But the roses were a nice surprise.

"Thank you," she said to the flower delivery man and took the vase he offered.

She inhaled deeply of their fresh scent. She loved red roses. She noticed a card attached. Curious, she went back in the house to set them down on the counter to see what it said.

She opened the card and was surprised at what she read.

You are the most beautiful pregnant woman ever. I hope that our children have half as much beauty and talent as their mother. I miss you.

Tears came to Sera's eyes. No one had ever bought her roses before. And the note was so sweet. She'd been trying so hard for so long to resist Nigel. She was a fool for putting up such a fight. He was a wonderful man.

While she was getting more water for the roses, the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Sera, it's Nigel. Did you get the roses I sent you?"

Sera blushed, they were so beautiful, such a thoughtful gift. "Yes. I did."

"I'm sorry I couldn't take you to your appointment earlier today. I'd like to make it up to you. Can I take you out to supper?"

"That would be wonderful."

"I'll pick you up at 7:00."

* * * *

Nigel arrived at 7:00 on the dot. But, Sera found that instead of taking her out to a restaurant, as she'd thought he would, he took her a house she'd never seen before.

He got out as he always did and opened the door for her and escorted her up to the house.

"Nigel, what's going on? I thought we"

"Hold on just a minute. It's a surprise."

She didn't say anything else as he unlocked the front door.

"Close your eyes."

She did as she was told.

He took her hand and helped her through the doorway of the house and shut the door behind them.

"Okay, now open them."

She opened her eyes and gasped. There was a small dining table with one candle and two plates with food on them. The rest of the house was completely barren.

"What's going on, Nigel?"

"Sit down and I'll explain."

She sat down. The food looked and smelled delicious.

"Did you order takeout?"

"No, I cooked it myself in my kitchen."

"Your kitchen? This is the rental house you've been staying at?"

"No, actually, this is the house I just bought." He paused and pulled out a little black velvet box from his pocket. He got out of his chair and knelt down on the floor in front of her.

"Sera, I bought this house with all of the money I put away throughout my years in the military. I know you have a house, but it only has two bedrooms and it's small. It's not big enough for our family."

"Our family?"

"Yes, and I'd like to make that official. I don't want to marry you just because you're having my children. I know we never met before, but I'm sure if we had I would feel the same as I do now. I love you, and I couldn't imagine my life without you. Will you marry me?"

Sera started crying, "Yes. Yes, I will. I love you, too."

Talking wasn't all he had on his mind, he realized abruptly as it settled solidly in his mind what it was that felt 'unfinished'.

Reaching up to grasp her upper arms, he hauled her halfway across his lap.

She sucked in a sharp breath of surprise, tipping her head back to meet his gaze.

"Now let me get some of the baby making practice I should have gotten months ago?" he murmured as he dipped his head closer to hers, pausing when his mouth hovered just above her lips, waiting to see if she would meet him or retreat.

She hesitated for several heartbeats and then lifted her lips until they brushed his.

His heart fisted painfully in his chest, punching the air from his lungs in a rush as he felt her soft lips meld with his own.

Covering her lips with his mouth and sucking lightly to seal the two of them together mouth to mouth even as he traced the soft contours of her lips and thrust his tongue between them to invade the moist heat of her mouth. The rush that went through him then was intoxicating. It demolished any possibility of rational thought. Releasing his grip on her arms, he shifted one hand to press it between her shoulder blades and the other to cup the back of her head and hold her to him for his exploration.

The painful fisting of his heart eased and then it commenced to slamming nearly as painfully against his chest wall as she flooded his senses, as he explored the texture of her tongue and tested the limits of the small cavern of her mouth, stroked the silky inner walls, tasted her, breathed her. The tentative touch of her hands as they settled along the sides of his chest sent another, headier rush of pleasure through him. He drew her closer, held her more tightly. Blood flushed his skin, heated it until he felt fevered. Blood pulsed

against his ear drums deafeningly, pounded in his skull, filled his cock until it felt as if it would explode.

A deep, unquenchable hunger welled inside him. The more he tasted and touched, the more he wanted. He slipped his arms around her, molding her more tightly against his body from chest to waist. His skin burned where her soft breasts flattened against his chest.

