



COBBLESTONE  
PRESS



# TAKE ME *I'm Yours*

Michelle Miles

*Take Me I'm Yours*

*By*

*Michelle Miles*

## **Take Me I'm Yours by Michelle Miles**

---

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

### **Take Me I'm Yours**

Copyright© 2009 Michelle Miles

ISBN: 978-1-60088-414-6

Cover Artist: Tuesday Dube'

Editor: Leanne Salter

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

[www.cobblestone-press.com](http://www.cobblestone-press.com)

**Dedication**

For Robert, because he always believes in me

## Chapter One

Marion Elizabeth Parker stood in her big white dress, gazing at her reflection in the mirror. Behind her, her bridesmaids giggled and helped each other get dressed in their lovely, pale blush gowns. Well, except for Delilah, her maid of honor. She was a no-nonsense kind of gal and refused to get caught up, much to Marion's chagrin. Still, she couldn't fault her best friend for that. And besides, she'd thrown one hell of a bachelorette party the night before.

Everything was perfect for Marion's special day, and she couldn't be happier. In just a few hours, she would be Mrs. Ethan Michael Baxter III. She sighed wistfully.

Glancing down at the two-carat diamond ring, she saw promises of a future with the man she loved. Of that house with the white, picket fence, and kids running through the yard. Cartoons playing during morning breakfasts. A dog. Maybe a cat.

Her dreams of happily ever after were finally coming true.

Behind her, Delilah carefully placed the crown with miles and miles of tulle on her head. "Now hold still. I'm going to pin it in place."

Delilah insisted on wearing a pair of four-inch Christian Louboutins for the *big day*—in pale blush to match the dress exactly, of course—which meant she was super tall. She had no problem seeing the top of Marion's head as she fumbled with the bobby pins. She had a pin pinched between her dark red lips, and Marion half wondered if she'd leave lipstick behind and in her hair. She knew better than to say

anything, especially when Delilah stabbed her scalp.

"Ow!"

"Hold still. Almost done," Delilah muttered around the pin in her mouth.

In the reflection of the mirror, Marion watched Delilah position the glittering tiara on her head. She winced as another bobby pin stabbed her scalp.

"Sorry, Mar," Delilah said. "There. Does that feel secure?"

"Yes. Thanks, Sweeney Todd." She smoothed strands of hair upward.

"Har. Har." Her maid of honor stuck out her tongue in Delilah fashion before grabbing a can of hairspray. "One more coat should seal it."

She sprayed liberally, leaving a cloud hanging in the air and Marion choking on the fumes. "Del, I think that's good."

"Just trying to make sure you're perfect for your day," Delilah said in a singsong voice. She turned toward the mirror and fluffed her wavy strawberry blonde locks. "You look calm."

"I am calm." She *was*. She had never been so sure about anything in her life. Okay, so she had a few butterflies, but other than that, she was great. She looked forward to spending the next week on her honeymoon with her new husband. Just her, Ethan, and a beach in Jamaica. *Bliss*.

Ethan was everything she ever wanted in a man. Kind, thoughtful, sweet, caring. Not to mention great in the sack.

Delilah handed her the oversized bouquet. "I gotta admit, you look fantastic, Mar," she said, smiling at her reflection.

"Thanks."

There was a quick knock on the door before it opened and her mother entered. "Oh, darling!" she gasped. "You look breathtaking." She kissed her soundly on the cheek.

"Mother, please," Marion said on a groan. "You'll muss me."

Her mother rubbed the lipstick smudge from her daughter's cheek. "I'm sorry, dear. But you do look breathtaking." She stood back, clasping her hands together, looking at her daughter with a wistful smile on her

lips.

Marion was sure she saw the glimmer of a tear.

"Thanks." Marion forced a smile on her face. She was ready to get the show on the road. What was the hold up?

"I think it's about time, isn't it?" her mother said cheerfully, holding her by the shoulders.

"Yes. Where's Dad?"

"Waiting in the foyer, dear."

"I think we should head that way," she suggested.

Before her mother could reply, there was another knock on the door. This time, the best man, Graeme Butler, poked his head in. His large, six-foot frame filled up the entire doorway. He had an odd look on his handsome face; one Marion couldn't quite read. Worry? Nerves?

"Can I come in?" He forced as smile as he peered into the room.

Marion waved him inside. "Hi, Graeme. Yes, yes. Come in."

She couldn't help but notice how great he looked in his tuxedo. Especially since all she ever saw him in were jeans and T-shirts. He even wore the pale blush cummerbund and bow tie. She wasn't sure he would after making such a ruckus about it being too *feminine* for him to wear.

"You wore it." She pointed to the pale tie and cummerbund.

Graeme glanced down, ran his hand down his shirtfront. "Yeah. Can I, uh, talk to you a second? Alone?" He shoved his hands deep into his pockets as he stood in the doorway, that same weird look on his face.

Alarm bells rang in her head. "Why? What's wrong?" She clutched the bouquet tighter in her hand that had suddenly begun to sweat.

"I just need a minute." Graeme couldn't look her in the eyes, which made her stomach plummet to her toes.

"The girls and I will just wait outside." Her mother bit her lower lip as she waved the girls toward the door.

"I'm staying," Delilah said and punctuated her words by putting one hand on a slender hip.

"I really need to talk to her alone," Graeme insisted.

"I'm not leaving," Delilah said with a shake of her head.

"You can talk to me in front of her." Marion knew her friend well

enough to know she wouldn't back down.

Her mother ushered the bridesmaids out of the dressing room. Once they were gone, Graeme closed the door quietly and stood there looking at the floor with that odd look on his face.

"What's this about?" she asked. When he remained silent, she prompted, "Graeme?"

Still with his hands in his pockets, he finally lifted his gaze from the floor to her. Then he glanced at Delilah and back again. He took two giant steps toward her, removing one hand from his pocket, and held a crumpled piece of paper. Was his hand shaking, or was it her imagination? And what did he have to be so nervous about?

"See, it's like this." He was a mere breath away from her, and she couldn't imagine what it was he had to tell her, especially minutes before she was to walk down the aisle. "Maybe you should sit down."

"Stop it, Graeme, and give it to me." She held out her hand for the piece of paper. Delilah hadn't budged an inch next to her.

With a grimace, he pushed the paper into her hand. She held it a moment, afraid to open it, her heart throbbing in her chest. But she *had* to, didn't she? She put the bouquet aside and gingerly unfolded the paper. Handwriting was scrawled across the page in a hurried, sloppy script.

*Marion –  
I'm sorry. I can't.  
Ethan*

"What the hell is this?" Marion blurted, staring at the words. "What does this mean?" She shook the paper at Graeme. "He can't *what*?"

"Marry you," Graeme said, his voice strained as he once again avoided her gaze.

Her heart, it seemed, burst into flame before plummeting into her stomach and burning a hole right through it. "He's just...kidding around." A half-sob, half-laugh hitched in her throat. "Isn't he?"

"He's not."

He merely stood there, staring at her with that apologetic look in



his pale blue eyes. Tears stung the back of her throat, burning her eyes. But still, some part of her thought this might be a joke.

"This is a mistake."

Graeme slowly shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

She searched his face for an explanation, anything that would tell her this was some sick joke he played on her. Graeme's expression, though, held nothing but remorse. And Marion's hand held the crumpled note of shattered dreams.

"I don't... I don't understand." Tears streamed down her face, ruining her perfect makeup she had sat so patiently for at the boutique.

"That son of a bitch." Delilah breathed out the words in a fierce whisper. She flung her bouquet onto a nearby table, the delicate petals scattering across the hard surface, and she started for the door. "I'll take care of him."

"No." Graeme caught her arm before she reached the door. "That will make things worse."

"Worse than leaving Marion at the altar?" Delilah nearly shouted, her face red with her anger. "I don't think so. That bastard needs to pay for this."

"Delilah—" Marion's breath hitched on a broken sob. She wanted to tell her to stop, not to worry about it. What was done, was done. But the words wouldn't come.

"I'm sorry, Marion," Graeme said. He reached for her, then seemed to think better of it and dropped his hand.

"Sorry isn't good enough. That bastard—" Delilah began.

"Yes, he's a bastard," Graeme interrupted. "But causing a scene in front of the entire congregation won't solve anything."

Marion hiccupped, listening to them squabble. She brushed away the tears that continued to fall. "He's right. How long have you known about this, Graeme?"

"He handed me the note when I got to the church today."

She clutched the paper in her fist and turned away from him, her heart fluttering hard in her chest as she blinked away the tears. "Graeme, you're his best friend. Why is he doing this?"

"I don't know."

How could he do this? Leave her this way? With hundreds of guests waiting beyond those doors to witness a wedding? To see them pledge their love for each forever?

Rage flooded her, and she turned on Graeme, her dress swishing with her sudden movement. "You mean you don't want to tell me."

"Marion—" He reached for her again, only to have her slap away his hand.

"Get out!" She threw the paper clutched in her fist at him. The wad hit him square in the chest.

He continued to stand there, looking forlorn, his hands in his pockets, and made no move to exit the room. What did he expect from her? Was he waiting to see her shatter into a thousand pieces?

"You heard her." Delilah moved to stand between her and Graeme. They stared each other down until finally, he turned and left the dressing room as Marion crumpled to the floor and wept. Her best friend was at her side, hugging her close, trying to console her. But all Marion could think about was her perfect life with Ethan...shattered.

## Chapter Two

*Six Months Later*

"Hello, Marion."

Her heart tumbled in her chest at the sound of his voice, and she looked up from her book to confirm her suspicions. There he stood in front of her table at the Bonjour Café, looking at her with a small grin and the sun at his back. There he was—the average man with the average looks and the average size penis that did above-average things to her. She had once thought Ethan was handsome and charming, but the past few months had jaded that thought.

A surge of emotions erupted through her. Everything from pain and anguish, to anger, to shock at seeing him. She never expected him to cross her path again. Once he left her that day in the church, it was over and done with.

She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry.

"Ethan," she finally managed around the cotton on her tongue. It took all her strength to maintain a civil tone. She never wanted to speak to him again.

She had to admit, though, he looked good...for a son of a bitch who'd jilted her moments before she was to walk down the aisle. His dark brown hair ruffled in the breeze, and his eyes still had the ability to draw her in—those soulful chestnut brown eyes she could get lost in. He wore a crisp, white shirt open at the collar to hint at the muscular chest she knew

was beneath.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked, reaching for the metal chair before she could say no. Like nails on a chalkboard, it grated on her nerves as he pulled it out and then had the gall to sit across from her.

She reached for her sweating water glass and took a swig. She put aside the book she'd been reading, crossed her legs, tucked her hair behind her ear, and took a deep breath. She wasn't sure what she was waiting for, but it had to be something big for Ethan to find her at the sidewalk café—their sidewalk café—on this sunny Saturday morning. Right in the middle of her brunch. Her heart rumbled an upbeat tempo in her chest, and her palms turned sweaty.

"So, how are you?" He leaned on his forearms, giving her a small smile as if they were old friends. As if they were catching up after years apart.

Small talk. She couldn't stand the small talk. And he knew it. He continued to give her that same grin. What did it mean? Her suspicious mind told her to keep her guard up.

"Never better, thanks to you. I narrowly missed making the biggest mistake of my life."

Their three-year relationship had been stormy and passionate. Not a day went by since he left her at the altar six months ago that she didn't think about him. At first, she was hurt, as if she'd been stabbed in the heart. Later, the pain turned to anger and something short of hate. She had destroyed every photograph she found of him and the two of them. Cut them into small pieces or put them through the shredder, depending on her mood that day.

Looking at him now, a wave of relief washed over her. Relief that she wasn't married to him and she'd gotten out before it was two kids too late.

And despite her wish not to, her gaze made a beeline for his left hand and found the ring finger devoid of a gold band. A sense of satisfaction went through her, glad to see he hadn't found anyone else, because she knew in her mind no one would be as good as her.

"Now, now." He flashed a grin, as if he thought she was kidding.

Well, she wasn't. "Aren't you going to ask me how I am?"

"No," she said, matter-of-factly. "Why should I?"

"I'm good, thanks," he said without missing a beat. He didn't seem to want to elaborate, and she didn't ask.

As the lump emerged in her throat, the waiter appeared, his crisp white apron tied around his hips a wavering contrast to the black pants and shirt he wore.

"Bonjour, Monsieur Baxter. May I take your order?"

Marion glanced up at the waiter with an imploring *help me* look, but he ignored her, his attention focused on Ethan. Ethan ordered coffee, orange juice, and eggs Benedict, then turned to her when the waiter disappeared. He leaned his muscular forearm on the table again and gave her a thorough once over.

His gaze dropped down the length of her, paused at her breasts, and then came back up to her face. He gave her a knowing grin.

She couldn't stop the shudder that went through her at that lascivious gaze. "Get a good look, because that's all you're going to get."

His mouth still quirked in a grin. The bastard. "And I have to say, Marion, you do look great. I've missed you."

She clutched the napkin in her fist, trying to remain completely calm, but her emotions nearly spun out of control. She bit her lip to keep from blurting out the questions she wanted to ask. How was it he had the *nerve* to sit there and look at her like that? To tell her how great she looked when only six months ago they were moments away from pledging forever?

She lost control, and she couldn't stop the words that came in a flood. "Well, I haven't missed you. Do you have any idea how much cash my parents and I dropped on that wedding? Or how humiliating it was to tell people to go home because there wasn't going to be a wedding after all?" He was a prick, and he deserved to hurt as much as she had.

"I know I hurt you—"

"Save it."

His expression turned from cocky to one of the boy who lost his puppy. Good. She wanted to cause him as much pain as he caused her.

She couldn't believe he would force her to finish her brunch with the very man who walked out on her. Why hadn't she thought to ask for the check? On second thought, she could drop the cash on the table and run. She stared at a half-eaten piece of black bacon and held her breath, trying to keep the other half from coming back up.

"Did you come here to dredge it all up again? I'm over it. I'm over you. In fact, I'm seeing someone." Her breath caught. What in the devil made her tell that lie? "And it's serious." Another lie. "Very serious. In fact, we're moving in together."

*Good God, Marion. Can you just shut your damn mouth?* She clenched the napkin tighter, making her hand ache. What the hell was wrong with her?

He pursed his lips the way he did when he had nothing else to say. They formed a thin, straight line, making them all but disappear. She forgot how much she detested that.

"I didn't know..." he began, but his words drifted away. His shoulders slumped in defeat.

She wanted to stand up and shout her triumph. She hoped her lie was as good as any punch in the gut.

"Of course you didn't. How could you?" she snapped, the rage bubbling inside her. She reached for her handbag and clutched it under her arm. "You were busy with everything else in your life and made it very clear I wasn't that important to you. Oh, and need we mention the woman I found you in bed with?"

And that was only a day *after* they were supposed to get married. She had gone to move her stuff out, thinking he'd be at work when she walked in on them. Again, he was silent with that same pursed-lip look.

"I thought not," she continued. "*You're* the one who left *me* standing at the church in the big white dress. And, by the way, since you've ruined my brunch, you can pay for it." Her chair scraped against the pavement when she stood and flung her napkin in the seat.

To her horror, he stood with her. "Marion, wait. I want you back."

"Too bad!"

His face paled at her raised voice, and she knew she attracted the

attention of several other patrons. She also knew he hated outbursts of emotions in public and unnecessary attention being drawn to him. "You had your chance with me, buddy, and you blew it. You couldn't even break off our wedding in person. You had to send someone else to do your dirty work. No explanation, no nothing other than a little note. Did you write that yourself, or did you have someone else do it for you, too?"

He shoved his hands into his pockets, looking forlorn and defeated. His shoulders drooped, his gaze shifted downward. She clenched her fist, resisting the urge to slap him across the face. When he didn't respond, she took a step toward the sidewalk. He caught her arm, his damp hand like a vice grip on her bicep, and she paused, staring into those chestnut brown eyes that seemed to challenge her.

She tensed her arm and glanced down at his hand. "You can remove your hand now, or I'll remove it for you. You have no right to touch me any longer."

"Let me explain."

Okay, so that's the way this was going to go. She tried to jerk her arm free, but he held fast. "It's too late for that." That familiar burning in the back of throat signaled tears. She choked them back—he wasn't worth any more of her tears.

"Is there a problem here?"

She turned away from Ethan to see a man standing a few feet away on the sidewalk. Her savior had several inches over her five-foot-six height. His glittering green eyes signaled warning.

"No problem," Ethan said.

"I suggest you let go of the lady," the stranger said. His tone said he meant business.

Ethan gave him a long, cool look that said, *Make me*. She held her breath, waiting for the two to get into a fistfight right there on the street. Instead, Ethan released her arm, and she smoothed her shirt against her hips.

"Goodbye, Ethan." She turned and walked away, trying to remain as dignified as possible.

To her utter surprise, the stranger fell in step beside her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine. Just an old flame." She waved Ethan away as though she were swatting a fly. And perhaps he wasn't anything more than a pesky insect.

"I thought so. You're shaking. Are you sure you're okay?"

Despite her efforts to keep her emotions in check, her nerves were raw as though she'd been through the wringer. She paused a block from Bonjour Café to look at the man who insisted on following her. He was nice looking with dark, wavy hair and green eyes. Any man willing to defend a woman's honor had to be all right. Right?

"I'm sure." She granted him a smile, glancing up at him as he towered over her. He was taller than she figured.

"Can I buy you a cup of coffee? I happen to know a great place." He thumbed to the coffee house behind him and winked. "And my mother happens to own the joint."

Marion glanced up and wondered why she'd never noticed the place before. The Bitter End Coffee House sat nestled on the bottom floor of a renovated building at the corner of Main Street and Fourth. And suddenly it struck her. Here was a nice looking, honorable man asking to buy her a cup of coffee. How could she say no? *And*, her devious mind thought, *it would be good if Ethan saw her with another man.*

"Yes, I think you can."

"Great." His face, shaded by a day's growth of whiskers, broke into a wide smile, showing off two deep dimples. "Mark Sawyer."

"Marion Parker." She extended her hand, and they shook like old friends.

He pushed open the door for her, and she entered, her heels clicking on the shiny wood floor. There were a few patrons inside the cozy coffee house, and she inhaled the heady aroma of coffee and baked goods. Cinnamon, nutmeg, and other yummy scents filled her nose. There was a glass case full of delectable delights—everything from pound cake, to honey buns, to cookies and scones. She even thought she spied slices of cheesecake.

Mark paused at the counter, leaning toward the young woman



with long, flowing blonde hair and a nametag that read Cara.

"Hey, doll," he greeted the girl, and she grinned at him. A familiar grin that said she was abundantly happy to see him.

"You took your sweet time getting out of bed this morning." She handed the customer in front of Marion his change, who then headed down the bar to the barista for his coffee.

"That's your fault." He leered at her across the counter. "This is Marion. Get her whatever she wants, on me."

"You got it, *sir*," she replied and winked at him. Then to Marion, "What'll it be?"

"A latte, please."

Cara was already reaching for a cup before she could get the words out.

Marion turned to Mark, who couldn't stop staring at Cara. It was clear to her they had a thing going.

"Enjoy," he said before heading around the counter.

"Thank you," Marion said, wishing she had a man who looked at her like that.

"Anytime. Stay as long as you like," he said, heading for the back office.

Moments later, as Marion grasped the warm cup of coffee in her hand, she turned to find someone she knew sitting in a corner of the coffee house. Graeme Butler hadn't noticed her entrance, since he had his head buried in his laptop.

With a deep breath, Marion headed over. There wasn't any reason why she couldn't say hello to an old friend. Was there? And she hadn't seen Graeme since... She mentally calculated how long it had been. Several months, to be sure. The last time being a night of shooting pool and drinking beer not long after Ethan left a horrendous aftermath in his wake.

Determined not to allow the painful memory of that day to cloud her thoughts, she pasted on a bright smile and sauntered over. She'd forgotten how good looking Graeme was, with his strong jaw line shadowed by a goatee. He shoved his hand through his dark blond hair,

which had golden highlights that didn't come out of a box—Graeme wasn't that kind of guy.

"Well, hello, you," she said in her sweetest voice.

Graeme looked up, question then surprise flickering through his devastating blue eyes. His mouth broke into a wide grin, and he looked genuinely happy to see her.

"Marion?"

"Are you as surprised to see me as I am you?" she asked as he rose and came around the table.

"You have *no* idea."

He folded her into his powerful arms, hugging her tightly and squeezing her to him, then kissing her soundly on the cheek. He smelled of soap and something else—a spicy scent she didn't know. It made her knees weak, which was totally unexpected, because Graeme wasn't the weak-in-the-knees kind of guy...or was he? Stepping back, he looked her up and down, his gaze sweeping over her.