He couldn't get enough air into his lungs. Intent on absorbing the taste and feel of her mouth, he fought the burning need to fill them as long as he could before he broke away, gasping hoarsely to replenish the deficit of air in his lungs, to oxygenate his blood before he passed out.

He stared down at her face as he sucked in gasps of air. Slowly, her eyelids lifted and she stared back at him, and his entire body seemed to tighten at the look in her eyes.

"But before you said you wanted to talk," she prompted after a moment.

He lifted a hand and hooked her jaw in the crook of his thumb and forefinger to keep her from turning her face away as he lowered his head to hers. "We did talk, now we have to make up for lost time," he murmured a breath away from her lips.

A jolt went through Sera as she felt the brush of his lips against hers and then heat flooded her as his mouth settled possessively over hers. A vague floating sensation intensified to a swirling darkness as his tongue skated along her lips and delved inside her mouth. For a handful of frantic heartbeats, she was suspended by surprise and confusion, caught by the certain knowledge that she was lost if she allowed him to kiss her as he had before.

The lure of pleasure was far stronger than her will to resist ever had been, and even as he invaded her senses with his touch and taste, she knew she'd lost the battle long before, curling her fingers into his flesh.

As if he sensed that silent yielding, he released his grip on her jaw and drew her closer, caging her with his arms.

She uttered a sound of need, of surrender into his mouth as he kissed her more deeply, with more fervor, sucking lightly on her mouth as he stroked her tongue with his own.

Weakness flowed through her in the wake of the heat that poured through her veins. She curled her fingers more tightly into the flesh of his arms, clinging to fight the dizziness as well as the heaviness that settled over her, struggling to breathe when there didn't seem to be enough air in the room to fill her lungs.

And still regret filled her as he broke the contact, lifting his head to study her face. Panting for breath, she lifted her eyelids with an effort to stare up at his face. A shiver skated through her at the tumultuous fire she saw in his eyes, a quiver of anticipation, hopefulness.

He slipped his hands to her face, settling his palms along her cheeks. "I love you, Sera," he murmured huskily. "I can give you the family you've always wanted. I'll never leave your side."

Licking her lips, she lifted them in supplication. Delight filled her with a roaring blaze as he seized upon her offering hungrily, greedily taking what she offered up and demanding more. The feel of his mouth on hers, the heat of it, gave rise to a desperate hunger of her own.

His hands moved her as he explored her mouth with far more possessiveness than before, coaxing her tongue into his mouth to suckle on it and sending jolt after jolt of heady pleasure through her. His hands alternately stroked along her back and pressed her closer as he moved restlessly against her. The chill of the air against her overheated body created an eruption of pebbly skin along her bare body.

He drew her tightly against him, dispelling the chill with the heat of his body, his hands, his mouth. She slid her hands up his chest to loop her arms around his neck as he drew her close again, threading her fingers through his dark hair, stroking the silky mane with delight at the cool, sleekness of it against her palms and fingers.

He wove his way downward and covered the tip of one breast with his mouth, surging upward to meet his caress when an electric current of pleasure sizzled along every nerve ending and drew her womb into a hard knot.

She gasped, shuddering as he teased the turgid tip with his tongue and then sucked on it, clasping his head tightly to her one moment and stroking her hands over his head and along his broad shoulders and back feverishly the next. By the time he'd made his way over to her other breast, she was beyond reason. All she could think about was mounting the engorged flesh surging against her thigh instead of where she needed it. Struggling with his weight until she managed to wrap her thighs around his waist, she groped between them in search of his cock.

She couldn't reach it, damn it all!

"Nigel!" she gasped, planting her palm in the middle of his forehead and shoving him away from her breast.

He surged upward, gasping, staring at her uncomprehendingly as she undulated against him in an effort to wiggle downward and impale herself on his shaft. He ground his teeth as she caught hold of his cock at last and stroked it and then guided it along her cleft.

Shifting upward abruptly as he felt the moist heat of her sex close around the head of his cock, he curled his hips to penetrate her. She fell back against the bed, groaning as she felt him surging against her, stretching her—turning her inside out as her flesh refused to yield to him.

"Nigel!" she gasped, reaching between them to stretch her flesh for him, shuddering as she felt his cock slipping between her fingers as he delved her—too shallowly to give her any relief. They struggled against one another, heaving, pressing until sweat slickened their skin and they were slipping against one another one moment and clinging the next.