She should have been incensed that he looked at her that way. But somehow, it wasn't the same creepy look Ethan had given her only moments before. This one was less on the lascivious side and more on the...well, since he was a man, his intentions were probably less than honorable. She found she didn't mind so much when Graeme did it.

"You look fantastic. I haven't seen you since—"

"I know." She cut him off and put up a Don't-Go-There hand, refusing to allow him to speak aloud the words of those fateful events. "It's been a while. How are you?" She smiled, incredibly happy to see him.

He waved her to a nearby cushioned chair, and she gratefully sat down. After saving his document, he shut down the computer and closed the laptop, then leaned back in the chair, propping his ankle on his knee. He gave her his full attention. "I'm great. Couldn't be better."

*Damn, he looks sexy.* There was something ruggedly handsome about him, yet she knew underneath that tough exterior was a sensitive guy. Of course, he never liked that to be common knowledge. He liked to keep up the rough façade. In the few years she'd known him, he'd always

been super nice to her, and she found she could be herself with him.

A vision of him dressed in a tux with a blush colored tie and cummerbund flashed through her mind. He had looked so handsome that day. So suave and debonair. And now she couldn't stop looking at him. He had the best forearms and hands. Nice, strong looking hands.

She held her cup in her hands to keep them from fidgeting. "What are you up to these days?"

"Just working. I've got some new clients lately, so the business is going really well."

"I'm glad to hear that." She forced her gaze back to his face, noticing for the first time the new facial hair. One corner of his mouth was upturned in a grin. She resisted the urge to reach out and run a finger down his stubbly chin. "I like the goatee."

He ran his hand over the beard, his skin bristling against the coarse hair. "It's something I'm trying out."

"Well, it looks great," she said. "And how's Charlotte?"

"Uh..." He cleared his throat. "That was over a long time ago. Shortly after you and Ethan—"

"Stop." She held up her hand. "Please don't say it."

"Sorry." Looking sheepish, he picked up his paper cup and sipped his coffee. "I don't mean to keep bringing it up. I figured after that day in the church, you'd never speak to me again."

"Why's that?" She quirked an eyebrow and leaned forward, placing the cup on the table. She wondered why Graeme thought she would shun him.

"I was the one who delivered Ethan's bad news," he said.

"Oh, right." She twisted the edge of her worn shirt around her forefinger. "Speaking of the devil's spawn... I actually ran into him this morning."

"Here?" Graeme sat up straight and glanced around the nearly deserted coffee house. He looked as if he were ready to fight.

"No, no. Down the street at the café. I was having brunch—"

"Alone?"

"Yes." She paused, unsure why that mattered. "Anyway, he just

showed up out of nowhere. Told me he made a mistake and he wanted me back."

"Fuck him." He scowled, clearly unhappy with his friend's actions. His face had lost the light he'd had only moments ago and turned dark and serious. Snatching his coffee, he sat back in the chair again, relaxed.

"No, thanks." She snickered at her own joke then blushed for laughing at herself. "I'm not sure what makes him think I'd want him back, especially after what he did to me." Looking back up, she met his gaze. "All that time we were together, he lied to me about his business dealings."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he did Web design for a..." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "...porn Web site." Clearing her throat, she glanced around to see if she had been overheard. "Did you know that?"

When Graeme was silent, she was certain it was from sheer shock. That was her first reaction as well. "I had no idea. And all that time we were together, he hid it from me. Talk about a scumbag!"

"Yeah," he agreed, his voice muffled behind his coffee cup.

"I wouldn't have made it such a big deal if he hadn't cheated on me with half the girls *from* the Web site. Of course, I found out about that after we broke up, but still...the nerve of that guy."

This time, Graeme cleared his throat. "How did you find out about all that?" He carefully placed his coffee cup on the table, then fixed his gaze on his computer. Was he avoiding her gaze on purpose?

Marion gave him a pointed look of disbelief and snatched up her cup, taking another sip of the tepid liquid. Either he really didn't know, or he was just as guilty as Ethan was for pretending *not* to know. "You never knew, Graeme? You were his best friend, after all."

Graeme kept his eyes on his laptop monitor. "Ethan and I shared a lot, yes. But he never shared that information with me. It's sort of written in the Man Rules."

"Man Rules?" She had to chuckle.

"Yeah," he said with a cocky smile. "Never share information that can incriminate you."

"Ha, ha." Marion first wanted to smack him for the remark, but his big, silly grin made her fall into laughter.

"Anyway, Ethan had his chance with you, and he blew it. His loss."

Her eyebrows shot up. She was surprised to hear this from the man who was supposed to be Ethan's best man and best friend.

"You deserve better than him, Marion. I always thought so."

"I...don't quite know what to say." A heated flash went through her, and her palms felt as though they had suddenly caught fire, forcing her to put down the cup once more.

"He's an idiot for letting you go." He snatched his coffee again, the liquid sloshing, and sipped. "What'd you tell him?"

She smirked, remembering her lie. "First I told him too bad, and then I..." She stopped, waving the thought away. "Nothing. It's silly."

"If you said something that will make that asshole suffer, please share. I haven't spoken to him since that day in the church."

She blinked. Graeme, it seemed, was full of surprises. She had no idea the two of them hadn't spoken in the last six months. So, Ethan had lost his fiancée and his best friend all in one day. *Interesting.*

"You haven't?"

"No, I haven't."

She wanted to press further, to find out exactly why the two hadn't spoken to each other in so long. Was Graeme sore because Ethan made him do the deed? Or was there something else underneath the cool façade he wasn't telling her? She suspected the latter. What did Graeme care, really, if Ethan ditched his girlfriend? *Unless...*

Unless deep down, Graeme had feelings for her. The notion seemed so ridiculous, she quickly pushed it away. Graeme wasn't interested in her any more than she was interested in the guy who owned this coffee house.

She stared down at her lap, toying with a string on the edge of her shirt. "Anyway, I sort of told him I was seeing someone." Looking up through her lashes, she added, "And that I was almost engaged."

"I see." Graeme downed the rest of his coffee and set aside the empty cup. He reached for his laptop and shoved it in its case.

She suddenly worried she had somehow upset him. "But, you

know, I was just lying to get him to leave me alone. I'm not seeing anyone. I've tried to date, but it's just...too much. I haven't been able to do it. I don't think I'm ready."

He stopped, looking at her with those blue eyes, and smiled. She wanted to melt into a puddle. "Marion, you don't have to explain yourself to me. I'm not Ethan."

"But I—"

"You want to go for a walk?"

### Chapter Three

"I'd love to," she said, and Graeme could swear she blushed.

Of all the coffee shops in Fort Worth, she had to show up there at The Bitter End. At that very moment. Not that he was complaining. She looked beyond fantastic. In fact, she looked just as she had that day so long ago. Still as beautiful as ever.

He'd fantasized about Marion since the day he met her three years ago when Ethan introduced her as his hot new girlfriend. What at first was merely infatuation quickly turned into something else. But allowing himself to fall for her was completely out of the question.

Graeme hadn't expected to run into Marion again. That day at the church, it had nearly killed him to see her crumble and hear her wracking sobs from the other side of the door. To tell her mother and her friends and the entire church full of guests the wedding was canceled.

When he had taken the forged note to Marion, she hadn't noticed his red knuckles or the split skin. She had been too intent on her appearance and all the other details around her. She hadn't noticed the fact that the handwriting on the paper wasn't Ethan's.

How could Graeme tell her he'd been the one to scrawl the note? He did it because he didn't want her to suffer the embarrassment of calling off the wedding herself, of having to look at the congregation and telling them to go home.

The only thing that made him feel any better was knowing he had broken Ethan's nose. Their business partnership and friendship had

already been irrevocably broken, so it seemed fitting.

After that day, he had checked on Marion periodically with a phone call here and there. He had even managed to talk her into shooting some pool one night. Not that he was hoping to cash in on Ethan's loss, but he certainly wouldn't have turned her down had she ended up crying on his shoulder.

Marion, though, was stronger than that. She managed to pick up the pieces and move on without so much as a backward glance. It was one of the many things he loved about her.

The next few months had been tumultuous, to say the least, as Graeme negotiated with Ethan via endless phone calls and emails to buy out his side of the business. At least he hadn't allowed himself to succumb to the corruption Ethan had.

Clearly, Marion had no idea he and Ethan had been business partners, and he planned to keep it that way. Especially after her "scumbag" comment regarding Ethan's business dealings. Graeme didn't want her to know what sort of Web sites he designed for a living—the very same porn sites she'd expressed disgust over.

Graeme thought he had left that asshole behind for good after buying him out. Apparently, Ethan was back, and he wanted *her*, too.

*Not if I have anything to say about it.*

Glancing at her now, he noted how her sensual mouth curved into a smile, lighting her entire face. She had high cheekbones and a dusting of freckles across the bridge of her pert nose, and nowhere else. He loved that about her.

She was quite alluring. Big, doe brown eyes, and gorgeous, wavy hair his fingers itched to run through. Faded blue jeans hugged her every curve, showing off her incredible ass, her narrow hips. Her shirt hugged her breasts just right, and he forced himself to look away.

He had to snap off that part of his brain, especially since he was hard just thinking about her curvaceous body against his. This was no plaything; this was Marion. He wouldn't allow himself to treat her like that.

It had to be fate that she crossed his path today. Especially after he



decided he was ready to move to Houston for a change of pace. He had tired of the Dallas-Fort Worth area and was ready to get out. Now that would have to wait, because he wasn't leaving Marion alone in this city with Ethan on the prowl. He wasn't sure what Ethan was up to, so it was even more reason to stay and keep an eye on Marion.

It was his turn to play the courting game. A challenge he readily accepted, and one he looked forward to. He wanted Marion all to himself, and he would do whatever it took to get her. She probably wasn't willing to trust men yet, and rightfully so, after being stood up at the altar and having her heart broken. Yes, sir, he'd have to play this one just right, or he'd lose her again.

Perhaps, though, he could make her a proposition. Maybe it was time to have a little fun with Ethan and turn the tables on him. All at the prick's expense, of course.

"Where are we going?" she asked, pulling him out of his intense thoughts.

He hadn't planned that far in advance. He just wanted to get her alone. "I need some fresh air. I've been working here all morning."

"Really?"

He picked up his laptop case and slung it over his shoulder. "Yeah, I got here about six this morning."

"You're certainly dedicated." She grinned, showing off two deep dimples on either side of her oh-so-kissable lips he was dying for a taste of.

"It happens when you're the owner of the company."

"See you tomorrow, Graeme," the young blonde behind the counter called.

He'd been coming to the coffee house for a while, and he'd gotten to know her as well as a few of the other staff members. He gave the girl a nod and a wave. At Marion's inquisitive look, he flashed a smile. "I'm a regular."

He slid his hand across the small of her back, leading her through the coffee house and out the front door into the late morning humidity. September was quickly approaching, but the dog days of August were

still in full force. The weather predictors promised another scorcher today, and so far, they were right on.

"I thought we could walk down to the bookstore," he said, grasping for an excuse—any excuse—to keep her by his side.

"I'd like that. I'm always on the lookout for a new book to read." She chucked her empty coffee cup into a trashcan. "I'm sorry about you and Charlotte."

That relationship was the last thing on his mind. When Charlotte walked, he should have been angry and hurt, but instead he'd been relieved it was over. In fact, the only thing on his mind was getting those clothes off Marion and doing all sorts of naughty things to her.

He glanced at Marion and waved it away as if it meant nothing. "Old news, and it's really for the best. The only thing we had in common was each other, and she got bored with me. I guess that's why she cheated on me."

"Oh." She breathed out the word, and it sounded deliciously sexy. "I'm sorry. I didn't know." She gave him an apologetic look, but the last thing he wanted was her pity.

"Don't be. I'm not."

She dragged her bottom lip through her teeth. It was probably one of the sexiest things he'd seen her do. Though she was silent, he could tell she wanted to ask more questions. Perhaps find out more about the break up and if Charlotte hurt him as much as Ethan had hurt her.

Charlotte was all looks and no brains. Despite all that, they had dated a while. He had taken her as his date to the wedding. Charlotte, though, wanted more than a few dates here and there. She wanted to take the next step, move their relationship to the "next level," as she called it. But he found it difficult to commit to that. He knew deep down she wasn't the one.

After he refused to let her move in with him, things had changed between them. He couldn't see living with someone after only knowing her for eight months—his record relationship length. He drifted away, and she drifted toward someone else. Several someones, in fact.

But Graeme had no desire to tell Marion any of that. And despite

the fact he wanted her so completely, he wasn't exactly sure he had anything else to say to her. He had pined for her for so long he wasn't sure what to do with her now that she was by his side. Sweat rolled down his spine from both the heat and his nerves.

Marion expelled a sudden breath. "So, your business is good then?"

A change of subject was always good. "Yeah, I've picked up a couple of big clients. It's a small Web world, apparently, and there is always a need for a good designer."

"I'm glad to see you doing so well. I know being in business for yourself was important to you."

Not only could he set his own hours, but the pay was obscene. He discovered quickly he could charge the owners of adult Web sites two hundred dollars an hour for his Web design services and they'd pay. Even though designing Web sites for the adult industry wasn't his passion, it was his bread and butter, and he made a lot of money doing it.

Besides, he planned to get out of the business as soon as possible. And it wasn't exactly something he was proud of or that he wanted Marion to know. Nor did she need to know he and Ethan started the company together. Or the things he had discovered about Ethan the night before their wedding.

"Marion!"

Ethan's voice interrupted seconds before Graeme could pull open the door to the bookstore. Graeme turned, there he was. Ethan Baxter III stalking directly toward them. But Ethan wasn't looking at Marion. He was glaring at Graeme.

Next to him, Marion froze in place. Even in the heat, he could feel her shiver.

"Son of a bitch," Graeme muttered under his breath and clenched his fist.

"You'd think he could take no for an answer," she said.

Ethan came to a halt in front of them, his hair ruffled in the breeze. He looked disheveled. Graeme took satisfaction in seeing his former best friend out of sorts.

"I thought I made it clear I wasn't interested," Marion said.

"Marion, I need to see you. Explain things."

"I told you it's too late for that." Fire flashed in her eyes as she waved him away.

"I miss you, Marion. I want you to come home."

"I have a home," she said, her teeth clenched. "I made one for myself after you left me."

Despite her attempt at bravery, Graeme could see her shaking. She blinked furiously, probably to keep herself from crying.

"I think it's clear the lady isn't interested. It's time you face the reality that you blew it," Graeme said.

"Shut the fuck up." He shoved his index finger in Graeme's face to press his point. "This is none of your business."

Graeme grabbed Ethan's collar and clutched it in his fist. He jerked him forward, their faces only inches apart. "Now you've made it my business." The moment Ethan tucked tail and ran from the church and Graeme wrote that note, it was his business.

"Graeme!" Marion wrapped her hand around his arm. "Don't."

Even though he wanted to pummel Ethan, he let him go with a shove. Ethan stumbled back, smoothed his expensive, designer shirt, and looked back at Marion.

"Is this the guy?" Ethan asked.

"Why don't you go find some other woman to hassle?" Graeme said before Marion could reply.

"He's just using you," Ethan said. "Or didn't you know his track record? He just wants to fuck you and that's it." He crossed his arms over his chest, looking smug.

"Shut up," Graeme growled. The man was unbelievable. For the first time, he saw Ethan for what he truly was, and he wondered how she could get mixed up with such an idiot.

"What's the matter? Can't handle hearing the truth?" Ethan asked. Then to Marion, "Women are playthings to him. He goes through a new girl every few months. He can't commit."

Marion glanced at Graeme, then back at Ethan, as if she was deciding what to do or say next.

Rage flooded Graeme. "Oh, and you can? Need I remind you about the wedding I called off for you?"

"And need I remind you about the stripper you fucked at my bachelor party?"

"Stop it! Both of you!" Marion's fists were balled, her face flushed with anger. "Ethan, I will see whomever I choose, whenever I choose." She inched a step closer to Graeme. "And if that person is Graeme, then you're just going to have to get over it."

All the rage whooshed out of Graeme as she slipped her hand into his, their fingers lacing. Her skin was warm and inviting. He blinked with surprise. Looking up at him, she stepped even closer and placed her free hand in the middle of his chest, a smile curling the corners of her mouth.

"This is the guy you're with?" Ethan asked. His face had paled with shock, as if he couldn't believe Marion would be with Graeme.

"I'm afraid so," she said smoothly and gave Ethan a haughty look down her nose. He could kiss her for that.

Her voice never wavered with her lie, but Graeme's heart hammered hard in his chest. Surely, she could feel it beneath her fingertips. Ethan's jaw clenched, the muscles flexing with his agitation.

Ethan glanced between the two before pointing at Marion. "This isn't over yet. I still want you, and not for sex. Like him." He thumbed toward Graeme.

The two of them watched as Ethan walked back down the street.

Marion released him, much to his disappointment, and stepped back, running a hand through her long hair. "What an asshole!" she shouted at Ethan's disappearing form. Ethan didn't turn back, but there was no way he didn't hear her. Marion turned back to him and huffed, disturbing her bangs. "Sorry about that."

"About what?" Using him as her pretend lover? Like that'd really hurt his feelings...

"I shouldn't have misled Ethan to think you and I were..." Her words trailed off, and she bit her lip. A blush colored her high cheekbones.

"It's all right," he said quickly. Oh, how he wanted to reach for her,

to hold her in his arms and kiss those lovely pink cheekbones. It was time to put his idea of having fun at Ethan's expense into motion. "What if..." He reached for her hand, slipping her fingers between his. "What if we just let him think that?"

Her eyes widened, and then a slow smile spread across her face. "But...that would be wrong."

He held her hand against his chest, feeling the warmth again of her skin, and cracked a broad smile. "If pretending you're my girl is wrong, then I don't want to be right."

Marion giggled and pulled away, slapping him playfully on the arm. "Oh, Graeme. You're so funny." She stepped back, closer to the door to the bookstore. "I've...missed you."

Perhaps there was something more to this than just friendship. Or perhaps he was reading between non-existent lines. Whatever the case, he wasn't going to let her go so easily.

"Seriously, Marion. What do you say we have a little fun?"

"I don't know."

He shrugged. "Okay. Maybe you'll let me know if you change your mind." He'd give her an out and not pressure her. He turned, started to leave, knowing what a dangerous game that would be. He didn't want to play with her affections or have her *think* that was what he was doing. He wanted her of her own free will.

"Graeme," she called, and he turned back with a questioning look. "You don't really use women. Do you?"

The *ah-ha* moment. Clearly, what Ethan said made somewhat of an impact on her. *The bastard*. Well, then. He would set the record straight. "No, Marion. I don't."

He took a step toward her, as if he had to prove to her he wasn't that kind of man. That he wasn't the kind of man who disposed of women as easily as disposing a paper coffee cup. Her gaze never left his, her soft brown eyes wide as he came so close. He could smell her perfume on the wind, hear the flutter of her breath as he neared.

He couldn't stop himself as he reached for her, right there on the street, sweeping his hand through her hair before resting it on her neck

and leaning in. Her lips parted in anticipation, and he knew she wouldn't stop him.

His mouth landed on hers, gently tasting the sweet recess of her mouth. She leaned against him, one hand on his chest, and he could hear her inhale. Their lips touched softly as they kissed each other for the first time. She yielded to him easily, her mouth only slightly parted. He dipped his tongue inside, sweeping the length of her bottom lip.

Graeme didn't linger there. Instead, he released her as quickly as he had taken hold of her, his hand still resting on her neck as he gazed down at her. "There," he said, his voice barely audible. "I can't tell you how long I've waited to do that." He flashed his best winning smile. He could see the pulse fluttering under her delicate throat. He swept his thumb over it, paused on the wild flutter against his skin. So...his kiss had affected her, too.

She stared at him a long moment, as if deciding what her next move should be. Maybe she had been struck mute by his admission that he'd always wanted to kiss her and wondered what he meant by it. He wanted to tell her he'd been in love with her for a long while, silently suffering as Ethan screwed around on her. Wishing he could tell her the truth about him, and wanting to be the one she came home to. The one she loved.

But he couldn't say any of that.

Feeling like an idiot, he dropped his hand and away from her, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. "I shouldn't have done that, Marion. I'm sorry."

She bit her lip and blinked. Her silence nearly drove him mad, throwing him into damage control.

"I hope we can at least be friends," he offered. If he couldn't have her in his bed, it was better than not having her in his life at all. He lost her once; he didn't want to lose her again.

"Graeme, would you like to have dinner with me tonight?"

His heart tripped in his chest. He never expected her to ask him to dinner, and his brain completely shut down. It was his turn to be struck mute.

"Maybe we can catch up on the last six months of our lives," she continued. "Unless you're busy?"

"I'm not busy, and I'd like that. Very much." He resisted the urge to grin like a fool.

She reached into her purse for a pen and piece of paper. "Great." She scrawled something on the paper then handed it to him. "Why don't you come by about seven?"

"Sure."

And with that, she was gone. Nothing more than a whisper in the wind. When she was out of his sight, he glanced down at the paper in his hand. She had given him her home address and her telephone number.

He wondered then if she wanted him to pick her up for dinner out or...stay in. He'd be prepared either way.



## Chapter Four

Marion swore she could still feel Graeme's lips on hers. Her heart fluttered at the memory as she walked down the street toward her car. He had tasted faintly of mint and coffee, a flavor somewhat interesting, though not displeasing. And the way his lips brushed hers in that tentative, gentle kiss...

Running her tongue over her still-tingling lips, she tried to conjure back that whisper of a touch. As she contemplated the way his lips brushed hers, she wished it had been a deep, soul-searing kiss. The kind of devastating kiss that could rock her off her axis. And she couldn't help but wonder what such a kiss would feel like with Graeme.

*Graeme...* She had known him for so long and it had never occurred to her to think of him romantically. But now...now, she couldn't stop thinking of him that way. It was as though with that one little kiss, he had awakened the sleeping woman inside her, and her curiosity made her want more from him than just a little kiss.

*I can't tell you how long I've waited to do that.*

His words came flooding back to her, and she pressed her hand against her abdomen to still the butterflies. Did that mean what she thought it did? And just how long had he wanted to do it? Months? Years?

She had to find out. She had to know. Which was exactly why she'd blurted out the invitation to dinner.

Usually, she thought things through before doing anything rash.

But this time, she allowed her emotions to rule her. She had never ever asked a man out to dinner, and now there was no going back.

Reaching her car, she pulled open the door and slid inside. Something told her this would be no ordinary let's-just-be-friends dinner date. Yes, she did want to catch up on the last few months of their lives. Yes, she wanted to spend time with Graeme. Yes, she wanted to see him naked. On top of her.

She blushed as she stuck the key in the ignition. What was wrong with her? It was as though she'd been turned into some wanton hussy.

Maybe it was something intoxicating about blowing off Ethan.

Or maybe she really liked Graeme.

There would be no going out on the town because she wanted Graeme all to herself. She didn't want to share his attention with a server. No distractions. That was why she had to figure out what she was going to cook, and then what she was going to wear, because they were of equal importance. The meal and her choice of wardrobe had to be both pleasing to him, and a little spicy. What would smell so good while it cooked that he salivated, and then when he saw her it whetted a more masculine appetite?

She hadn't the first clue how to seduce a man. Correction, how to seduce Graeme. Friends—bah! Forget that. She wanted Graeme in all his glory. However, she didn't want to come off as pathetic and needy. Nor did she want to seem desperate.

The only person that could help her with her small dilemma was her chic best friend, Delilah Storm.

In the stifling heat of the car, sweat rolling down her back, she rummaged in her bag for her cell. When she finally found it, she flipped it open and called her friend who happened to be on speed dial number two—since voice mail was reserved for the number one spot.

"Hey, girl."

Marion grinned at her friend's answer. "Hey, Del."

"What's up?"

"I need some help. I'm having this...friend over for dinner tonight and—"

"Wait. Friend as in *strictly platonic friend*, or friend as in *let's get naked and have fun friend*? Just so I'm clear." Only Delilah could come up with that.

"Um..." Could she be that transparent? And how could Delilah glean that from her one use of the word *friend*. She had only said that for lack of anything better to use.

"Okay, since it's the latter —"

"I never said that!"

"You paused, Mar. You paused. I can totally tell when you have an I-want-to-get-naked crush on someone."

"How can you tell that in a two point three second conversation?"

"Trust me. I can. It's your tone of voice."

"Well, I don't want to get naked with him," Marion protested, even though it was a lie "He's just a friend. That's all. Nothing else." *Yet*.

"Uh huh. You keep telling yourself that, and I'll pretend I don't hear you. Now, I'd suggest you wear a skirt, thigh-high stockings, and the highest heels you have —"

"Delilah," Marion groaned. "I swear he's not that kind of guy. He's a nice guy." True, Graeme was a nice guy, but she secretly hoped there was a bad boy underneath that cool façade.

"Mar, there are two kinds of men in this world. Nice men who want to get you naked, and not-so-nice men who want to get you naked."

"What?" Marion knitted her brow, confused, and then the light bulb went on. "Ohh...right. But Graeme isn't like that."

"All men are like that and um, Graeme?" She could hear the recognition in her friend's voice. "The same Graeme who was that Scumbag Who Shall Remain Nameless' best man?"

"Right. That one."

Delilah sighed heavily, and Marion could picture her exasperation. It made her smile. "Why are you calling me then?" Delilah asked.

Suddenly, her reason for calling seemed ridiculous. She bit her bottom lip, trying to decide how to ask her friend the silly questions cluttering her brain. What *was* she doing with Graeme? She would have thought he couldn't want her in a million years, but after that kiss he laid

on her... She shook her head. No way. *This is Graeme, not some random guy.* Still...she couldn't stop thinking about him.

He was good-looking and sweet and...Ethan's former best friend. Could there potentially be bad blood between them? Could Ethan really cause problems with her and Graeme? Not that she would even consider getting back with Ethan. Not even if he begged. Not even if he crawled to her on his hands and knees over broken glass, stark naked in front of the Pope himself and asked her back—

"Hello, Marion?"

"Oh, right. I, uh—"

"Oh, girl. You need an intervention. I'm on my way."

"But I'm not home!" she protested.

"Then I'll meet you there in twenty."

\* \* \* \* \*

The doorbell rang, and Marion knew her friend was on the other side of the door. She also knew she couldn't keep Delilah waiting, or she would barge inside. Instead, Marion whisked open the door and had to quickly get out of the way as Delilah stormed by her, leaving a trail of spicy perfume that was her signature scent. She was, of course, dressed to perfection even in a pair of faded blue jeans and a bohemian tunic. Without a greeting, she headed straight for her bedroom.

"Not even a hello?" Marion gaped after her and finally swung the door shut.

"No time for that," Delilah shot over her shoulder. "You have a hot date with a—" She paused, glancing over her shoulder with question in her emerald green eyes. "Hot man?"

"You could say that, yes."

"I never thought of Graeme as hot, but okay," she said with a shrug.

*Neither did I, until today.* "Anyway, it's not a date. It's just dinner." Oh, sure. She wanted to play it off that way.

"You mean a *non*-date?" Delilah raised a brow and gave her a

cursory glance, one that said she didn't really believe her.

"Something like that."

"Uh-huh." Delilah flipped her strawberry blonde hair over her shoulder and started walking again. "Seriously, Mar, I don't know what you're thinking. You shouldn't be taking up with him. He was the best man at your wedding, for God's sake."

"The wedding that never took place," Marion corrected as she followed her friend. "And it wasn't Graeme's fault Ethan left me there. In fact, Graeme is the one that brought me the note, in case you forgot."

Delilah threw open her closet door. "No, I didn't forget. But did you ever wonder why Graeme was the one that did it?"

"Because Ethan was too chicken shit to do it himself. We both know that. And we were all friends." Marion folded her arms across her chest, feeling rather defensive of Graeme.

"You may have all been friends in the past, Mar, but I think I would be wary of this guy." She shuffled the clothes on the racks, searching through the garments.

"For crying out loud, it's just *Graeme*," Marion said and huffed. "He's harmless." But, really, she hoped deep down he wasn't.

"If he's so harmless, why is he sniffing around you after all this time?"

"He's not sniffing. Ethan is the one that's sniffing. He showed up at my table when I was having brunch this morning at the Bonjour Café."

Delilah halted her rummaging in the closet and spun to face her friend, her eyes wide. "Come again?"

"He wants to get back together."

"And you said...?"

"No, duh." Marion rolled her eyes. "Anyway, I walked down the street to this coffee house to get away from Ethan. That's where I ran into Graeme. It was good to see him again. We reconnected."

"Uh-huh." Delilah still didn't sound convinced.

"I asked him to dinner."

She turned back to the closet, shaking her head. "Still, I don't like it. What kind of man willingly breaks the heart of his best friend's fiancée?"

"Why are you giving me such a hard time about this?" Marion propped her hands on her hips, frowning.

Her friend paused and looked at her. "I just want you to be careful. That's all. You're my best friend. And as dumb as it sounds, I love you, and I don't want some jackass fucking with you."

Touched, Marion smiled. "I know you care. And I'm glad you do. But Graeme isn't a jackass. At least, I don't think so. He's certainly nothing like Ethan."

"And if he turns out to be...well, then he'll have *me* to deal with." Delilah turned back to the racks of clothes. "Now, let's find you something to wear, and then I'm taking you grocery shopping."

Delilah picked a black shirt, low cut enough to give him eye candy but still respectable enough for Marion's taste. It gave the message she was available but not desperate. Or so Delilah said.

After much argument, Marion chose a pair of form-fitting jeans. She'd wear her favorite comfy shoes, since she'd be on her feet cooking.

"No sexy underwear," Delilah said.

"Why not?" Marion asked.

"Because sexy underwear means intent. Intent means you plan to get naked with this guy. My suggestion is you do not get naked with this guy on an unofficial first non-date. And that's my official opinion."

"Fine. I'll wear the granny panties, then, if it'll make you happy." Marion pouted even though she knew her friend was right.

"Good girl."

It was then with much horror that Marion watched her best friend open her lingerie drawer and pull out all her sexy little things.

"You can have these back after you report in," Delilah said, and Marion scowled.

Forty minutes later, with a pile of clothes in a small mountain on her bed—Delilah said it was to keep them from having sex on the first "non-date"—the outfit was chosen, and they were on their way to the local grocery store.

The store was another fight to the death. Marion wanted to cheat and use the pre-cooked frozen meat in a package that would take only ten

minutes on the stove. Delilah had other plans, which became readily apparent when she picked a grocery cart and wheeled toward the meat section.

"Where are you going? The frozen food section is over there." Marion pointed to the left of the store.

"No way. You're not getting off that easy. Besides, I have a foolproof recipe that will have him eating out of your hand." Delilah paused in front of the chicken section, perusing the selection. "You do want that, right?"

Marion hurried to catch up, walking fast through the aisles and pausing next to her friend to stare in terror at the packages of meat. "Yes," she said slowly. "But maybe you've forgotten I don't know how to cook."

"Mar, trust me. You'll look like Rachael Ray by the time I get done with you. He'll be ready to make babies with you."

"I'm confused," Marion said as Delilah reached for a package of chicken legs. "I thought I wasn't supposed to get naked with him tonight?"

"You're not. I'm just saying, he'll *want* to. You know?" She flashed a smile, showing off her perfect, white teeth. "Now on to the spices."

"And what am I supposed to be making?"

Marion trailed after her friend and headed down the aisle with all the spices and cooking oil. Feeling as though defeat loomed, she slumped her shoulders and followed, despite the fact that all she wanted to do was run screaming from the store.

"You have olive oil?"

When Marion's response was a blank stare, Delilah grabbed a bottle of extra virgin olive oil and put it in the basket. Then she stood in front of the spices for what seemed like hours. Marion fought the urge to check her watch. She picked out cumin, oregano, bay leaves and two things Marion had never even heard of. Then it was on to the vegetable aisle where Delilah picked out red potatoes, bell pepper, onion, garlic, and cilantro. The only thing pre-done she would even consider buying was the salad.

"Um..." Marion began.

"Shh. You'll be fine."

Next, it was the beer and wine section where Delilah picked out a red wine.

"I'm not sure if Graeme likes wine," Marion said.

"That's fine because we're cooking with it."

"We are?"

"Trust me." Again, she smiled.

The checkout was surprisingly painless—unusual for a Saturday afternoon. Back in the car, Delilah drove them to Marion's. As Delilah set about putting the groceries away, she turned to Marion and said, "I want you to get ready while I get this in the oven."

"Um, what exactly are you cooking?"

"Chicken fricassee. You'll love it, and so will he. Now scoot." She shooed her away and turned back to her cooking.

Delilah was a fantastic cook—she broke many a man's heart with her delicacies. Marion had often heard the quickest way to a man's heart was through his stomach, so maybe her dear friend was on to something. She hoped, suddenly, she wasn't making a colossal error in judgment.



## Chapter Five

Marion stood under the hot spray until her skin turned red. Reluctantly, she got out, wrapping a thick towel around her. As she wiped the steam off the mirror, she stared at her face, her wet brown sugar hair dripping over her shoulders. She had dark circles under her eyes—a testament to her sleepless nights.

She didn't really want to remember that day in the church, but somehow it always haunted her. She had dreamed of her wedding day since she was a little girl—how perfect everything would be with the perfect flowers and wearing the perfect dress. Even the church would be perfect, and she would be marrying the perfect man of her dreams.

But Ethan crushed the dream with two short sentences. *I'm sorry. I can't.* She had often wondered what exactly it was he couldn't do. Can't marry her? Can't live with her? Can't commit to her? What? Even when she had the opportunity to ask him in person, she didn't.

Probably because she was afraid to hear the truth. Deep down, she didn't really want to know.

After that day in the church, things began to move swiftly. She had gone to their place to start packing when she found Ethan in bed with *that woman*. The blonde, blue-eyed vixen even had the look of a porn star or a stripper with her gigantic fake breasts, fake fingernails, fake tan, and her perfect figure, which Marion was sure had to be fake, too. There couldn't be much that was real about that girl, except for the fact she was straddling Ethan in *their* bed.

And he didn't seem the least bit remorseful.

Marion's statement to Graeme that her ex-fiancé had slept with half the women on the site was, of course, an exaggeration. In fact, she wasn't sure if Ethan really did cheat on her while they were together. She had used that to see if Graeme knew and would come clean. She wanted so desperately to believe Graeme told her the truth—that he had no idea. He seemed sincere enough.

Scrubbing a hand over her face, she pushed away the thoughts of Ethan's horrible break-up and instead tried to focus on the here and now. The past was done and gone, and she couldn't change it.

And now Graeme. She had never expected to see him again. He had all but disappeared after that day, too. She'd run into him only one other time, and it was at one of their usual haunts. Marion, Ethan, Graeme, and his current girlfriend spent a good portion of the time at the local pool hall, shooting pool and drinking beer. To this day, she still wasn't sure what made her go there. Maybe to close that chapter on her life. Instead, she found Graeme, shooting a game all alone.

He spotted her, dropped his cue stick on the table, and came over. "Hey," he had greeted.

"Hi," she said. "What are you doing here?"

He shrugged. "Killing time. You want to play a game?"

"No, I don't think so. I just... Well, I don't know what I'm doing here really."

"How about I buy you a beer then?" he offered.

She had hesitated, thinking it through. She had never been alone with Graeme the entire time she had known him, and the three of them had hung out a lot. It seemed...strange.

"It's just a beer, Marion. Don't over think it." He winked.

She instantly relaxed. "Okay."

She ended up playing a game of pool with him, drinking a beer, and having some laughs. Later, when they parted ways, he would tell her if she ever needed anything, to call. She said she would but knew deep down she could never do that. Seeing Graeme again would be too painful. It had been months since she'd seen him until that morning.

Marion shook her head, bringing herself back to the present. She wrapped her hair in a towel and began to apply her makeup. All she could think about was seeing Graeme later, and wondering what they would talk about. Old times? It seemed rather depressing to talk about the day she almost married Ethan.

*It's that kiss. I can't stop thinking about that kiss.*

That was it. Graeme could kiss like no other man she'd ever been with. Not even Ethan could kiss like that. It was enough to melt her into a puddle and make her knees buckle. She remembered clearly the way his chest curved through the material of his shirt. Her palm went over the smooth, hard lines, up to his neck where she knew she had to hold on for dear life.

She swayed with the memory, the butterflies flurrying in her stomach again at the thought. She pressed her hand against her abdomen to make them stop.

It had been a while since a man had made her feel that way. Ethan once, long ago. But certainly not at the end, even on their wedding day.

"I will not fall for him," she told her reflection in the mirror, pointing at herself. "*I will not.*" She couldn't. He was Graeme, after all. She must heed her own warning.

After applying lipstick and still feeling somewhat distracted, she dressed.

It became readily apparent she would need a distraction from her distraction. She had taken up art classes a few months ago, but since she wasn't very adept at painting, she thought maybe it was time to try her hand at sculpture or pottery.

In the morning, she'd do some Internet research. For now, she was going to enjoy dinner with an old friend.

Delilah was tossing the salad when Marion entered the kitchen. Something smelled divine.

"Hey, that smells great," Marion said.

"It's the fricassee. You need to let it bake about 35 minutes." Delilah covered the salad bowl with plastic wrap before turning to inspect her friend. "You look great."

"I have you to thank for it," Marion said.

"And don't you forget it." Delilah grinned. "Now listen." She paused, pointing her finger and Marion knew she meant business. "No sex tonight, remember?"

"Yes, Mother."

"I mean it. You behave yourself." She shook a finger at Marion to punctuate her point.

"I don't know why you think I'm going to fall into bed with him. This is Graeme we're talking about."

"Yeah...well...I just want to make sure you know the rules."

"Rules, schmules. Would you get out of here already?" Marion shoved Delilah toward the door in a *hurry up and get out* gesture.

"I want a full report in the morning." Delilah picked up her purse. "And don't burn the fricassee, for God's sake."

"Promise." She even crossed her heart.

She hugged her friend and walked her to the door where she waved goodbye. As she leaned against the front door, the butterflies insisted on coming back. She was alone...but not for long.

\* \* \* \* \*

Graeme snagged the printed directions off his printer and read them over again. He knew exactly where her house was, and it wasn't all that far away.

Since he wasn't sure what sort of evening Marion had in mind—because he intended to let her lead and he'd follow wherever she wanted—he brought his hostess a nice bottle of wine. It was the least he could do.

Dressed in a pair of faded blue jeans and a nice shirt, he grabbed his keys off the kitchen counter.

He had spent his afternoon working on the Web site, TakeMeI'mYours.com, tweaking and making it better for easier navigation. He had never intended to host and design a Web site for the porn industry, but it paid the bills—and very well, too. It was a profession

he'd fallen into and at first. He'd thought it'd be great to look at hot girls all the time. He had even dated some. But as time wore on, he became jaded and they didn't "do it" for him anymore.

His true love, though, was creating life from a blank white canvas. He could lose himself in his paintings.

His loft apartment gave him the studio space he needed for his artwork, as well as a nice office for his day job. His furnishings were clean and contemporary. Amber, a couple of girlfriends ago, had called it stark and sterile. She had tried to inject her own touch by adding a bit of color here and there with throw pillows on his black leather couch, but he would have none of it. Jade and purple pillows with bead trim and fringe were not allowed in his *man cave*.

Climbing into his late model luxury sedan, he started the engine and turned his thoughts toward the evening ahead. Marion had been on his mind all afternoon, and he wondered what her ulterior motive was by inviting him for dinner. If she had one. She didn't strike him as the type to have a secret agenda, but he'd been wrong before.

Whatever the reason, he'd take it. If it meant he spent the evening with her playing Parcheesi, he'd do it. If only to spend time with her. If only to see her pretty face and smell her intoxicating scent. He had been in love with Marion since the day he'd met her.

He pulled up in front of her house as the sun dipped toward the horizon. As usual, August was blazing hot, and this evening was no exception. He grabbed the bottle of wine and headed to her front door.

As he pushed the bell, his stomach erupted into a ball of nerves. He hadn't been this nervous about a date since high school, and that was more than twenty years ago. When she whisked open the door, he stared a moment into her lovely doe brown eyes. Her hair seemed fluffier for some reason, and her shirt gave him a great view of what was in it.

"Hi! Come on in." She smiled as she stepped aside to let him in.

He could smell the scent of her perfume as he walked by to check out her small house. Something smelled so good it made his mouth water. The living room and kitchen was one big room, one flowing into the next. There was a separate dining room off to one side. The entire house was

small but warm and inviting.

"This is for you," he said, handing her the bottle of wine. He had picked out a pinot grigio that cost in the twenty-five dollar range.

"Oh, thank you." Marion took it, reading the label. "Nice brand."

"Only the finest for you," he replied. He wasn't sure what she had in mind for the evening, but it seemed she had intended to stay in. Especially since she'd cooked. He couldn't remember a woman ever cooking for him before, and it touched him.

"I thought we'd stay in, if that's okay." She waved toward the oven. Was that a blush he saw high in her cheekbones? "It should be ready soon. Should I open the wine?"

"If you'd like. I hope it goes with dinner."

"I'm sure it will be fine. We're having chicken fricassee."

She opened and closed the drawers, searching for the wine opener. When she finally found it, she fumbled with it until she managed to open the corkscrew.

He grinned, reaching for it and slipping it out of her hand. "Here. Let me."

Their hands brushed, and for a moment, her smooth skin grazed his. It left his palm tingling in her wake, making him crave more, wanting to feel the rest of her. Marion pulled her hand away quickly and stepped back, watching as he released the cork from the bottle and set it aside.