He heaved upward abruptly, disengaging their bodies and shoving himself downward.

Before she could object, before she'd entirely grasped what he meant to do, he thrust her thighs wide and covered her sex with his mouth. A shockwave of intense sensation rolled over her as she felt the lathe of his tongue along her cleft and then connecting with her clit. She groaned, bucked against him.

He caught her hips, holding her for his mouth as he lathed and suckled at her burning flesh until she was sobbing for breath and torn between the urge to make him stop and the equal demand of her body to yield to the explosive climax she felt building inside of her.

She almost wept when he did stop.

Lifting away from her, he crawled over her body once more, aligned his shaft with her opening and curled his hips to penetrate her, pressing steadily against her until he'd breached the mouth of her sex. When he withdrew slightly and thrust again, she felt him sinking slowly deeper and deeper inside of her, felt the friction of his passage along her channel in waves of intense pleasure.

"It feels so good," she moaned, lifting her arms and legs and locking them around him to counter his thrusts until he'd filled her to capacity, stretched her almost to the point of pain.

Dropping her feet to the mattress as he withdrew, she met his next thrust, focused inwardly as she felt her body rising, tightening, preparing to take the leap into ecstasy. She gasped in a harsh breath and held it as she reached the precipice and teetered, struggling to hold it off just a few more moments to enjoy the pleasurable glide of his flesh along her channel. She lost her hold on it as he began to thrust faster, slamming into her in jolts that pushed her control beyond her reach, exploding in glorious waves of rapture as her climax hit her with such force that it dragged keen cries from her.

He shuddered as her body began to convulse and then surged into her faster until he found his own quaking release.

Gasping for breath, shuddering at the quakes that continued to rip through him, he leaned heavily against her, struggling to catch his breath and gather enough strength to move off of her. Finally, he heaved himself to one side and tipped onto the bed beside her.

Nearly comatose in the aftermath, she allowed herself to drift lazily while her heart and breath slowly calmed until she could breathe more easily.

She groaned as he groped her until his hand settled on her shoulder and he dragged her over to face him. Ignoring her protest, he pulled her against him and sought her mouth, kissing her briefly before he released her.

Epilogue

"Nigel, please slow the car down. I'm not going to have the babies in the car."

"Don't try to distract me from the subject at hand."

"Well, at least we have Nigel's name picked out since we named him after you and your father."

"Yes, but that's only half of the problem. We still haven't agreed on our little girl's name and now she's almost here." He paused. "Hold that thought," he said as he pulled up and into the driveway in front of the hospital to drop her off. "I'll be back as soon as I park the car. Okay, honey?"

"I'll be fine. You don't have to rush."

She got out and he helped her into a wheelchair. A nurse wheeled her inside.

Two Hours Later

"Aren't they beautiful?" Sera gushed, holding both of her babies in her arms.

"Yes, they are. They're so amazing," he admitted.

"But we still haven't agreed on a name for this little angel," he said, gently caressing his little girl's cheek while she slept.

"How did you mother come up with your name?"

"It's funny that you mention that right after calling her a little angel. My mother called me her little angel the whole time she was pregnant with me and finally decided that's what she would name me. Sera is actually short for Seraphim."

"She was right about that, you know."

"Hmm?"

"You are an angel."

He grabbed his son, Nigel the third, and laid him gently in the baby bed a nurse had brought in.

He then grabbed his daughter, still unnamed and laid her down gently beside her brother. He admired them for a minute before turning back to Sera.

"Scoot over."

She scooted over in the hospital bed.

He lay down beside her in the bed, trying to be careful and not hurt her because she was still very tender from the delivery.

He gently pushed some stray hair out of her face, kissing her tenderly on the temple.

She smiled up at him, thinking it couldn't get any better than this.

"So, I was thinking. Since there's enough room in this hospital bed for two, we should probably get started on making some brothers and sisters for Nigel and his sister."

She laughed and playfully batted at him, although she was as weak as a newborn kitten.

“Don’t you think we’ll have our hands full for a while?”

“Are you telling me no woman?” he asked, raising a questionable eyebrow at her.

“Never.”

The End

Read an excerpt from *Exposed*, also available from NCP.

EXPOSED

By

Megan Ziese

Chapter One

Keira Johnson, aka Sexx, took one last look in the mirror, shifting her red halter top a little more. The D.J. was going to call her name any minute. Even after a week of dancing at the club, she still wasn't over her stage nerves. She supposed for the most part that, more than worrying about strangers ogling her, she'd been nervous that one day her boss might discover that she'd taken on a second job working nights at Cheaters.

She had worked at the law firm of Douglas and Tremaine for almost six months before she'd finally concluded that one job just wasn't going to pay the bills. If she was ever going to get out from under her college debts, she was going to have to try something drastic.

Deciding to work nights as an exotic dancer was pretty drastic, but then she'd considered long and hard before she'd finally concluded it was her best option. Nothing else would bring in enough money to get her debts off of her back nearly as quickly, and she didn't think she had the stamina to hold down two jobs for very long. She didn't think it would even have occurred to her to check out the exotic dance scene except that she'd discovered pretty soon after she'd started working for the firm that her boss, Devin Tremaine, entertained his male clients at a strip joint fairly regularly.

As far as she'd been able to discover, though, Devin Tremaine always took his clients to the strip club down the street, the Purple Pony. She'd been as casual as she could possibly be when she'd asked his personal secretary, Sarah, on their lunch break one day if he always frequented that establishment. Sarah had given her a strange look, which had given her the uneasy feeling that, maybe, she hadn't been as subtle as she'd thought, but had assured her that Mr. Tremaine always went to the Purple Pony.

It was for that reason Kiera had chosen Cheaters, even though the Purple Pony

seemed to be more popular, catering to a more upscale clientele that probably meant it would also have paid better. Far better, she'd thought, to take a little longer to shed those debts that had been keeping her awake at night than risk the chance of running into her boss and losing the job she expected to make a career out of. Sarah had been Mr. Tremaine's personal secretary since they'd started the law firm, and she knew him better than anyone else. If she said he never went to Cheaters, Kiera was sure she could count on the information being reliable.

Her own, more limited, knowledge of Mr. Tremaine supported that. Since she'd started working at the law firm, Keira had noticed many things about her entirely too handsome boss. Not to say he was OCD, but he was definitely a creature of habit and always did things the same way. He kept his blonde hair short and impeccably neat, parted just off the side, smoothed straight despite its tendency to curl—not a hair out of place—and it never budged, just like him. He never relented on office policy. He never arrived late, never socialized internally. His clothing and demeanor were always immaculate, perfect. And he expected all the qualities and practices he exhibited to be followed to the letter by his employees, all of them, no matter their job at the company.

It was no surprise to her to learn from many of the female employees that the straight-laced, extremely cold and serious Mr. Tremaine had never dated anyone in the law firm. She had heard horror stories of women who thought they could work their way up the social ladder by engaging in a relationship with him. It hadn't taken long for them to be shown the door.

Following office policy hadn't been a problem for Keira but being able to get by with the salary they'd started her off on was another matter. Her college loans and the cost of living in a big city were bearing down on her. She had recently been forced to choose between eating and paying rent—and she didn't like those kinds of choices. She knew that something had to give, and it wouldn't be a promotion at work. She hadn't worked there long enough to expect anything of the sort. The only solution was a second job, which the law firm had expressly forbid. But she didn't have a choice in the matter. And the only job she could get with flexible hours at night that could offset her loans was a job as a stripper. They paid cash, she worked under a stage name, and she didn't have to claim the income. She had only taken the job as a temporary fix anyway, hoping that in another six months she would get a promotion and she'd be able to quit the second job.

"Let's give a round of applause for China. And now introducing . . . Sexx!" D.J. Mike announced on the microphone.

That was her cue. By that time, Keira had taken her place. At the announcement, she stepped out onto the stage, passing China on the way. Dazzled by the spotlights and, thankfully, unable to really see the audience, Keira claimed the stage, using the strut she'd been taught as she slunk with a provocative sway of her hips across the smooth surface. Grabbing the steel pole in the middle of the stage once she reached it, she began to twirl around it sinuously, taking care not to lose her footing. The six inch heels she'd bought for the job were dangerous.

She turned her back to one side of the stage, dipping low as she slid her hands down the pole, using her legs to shake her ass.

The men behind her cheered, waving dollars.