"Thanks," she said, her voice low and almost sultry. He resisted the urge to pull her to him and kiss her senseless.

As she poured two glasses of wine, a timer went off. She reached for potholders and lifted the dish out of the oven.

"Damn, that smells great." He peered over her shoulder at the food, and his stomach rumbled in response. "I'm hungrier than I thought."

"Good. I'm glad you brought your appetite." She reached for a serving spoon and plated the dish, a green salad on the side.

They settled at the dining room table. He wondered what they could possibly have in common they could talk about. But then...this was Marion. He'd known her for a few years.

"So, how have you been?" he asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Good." She forked some green lettuce, keeping her gaze lowered to her plate.

"I haven't seen you since that day at the pool hall. That's been—what? Four or five months ago?"

He remembered that day as if it were yesterday. Buying her a beer, shooting some pool, and having some laughs. He loved spending time alone with her, without Ethan there to distract her. He'd resisted the urge to tell her then how devastating it had been for him to give her that note. How could he tell her that seeing her heart broken like that had torn him apart? She wouldn't believe him. He had been so comfortable with her then, and now he was a nervous wreck. It was as though the universe was giving him a second chance, and he didn't want to blow it.

"Yes." She kept her eyes lowered, refusing to meet his. "It seems so long ago."

"You know, that day at the church—"

She flinched, and he stopped talking. He had intended to tell her what had happened then between him and Ethan, and that it nearly killed him to be the bearer of bad news. Clearly, that incident still affected her, and he was a thoughtless idiot for bringing it up.

"Sorry."

"It's okay." Finally, she lifted her gaze, meeting his, and then waved it away as if it were nothing. "You know, six months ago, I'd have told you it was the worst day of my life, but today, I see it differently. You rescued me by keeping me from making the worst mistake of my life. I guess I owe you for that." She put her fork down and reached for her wine.

With his heart thudding hard, he reached for her other hand, gripping her soft fingers in his. She felt like an angel. *His*. "I'm sorry he hurt you."

"It's not your fault." She slipped her hand away and placed it in her lap. "Besides, I think it was for the best. Ethan is rich and spoiled. I'm not sure he'd be happy with me anyway." She shrugged, as if to say it all didn't matter anymore.

*But I would.* "He'd be a fool not to be happy with you."

A small smile crept up her cheek. "That's sweet of you to say—" Blushing, she glanced down.

"I mean it, Marion. And now he wants you back after everything he put you through." Something inside made him feel protective of her. He wanted to tell her not to take him back, to let him in instead. But he held back. He didn't want to seem too forward or scare her off.

"I'm not taking him back," she said. "I'm fine without him, or anyone for that matter. I like the way my life is right now. And I've decided to take art lessons."

"Art?" Surprise flooded him. He had no idea she was interested in art, and he wondered if she knew about his own passion for it.

"Don't laugh now. I've been taking painting lessons, but I want to try something different. I was thinking sculpture or pottery or something." She glanced up at him through her lashes, looking sheepish.

He couldn't help but grin.

"You're laughing at me!" she said, sitting up straight.

"Not at all," he said. "I think it's fantastic you want to try your hand at art."

"My painting skills are less than fantastic, and I'll probably suck at anything else I try."

"If you want my opinion, you should try pottery. You have good hands for molding clay between your fingers." He couldn't help but stare at her hands, admiring her slender fingers. He resisted the urge to reach for her hand and run his thumb over the curves of her knuckles.

She cleared her throat. "I'll look into it. Anyway, I think it will get my mind off Ethan."

"So you don't want to date?" He turned serious, watching his hope of seeing her on a more continuous basis float out the window.

"I don't think so. I'm not ready and besides, men are really more trouble than they're worth. No offense."

"None taken. I think." He tried to pretend it didn't hurt, but it did. Oh, it did. He wanted Marion more than he cared to admit.

"I mean, you don't count because we're friends. Right?" She glanced up through her lashes. Was that a hopeful look on her face? Did



she really want to be friends and nothing more?

Graeme put on his best false front. "Of course, we're friends."

"That's why I asked you here for dinner tonight. So we could catch up on old times."

Swallowing the sting in the back of his throat, he reached for his glass and held it up. "To old friends."

She clinked his glass with hers. Despite her declaration that they were just friends, Graeme couldn't help but still be in love with her and determined to change her mind. He wasn't sure how yet, but he'd come up with a plan, and she would be his.

## Chapter Six

Marion touched her glass to Graeme's, listening to the resounding *clink*. She searched his face for any sign he wanted to mean more to her than just a friend, but he gave no hint.

Her heart sank, in spite of her best efforts to keep it from doing just that. If they were just friends, she wondered, then why did he kiss her that way at the bookstore? She had hoped, for whatever reason, there was something between them. Some spark. Or maybe she imagined it all when he kissed her and she was projecting a huge fantasy of this romantic involvement with him that didn't exist.

Still...she could feel his lips on hers even now, hours later.

She shoved away the thoughts. If that was the way he wanted it, then that was the way it would stay. She could live with that. And perhaps they would still see each other occasionally.

"So, what have you been doing for the last few months?" she asked, forking some of the chicken.

"Work and more work." He took a bite of the main dish and paused, giving her a look of bliss. "I have to say, Marion, I had no idea you could cook. This is wonderful."

"Thanks. Neither did I." She bit her lip. She wanted to tell him she didn't make it, but instead choked back the words. Especially since this evening seemed to have spun in a totally different direction than she had originally imagined.

What she had imagined was nothing more than a daydream. She

had somehow pictured they would laugh and talk about old times, and he would twist a lock of her hair around his finger. She could smell his faint cologne lingering on his skin as he leaned toward her...

"I'm impressed," he said, snapping her out of her fantasy.

"Don't be. It really wasn't all that hard." *Thanks to Delilah.* She nervously twisted the napkin around her hand in her lap. She wanted to get off the subject of her cooking as soon as possible. "So, how's the business? You said you had more clients these days."

He cleared his throat. "Yeah, it's good."

He seemed to avoid her gaze, as though he really didn't want to talk about the business. So she pressed on.

"Are you still designing Web pages? I know you were doing that a while back." Was it her imagination, or did he look uncomfortable talking about his work?

"Yeah, I'm still doing that. It's good money for the most part, but not very fulfilling."

"Why's that?"

"I'm looking to maybe branch out some. Do something a little different."

"In the same field?"

"I'm working on a deal that could open some doors for me," he said.

His answer seemed vague to her, and maybe he meant it that way. She had no idea the IT world was so confidential. She shrugged it off as she finished the remainder of her dinner. She wasn't sure what more they could talk about, since he didn't want to talk about work, and her work was just downright boring.

"How about you? Still working the gym?"

"Yes, I am. Though, it's not very exciting, really." As a personal trainer, her job fulfillment was seeing her clients achieve their goals and lose the weight they wanted. But she really wanted to become a physical therapist. She gave up school because Ethan wanted her to.

"But you're helping people, right?"

"Sure. I help them lose weight and eat right. I make them have

accountability."

"It's not what you want to do, though."

It was as if he could read her mind. She nodded, reaching for her glass. "You're right."

"What do you want to do?"

"This sounds crazy, but I've always wanted to be a physical therapist."

"Why would that sound crazy? I think it's wonderful."

She shrugged. "Ethan didn't want me to finish school."

He pursed his lips, and she could tell he bit off his retort to her statement. "You know what I think? I think you can be and do anything you want."

"That's what my mother always said when I was growing up."

"She's right. Moms know best." He winked. "Seriously, why don't you go back and finish?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm too old now."

"Bullshit. You're never too old for school. And if it's something you want, then you should go for it. Right?"

"Maybe." She smiled slowly, appreciating his enthusiasm and encouragement. "I'll think about it."

"You should. Have you thought about night school? Then when you get your license, I'll volunteer to be your guinea pig." He gave her a wink and a grin, and she laughed.

"Oh, Graeme. I've missed laughing with you." Their gazes collided for a long moment until she finally cleared her throat. "Well, I think I'll just clear these plates."

She dropped her napkin on the table and reached for his plate. He grasped her wrist then, something she was completely unprepared for. His hand was so warm, so soft against her skin she never wanted him to let go. She looked down, watching the way his fingers wrapped around her wrist, just holding her. Not pressing into her, not malicious at all. Just touching and being touched.

"If you want, I could go with you to look into classes." He suggested it so casually, it was hard to resist.

And then his thumb brushed over her in a gentle, sweeping motion, her skin tingling in his wake. Her gaze drifted from his hand to his eyes, which were so pale blue she could get lost in them. She reminded herself they were *just friends* and pulled her wrist away.

He dropped his hand in his lap.

"I'll think about it," she promised.

As she collected their plates, he picked up their empty wine glasses and followed her into the kitchen.

"You know what I think we need now?"

She placed the plates in the sink and ran water over them. "What's that?"

"Dessert."

"Oh, I couldn't." She pressed her hand against her full belly. "I'm stuffed."

"Me, too. But after a meal like that, it wouldn't be right not to top it off with something sweet and delicious." His gaze drifted to her lips before meeting her eyes again. "And I have just the place in mind." There was a knowing twinkle in his eyes.

"Is that so?"

"Yep. Come on, Marion. What do you say?" His mouth quirked in an inviting smile.

"With an invitation like that, how could I refuse?"

As they headed out the door, Marion couldn't help but wonder...was he an ice cream man? Or maybe his idea of dessert was going back to his place and slathering her with whipped cream.

She shoved that idea away as just plain...*naughty*, despite the fact she'd totally go for it if he asked...

\* \* \* \* \*

A short car ride later, Graeme parallel parked—something that totally impressed Marion—at a meter in front of the Bitter End Coffee House. Downtown at night was never really her thing, and she certainly wasn't too keen on having coffee so late in the evening. She had to admit

she was disappointed dessert didn't involve their naked bodies and a can of Reddi-Whip.

But the sun was going down, casting a late afternoon glow on the streets and shadowing the walkways. There was something almost romantic about their surroundings, even though she kept telling herself there was absolutely nothing romantic about her relationship with Graeme.

"But, Graeme...I can't drink coffee this late in the evening."

"Not to worry," he said. "They have plenty of other things to sample. And besides, the pastries are to die for."

Inside, the heady aroma of coffee filled the air. The coffee house at night was a completely different crowd than the early birds that frequented the place in the morning. On the small stage in the corner, a local folk band played unfamiliar tunes that were still catchy enough to make her want to tap her toe.

A lady waved to Graeme from behind the counter and greeted him with a smile. She was probably in her late forties, with dark wavy hair and striking green eyes. "Graeme, it's great to see you here." She came around the counter to greet him by kissing him on the cheek. "I haven't seen you in a while."

"I was in this morning," Graeme said. "Jody, this is my good friend Marion Parker. Marion, Jody Sawyer. She's the owner of the Bitter End."

"It's great to meet you," Marion said, extending her hand in greeting.

As Jody shook her hand, she said, "What can I get you two?"

"A slice of your finest cheesecake, a latte for me, and for you, Marion?"

Marion examined the menu above the counter, trying to decide on something without so much caffeine. "Um...maybe some tea."

"How about some Earl Grey?" Jody suggested. "With cream and sugar or honey and lemon?"

"Early Grey is great, and I'll take it with cream."

"Nice choice," Graeme whispered.

Minutes later, they settled into a cozy corner in a couple of leather

chairs, drinking their coffee and tea and sharing the cheesecake. Marion had never tasted anything so divine. It was creamy and light and fluffy. The raspberry puree drizzled on top was sweet and delectable. She licked her fork clean and leaned back in the chair, completely satisfied.

"I told you it was good," Graeme said, grinning at her over his paper cup.

"You were right. Now I'm really stuffed." She stretched her legs in front of her and rested her hands on her stomach.

"After the band plays, maybe we can talk a walk through downtown," he suggested.

"Sure." This evening of catching up sure seemed as though it was turning into a date.

The band was loud enough to hear and enjoy, but not so loud they couldn't carry on a decent conversation. They finished their set to a round of applause and took a break.

"They're not half bad," Graeme said, nodding to the musicians.

"I had no idea you liked this kind of music."

"There's a lot about me you don't know." He winked, smiling and bringing out the devilish dimples.

Was that an invitation to get to know him better? Unsure, Marion sipped her tea.

"Hi, Graeme."

Suddenly all thoughts were ripped from her mind at the sound of the flirty, singsong female voice. Glancing up, she saw the hot young girl standing behind him. She couldn't be more than twenty, if a day. She wore tight jeans and an even tighter shirt that hugged her very voluptuous curves and showed ample cleavage. She twisted a lock of shimmering, sunny blonde hair around her forefinger. Marion hated her on sight.

Graeme twisted in his chair to look up and see who greeted him so sweetly. "Jessica, hey."

He made no move to get up or greet her warmly. In fact, he sounded downright annoyed she had interrupted them. *Good*, Marion thought. Instead, he took a sip of his coffee, ignoring her standing there

looking forlorn.

"I hope it's okay I came over to say hi," Jessica said.

"Yeah, sure." He propped his ankle on his knee in a nonchalant way.

"I'm Marion." She reached over him to extend her hand.

Jessica's handshake was like a wet noodle. "Yeah, hey." It was the only response Marion was going to get, since she turned her batting eyelashes back to Graeme. "My friends and I wondered if you wanted to come with us to the Library. We're going to shoot some pool and stuff."

"Sorry, I can't," Graeme said, sounding much nicer than he probably should have. He nodded toward Marion. "I'm already with someone."

Marion smiled smugly when she saw the look of defeat on Jessica's face.

"Oh, okay. Well, call me sometime?"

Graeme gave her a half nod and a half-hearted wave then busied himself with his latte. Under his breath, he uttered *not*, and Marion stifled a chuckle. Thank goodness he wasn't interested in that girl.

Jessica retreated to her huddling girlfriends, where she whispered something to them and four pairs of eyes pinned on Marion.

"What's the Library?" Marion asked, as soon as the girl was gone.

"It's this new bar here in downtown with pool tables, darts, things like that. We can go sometime if you want."

"I'm guessing, then, it doesn't have shelves full of books," she said with a smile.

"Not a lot of studying goes on there, that's for sure." He chuckled.

"Where do you know her from?" Marion kept an eye on her over the rim of her cup.

"Oh...just around." He ran a finger around the rim of his cup, avoiding her gaze.

"Right." Was he kidding her? Did he think she was stupid?

He glanced her way as she reached for her purse and fumbled inside it for her compact. She had to do something to keep her hands busy and her mouth from babbling. She understood he had girlfriends before



her, but she didn't want to actually put a face and a body to one of them.

"Marion, she's a nobody. Like I said, I'm a regular here, and I meet a lot of people." He reached for her, placing a warm hand on her arm and forcing her to make eye contact with him. He sounded sincere, and the look in his face told her he really was.

Despite that, she couldn't help but think how many girls he knew. How many came up to him like that. Young ones. He was, after all, here with *her*.

She grinned then, giving him a nod.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" he asked.

The unexpected question made her freeze, her heart sputtering in her chest. "Sunday?"

"Yes, tomorrow. Sunday. You mentioned you were taking painting classes, so I thought maybe we could visit the Kimbell or something."

All the years she'd live in this city, she'd never had the opportunity to visit it. "Together?"

He chuckled. "Yes, together."

She knew without a doubt what her answer would be. "I would love that."

"Then it's settled. I'll pick you up tomorrow afternoon."

"Yes, please." She couldn't help but grin.

And to think, only moments ago, she saw the evening as a complete and utter failure. An awkward silence lapsed, and she bit her lip, watching the patrons in the coffee house, and the band take up the stage once again. Marion noticed Jessica and company still eyed them. Or rather, Graeme.

And suddenly her inner bitch awoke, and she sidled next to Graeme and slipped her hand in his. He glanced down at her, looking somewhat surprised though not displeased, and laced their fingers.

"Should we call it a night?" Graeme sounded as unsure as she felt. Maybe he didn't want the night to end either.

"I am pretty beat," she lied. "It's been a long day." *A long, emotional day.*

He got to his feet as she stood. "Then I'll drive you home."

As they left the coffee house behind, Jessica and company staring after them, she couldn't help but feel a little smug that Graeme was leaving with her. He winked at her, a signal he got what she was doing, and she bit her lower lip so as not to laugh out loud.

They stepped outside into the balmy nighttime air, and then her beautiful evening turned into a nightmare. She saw Ethan headed up the sidewalk toward her and Graeme with a gorgeous blonde on his arm.

"Oh, no."

"What is it?"

She stifled the groan that wanted to erupt. She nodded in Ethan's direction. Graeme placed his hand in the small of her back in an almost protective gesture.

"Don't worry," he said, his voice low so only she could hear. He swung her into his arms, pulling her close to him so she could get a good whiff of his delicious cologne. "We can handle him."

His mouth landed on hers in a fierce kiss of possession, his arms holding her so close their bodies seemed to meld right there in the hot evening of downtown. His lips were soft and sensual, demanding and determined. His tongue delved deep inside, swirling with hers and dancing an oral waltz. She never wanted it to end; he had taken her breath away. Quite literally.

"Well, well." Ethan's voice broke their embrace.

Graeme released her slowly, and she staggered to his side, his arm still around her waist, holding her close. Her lips were swollen in his arduous aftermath, and she resisted the urge to run her fingertips over them.

Ethan gave them a look of disgust and said, "If it isn't the happy couple. I can't believe you're still hanging out with this loser, Marion. I thought you had better taste than that."

"Awfully snide for someone who wants me back," Marion replied calmly. She glanced at the girl next to him who looked at Ethan with wide eyes.

"She's your girlfriend?" she asked, nodding toward Blondie. "Did you already have her lined up, or did you find her this afternoon?"

"Ethan and I have been together for four months," Blondie said, sounding defensive.

"Wow, four *whole* months. I'm impressed," Marion said. "Did he tell you he came to me earlier today wanting to reconcile?" She turned her gaze back to Ethan. "He said he wanted me back."

Beside her, Graeme coughed to cover his smirk.

"Ethan...?" Blondie released his arm and stepped back from him, looking hurt. "Is that true?" She crossed her arms over her much-too-ample bosom.

His chiseled features were stony, the muscle in his jaw ticked with his annoyance as he glared at Marion. Finally, he put on his best fake smile and turned to Blondie, putting his arm around her shoulders and pulling her close.

"Of course not, sweetie. Don't you recognize the cry of a desperate woman when you hear it?"

Marion balled her fists, wishing she could punch in him that sardonic grin. "You—"

"He's not worth it, baby." Graeme hugged her gently to him. "You know what a master manipulator he is, and I'm sure he'll hurt her again. He brings it on himself."

"And I suppose you're worth it?" Ethan shot back, ignoring the last of Graeme's comments.

"She's with me, isn't she?" Graeme said

Marion glanced up at Graeme to see that he looked smug and rather proud of himself, and then he flashed Ethan a wicked smile. Her heart throbbed hard in her chest, and she found him completely irresistible. All those feelings she had tried to suppress flooded up, threatening to overcome her. She had to get it in check and quick.

"Come on, baby," Ethan said. "These losers aren't worth our time."

Ethan stepped around them with the girl in tow, who gave Marion a look of death. Marion wanted to shout something sarcastic back but couldn't think of anything. If Delilah had been there, she'd have a ready comment. Instead, she bit her lip. Graeme kept his arm around her waist.

As Ethan walked away, Marion started to giggle. The further away

he got, the harder she laughed, and soon she was overcome with gales of laughter. Graeme started to laugh too, whether at her or the entire situation, she couldn't be sure, but she didn't really care.

"What did...I...ever see...in that guy?" she asked between breaths. It was more of a rhetorical question than anything.

"I don't know, but calling us losers is like the pot calling the kettle black."

Graeme still held her quite close, and she liked it. He was so warm and cozy next to her. She couldn't help but want him to keep her there for as long as possible but knew it would have to end sometime.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get you home."

## **Chapter Seven**

Marion woke up early on Sunday, before the sun even started streaming in her window. She glanced at the clock and groaned when she saw it was just after seven. Why she found it difficult to sleep in on weekends was beyond her.

Her day usually started early during the week when she would get to the gym and do her own workout before her clients came for theirs. She started the day off with a cup of coffee and toning exercises. On the weekends, after crawling out of bed, she'd do yoga to keep her muscles flexible and to center herself.

But this morning, she couldn't bring herself to get out of bed. Instead, she buried herself deeper under the blankets, pulling them over her head to block out the morning light. As she lay there listening to the silence of the house, her thoughts turned to Graeme. Today they would be visiting the museum together, and it made her smile. She had to admit she was really looking forward to spending time with him.