She crouched down and bounced her ass a few times to the beat of the music

before turning and dropping to her knees to crawl on the stage in front of the men, keeping her gaze focused on where she was going and her mind on maintaining the sensual movement. She'd discovered it helped to 'tune' out her audience as much as possible.

Grabbing the garter on her thighs as she passed them, the men began to insert their money, using the opportunity for a quick feel.

Keira had only made it around half of the stage before the next song in her set came on. She used the pole to get up and turned her ass to the other side of the stage as she tried to seductively slide out of her leather hipster shorts. Turning around, leaning back against the pole for support, she slipped the knot at the neck of her halter and then the one just behind her back. She held the cups over her breasts for a moment before she whipped it away by the strings, twirled it a couple of times to set her breasts to jiggling in a circular motion, and then tossed the halter toward the back of the stage. She slid down the pole then, dropping to her knees, and then crawled in front of the men. Coming up on her knees, she cupped her breasts in front of them, massaging them, playfully jiggling her breasts before sliding a hand down her hip to play with the ties on her string bottoms. When the appreciative catcalls reached a fever pitch from her teasing, she came up on her knees, sidling closer to the edge of the stage to offer her garter for more tips. Allowing her eyes to drift half closed as if she was unbearably excited by them and the feel of her own body, she continued to move with the music, skimming her hands along her torso from breasts to hips and back again to draw the men's gazes to her smooth skin.

Even focused as she was on undulating her body sinuously, on pretending to be caught up in a sexual haze as she lifted and stroked her breasts, Keira noticed the large hand that snaked out and tucked a twenty dollar bill in her garter, stroking lightly along her thigh. A thrill went through her since she rarely saw anything bigger than a five.

Dropping to her hands and knees directly in front of the big tipper, she shook her breasts almost in his face, lifting them to him in offering.

The sensual, teasing smile on her lips died as she met the man's gaze over the top of her breasts. Recognition washed over her in a cold wave, freezing her as still as a statue. Her mouth dropped open in shock. She didn't hear the men beside him whooping and hollering for more. She didn't hear the music resonating throughout the bar. All she could hear was the frantic beating of her heart. And all she could see was . . . her boss, Mr. Devin Tremaine.

Chapter Two

Abruptly, she elicited a sharp gasp of surprise. Scrambling to get up on her six inch heels, Kiera dashed to the rear of the stage, ducked behind the curtains, and raced to the dressing room to hide, her clothes forgotten, the rest of the customers at the stage forgotten.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," she chanted, like a mantra, dropping weakly onto the bench at her dressing table.

"Sexx. What are you doing?" Lacy asked, her voice eloquent of shocked disbelief. "You didn't finish your set!"

Keira ignored the skinny blonde girl.

"You have to finish! The boss'll be furious."

"You have *no* idea," Keira muttered, her heart still hammering in her chest almost painfully. Tears welled behind her eyes as the shock finally wore off enough for her to wrap her mind around what had just happened and worse, to begin to imagine the repercussions. This was it. She was fired. All those years at college and now she was going to be fired from her first job, and she had only been there for six months! What was she going to say? Douglas and Tremaine was one of the most prestigious law firms in the country. She was fucked. She would never be able to get another job at a law firm. Fuck!

A big meaty man in a black tank top, the bouncer Mike, burst into the dressing room. He looked around until he spotted her.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing, Sexx? Get your ass back out there on stage ... *now*! Before we have a fucking riot on our hands!"

Still upset about what had just happened, all Keira could do was stutter. "I . . . I . . . can't," she managed.

"You damn well will. Get your ass out there or you're fired," he shot back angrily without bothering to ask why she felt like she couldn't go back out there.

Probably, because he obviously didn't give a fuck!

Dismayed as she was, it dawned on Kiera pretty forcefully that she couldn't afford to lose *both* jobs on the same night. Grudgingly, stiff with nerves, she skated back out onto the stage, almost groaning when she realized they'd restarted the damned set and she had an entire song to make it through.

Cringing inwardly, trying her best to focus on the music and move fluidly through her number, she focused on keeping her back to Devin Tremaine—or where he'd been sitting before, in any case. For once, the fact that the stage lights made it almost impossible for her to clearly see the faces of her audience didn't particularly make her happy.

She was too unnerved by the possibility of coming face to face with her boss again—soon to be ex-boss—to shake off the sense of awkwardness that had gripped her, and certainly too unnerved to move very close to the edge of the stage to collect tips.

Instead, she focused on a pole dance, sliding up and down the pole, gyrating to the music and trying not to cringe at the bounce and sway of her breasts in counter to every move. When the song neared the end, she pranced with more haste than grace around the perimeter of the stage to collect whatever tips the men could hastily stuff into her garter and then, with relief, shot off the stage again.

Shady poked her head in the dressing room door almost before Keira's ass had settled on her bench again. "There's a guy out there that wants a lap dance."

Keira blinked rapidly at her, trying to focus, trying to calm herself by breathing normally. "Who is it?" she asked, a little out of breath. She didn't really feel up to lap dancing. All she wanted to do was crawl in a big black hole. She wanted to hide in the dressing room the rest of the night and only go on stage when she had to.

"I don't know his name. He's not a regular. He looks like he has money though," Shady said, leaving the room before Keira could ask her more.

Keira gaped at the closed door as a horrible thought popped into her mind.

Shit! Could it be? Was it Mr. Tremaine? Surely it couldn't be.

He took his *clients* to watch the strippers. She seriously doubted he paid them any attention at all—let alone consorted with them. It just didn't fit anything she knew about him.

It *did* seem to fit his character that he counted on the strippers distracting his clients.

Taking several deep, fortifying breaths, Keira tried to relax. It wasn't him. It couldn't be. He didn't do that sort of thing. She said that now, but then him even being in the club was out of character. He should be at the club down the street. Why was he here?

Trying to convince herself that the man asking for her couldn't possibly be Mr. Tremaine, she rifled through her dance bag and found another halter top to put on, this one black, and another pair of black faux leather short-shorts to put on. It only took her a minute to don the skimpy outfit before heading out of the dressing room door. Making her way into the main area of the club, she headed straight for the bar, trying not to look in the direction of the stage where she had seen her boss. Maybe he wouldn't notice her leaving the dressing room? Hell, if she was doing some wishful thinking, she might as well hope he hadn't recognized her at all. After all, the only thing he'd seen exposed at work had been her face.

Maybe he'd been too focused on the tits slapping his cheeks to notice the face attached to them, she thought a little hopefully?

She approached the first man that was alone at the bar.

"Buy me a drink." It wasn't a request.

Thankfully, the man didn't balk at her demand. He turned around and waved the bartender over.

"I'll have sex on the beach," she told the bartender. Minutes later, he set the drink in front of her. Keira turned it up and drank the whole thing as fast as she could. She wasn't a drinker, but tonight was different. Her world had been turned upside down. Tonight, she needed it. She turned to thank the man that had bought her drink, giving him a kiss on his shiny shaved head.

She turned to leave and ran into a brick wall. At least, it seemed like a brick wall

at first. Stunned for several seconds, she opened her eyes to find a tailored suit. She swallowed hard past a knot of worry that had suddenly formed in her now dry throat. As she swept the 'wall' with her gaze, she found a hard chiseled chin, a fierce set of humorless lips, a straight imperious nose, and the coldest blue eyes she'd ever seen outside of the office staring back at her, sizing her up, taking her apart even now. Suddenly, she felt very small and insecure standing there before him. What an idiot she had been! She should have just cowered in the dressing room all night. But she had been so certain that she could work and ignore him. After all, it was a sizable club. But, she had been wrong. Or, he had sought her out.

"Sexx is it?" he asked, his voice cold, without emotion.

That did it. He was purposefully digging in the open wound. "Yes, it's Sexx," she said tightly, her defenses up now, knowing full well that he knew that was how they had introduced her on stage. He was blatantly taunting her!

The prick!

Grasping her arm, he forcefully led her to a darkened corner, away from most of the customers, while Keira struggled with the urge to make things worse by creating a scene. She didn't particularly *want* the bouncers coming down on them, however, so she kept pace with him the best she could and tried to pretend she *wanted* to go with him. He released her, to her relief, once they reached the table that seemed to be his objective, although she'd more than half feared he meant to drag her outside for a confrontation. Sprawling in the chair he'd pulled out, he dragged a money clip from one front pocket of his dress pants, peeled a twenty off of it, and laid the bill on the table without a word. His gaze flickered over her as he shoved the money clip into his pocket again, a frown furrowing his blonde brow, his jaw clenching so tightly a muscle in his jaw ticked.