He had held her so close against him last night when they ran into Ethan on the street. She was certain she could still feel Graeme's warmth and smell his cologne. She liked the way he made her feel safe and warm. Especially in front of Ethan. She found it hard to believe he could only feel friendship for her by the way he acted. Perhaps he just masked his emotions so well she couldn't read him.

She could picture his face clearly in her mind, his beautiful pale blue eyes that were so striking she could get lost in them. She even liked

his goatee, and she was so not a fan of men with facial hair. But on him...it was sexy, sensual. And when he kissed her, his whiskers tickled her face. *Mmm.*

She couldn't forget the way his face scraped against hers as they kissed. The way it left her skin feeling sensitive. And she wondered, if they kissed for more than a mere thirty seconds, what would it feel like? And what would it feel like on...other places on her body.

Just thinking it made the dark recesses of her body respond. She stretched her arms over her head and arched her back, thinking of his incredibly soft hands, his elongated fingers, the perfectly trimmed nails.

Her hand slid down her body, over her breasts, pausing only a moment to squeeze their softness. She lifted her shirt, ran her hand over the peaks, making the nipples rise and harden. Her hands moved lower, under the waistband of her shorts, over her sharp hipbones as she shoved away the material, thinking only of Graeme. Feeling relaxed, her legs fell apart with her knees slightly bent.

With thoughts of Graeme firmly planted in her mind, she ran her fingers over the coarse hair and then slid into the warm dampness. Her fingertips made slow, deliberate swirls, barely grazing her skin and igniting the fire deep inside her.

She ran her hand back and forth over her swollen clit, feeling the dampness increase and her excitement mount. Visions of Graeme and that glorious tongue of his danced through her mind, making her want his mouth on her *right there* as she neared climax. Her body ached for more, wanting to feel his hard length sliding in and out of her. She imagined Graeme's lovemaking would be slow and deliberate, bringing her right to the edge

With her eyes closed, and thinking only of Graeme, she slipped two fingers inside. Her body contracted instantly. She pressed her hand against her sex, rolling her hips as her orgasm burst through her, and she cried out.

With her chest heaving from the exertion of her own self-pleasure, she lay there, staring up at the ceiling and wishing Graeme lay beside her. It had been so long since she'd felt the touch of a man, and the only one

she really wanted was him.

Her ringing phone broke into her dreamy state, and she jumped, her nerves raw and on edge. She yanked the sheet over her nakedness, as if the person on the other end of the phone would know what she was up to. The phone rang again, and she snatched it up with a gruff hello.

"Marion?" It was Delilah on the other end. "Did I wake you?"

"No, not really. I was just...lying here." *Wishing there was a man in my bed.*

"How'd it go last night? Did you behave?"

"Yes, Mom." Marion rolled her eyes. "I was a good girl, and it went fine. Graeme loved your fricassee, by the way."

"Great! And...?" Delilah prompted.

"And nothing. We had a nice dinner together, and then he took me to a coffee house for dessert."

"Mar, you're not telling me something. You slept with him, didn't you?"

"No!" Marion pushed herself to a sitting position, fumbling under the covers for her shorts. "I did not. He didn't even kiss me good night." Even though she'd wanted him to. She even leaned toward him, giving him the opportunity. She wanted to feel that mouth on hers again. "I suppose it's because we ran into Ethan outside the coffee house."

"Oh, no. Again? Is he stalking you?"

Marion couldn't help it, she laughed. "With his new girlfriend in tow? I doubt it."

"Wait. He has someone else?"

"Yeah, a blonde bombshell. He didn't introduce me, but she knows I'm the ex. And she also knows he came crawling back, begging to get back together."

"How does she know that?" Delilah asked.

"I sort of told her."

Her friend laughed. "Good for you, Mar. So, what happened?"

"Oh, he was just an ass. I did get to insult him a few times. Graeme was sweet about it, too. He asked me to go to the Kimbell with him today."

"Reeeeeeeally? That sounds more than just friendly."

"We'll see." Marion smiled at the thought of *more than friendly* with Graeme. "Anyway, I don't want him mad at me because Ethan keeps showing up."

"As if that's *your* problem. Ethan is the one with the problem. If you run into him again, I'm going to think he really is stalking you. Anyway, I just wanted to see how it went last night. And to make sure you were a good girl."

"Ha. I was."

"And that's perfectly okay, too, you know."

Marion couldn't help but smile. Even though Delilah seemed against the match, Marion knew she just wanted her to be happy.

"I'm headed to the mall. You want to come?" Delilah said.

"Nah, I'm off to the art store before Graeme picks me up. I have to get some stuff for my art class on Tuesday. Plus, I want to look into pottery lessons."

"Pottery?" Delilah didn't bother to hide her surprise. "What for? Are you hiding from men in art or something?"

"I want to try something new. Besides, I suck at painting."

"Actually, I think you have a very strong future as a cubist."

"Ha! Very funny."

"I'll catch you later, girl."

\* \* \* \* \*

Not long after that, Marion made her way to Marshall Art Supply in downtown. There weren't many art suppliers in the area, and she found this one was the best as far as selection. Not that she was a connoisseur of paintbrushes or anything.

The store held some charm with its colorful artwork on the walls and the metal shelves separating the aisles. Far from a pristine store, this place had dust on items that had been there for years. But still, they knew their business and what people wanted and needed.

For her class on Tuesday, she needed a new canvas and some new



paint colors. As she stood in front of the rows of brushes, contemplating whether or not to purchase some new tools, the door chime sounded. She could hear a male patron talking to the girl behind the desk, and the voice sounded familiar. Before she could investigate, one of the sales associates interrupted her.

"Can I help you find something, ma'am?"

She had been in here enough to recognize the folks that worked here. He wasn't familiar and looked fresh out of high school with a friendly, open face. And he called her ma'am; another sign she was much older than him.

She held the new canvas under her arm and several small jars of paint in one hand. "Oh. No, thanks, I'm good."

"Let me know if you need anything."

"Okay, thanks."

Up front, she could hear the counter girl going on and on about something.

"I've seen your work. You're *so* amazing."

"Thanks. I appreciate that," was the response.

When she couldn't stand it any more, she stepped backward and peered around the edge of the end cap. There, standing with his wallet in hand, was Graeme. Her brows knit as she watched him pay for an item, and the girl behind the counter batted her long lashes at him.

"I'm totally looking forward to your showing at the gallery," she said. She leaned on the counter, allowing her scooped neck shirt to drape open and give him something to see. Which, in Marion's opinion, wasn't all that much. "I have a friend who works there, and she says your exhibit is going to be totally awesome."

"Great," he said, obviously trying to remain cordial. "Then maybe I'll see you there."

From her viewpoint, Marion saw the tick in his jaw, and she suppressed a smile. Graeme had to be completely annoyed by this young thing that couldn't stop flirting with him and, like, saying the word, "totally."

"I hope so." And then in her best singsong voice, "Bye, Graeme."

He grabbed his sack of whatever he bought and headed for the door. Marion rolled her eyes, but she wondered what they were talking about. Graeme was going to have an exhibit at an art gallery? And even more shocking, an exhibit of...what? His paintings? She had to find out when and where, because she would be there.

Her stomach knotted at the thought. Should she? Could she be so bold as to show up at the same place as Graeme, even if he hadn't asked her to go? They had, after all, talked about art. And she liked art. She enjoyed wandering through the Kimball and the Modern Art Museums. Even though she'd never been to an art gallery, she imagined it wouldn't be all that different.

She could see it now... She enters the gallery, wearing her favorite dress and her high-heeled shoes. She walks in, admiring a piece of framed artwork and then, suddenly, she sees him. He's just as surprised to see her as she is him. And then they'll walk the rest of the gallery together, laughing and talking about art and having a great time. And then he'll ask her out for a drink, and she'll say yes, and they'll end up back at her place...

Marion shook her head, releasing herself from the daydream. *Focus, Marion, focus.* First, she had to find out where and when.

Once Graeme was out of the store and out of sight, Marion headed for the counter. She placed her items there, trying to figure out a way to bring up the gallery showing. Better to jump in feet first and get it over with.

"Did you find everything okay, today?" the girl asked with a bright smile. Her nametag read Rebecca.

"I did, thanks. Um, that man that was here before me..." But that was as far as she got. Turns out, the girl was all too happy to oblige her with information.

"Graeme Butler. He's *so totally* talented. I love his paintings. They're awesome," she said as she scanned the first item. "His art is inspiring and just...cool, you know? I'm hoping I can get into his art class next semester." She sighed with a dreamy look on her face, clearly enamored with him.

"He teaches?" Surprise flooded her. She had no idea, and he never mentioned it the other night at dinner. Why wouldn't he tell her?

"Like, he's somewhat famous. Duh." The girl looked at her as though she were an idiot.

Graeme? Somewhat famous? *In the art world?* What the hell...? She forced a fake smile. "Well, I'm new to the art world. What gallery can I see him at?"

"The Craig Mueller Gallery in Dallas. He has a showing there on Friday. I'm totally excited. I can't wait. Plus, he's just so cute." She popped her gum. "That'll be thirty-two-seventy-five."

*And way too old for you.* She couldn't be more than eighteen.

Since she wasn't up on galleries in the area, she made a mental note to remember the name as she handed over her check card. She, obviously, didn't know a lot about the art world.

"Thanks! Have a nice day," the girl said, as she handed her the bag.

"You, too."

All thoughts of pottery lessons departed her mind. All Marion could think about as she left the building was the Craig Mueller Gallery and Graeme being somewhat famous.

*Totally.*

As soon as she got home, she dumped her supplies on the kitchen counter and headed for her computer. She did a Google search for the Craig Mueller Gallery and discovered it was in the arts district of downtown Dallas. She scowled. She despised driving in Dallas.

But since it was for Graeme...

She hit the Web site and found information on the home page about an upcoming showing with local artist, Graeme Butler. There was even a little bio about him.

*Graeme Butler found passion for art at the young age of six, when he picked up his first paintbrush. He was hooked ever since, and painted his first masterpiece at the age of eight, which still hangs on his parent's refrigerator to this day.*

*He was classically trained and graduated from art school*

## Take Me I'm Yours by Michelle Miles

---

*with honors from the University of North Texas. Shortly after receiving his degree, he began painting the human form, as well as toying with sculpture, while also working part-time as an art teacher.*

*He flirted with oil paints in his early canvases, but eventually preferred the more contemporary medium of acrylic. Drawn to the world of fantasy where the real meets the surreal, Butler began studying artists such as Julie Bell and Boris Viejo. His fantasy art is so realistic and alive the viewer is quickly transported into a rich and imaginative world where the past merges with the future. His attention to detail is impeccable.*

*Graeme Butler is an extraordinary new talent who is beginning to garner strong attention within and from outside the art world. His work is widely collected by institutions and individual collectors and has been shown in galleries across the United States. He has participated in shows and exhibitions both locally and across the country.*

*It is Craig Mueller Gallery's honor and privilege to showcase these masterpieces. Opening reception Friday from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm.*

Marion read the words repeatedly. She was stunned to learn Graeme had a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. She'd had no idea. Nor had she known he even went to college at Sam Houston. Reading the bio again, it was clear she didn't know Graeme very well at all. However, the one common thread they had was art, but on two totally opposite ends of the spectrum—he painted masterpieces, and she painted crap.

If she were going to the gallery on Friday, she'd need a new dress. And new shoes. And perhaps even a haircut...an eyebrow wax...and she might as well get a pedicure while she was at it.

And she certainly couldn't go alone now that she knew Graeme was semi-famous. There was really only person she could ask to go with her. She reached for her phone and dialed the number.

"Delilah...how do you feel about art galleries?"

## Chapter Eight

Marion had managed to talk Delilah into going to the opening with her to “run into” Graeme. Despite her initial refusal, Marion managed to convince her friend it’d be a fun outing.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to fake a run-in, Mar,” Delilah had said. “But fine, I’ll go. There had better be cute boys there.”

Marion chuckled at that. Delilah often referred to men as boys because, in her mind, they all were. Men never grew beyond their adolescent years—or so Delilah thought.

As she hung up the phone, the doorbell chimed. Knowing Graeme was on the other side, she held her breath and smoothed her palms down her jeans. Armed with her new information about Graeme’s secret artistic ability, she reminded herself she would have to keep from blurting it out.

And anyway, she wanted to see if he was going to ante up the information. It was his idea to visit the museum after all.

“Hi, there,” he greeted when she opened the door.

He looked positively smashing in jeans and a blue Henley shirt. Her mouthed started to water. “Hi.”

“Ready?”

She nodded. “Let me just get my purse.”

He followed her inside, shutting the door behind him. As she reached for her purse she said, “I’m really looking forward to this. I don’t think I’ve ever been to the Kimbell.”

“You’re kidding, right?” he asked, blinking in surprise.

"No."

"It's a great experience. Very calm and quiet."

"Sounds serious," she teased.

"Art is serious." He sounded so passionate about it, and only now, after having talked with the salesgirl, did she understand he truly was.

She nodded again, tucking her cell phone into her purse. He stepped closer, the scent of his faint cologne wafting over her. She couldn't help but inhale deeply. His hands slid up her arms, pausing at her shoulders.

Looking up, she met his gaze, and her breath caught. It wasn't the fact he was looking at her, but the *way* he looked at her so intently. As though he meant to—

His lips met hers in a soft, gentle kiss. She yielded instantly, leaning into him, allowing his mouth to taste her. His goatee scratched against her skin, but she didn't mind one bit.

Stepping back, he took her hand in his. "There, that's much better." He grinned.

*Yes. Yes, it was.*

"I'm ready now," she said.

But her voice was barely above a whisper.

If she had known things were going to go like that, she would have dressed a little better instead of in her favorite faded blue jeans. And she would have taken a little more effort with her makeup and hair. Instead, as it was, she looked one step above troll in her book.

Still, she would have to suck it up. There wasn't time to go back now and make a change.

They headed to the museum in the cultural district of Fort Worth, parked, and went inside. She liked the way the place looked with the marble flooring and walls. She was glad for her quiet, soft-soled shoes so she wouldn't go clicking throughout the place.

Graeme seemed to know his art. He talked about everything they saw in the permanent collection. He even knew tidbits about certain artists that Marion would have never had a clue about. She could tell he loved talking about the paintings and their artists. He would point from

one painting to the next, his excitement evident on his handsome features.

The way his face lit up when he talked did incredible things for her. She couldn't help but smile at him. Of course, she knew his deep dark secret—he really was passionate about art because he was an artist himself.

The only thing she was really that passionate about was shopping. Of course, her credit card companies were just as passionate about her shopping—she could single handedly keep the economy running with her spending habits. Marion had to admit she was a little envious of his enthusiasm.

As they walked the museum, she still couldn't help but smile.

"What are you grinning about?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said, trying to suppress it. "I never imagined you knew so much about art. It's rather impressive."

Graeme shrugged. "I just...like it."

"It's really nothing to be ashamed of," she said, sensing his hesitation. Perhaps he thought his love of art would make him less of a man. She could almost hear Ethan make fun of him. "Ethan never mentioned to me how much you liked it."

She was probing, and she knew it, hoping he'd offer her that most hidden inner secret of his.

"He doesn't know," Graeme said. "I never told him because I didn't want the ration of shit he'd give me for it."

Her eyebrows rose. This was curious. Ethan and Graeme had been inseparable best friends. She thought they knew everything about each other. "Oh?"

"You know how Ethan is," he said. "Art isn't his thing."

"Culture isn't his thing," she corrected and giggled. "I remember trying to get him to take me to the opera or the ballet many times. He always said no. He was afraid he'd have to turn in his Man Card if he was caught there."

His fingers were still laced with hers, and he squeezed her hand. "I'll go."

Then a funny thing happened. Her heart did this really weird

tumble in her chest as she glanced at him, saw the look of complete sincerity and seriousness on his face. He gave her a sweet half-smile, and she knew he really meant it. He really would take her to the opera, and the symphony, and the ballet, if she asked him.

"You'd go to the ballet?" she asked.

"Sure." He shrugged as if to say it was no big deal. "My kid sister used to do that stuff all the time. My parents dragged me to annual recitals, you know."

She'd forgotten. His sister, Melissa, grew up in a tutu and ballet slippers.

Even if it truly wasn't his thing, she had the distinct feeling he would go simply because she asked. She flushed and cleared her throat. "Well, then, maybe we'll have to go sometime."

"Maybe we will." He looked away first. "You want to get something to eat? I'm starving."

\* \* \* \* \*

Their afternoon turned into an evening with a nice dinner at a local Italian restaurant. They had pleasant dinner conversation and shared a bottle of wine, which went straight to Marion's head.

As Graeme took her home, disappointment swept over her. Despite the fact that they had spent the last five hours together, she wasn't ready for it to end. And she was feeling far too tipsy to let it go to waste. Plus, she found she was getting quite fond of him holding her hand, as he was doing now while they walked to her front door.

"I had a good time today," Marion said.

"So did I." He squeezed her hand affectionately.

They paused on her porch, and Marion wondered what to say next. As she searched her mind, Graeme spoke first.

"I hope we can do it again sometime soon."

Knowing his gallery event was Friday, she tested the waters. "How about dinner Friday?"

Indecision flashed across his face before he replied. "Oh...I can't. I



have other plans.”

She waited. But he didn't elaborate. Crestfallen at the fact he didn't want to tell her the truth—or invite her along—she merely nodded. “Of course.” Even to her own ears, she sounded put off and turned toward the door.

“I just have this...work thing to go to. But I'm free on Saturday,” he suggested.

A work thing, she knew, translated to an art thing. Anyway, she had every intention of waking up with him Saturday morning, too, after a rousing evening of art and hot sex.

The sudden thought made her blink. How was it she had planned to seduce him in two-point-three seconds? Maybe she'd had more wine than she thought.

“Okay.”

Oh, she would see him on Friday, all right. All night. And he better be naked.

She could imagine it now. She'd see him at the gallery, he'd be surprised, though not displeased. They'd talk, have a drink. He'd ask to come to her place. One thing would lead to another...

As she was distracted with those thoughts, he leaned in. One hand swept her hair back from her face and rested on her neck. This time, intoxicated impatience swelled, and she pulled him to her, kissing him with all the fervor she possessed.

She didn't know what came over her. All she could think about was having Graeme on top of her. She fell back against the door, bumping her head against the jamb, but not caring. She pulled him with her and kissing him hard and fast. His arms went around her waist, held her close. And then, like a wanton hussy, she wrapped her leg around his waist.

She wasn't that kind of girl. She didn't believe in sex in public places. She didn't even believe in public displays of affection—but that handholding thing sure was nice. It surprised her the way she rocked her hips against him.

And she was certain she felt his rock-hard cock. He ground against her, the friction of denim against denim nearly driving her wild with need

and desire. Her hands tangled in his hair while their mouths did a sexy oral tango, each wanting more of the other. He cupped her ass, pulling her harder toward him and grinding against her even more. She moaned with the delight of it all.

He wanted her. She was sure of that. There was nothing about their actions that shouted friendship. It was all raw, sexual need, pure and simple.

She wanted more. And Graeme did, too, apparently, because he tugged at the button on her jeans. It popped open obediently, which was quickly followed by the unzipping. Marion leaned back hard into her front door, her chest heaving like some damsel waiting to be deflowered. His hand slipped between her skin and the fine lace of her panties, his fingers gliding lower until he found her slick and hot.

With her leg still around his waist, she opened her hip to give him more access as his fingers swirled around her swollen clit. She bit her lip to keep from crying out with her pleasure as he increased the pressure, rubbing back and forth. His mouth was dangerously close to hers, his breath ragged. She tilted her head back, her mouth open in invitation.

Graeme kissed her, his wet tongue meshing with hers while his hand did wonderful things to her she could have only imagined until now. She sucked on his bottom lip, nipping at it to signal she didn't want him to stop. She let herself go then, allowing the pleasure to wash over her, and she moaned into his mouth. Her orgasm shuddered through her, shaking her to the core.

Everything around them stilled, and somewhere in the distance a dog barked, and a horn honked, and she realized then they were standing on her front porch.

Graeme removed his hand and released her, his chest rising and falling as he breathed hard. He pressed his forehead into hers, but all she could look at was that little open space at the top of his shirt. She could see the fast throb of his pulse and resisted the urge to reach out and run her fingers over it.

"We shouldn't have..." he whispered, his voice hoarse.

Marion wasn't sure if he meant they shouldn't have because they

were on her front porch, or they shouldn't have because of their long history together. Or maybe he meant they shouldn't go any further than they already had.

"I'm sorry," she blurted. "I don't know what came over me." She wiggled out of his arms and collected herself, buttoning and zipping her jeans. She ran a hand over her clothes to straighten them before she got busy digging around in her purse for her house key.

"It was...unexpected."

Marion turned to the door, hoping he didn't see the embarrassment on her face. "Really. I'm very sorry." She twisted the lock and pushed open the door. "Good night, Graeme."

"Marion—"

But she had shut and locked the door before he could finish.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Aren't you going to an awful lot of trouble for a faked run-in?" Delilah gave her a once over as she stood behind her.

Delilah, as usual, was dressed in her best. A black Chanel dress, pink, satin Christian Louboutin heels, and carrying her favorite Prada handbag. She wore a simple string of pearls around her neck and no earrings. And she, of course, was dressed to kill.

"How come you always look better than me?" Marion complained.

Compared to Delilah, Marion was a low-end fashion diva. While she loved shoes and clothes as much as her best friend, she could never bring herself to spend five hundred dollars on a pair of shoes or a handbag. Instead, she chose her bargains wisely.

"I tried to loan you my Dolce & Gabana dress, but you wouldn't have it."

"I know me," Marion said. "I would feel horrible if I spilled a drop of anything on your dress."

"That's what cleaners are for, darling. Anyway, you didn't answer me about the dress."

Marion smoothed her palms over her forty-dollar black dress,

making sure it was as form fitting as she thought it should be. She couldn't resist it when she saw it in the store and it was on sale. Yes, she probably was going to a lot of trouble. Especially after the embarrassing episode on her front porch. She wasn't at all sure how she could face him after that.

However, she was determined. She would have Graeme in her bed—or his—tonight, if it was the last thing she did. She had to finish what they started on her porch, and soon. And she sincerely hoped slipping between the sheets with him *was* the last activity of the day.

"I just want to look nice, that's all," Marion said. She picked out her favorite four-inch heels and slipped them on.

"My ass," Delilah muttered. "Mar, when are you going to admit you have a thing for this guy?"

"I don't." She propped her hands on her hips and looked at her friend in the reflection of the mirror. "We're just friends."

"Friends, huh? You dress up in slinky black dresses and red four-inch heels for a friend?" She shook her head. "I hope this friend comes with benefits."

Marion rolled her eyes. "Come on, Delilah. I haven't had fun in so long. Not since Ethan. I haven't had an excuse to go anywhere or dress up or anything." She turned to her dresser and reached for her lipstick. "This is a chance to actually go out and be with someone I like and have some fun. That's all."

"I'm just saying you want to get naked with this guy."

Of course, she did. Now, if not sooner. "And is that such a bad thing?"

Delilah looked thoughtful for a moment and then heaved a sigh. "No. I suppose not."

"Good, then, because I plan to seduce him tonight." A smug smile crossed her face as she picked up her black handbag.

"That's why you had me drive tonight. So you could hitch a ride home with him. You sneaky little bitch, you. I can't believe I fell for that." Delilah pursed her lips, and Marion could tell she was disappointed in herself. She followed Marion through the house and out the front door.

"You got it." Marion knew pulling off a small coup like that would be difficult, especially with Delilah, her overprotective friend.

"Do you think that's such a good idea? I mean, you barely know him."

Marion hadn't divulged her dirty little secret—that she and Graeme got hot and heavy on her front porch a few days ago. She wasn't about to release that information now. As for the barely know part, she had known Graeme for a long time as Ethan's best friend. She thought she knew his temperament better than most men who'd filtered in and out of her life.

"Don't be silly," Marion said. "I've known Graeme as long as I've known Ethan."

"Yeah, but..." Delilah's voice trailed off.

"Delilah, don't worry. Really. I know I'm attracted to Graeme, and I think he's attracted to me. What else is there?"

"A bloody lot, if you ask me. Mar, you're setting yourself up to get hurt. You know that, right?"

She turned to her then, placing a reassuring hand on her arm. "Relax. I'll be fine. I know what I'm doing. It's just sex and nothing else."

Delilah looked less than convinced as Marion reached for the passenger side door. "It's never just sex, Mar. You're a woman. When you take your clothes off with someone, there are always emotions involved, whether you'd like to think so or not."

"Delilah..." she groaned.

"I just don't want to see you hurt. Ethan nearly destroyed you—"

"And that was six months ago. It's time to move on."

"But with Graeme?" She gave her a sour look. "Couldn't you pick someone else to move on with?"

Marion pursed her lips and heaved an annoyed sigh.

Delilah put her hands up in surrender and nodded. Marion could tell she had more to say, more convincing to do. Instead, she merely walked around the front of the car and got in without another word.

Marion shut the door and buckled her seatbelt. She knew Delilah had a difficult time understanding her need for Graeme, but she needed her friend to support her, no matter what her decision. She knew, deep

down, Delilah did, even though she gave her hell about it.

As they started toward Dallas, the butterflies erupted in her stomach. Tonight, she vowed, she would be with Graeme. The thought of defeat never crossed her mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

After dodging several wrecks on I-35, the two finally made it to Dallas' design district. Here, there were multitudes of interior designers and art galleries. Marion never thought she'd see this part of Dallas.

The Craig Mueller Gallery, as it turned out, was a big stone building that seemed rather nondescript. And not in a very good part of town. As they parked and headed toward the building, Marion's heart was in her throat, pounding hard. Her head began to hurt, too. What was she thinking? Was she insane coming here? What would Graeme think when he saw her? She should be home, watching her DVR, instead of chasing after some guy.

What if she didn't get his work? For that matter, what if he was awful? Could she keep a straight face if she thought his work sucked?

"Still going through with it?" Delilah asked, giving her a sidelong glance. It was as though she could read her thoughts.

"Yes," Marion replied, sounding more sure than she felt. "Yes, I am."

"All right then. Let's hope they have cocktails. And lots of them."

Inside the gallery, those who had shown up were mingling and—thankfully—holding glasses of wine or champagne. Marion knew she would need more than one drink to give her the courage to get through this night. Especially if she intended to plan a seduction, which she hadn't really figured out yet.

If only she could be more like Delilah who was always so sure of herself. She always knew the perfect innuendo in any situation.

She wasn't exactly sure what she was going to say to Graeme when she saw him.

The floors of the gallery were shiny black; overhead the exposed

ductwork gave the building a modern feel. Freestanding walls painted white showcased the art and there, in a special exhibit hall to the right, were Graeme's paintings. There was already quite a crowd, and Marion checked her watch.

Finely dressed men and women mingled throughout the gallery, talking in hushed tones. They drank champagne and ate little hors d'oeuvres of what looked like smoked salmon on a wafer thin cracker. There were mini quiches and some kind of tartlet that passed by on a silver tray.

"He's had quite the turn out already," Delilah said, voicing Marion's thought. "Impressive."

"I was just thinking that."

A waiter walked by with a tray of champagne flutes, and Delilah flagged him, snagging two glasses. She handed one to Marion.

"What sort of paintings did you say he did?"

"Fantasy art," she said as they entered the room.

"You mean the kind with half-naked women?" Delilah asked.

The sight of his paintings made her forget any response Marion had. She couldn't believe how many there were, all spaced evenly on the white walls. And they were all so amazing. The first one she paused to admire depicted what looked like a war from medieval times in the background. In the foreground, a haunting black-eyed maiden stood on a grassy knoll, her long, red hair flowing in the breeze, her pale white hand clasping a cloak at her neck. In her other hand, she held a blue-white orb extended toward the soldiers. White lighting burst from it, illuminating her face in that same glow. There was something about the painting that seemed as though Marion could reach out and touch the orb in her hand. The piece was entitled *Unearthly Maiden*.

"Wow," she breathed. It was simply that breathtaking.

Delilah stood rock still next to her, staring wide-eyed at the painting in awe. In fact, Marion saw her mouth agape.

All of Graeme's paintings seemed to capture a time long ago but mixed an element of fantasy. Their depth gave them that three-dimensional affect, and she had to keep herself from reaching out

and touching them.

"He's good," Delilah said.

"Why do you sound surprised?"

"I don't know, but I really am. How does he have time to do this? Didn't you tell me he designed Web pages?"

"That's what he told me." Marion sipped her champagne, feeling the bubbles in her throat. "Clearly, he didn't tell me everything."

"Clearly," Delilah agreed.

"Marion?"

She recognized his voice from behind her, and she froze. She didn't want to turn around and see him, yet she couldn't stop herself. Slowly, she turned to the side and peered at him over the rim of her glass. She gave her best fake surprise.

"Graeme?"

He wore a pale green button-down tailored shirt that molded to his muscular body. She could clearly see the outline of his biceps and chest muscles. The top two buttons were undone, giving her a peek at what was underneath. She wasn't quite sure what color his pants were, since she couldn't get past that shirt.

"This is a pleasant surprise," he said, smiling. "I never expected to see you here."

"Oh...well, Delilah got tickets, and since they were both free, we figured we'd check it out. You remember Delilah, right?"

Her friend glanced her way, surprise registering before she quickly overcame it and pasted on her best smile. "I remember you," she purred. "It's been a while." She extended her hand.

"Sure, I remember. Maid of honor at the wedding." Graeme shook her hand. "Good to see you again."

At the mention of the wedding, a stabbing pain went through her. Why did people have to keep bringing that up? That was in the past, and sometimes, she wished she could erase the past as easily as a chalkboard. She downed her champagne and wished for another one.

"And I thought this would be boring," Delilah said, still putting on the charm. "Looks like there will be some good looking men here tonight,



after all. Right, Marion?"

"Uh, right." Marion never took her eyes off of him. "So, Graeme, is this the work thing? I had no idea..."

"Yeah, I didn't tell you." He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and glanced around the room before landing on Delilah. "What brings you here?"

Marion held her breath. They hadn't rehearsed what their story would be, but she knew her friend was quick on her feet.

"I have an old boyfriend in the business," Delilah said, lying coolly. "He sent me the invite, hoping I'd be charming enough to bring him. Too bad I'm not that charming." Looking smug, she glanced around the gallery, appreciating the scenery of good-looking men.

Graeme laughed at this, and Marion expelled the breath she'd been holding. An uncomfortable silence lapsed, and Marion wasn't sure what to say next. Graeme wasn't all that forthcoming with information either. She shifted from one foot to the other, trying to figure out what to do next, and feeling like a total fool.

"Maybe I'll go get us another drink," Delilah said, even though her glass was still full. She took Marion's empty and replaced it with hers.

Marion could swear she heard every click of Delilah's heels as she walked away. Perhaps she could sense the tenseness between them and thought it best to make herself scarce so they could talk. At least, that's what Marion thought, but Graeme wasn't making a move to explain anything to her.

"Why not?" she finally said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged. "I didn't think it was important at the time."

Her eyebrows shot up. "You think the fact you're semi-famous in the art world isn't important?"

"Oh, come on, Marion. I'm not semi-famous." He waved it away, as if it were no big deal.

"Maybe I should quote your bio from the gallery's Web site. I believe it said you were an 'extraordinary new and young talent' and that you were garnering 'strong attention within and from outside the art world.' And, as I recall, there was even something about your art being

widely collected by institutions and individuals across the US."

Graeme stared at her in utter disbelief. "That's what it says, huh?"

"I was paraphrasing." She sipped her champagne and was finally starting to feel the affects of the alcohol.

He gave her a knowing grin.

"I didn't know any of that. I didn't even know you went to UNT and graduated with honors."

"Top of my class." He said it as if it were nothing more than a mere fact, not something he should be supremely proud of.

Glancing away, she took notice of one of his nearby paintings called *Untamed Beauty*. It was another bewitching woman, dressed in a flowing white robe and golden armbands, riding bareback on a unicorn that reared up on its back legs on a black background.

He expelled a breath. "I didn't know how to tell you, Marion. I never really talked about my art. I never thought I would be so well accepted in the art world. Even Ethan didn't know," he said.

"How could he not know? You guys were best friends," she said, turning her attention back to him. That shirt was driving her insane. It took all her strength not to rip it off his body, here and now.

"I met Ethan after college, after I got let go from one of my part-time teaching gigs. I needed a job. He needed a graphic artist and a Web designer. And since I had only dabbled in computers, he was willing to let me do some on-the-job training. Then I started doing Web design, and the rest is history."

"But all this..." She waved her hand to encompass the entire room filled with his gorgeous paintings along with the rich, gorgeous people looking to score an original from an up-and-coming artist. "When do you have time?"

He stepped closer, giving her a whiff of his cologne. Which only served to drive her more insane. "You want to know a little secret?" His voice was low, sultry, and right in her ear.

Marion looked up at him, then. His gaze held hers, and all she could do was nod. No words were forthcoming, because her tongue was frozen in place.

"I don't sleep a lot." He reached up, gently brushing back a lock of her hair from her shoulder. His hand barely grazed her, leaving a burning aftermath.

"Why's that?" And why was she whispering? No one could hear their conversation, and he was standing only a few inches from her.

"I don't know. Maybe you could help me figure that out sometime?"

Was that an innuendo? Marion's flirting skills were certainly rusty. She probably wouldn't recognize one if it jumped up and smacked her in the face.

"Since we're friends, right?" he continued.

*Ouch.* Friends?

"Of course." Her throat wanted to close up around the words. He left her breathless.

Even though she told Delilah her relationship with Graeme was strictly physical, she wanted to be more than friends. However, she might have screwed that up the other night after dinner with her shameless behavior. A pang of regret went through her. Somehow, she would have to figure out how to rectify things. Perhaps her planned seduction could be a beginning.

His hand landed on her waist then, slipping around behind her and resting in the small of her back. She gripped the champagne flute tight in her hand until her fingers ached and she thought the glass might shatter.

"We'll have to find a time when we can do that. Won't we?"

Time stood still, and everything around her seemed to disappear. The sounds, the sights, all melted into one blur behind him.

"Maybe you should come home with me," she suggested.

There it was. The words burst out of her mouth before she could stop them, and there was no turning back now.

His gaze dipped to her lips, and she subconsciously licked them as if in anticipation that he might kiss her. She could only hope.

"I'm not sure about that."

Her heart sank, the rejection hitting her harder than she cared to admit. She'd had high hopes for spending the night with Graeme. It was

all she had thought about the last few days. Her fantasies were about to get the best of her. And now...

"How about *you* come home with *me*?" he said, interrupting her thoughts.

And just like that, her heart went from nearly broken to pounding a wild tattoo. He leaned in, his lips on her ear.

"I'll show you my private collection," he whispered, his breath warm and moist.

Marion thought she might faint. Now, *that* she did recognize as an innuendo.

His lips grazed her earlobe before he pulled away, his gaze meeting hers once again. "How does that sound?"

"Perfect, actually."

"Good." He released her and stepped away. "I have to mingle, but don't go away."

"I'll be right here."

She watched him melt into the crowd, talking and shaking hands as he greeted others. He seemed in his element here. As though he were born to be a part of this world, like he belonged with the elegant people surrounding them. And every now and then, he'd glance her way and give her a surreptitious wink. It made her knees want to turn to jelly.

So in order to keep herself steady, she downed the rest of her champagne.

"He's a hunk."

Delilah's voice interrupted her thoughts. She removed the empty flute from Marion's hand and replaced it with a full one.

"I mean, I don't remember him looking *that good* at the wedding. Did he?"

"I..." Marion was at a loss for words.

That fateful day, it seemed, just wouldn't go away no matter how hard she tried. At Delilah's words, the flash of memory hit her. Graeme walking into the room wearing that tuxedo, and Marion thinking how dashing he looked. It was quite a change for him since back then all he wore were jeans and T-shirts. And now...he wore that great shirt, nice

slacks, and good shoes.

"Hello, Marion?" Delilah snapped her fingers. "Is anybody home?"

"Sorry, I was just..." Her voice trailed off again.

"Looking at his ass. I get it." Delilah turned and admired. "It is rather spectacular. I can see why you want to get hot and sweaty with him."

"Delilah, shh. Not here."

"I don't think his art will mind." She thumbed over her shoulder to the display behind her. "How come you didn't tell me he had a penchant for designer clothing? Those are Prada shoes he's wearing, by the way. And an Armani shirt. Damn, that's hot."

"Yes, he is. But I don't like him for his clothes."

"I bet you don't. I bet you like him for what's *underneath* those clothes, and I don't blame you." She patted Marion on the shoulder then. "Go get him, girl."

"Are you giving me your blessing?" Marion asked, turning to her friend for the first time since she appeared back at her side.

"Yes, but on the condition you give me all—and I do mean *all*—the juicy details tomorrow."

## Chapter Nine

Marion laughed. "You got it."

"And on that note, since you have a ride home, I'm gone." Delilah downed her champagne. "Besides, I have my eye on that very hot, tall, European-looking man over there." She nodded in the direction of a man who couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Be careful," Marion warned. As if she needed to warn her best friend of anything.

"Honey, please." She flashed a wide grin. "Why should you get to have all the fun tonight?" Licking her thumb, she placed it on one derriere cheek with an audible *hiss*.

Every man within two feet of Delilah knew she was hot.

Marion laughed. "Well, have fun."

"I will, and girl..." She nodded toward Graeme, who was surrounded by ladies. "You better go stake your claim."

Marion's heart tripped in her chest at the sight of all the young and attractive girls surrounding him. He seemed to be enjoying himself way too much, flaring the jealousy inside her. As Delilah sauntered toward Mr. GQ, Marion charged toward Graeme, and then stopped herself short. He was laughing at one of the girls while she batted her eyelashes and looked at him demurely. She recognized her as the girl from the art supply store whose name was Rebecca.

*The nerve.*

Smoothing her hands down her dress, Marion walked calmly

toward Graeme, pasting on her best smile. She was trying to come up with something smart and witty to say, but unfortunately, words failed her.

"There you are, baby," he said and held his arm out to her. Her heart fluttered as his gaze landed on her, and all she could think about was slipping next to him. At least she didn't make a fool out of herself by causing a scene. Thankfully, her good sense prevailed.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." He kissed her on the cheek. "Excuse me, ladies."

"But Graeme, I—" Rebecca began. Disappointment flooded her youthful face, and Marion secretly cheered for joy.

"I'll see you in class, Rebecca." He gave her a jaunty wave as he wrapped his arm around Marion's shoulders. As they walked away, he whispered in her ear. "Thanks for saving me. Is that for me?" He nodded toward her glass.

"Sure." She handed it over, feeling a little woozy from the two she'd already downed. She certainly didn't need another one, although it would release *all* her inhibitions if she did. "You have quite a few admirers."

"Bev seems to think so, too. I've already sold four paintings."

"Bev?"

"The manager of the gallery," Graeme explained. "Come on. I'll introduce you."

He downed his champagne in one gulp as he led her through the gallery. Bev, or Beverly St. John as Graeme introduced her, turned out to be an older lady. Probably in her late fifties, if Marion had to guess, with straight white hair, black eyebrows, and cool black eyes. She had an air of sophistication and chic-ness, and was certainly in a different social class than Marion. She smiled politely, shook her hand, and then listened quietly as Bev and Graeme talked art.

Marion was lost about thirty seconds into the conversation and took interest in the paintings around her. Graeme's talent was beyond compare. At least Marion thought so.

When she thought no one would notice, she slipped away from his side and wandered toward a painting hanging alone. As she neared, she

read the title as *Black-Eyed Girl*. She glanced surreptitiously at Bev to see if the girl in the painting remotely resembled her. With some relief, Marion discovered she didn't.

Turning back, she gazed at the woman in the portrait who happened to be naked. Long dark hair cascaded down her shoulders, covering her breasts. A swath of cloth draped over her hips, covering her pubic area.

She reclined casually on a chaise under a willow tree, as if being naked in nature was of no consequence. She had high cheekbones, a dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose, and full, sensual lips painted a pale pink. Her eyes were definitely black, but Marion thought she could see a hint of color there somewhere. Her eyebrows were perfect arches. Her chin came to a point, clearly indicating her heart-shaped face. She had long, slender fingers, perfectly manicured nails, and narrow hips.

There was something vaguely familiar about the portrait.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

The male voice next to her startled her. She turned to see a man wearing a nice suit. He had a pencil mustache and an aquiline nose, and he gave her a warm smile.

"Yes, it is," she agreed.

"This is one of his earlier works." He gazed at the painting with an admiring eye. "Not at all like his other fantasy work." He had a slight accent, something European she couldn't place.

"I noticed that," Marion said.

"'Tis a one of a kind. Perhaps you'd like to purchase it?" he suggested.

"Oh, I'm not...sure."

"Forgive me. I'm Jon Ramsey. I work here at the gallery."

"Nice to meet you." She shook his hand. "I'm Marion."

"You are a friend of the artist?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then you must have it. I will give you a deal on it, too." He looked thoughtful a moment as he gazed at the painting, trying to assess an amount. "It's yours for one thousand."



*One thousand dollars? Is he kidding?* "That's very kind of you, but I don't think I can."

"What a shame. It's a real bargain. His other work goes for twice that and then some. This is sure to be worth quite a lot in the coming years. Especially since he has not done another piece like this."