Keira gawked at him, dragged her gaze from his face to the twenty, and then looked at him again. She didn't know what to think.

It dawned on her, though, that her fairy godmother was sprinkling shit tonight. Every wish was denied.

Obviously, the forlorn hope that it couldn't possibly have been *him* that had asked for the lap dance had been wrong. It was as if he was *demanding* a dance.

What she couldn't figure out was why. He sure as hell wasn't wearing the vacuous look of the men who generally paid for a lap dance. He wasn't intoxicated—either with booze or lust.

She had a bad feeling she was going to be swept up in a very unpleasant scene if she turned and stalked off, especially after the stunt she'd already pulled on stage earlier. Well, she wasn't going to refuse his money tonight. She knew damn good and well that he was going to fire her in the morning. She would need that money to pay the rent, which was due in a week.

Fuck it! She'd danced for her dinner plenty by now.

She reached for the money. He grabbed her wrist before she could grasp it.

"Dance first," he said in a stern voice.

Irritated further, Keira straightened, glaring at him until the next song started, tapping the toe of one shoe, biting her bottom lip to keep from giving him a good tongue lashing. She didn't care if she looked like a petulant child. Right now, she wasn't in the office. She was at a damn titty bar. She could act any way she damned well pleased, but

she wasn't going to cuss him out before she got that twenty from him.

It might be all she got in the way of 'severance' pay.

The next song started, and she pulled up a chair from beside them, turning her back to him as she placed the back of the chair to her. She bent over, resting her arms and her upper body weight on the chair, bouncing her ass up in down to the rhythm of the music, shaking it from side to side, her ass cheeks jiggling frantically with each thrust of her hips, each turn of her legs. She had turned away from him so that she didn't have to look at him, but the more she danced the more she thought about his reaction. He was always so stony, even when he had insisted on a dance. She was curious to see if it was affecting him at all. As the next song began, she pushed the chair back where she had gotten it and began to undress, slowly.

She used her fingertips to push her shorts lower and lower, swaying in front of him seductively. She pushed them down until they fell to the floor.

He didn't take his gaze away from hers.

That further irritated her, but she managed to keep the expression on her face neutral. What the hell had he even asked for a dance for if he wasn't going to look? It wasn't that she wanted so much for him to look at her with desire, but, maybe, in a perverse way she did. Maybe she wanted to see that he felt something besides disdain? Maybe she wanted to break down that cold exterior, that haughty attitude he carried with him like a shield?

She pulled her halter top off quickly, her breasts bouncing up and down as the fabric that was holding them was ripped away. She watched him carefully and noticed that he glanced briefly at her breasts. Feeling a small sense of triumph, she moved closer to him, placing a knee on his upper thigh, undulating her hips toward him, caressing the skin of her inner thigh before tracing the outline of her string thongs, watching his face the entire time. She leaned closer still, one hand on the wall behind him for support, the other cupping one breast as she brought it mere breaths from his face. She molded it in her hand, pinching the nipple, licking it with her tongue. She saw him shudder slightly at that. Not knowing whether that was a shudder of pleasure or not, she became more emboldened still, desperately needing now to make him feel something. She moved in closer, setting her other knee on his other thigh. Bending so that the rest of her body was not touching him but very close, she brushed a stray lock of blonde hair away from his ear, tracing the folds of his ear with her finger, breathing hard in his ear as she lightly scraped her nails on the flesh behind his ear, down his throat to his collar bone.

Another almost imperceptible shudder went through him.

Keira almost shouted in her triumph. She was giddy with the power of it. She had broken through his icy shell. He might fire her in the morning, but at least she knew she had gotten to him, even if on a small level.

The song ended, and she got off of his lap, standing before him as stonily as she could manage, waiting for him to make the next move.

He grabbed the twenty from the table and looked her straight in the eye as he grabbed her leg, pulling her closer until her breasts were almost in his mouth.

A shock, like electricity, went straight through Keira at his touch, almost sending her to the floor if not for the hold he had on her leg.

He didn't say anything, he just kept looking at her with his penetrating blue eyes

as he pulled her garter away from her leg with his other hand, sliding the twenty in.