The fact that Graeme's paintings sold for at least two thousand dollars still took Marion aback. If she had the cash in her pocket, she'd snatch this one up. She loved the dreamy look in the girl's face, the way she reclined and seemed so carefree. As though she had not a care in the world. And even looking at it now, there was something vaguely familiar about that face, though she couldn't place it.

"All right, you twisted my arm. Eight hundred. No less," Jon said.

"I really do appreciate it. I just can't."

"Ah, 'tis a shame. Perhaps I hold it for you for a day or two if you change your mind, eh?" Jon offered.

"I'm sure I won't, but thank you."

"Jon, are you harassing the ladies again?" Graeme said as he joined them. He winked at her.

"It's hard to resist one as lovely as she. I was trying to convince her she simply must have this painting for her collection." He waved toward the painting.

Graeme glanced at the painting, and a strange look passed over his face. He reached for her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and turning her from the painting. "Oh, she doesn't want that. Apparently, no one does."

Graeme steered them away from the painting, walking at a very slow pace. Jon fell in stride next to them.

"It's not your usual work," Jon said. "But I was telling her it will be worth quite a lot some day because of that fact."

"You're too kind," Graeme said, forcing a smile. "I've said my goodbyes to Bev." He extended his hand. "Good night, Jon."

"Leaving so soon?" He tisked. "You still have a full house." He waved toward the crowd.

"I'm sure you can let me know the numbers tomorrow," Graeme

said.

"It doesn't look good to disappear from your own opening early, Graeme."

"I'm sure they'll recover." Graeme started toward the door, tugging her with him. Clearly, he was done with all conversation with Jon Ramsey. He glanced her way. "I don't know about you, but I'm ready to bust out of here. You want to get a drink or something?"

"If I'm being polite, sure, I'd love one. But if I'm being honest, no, not really," she said.

And she didn't. All she could think about was getting naked with Graeme, running her mouth over that body of his and touching him.

"Good. Because neither do I."

\* \* \* \* \*

Graeme drove at breakneck speed to his loft apartment in downtown Fort Worth. To her surprise, the apartment was within walking distance of the Bitter End Coffee House. Even at this late hour, the coffee house still had quite a crowd.

Doubt seized her, when only hours ago getting him between the sheets would be no problem. Now, her confidence waned. She half-wished she had taken that third champagne just to keep the buzz going.

Graeme, however, seemed cool and confident. He unlocked the door to his apartment and pushed it open, flipping on the light. He had black leather couches, glass tables, dark mahogany furniture. It was all very contemporary and sleek.

A corner fireplace dominated one side of the room. A staircase the other. The kitchen was bright with black and white tile on the floor and all stainless appliances.

"Wow," she said. "I love your place."

Glancing around, she noticed pictures of him in various destinations. One in New York, one on the slopes of a snowy mountain. Another with a mountain behind him.

"I see you like to travel," she said.

"When I can." He tossed his keys onto the kitchen counter.

She picked up the snowy picture and held it up for him to see.

"Where's this?"

"Taos. I went skiing there a few years ago with some buddies."

Graeme wore an orange and black ski jacket, goggles with orange lenses, a black ski hat, holding his poles. He beamed into the camera. She'd always wanted to try skiing.

As she replaced the picture, his hand slid around her waist. Her heart sped up to an unreasonable pace, and she told herself to continue to breathe normally. He leaned into her, his scent surrounding her in a faint cloud. She wanted him. She couldn't deny that much longer.

He brushed aside her hair, and his lips landed on her neck, tracing a faint line upward to her earlobe. Her body responded, sending a flood of warmth downward between her legs. His mouth felt like heaven against her, and she never wanted him to stop.

"You want to see my private collection now?" he asked, his voice soft as his words whispered across her skin.

"Are you talking about art?" She cocked her head to look at him, and his gaze met hers.

"Of course." He gave her a sideways grin and took her hand in his. "Follow me."

He led her to the staircase, still holding her hand as they ascended. The handrail was wrought iron, keeping with that contemporary feel. She had never seen any place like it before, and it became readily apparent Graeme made a lot of money doing Web sites and painting pretty pictures.

Upstairs, he flicked on the light to reveal his studio with stark white walls and warm wood floors. This was where all the magic happened. This was where he created something out of nothing.

He had an easel holding a half-finished canvas. A drafting table on the other side had an open book of sketches. There were drawing pencils, pens, chinks. His paints lined an entire shelf. He had buckets of paintbrushes of all sizes and shapes.

Releasing her hand, he walked toward the drafting table and shut the book.

"What's that?" She nodded toward it.

"My sketches. I usually start in pencil before I go to the big canvas." He waved toward the one still on the easel. "Sometimes they come out the same. Sometimes they don't."

She gazed around the room. Several canvases of various sizes stood against one wall. She could see they had all been painted on, and she marveled at the amount of his work.

"I feel like I'm getting a peek inside you," she said, still glancing around. "I had no idea who you were." She turned to him. He had never stopped looking at her. "Thank you for sharing this with me."

"You know..." he began as he took long, slow steps toward her. "Now that you've seen the studio of a master, I can never let you leave." Smirking, he reached for her, his arms circling her waist and pulling her close.

"Why is that?" she asked, playing along. "Is it top secret?"

"All artists' work usually is until they're ready to release it into the wild." He nuzzled her neck. "I've never let anyone up here. Not even Charlotte."

Marion's pulse quickened. *No one? Not even Charlotte?* "Then I feel pretty special."

"You should, Marion. You are special." He nibbled her earlobe.

Graeme sounded so sincere, she found him hard to resist. Of course, she found him hard to resist anyway, but now more than ever. Her eyes drifted closed as he continued the gentle assault on her neck and earlobe, doing dangerous things to her inner psyche, turning her into a limp noodle.

"So...why am I so special that I get to see your studio?" she asked, unable to resist the question burning inside her.

"I wanted you to see where I work. Where my true passion begins."

His hand slid up her body, landing on her breast. Her nipple hardened against the delicate lace of her bra. A breath of cotton and silk separated the brush of skin on skin.

His mouth found hers, his lips parting just enough to taste hers. His tongue dipped in, tracing the soft fullness of her lips. She melted against him, her arms finally able to move. She rested her hands against his shoulders, feeling the taut muscles, the curve of his bicep.

This wasn't how she had imagined things would go. She had imagined she would be in complete control. He would resist at first then succumb to her charms. She would be the one who advanced first.

But then again, it didn't seem like it would go any other way. Of course, she would fail miserably at her seduction attempt. And instead of doing the seducing, she allowed him to take control of the situation.

It was time to regain some of that control.

As his mouth traveled down again to pillage her neck, his hand slid behind her, running along the length of her zipper.

"Take me to bed, Graeme."

His hand stilled for a moment, but his mouth never stopped.

"I want you," she said. "I want to feel you." As if he needed any encouragement. But she was impatient, and at this rate, they could be standing there for a while.

He released her, grasping her hand and lacing their fingers. Without another word, he took her down the staircase, through the apartment to his bedroom. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest. She had a burning desire deep within her only he could sate.

As they crossed the threshold of his bedroom, she knew there was no turning back.

Graeme released her hand and flipped on the light. His bedroom was much like the rest of the place except for one unexpected thing—a rich chocolate accent wall. The other four walls were a pale shade of blue. His bed was wrought iron; the comforter the same blue as the other walls. His furniture was in the dark wood as the rest of the house.

She turned to him, reaching behind her and unzipping her dress. She slipped her shoulders out and let it pool at her feet. Underneath, she had planned her lingerie. She wore a lace demi-cup bra in black with thigh-high stockings and lacy panties.

His gaze raked over her from head to toe before he reached for her.

She forced herself to stand still and let him look, despite the fact all she wanted to do was cover up. She much preferred doing this with the lights off, but something about Graeme made her want him to see her.

His index finger traced the swell of her breast. She shuddered with the contact.

"You're exquisite, Marion."

"Exquisite?" No one—not even Ethan—had ever told her that. In fact, Ethan had said she could stand to lose a few pounds.

"Mm-hmm." His reply rumbled deep in his throat and chest.

Marion's fantasy of wanting to see what was underneath that shirt was about to come true. Her fingers fumbled over the buttons, and she silently cursed their clumsiness. She concentrated on pushing each button out of the hole, waiting for the moment when her hands would land on his chest. One by one, she got closer to the bottom of the shirt, still tucked into his black pants.

Before she reached the bottom, he jerked the tail out of his pants, watching as she popped the last button free. She slipped her hands inside, feeling the warmth of his skin, the soft hair covering his curved pectorals.

She was lost in her moment, while Graeme striped off his shirt with a ruffle of material. A line of hair went down his flat abdomen, disappearing into the waistband of his pants and making her mind ignite with all sorts of saucy images.

But he had other ideas. He unhooked her bra, pulling away the delicate material. His hands landed on her breasts, cupping them and covering them. Her nipples responded as before, turning into hard pink peaks. He bent to capture one in his mouth and sucked, his tongue flicking over her sensitive nub. Desire shot down between her thighs where she was already warm and wet.

His hands went down the length of her body as he knelt, stripping away the last barrier between them. His fingers left a searing trail in their wake as he pulled her panties down. She lifted one foot, then the other, stepping out of her four-inch heels. His hands cupped her calves, roamed back up over stocking-clad legs to the tops of her thigh highs, paused to trace the outline all the way around her thigh. Then he rolled down each

stocking, slowly and methodically.

The sensation of his touch set her on fire. Her heart pounded hard.

He lifted one leg, placing it gently on his shoulder. When his tongue made contact with her dark, wet depths, she gasped. Pulling apart her vagina lips, he delved inside, tasting her.

Marion gripped his hair in her fists, holding on for dear life with every flick and suck. He licked her wet clit with the tip of his tongue, teasing her and bringing her to the brink of orgasm. She bit down on her bottom lip, trying to think of anything to keep herself from coming. She wanted to enjoy this moment for as long as possible.

A raging fire built inside her with every taste, every lick. The prickly hairs of his goatee rubbed against her sensitive skin, heightening her arousal, chafing her delicate parts. He quickened his pace, sucking harder and faster.

Marion cried out, unable to contain herself any longer.

"That's it, baby," he said against her. "Come for me."

The orgasm exploded inside her, making all her muscles tense. Just as she came, he inserted two fingers inside her. Her body contracted around him as he thrust, his tongue still doing a dangerous dance over her swollen clit. She gripped his hair harder, pulling him closer to her, rocking her hips back and forth against his mouth.

She cried out again, her knee about to buckle. She wasn't sure how much longer she could stand before she turned into jelly and melted to the floor. She didn't have to wait long.

Graeme stood up, his arms around her as he backed her against the bed. She fell to the mattress, her chest still heaving and her legs wobbly. She could hear the whisper of cotton against his skin as he shed his pants, and another moment later, he slid on top of her.

Every inch of him covered her, his arms wrapping around her. He buried his cock deep inside her. Her clit, still swollen from his oral play, reacted to his hardened length.

He groaned with pleasure when he entered her. "God, you feel good." His voice was a roughened whisper against her ear.

She had never imagined it would be so good. Words froze in her

throat as his hard body covered her. All she wanted to do now was *feel*. She wanted to feel him on top of her, inside her, making love to her.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, rocking against him, pushing against him. The length of his cock slid in and out of her, slowly at first then harder and faster.

His mouth crashed against hers, tasting faintly of her sweetness. She moaned into his mouth and gripped him hard. Her orgasm came again, making her shudder. He pushed deep inside her just as the last tremble went through her, then quickly pulled out and fell to the bed next to her.

"Why'd you stop?" she asked, suddenly feeling exposed. Her body still wanted to contract, needing more.

"Because...if I hadn't..." He turned his head to look at her. "We might have a little problem in about nine months."

It occurred to her then he hadn't even bothered to put on a condom. Still, she wanted him to have his happy ending since he'd given her multiple ones.

She rolled to her side and dragged her fingers through the hair on his chest. "So you want to take care of that and go again?"

"Baby, I like the way you think."

He grinned as he reached for the top drawer of the bedside table. Marion had a feeling she might be in for a nice long night.



## Chapter Ten

Graeme had never driven so hard and so fast to get somewhere before in his life. But tonight was different. Tonight he had Marion next to him in his car. And they both knew what was going to happen when they got to his place. He couldn't wait to undress her and see her naked. Feel her. Touch her. *Be* with her.

Once inside, though, he knew he would have to take his time and go slow. He didn't want Marion to think he was a horny bastard. Which, most of the time, he was. Instead, he wanted to woo her because that was what she deserved.

All he'd thought about was their encounter on her front porch days ago—so warm and wet against his fingers. The way she had brazenly wrapped her leg around his waist and pulled him to her. Those few moments kept his fantasies fueled for days.

Graeme had to admit that he'd never expect those things from Marion. Dear, sweet, quiet, somewhat shy, Marion. But perhaps there was more to her than met the eye. He couldn't wait to find out, the very thought driving him mad with excitement.

He followed her inside and flipped on the light, pausing at the door to let her take it all in.

"Wow. I love your place," she said. She wasn't like all the other girls he'd brought here. Their first reaction was one of less than interested.

Her voice was breathy, sexy. His cock hardened, straining against the cotton of his pants. *Easy, tiger. We'll get her.*

He admired the length of her from behind as she walked over and looked at the few framed photos he had sitting out. Her back tapered down into those slender hips, her ass was perfectly round. Her legs were long and lean with rounded calf muscles. He knew her rigorous workout schedule, and it showed in her perfect body. Ethan was a damn fool to let her get away.

An image flashed through his mind of her naked in front of him, bent slightly at the waist and him pounding her from behind.

It made him even harder.

"I see you like to travel." She glanced at him over her shoulder, a small smile on those sensuous lips.

"When I can."

He still held his keys, and they bit into the flesh of his palm, so he tossed them on the nearby kitchen counter. He walked toward her, keeping himself from rushing. It wasn't easy with this hard-on in his pants.

"Where's this?"

She picked up his skiing picture one of his many girlfriends had taken. They had taken a long weekend up to the mountains of New Mexico. It was the only day they managed to get out of bed to actually ski.

"Taos. I went skiing there a few years ago with some buddies."

Okay, so he lied. But Marion didn't need to know he had been there with a model that happened to have large fake breasts. Besides, he liked real tits anyway. He couldn't wait to get his hands on hers.

Marion replaced the picture as he stepped up behind her and slid his arms around her, pulling her to him. Her soft curves molded against him, and it took all his strength not to grind his cock into her backside.

He brushed aside the soft length of her brown-sugar hair that smelled sweet. His lips landed on the smooth skin where her neck met her shoulder. He inhaled quietly to take in her scent, letting his eyes close as he kissed his way up to her earlobe.

Pressing his hand against her abdomen, he felt her muscles tighten as she inhaled. A soft moan escaped her lips. He had to do something to distract his attention from her hot body before he ripped her dress off and

fucked her right here.

"You want to see my private collection now?" He flicked her earlobe with his tongue, toying with her earring.

"Are you talking about art?"

He couldn't help but grin. "Of course. Follow me."

Taking her hand in his, he led her to the staircase. Prolonging the situation only made things torturous for him, but he was determined to take his time. And the only way he could do that was to show her his loft studio—something he had never shown anyone. He had never shared his art with any of his girlfriends simply because he didn't think they'd understand.

He flipped on the light to reveal his untidy workspace. He found he could only work in a disorderly space—it helped his creative juices. On the drafting table, he had left his sketchbook open. The last thing he needed was Marion seeing his sketches. Most of them were of her. He had started to draw her shortly after meeting her, and when he found he needed a little inspiration, he'd sketch her.

Earlier, he had managed to keep her from realizing the painting Jon tried so valiantly to sell was of her. If she knew he painted her naked from his wild imagination, he wasn't sure how she'd react. He certainly didn't need her seeing his sketches.

Releasing her hand, he walked over and flipped the book closed before she could get a good look at it.

"What's that?"

"My sketches. I usually start in pencil before I go to the big canvas. Sometimes they come out the same. Sometimes they don't."

It wasn't far from the truth. He had painted *Black-Eyed Girl* from a sketch he did of Marion. It was one of the first paintings he'd done in oil. The only thing he changed was the color of her eyes—an afterthought. He had painted them the same doe brown as hers but then went back later and painted over them. Just to make it not so much like the real Marion.

Frankly, he was shocked she didn't know she'd been looking at herself in that painting.

Marion glanced around the room, hugging her elbows. He could

see the goose bumps rising on her arms. "I feel like I'm getting a peek inside you. I had no idea who you were." She looked awed as she glanced around.

Perhaps not, he thought. But he knew who she was. Beautiful, intelligent, sexy. How could he let her go now that he was so close to having her? This "friends" business was nothing more than a cover up, and they both knew it. He wanted her as much as she wanted him. He intended to prove that tonight.

"You know...now that you've seen the studio of a master, I can never let you leave." Graeme pulled her into his arms, gazing down into those eyes he had memorized so long ago.

"Why is that? Is it top secret?" She looked up at him through her thick black lashes, making his heart palpitate in his chest.

"All artists work usually is until they're ready to release it into the wild." Bending, he nuzzled her neck, inhaling her soft scent again and feeling her velvety skin. "I've never let anyone up here. Not even Charlotte."

He hadn't trusted her anymore than he trusted Ethan, and Ethan was his business partner. Mostly, he didn't want her seeing his work and poking fun at him. She tended to do that because she didn't understand art, nor did she understand how important it was to him.

"So...why am I so special that I get to see your studio?"

She really didn't know, did she? She really had no idea he had been in love with her for so long. Graeme pulled her closer, feeling her body curve against his.

"I wanted you to see where I work. Where my true passion begins."

His other passion—Marion—was in his arms.

Graeme cupped her breast. She fit perfectly into the palm of his hand. Not too big, not too small. He gave her a gentle squeeze, kneading her flesh and feeling her. It seemed he had waited forever for this moment to come, as if he'd waited a lifetime to hold her close and taste her.

But still, he would wait for the perfect moment to take off her dress and make love to her. He kissed her, delving into the sweet recesses of her mouth. He explored the outline of her mouth with his tongue, reveling in

the taste, the sensation, the touch. His cock strained against his pants. All he could think about now was burying deep inside her.

He kissed her neck, his hands playing along the length of her zipper. He could imagine the supple skin beneath and wondered if she wore tempting lingerie. His fingers itched to pull it down, to slip inside her warmth and touch her.

"Take me to bed, Graeme."

He froze, his hand in place, hovering over the zipper pull. Her words had been breathy, seductive, making the blood drain from his head. As if she knew all along that he had intended to bed her tonight.

"I want you." Her face pressed into the curve of his neck. "I want to feel you."

Not wasting another minute, he grasped her hand and led her down the stairs to his bedroom.

In the past, he had bedded women because he knew they were an easy conquest. He knew he was being used just as they knew he used them...it was never serious. He wouldn't waste a moment to strip them and throw them down for a good hard fuck. But not Marion. He didn't want that for her. He wanted long, slow love play. He wanted to savor the moment, feel every curve of her body against his. Hear every breath, every sigh. And make it last for as long as it possibly could. It seemed as though he'd waited a lifetime for this moment, and there was no way in hell he would rush things.

Once inside the bedroom, she stepped away from him and turned. Her face was flushed, the color in her high cheekbones, which made her all the more enticing. Her lips were still damp from his kisses. Her long hair cascaded over her shoulders.

Marion reached behind her, pulling down the zipper. He could hear the release of each one of the teeth, building the desire higher and higher inside him. He resisted the urge to reach down and rearrange, despite the fact his hard-on hurt.

She slid her arms out of the sleeves and gave the material a sexy little push, letting it pool at her feet. Creamy white skin against black lace sent him reeling. She had planned this all along. The very thought she

wanted to seduce made him harder and want her even more. All night she had stood at his side, wearing sexy lingerie and waiting, biding her time until the moment was right.

Perhaps they weren't so different after all.

"You're beautiful, Marion." She made his fantasies come alive at long last.

"I don't think so." She shook her head in disbelief, so he would have to show her he meant it.

"Mm-hmm."

Beautiful. Tempting. Gorgeous. He wanted her. Now more than ever.

She reached for him, her hands shaking as she began to unbutton his shirt so slowly it drove him mad. He watched her perfect, slender fingers pushing button after button out of the holes, making her way down toward his waistband. Helping her, he jerked the hem of his shirt out of his pants.

When he was completely unbuttoned, she shoved her hands under the material and against his chest. She was warm, inviting. Her fingertips made him tingle as she dragged them through the covering of hair.

Stripping off his shirt, he reached behind her and flicked open the clasp of her bra, unable to wait another moment to see what was beneath the lacy covering. He wasn't disappointed.

Taut, dusty nipples beckoned him closer, and he bent, capturing one in his mouth. Sucking gently, he closed his eyes and savored the moment. A breath shuddered out of her; a small moan escaped her throat. He moved downward, his hands sliding over the curves of her body. On his way down, he removed her panties, exposing her perfectly shaped V between her legs with the perfectly trimmed hair.