Keira stepped away from him after he had put it in. She turned away and headed straight for the dressing room, not daring to turn around to see if he was watching her. She knew he was. She could feel his gaze searing her exposed flesh.

It was twenty minutes later when she was called to go on stage again. With great reluctance she went on stage, but when she got there and scanned the crowd, she didn't see Mr. Tremaine anywhere. She tried to tell herself that she was relieved.

Chapter Three

The next day, Keira dutifully went to work. She couldn't just not go to work, even if she was going to have to get a face to face lecture and dismissal. She was a big girl. She could handle it. At least, that's what she told herself. Outside, she was trying to maintain a look of indifference. Inside, she was a quivering mess.

She had only been at work for about ten minutes before seeing Mr. Tremaine. She had just walked into the break room to make herself a stiff cup of coffee, needing it because of her late night working at the club. Just as she began to pour coffee into her cup, he walked into the room. Not realizing it, she overfilled her cup, burning her fingers. Thankfully, the coffee machine had a built in area to catch spills or it would have gone all over the floor. She was still trying to wrestle with her embarrassment for burning herself because she had been staring at him, when he left the room. Confused, she walked over to the door and watched him walk down the corridor as if he hadn't seen her.

That was highly improbable. They had been the only ones in the break room. And yet, he acted as if she hadn't even been there. Maybe he just didn't want to confront her about last night yet? Maybe he was waiting for something? But what? The partner? He didn't need his partner to fire her.

The more she thought about it, the more she worried. And as she fretted, the hours in the work day seemed to last forever. Every time someone came to her desk, she steeled herself, expecting to see Mr. Tremaine's stern face demanding her presence in his office. By the end of the day, she was a complete wreck, and he still hadn't called her to his office. She was more confused than she had ever been before. Why hadn't he reprimanded her? Why hadn't she been dismissed? How could he just ignore her after last night? If their only encounter had been the one when she was on stage, she might've overlooked what had happened, convinced herself that he hadn't gotten a good look at her face. But she couldn't deny the fact that he had asked, no, demanded a lap dance from her. He had hardly glanced away from her face. There was no way he could have *not* known it was her. It was like he was taunting her.

It was a hell of a lot more unnerving than simply calling her into his office and coldly dismissing her would've been.

* * * *

After work, Keira drove home and made a quick job of getting ready for the club. She was still going over her current situation as she entered the dressing room at Cheaters. Maybe he had blackmail in mind? Maybe he wanted something else from her? She couldn't imagine what, though. She didn't have money, assets, connections. He had never acted as if he desired her. Truthfully, she'd felt like the invisible woman at work. The fact that he'd barely acknowledged her half-naked body in front of him the night before certainly didn't indicate that he'd just been hiding his interest before.

So what were the reasons behind his behavior?

The only way to find out would be to ask him, and she just didn't think she was up to that. Maybe he was going to fire her tomorrow. Maybe he was just going to leave her hanging until he'd had the chance to replace her? She couldn't be sure of anything now. The one thing she *was* sure of was that this whole situation was making her a nervous wreck.

Brought abruptly back from her thoughts from the sounds emerging from the other side of the curtains, Keira took a few calming breaths to try to prepare herself for her number.

"Let's give a round of applause for Shady," the D.J. announced. "Now, put your hands together for Sexx."

Keira bit her lip as she made her way to the curtains that separated the dressing room from the stage. She took a few deep breaths. She was fine. Nothing had happened. She could worry about tomorrow and getting fired when it happened. Tonight, she had to concentrate on making the rent. She couldn't let her worries interfere with work.

As she stepped past Shady and onto the stage, however, her gaze automatically moved to where she'd met up with her boss the night before. A jolt shot through her as she made eye contact with Mr. Tremaine. He was sitting in the same spot where he'd been the night before.

Keira's breath caught in her throat. She missed a step but kept on going, trying to remain calm, or at least present an exterior of calm.

She worked the stage just as she always did, except she pointedly stayed away from the part where her boss was sitting. When her two songs were over, she left the stage and went to the dressing room.

China met her just as she stepped past the curtains.

"There's a guy waiting for a dance from you."

She didn't say anything else. She didn't have to.

Keira had a strong feeling she knew who it was.