But he couldn't stop yet. He had to touch more of her.

Her calves were rock hard. Her thighs powerful, yet feminine. He was well aware of the firm muscle beneath the smooth skin. Knowing it would delay things further, he took pleasure in rolling down her stockings and removing them one by one. She had great legs.

Picking one up, he lifted it. The back of her knee rested comfortably

on his shoulder. Her wet secret depths beckoned him as he pulled apart her lips and dipped his tongue in. Slowly at first, testing, tasting. She grasped two handfuls of his hair, pushing him toward her. He flicked his tongue over her swollen clit before gently sucking her into his mouth.

When she cried out, he quickened his pace. He used the tip of his tongue, knowing she was at the brink of orgasm, her hips rocking against his mouth as she softly moaned.

"That's it, baby. Come for me," he urged.

He wanted to taste her, wanted to feel her shudder against his mouth. She tasted every bit as sweet as he'd imagined. Her orgasm exploded against him. Feeling her muscles tighten, he slipped his fingers inside her. Her body contracted around him, squeezing him as she cried out with her pleasure.

Unable to wait another moment, he stood and leaned her back onto the bed. She went willingly, melting to the mattress as he stripped off his pants and finally freed his painful erection. He landed on top of her, sliding his hardened length inside her and groaning with his own pleasure.

"God, you feel good."

And she did. Better than he could have imagined. Better than any model or bimbo he'd ever fucked. This was more intense, with more feeling than he'd had in a very long time.

Marion wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer, rocking against him. He fought against his urge to pound her hard and instead forced himself to go slow. Moving in and out in long, even strokes. But he couldn't do that for long. His thrusts came faster and harder, pushing deep inside her as she gasped for breath, clutching him to her.

Graeme's mouth covered hers, their tongues tangling in an oral duel. She moaned that sexy deep moan right into his mouth. Another orgasm exploded against him, this time around his cock as she came. She shuddered hard, and he was moments away from letting go.

He pulled out of her and landed on the bed next to her. His chest rose and fell from exertion. He had never felt so exhilarated in all his life.

So alive and free. Having Marion naked beside him was better than selling any old painting.

"Why'd you stop?"

She sounded disappointed, and he couldn't blame her. He wanted to finish deep inside her, but he also didn't want the consequences of a pregnancy. He wasn't ready for children. He hadn't bothered to put on a condom for his own selfish reasons. He wanted to feel Marion without that rubber barrier. He wanted to feel every velvety inch inside her.

"Because if I hadn't, we might have a little problem in about nine months."

Marion rolled to her side, and her hand landed on his chest. She ran her fingers through the hair, then over the line running the length of his abdomen.

"So you want to take care of that and go again?"

Hearing her say the words made his cock hard again. Did he ever. He planned to wear her out before dawn.

"Baby, I like the way you think."



## Chapter Eleven

It was some time in the pre-dawn hours when Marion awoke to find Graeme spooned against her. He had his arm around her, holding her close, his regulated breathing in her ear. She felt deliciously warm and comfortable there. The only other sound in the loft apartment was that of the central air conditioning. It was sort of a white noise against Graeme's soft breathing.

She sighed.

She could totally get used to this. Then again, maybe it wouldn't last. Maybe this was it and it was only a one-time thing. At least it had been a fantastic one-time thing, if that were the case.

But she hoped not.

The night had gone quickly, it seemed. The last thing she remembered before falling asleep was lying on her back with her eyes closed, and Graeme tracing the outline of her face. His nimble fingers going over every curve and every line. As if he were drawing her in his mind's eye. It made her feel treasured, like the *pièce de résistance* of his entire collection.

Before that...oh...much more before that, their bodies intertwined in ways she didn't know were humanly possible.

Marion grinned in the darkness, remembering. At first, their love play was frantic and fast, and then things slowed down. Slow and easy. Calm. Serene. As if they were the only two people left in the world. As if time stood still for them.

She never wanted it to end, even though she knew it would, and very soon. Her muscles were delightfully sore and in all the right places. Maybe she could get breakfast out of him. After all, the Bitter End and the Bonjour Café were within walking distance of his apartment.

His hand slipped over her hip and down her thigh as far as he could reach. Then back up again. Something else came to her attention, and it was clear he was awake, even if his eyes weren't open yet.

"Morning, beautiful," he said, his voice deep and throaty and right in her ear.

Marion rolled toward him, snuggling closer and looking up into his face. He still had his eyes closed, and his cheeks were scruffy with stubble.

She ran her forefinger down his chin, feeling the bristly hair of his goatee. "Morning."

She never thought being in his arms would feel so good. All that talk about being friends was definitely long gone. And if she wasn't careful, she was bound to lose her heart to him very quickly.

"Sleep okay?" he asked.

"Mmm." She smiled, her gaze landing on his throat and traveling down his broad chest.

"I'm going to take that as a yes."

"Did you?"

"You really have to ask?" Graeme cracked open a pale blue eye, a corner of his mouth lifting in a grin.

"Judging by the silly look on your face, I suppose not."

He propped up on one elbow and looked down at her, his gaze raking over the length of her. Seeing him look at her that way made her spine tingle. He ran his hand over her breast then down her abdomen and back again.

"Marion, I'd like to sketch you."

Heat flashed through her and it burned her cheeks. She was sure she blushed. Did he mean...?

"Just like this." His hand went over her again, caressing her curves. He palmed her breast, the dusty nipple peaking against his hand.

*Yes, he did.* "I don't know about that."

"You'd make a great model. What do you say?"

Sitting up, she pulled the sheet to cover herself, feeling modest and rather embarrassed. "I don't think so."

"Well, I *do* think so. And my opinion is really the only one that matters."

She could hear the smile in his voice, and it made her smile. Still, though, she wasn't sure she could do it. She'd be forever in his sketchbook...*naked*. And besides that, what if he showed someone? What if he painted her? What if he sold that painting in the gallery? And then everyone would see her naked. And she really hated her thighs. She tugged her bottom lip through her teeth, considering.

"Oh, I get it. You think I'm going to put you on canvas," he said then as he sat up. Almost as though he read her mind.

"Well...you did say you like to sketch before you paint..."

"What if I promise you it'd be for my eyes only?" His gaze went over her sheet-covered body as he said it. Did the man have x-ray vision?

"I'm sure I'm not the first naked woman you've sketched?" she teased. "I'd be just another page in that book of yours."

"No, Marion." He sounded insulted, and she laughed.

But her heart pounded a fast cadence in her chest at the thought. Allowing him to sketch her would mean, then, Graeme could see her naked anytime he wanted. Did she really want to be immortalized that way for him? Or would she rather he remember her in her fabulous black party dress?

"I'm still not sure."

"You can pose any way you like. In fact...roll over." Graeme tugged the sheet away from her.

"What?" Her brows knit. "Why?"

"Just do it."

Huffing out a breath, she did as he asked, rolling to her stomach.

"Now, tuck your arms under the pillow. Yeah, like that." He fanned her hair out on her arm and down her back, then looked her over, examining his handiwork. "Perfect. That's exactly what I want."

"You want to sketch my back? Why?"

He ran his hand over her, down to the sway in the small of her back, over her ass and then back again. "Because it's perfect. It's not a sexual thing, if that's what you're thinking."

"Then what is it?"

"It gives a hint of sexuality, yet shows me your beauty. Perfect lines and all the right curves in all the right places."

"I see." Her heart pounded hard against the mattress. She really wanted to say yes.

"And besides, I don't need to see you naked to want you."

Now she knew she was going to say yes. She lifted her gaze and met his. "Okay. I'll do it."

"You will?"

"Yes. Right now."

\* \* \* \* \*

Graeme rolled to his side, hoping she didn't see the sudden erection she gave him when she said yes. He reached for his pants and slipped them on. He couldn't believe he'd gotten her to agree. This was not the same woman Ethan had spoke of so long ago. This sexy woman knew her way around a man and was certainly no prude. More lies...

She slid off the bed, standing beside it as if waiting for direction.

"All right then," he said.

But he knew Marion was still a little shy and maybe a tad modest. Even though she tried to hide it. He was well aware of the blush in her cheeks when he told her he wanted her even if she wasn't naked.

It was probably too bold of him to say it, but he couldn't stop himself. It was true.

He reached for his discarded shirt and handed it to her. Seeing her in his shirt would probably drive him to the edge, but he didn't have anything else handy.

"You can wear this, if you'd like."

"Thanks."

Marion blushed again as she took the shirt, their hands brushing. It

was completely sexy the way she blushed like that. He hadn't noticed that before. Maybe because he had been too caught up in the moment last night. He watched her slip on the shirt, fastening the first few buttons. She rolled up the sleeves to her elbows.

God, she looked incredibly sexy standing there with her hair still mussed and wearing his shirt.

He wanted her. Wanted to rip it right off and take her hard and fast. He wanted her so much it ached down in the middle of his chest. And, what was worse, he was afraid he would want her this way from now on. He was afraid that ache would never go away.

"Come on."

Graeme extended his hand to her as she walked around the bed. She laced her fingers with his, and they headed up to his studio, their bare feet quiet on the wood floor. His blood pulsed in his ears, and he was very aware of everything around them.

Once upstairs, he shoved papers and books off the sofa residing across from his drafting table.

"Sorry about the mess," he muttered. And he was. Completely embarrassed he had let it get out of control.

"But you said you liked the clutter." She smiled as she watched him.

"I do." And he liked seeing her *in* his clutter. "Here you go." He waved her to the sofa.

She slipped by him, giving him a faint whiff of what was left of her perfume and a hint of sex. Their sex. With her back turned, he could see the slight ruffle of the shirt as she unbuttoned, then slipped it off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor at her feet. Glancing at him over her shoulder, she gave him a small smile before sinking to the sofa. She positioned herself just like on the bed, except this time she pillowed her head on her arms.

"Like this?" she asked.

"Yeah. Don't move."

Graeme reached for his sketchbook and his favorite drawing pencil. The tip was perfectly worn down—not too sharp so that he could draw

with ease. He settled into a chair near her and flipped open to the first blank page. Jesus, she was hot.

Glancing up, he met her gaze. She gave him that small smile again, and it nearly made him melt. His pencil began to move across the page, as if his fingers and hand already knew how to draw her. And maybe they did. He'd drawn her so many times from memory he could do it now without even looking. But he wanted to look...and he wanted to savor the moment.

"That's perfect."

He looked back down at his page, saw the outline of the curve of her back. It flowed down into the roundness of her ass, the lean line of the back of her thighs. He added shading here and there.

"Graeme?"

His pencil tip went back up again, adding the shape of her hair as it splayed across her back, down her arm.

"Hmm?"

"Have you...done this before?" she asked. She paused, waiting for him to answer. When he didn't, she said, "You know...drawn other women?"

His hand froze. He looked up at her, seeing the question in her deep brown eyes. And was that a hint of worry? Did she hope to be the first? Clearly, she couldn't let her earlier teasing go.

"Drawing the naked human form was sort of a prerequisite in art class." He glanced up at her over his sketchpad. "It wasn't erotic, if that's what you mean. Certainly not like this."

She seemed relieved. He couldn't tell her the truth. She wouldn't understand. He was an artist and interested in female forms and shapes. Every woman smelled different and even tasted different. She wouldn't or couldn't understand. Hell, he couldn't even understand it.

So he'd had a long line of girlfriends that rarely lasted more than a few months. And most of them worked in the same industry he designed Web sites for. They were easily accessible and easily amused. They were shallow and gave him just enough sex to take the edge off. They meant nothing.

But Marion...she meant everything to him. And he wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that. And knowing how Marion preferred honesty over a lie, his guilt began to fester inside him. Eventually, he'd have to come clean.

He focused on the page in front of him again, glancing up from his work every so often to get another curve in his mind's eye before he put it on paper. He drew her arms, the way she curled them under her head. Adding the curve of her breast pressed into the cushions, her perfect shoulders. He drew her face with such accuracy it was like looking at the real Marion. Despite his best efforts not to pat himself on the back, he had to admit it was some of the finest work he'd ever done.

When he finished, he dropped his pencil back on the drawing table and sat back, admiring it.

"You're done already?" she asked, rising up slightly to give him a spectacular view of her cleavage.

"Yep." Graeme turned the book around so she could see. "What do you think?"

Marion stared at it for a long, excruciating moment. Then she blew out a breath. "It's amazing. It looks just like me."

"It's not bad." He tried to be modest.

"I love your work, Graeme."

The sentiment was so heart-felt, so sincere, it made his stomach bottom out.

"There's something I want you to do now," she said, breaking into his thoughts.

"What's that?"

"Draw me like this." Marion rolled to her side, showing him every lovely inch of her.

The response in his pants was clear. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

He didn't waste a moment grabbing his pencil. Marion had just given him her ultimate trust.

## Chapter Twelve

There was something completely erotic about watching Graeme draw her. As though he had flipped a switch inside her. Marion couldn't take her eyes off him. And his hands...such great hands. She discovered quickly she loved watching him work.

"Done."

Marion's was completely turned on that he had managed to draw her so well.

"You do good work," she said.

Standing, she took the sketchbook out of his hands and tossed it aside. Without a word, she lowered herself down on him, and his hands slipped over her hips. Their lips met in a fiery kiss. Her hands slid around his neck, one diving into the thickness of his hair. His erection throbbed between her legs, making her want him inside her as she rocked against him.

The crinkle of a wrapper made her pause. "You sneaky devil."

"I thought it best to be prepared." He looked pleased with himself.

"You thought right."

She helped him out of his pants. With her heart ramming hard against her chest, she sank down onto him, and he filled her up. His mouth kissed a hot, searing path from earlobe to shoulder and back again.

Her head fell back, giving him more access to her neck. Her breasts brushed against the fine hair on his chest, heightening her arousal. Her hands fisted in his hair, pulling him closer to her as her hips rocked



against his and his hands palmed her ass.

Marion never wanted to stop tasting him. Her mouth melded with his, their tongues tangling with each other, their mouths wet and hot and sweet. He knew just how to kiss her—not too hard, not too soft with just the right amount of tongue and lip.

With her mouth pressed against his and their bodies meshed, she quickly came undone. Her orgasm shot through her hard and fast, making her shudder with every spasm. His came seconds after hers. Both their bodies were damp with after-sex sweat.

She dropped her head onto his shoulder, her breathing labored as she tried to regain her composure.

He kissed her forehead. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm starved." As if in response, her stomach rumbled.

"We could eat here, stay in bed most of the day. Unless you have other things to do."

"Well..." How could she tell Graeme the only thing in the world she wanted was to spend the entire weekend with him in bed? She desperately wanted that. She wanted to play house with him, run errands, and do dishes. All the sort of things couples do.

But then she reminded herself they weren't a couple. Not yet. Maybe not ever. They merely had foreplay in his studio with hot sex as a side dish.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed," he said. "Of course you have other things to do."

"I did make a promise to Delilah," she said. It wasn't far from the truth. Still, she couldn't believe she was ditching him to spend the afternoon home alone. *What a fool I am.*

"Then let me at least take you down the street for brunch. The Bonjour Café is great," he said.

"I know. I've been."

She and Ethan frequented the place nearly every weekend. Now was her big chance to erase some of those memories of him and make some new ones with Graeme. Even if it was the one and only time she'd be with him there.

He trailed his hand down her back, making gooseflesh spring up on her arms.

"Quick shower then we'll go?" he asked, gazing at her with those incredible pale blue eyes.

"Sure."

Their gazes locked for a long moment, as if they were staring each other down. As if neither one would release the other. He grinned then, his finger sweeping down her cheek. Reluctantly, she slid off him and reached for his shirt, slipping it back on. She buttoned the top button and turned to see him holding his pants in one hand and giving her a grand view of his erect anatomy.

"Graeme...?"

"I just had you and I want you again. Explain that."

"I guess I can't, since I feel the same way." Especially because she wanted him, too.

"Maybe we have more play time in the shower. What say you?" he asked.

A wide grin spread on her lips. "I thought you'd never ask."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was another hour before the two of them managed to get dressed. Of course, Marion had one teeny problem—all she had to wear was her cocktail dress from the night before. She knew she couldn't very well wear that to the Bonjour Café for brunch. She'd look ridiculous. Especially if Graeme wore jeans and a T-shirt.

"Well then," he said as he slipped his arms around her waist. She was still wrapped in a towel. "I guess you're my hostage."

"Ha! Very funny, Graeme." She tried to wiggle out of his grasp, but he held fast.

"And you'll have to be naked."

"Graeme!" She gave him a half-hearted shove on one shoulder. "You know you have to just take me home."

He clucked his tongue in dismay. "Too bad for me." Leaning in, he

kissed her soundly on the lips. "How about I at least buy you coffee and donuts?" he suggested.

"You certainly are determined to buy me breakfast."

Her hands rested on his shoulders. His magnificent, strong shoulders. He was shirtless, which gave her that glorious view of biceps and chest, too. And all she could think about was him on top of her, those biceps flexed to his maximum power. It nearly made her swoon.

"I just want to do something nice for you. Especially since you went to all the trouble of coming to the opening for me."

"I wanted to."

"I knew it!" He released her then, grinning like a fool, and stepped back. He wagged an accusatory finger at her. "You planned it, didn't you? You knew all along about the gallery opening."

Marion was caught red-handed, and Graeme looked completely pleased with himself. Like a kid who just guessed a big secret. His chest puffed out.

"I...um...I..." Dumbfounded, she didn't know what to say or how to respond. He'd caught her in her little white lie. She had tried so hard to make it seem casual.

"Delilah didn't drag you there, did she?" Graeme crossed his arms over his chest, looking smug and rather proud of himself.

"No." There. She admitted the truth. Defeat, at last. "Aren't you glad I came, though?"

"You have *no* idea." He smiled and gave her a surreptitious wink, making her giggle. "I'm...flattered, Marion. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why didn't *you* tell me about your art?" she asked.

"Ah. Good point." He gave her a sheepish grin.

"Are you embarrassed about your work? Because from what I saw, you have everything to be proud of. Your art is fantastic and amazing."

"No, not embarrassed," he said. "And thank you. It means a lot to me to hear you say that."

"It's all true."

"I don't know, Marion, it's just something I do." He shrugged, indifferent. As if to say it wasn't all that amazing.

"Clearly something you're very passionate about."

He looked thoughtful. "I don't try to hide it from anyone. It's not exactly anything that comes up in everyday conversation."

"When exactly do you have time for all of that?" She pointed toward the loft upstairs. "I thought you designed Web sites for a living."

"I do."

He turned, opening his closet door and disappearing into the cavernous abyss that held rack after rack of clothing. Marion had never seen a man possess so many clothes in all her life. Except maybe for Ethan, and he ran a distant second to the man whose bed she happened to share last night. And the shoes! My God, the shoes. He put Delilah's shoe obsession to shame.

"And I thought you said you had a lot of clients."

"I did?" His voice sounded muffled as he pulled on a shirt.

Marion was immediately suspicious. "Yeah. That first day I saw you at the coffee house."

He popped out of the closet, tugging his shirt down. "I said I had some new clients lately, and I do. They're relatively low maintenance."

"Oh." Trying not to feel foolish, she reached for her dress. "I thought..."

"I'm the boss. So I get to have flexible hours." Walking up behind her, he kissed her neck. "Why don't you dry your hair and then we'll head out? I know a place that has gourmet donuts."

"Gourmet, huh? Gourmet isn't code for tofu or anything, is it?"

He chuckled. "Not at all." Patting her on the butt, he headed for the bedroom door. "I'll give you some privacy."

As he softly closed the door behind him, Marion had the distinct feeling he changed the subject about his Web design business for a reason. He never liked to talk about it, and it seemed something he avoided. Perhaps even something he was ashamed of.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few minutes later, they were in his car and headed through

downtown. But their drive was short-lived. Graeme pulled over at the curb in front of a store that read Jason's Donuts. It looked like a dive. Especially with a dilapidated sign hanging on the front of the building over the glass double doors.

"I thought you said this was gourmet?" she asked, staring at the building.

"Baby, it is. Just wait. You'll see."

Even though she didn't want to think it, hearing him call her *baby* made her weak in the knees every time. There was something about the way he said it. As if she really was his baby.

That and the fact Ethan never called her by any pet names.

"Come on." He opened her car door.

"I can't go in wearing this!" She waved toward her cocktail dress, bare feet and legs. She didn't even bother to put her shoes on, figuring she'd stay in the car.

"It'll be fine." His mouth quirked in a lopsided grin as he held his hand down to her.

"This is against my better judgment." She scowled, slipping on her shoes, and he chuckled. Placing her hand in his—and delighting in the warmth of his touch—she stepped out of the car. He laced their fingers, shutting the car door and leading her into the donut shop.

And as the door chime sounded upon their entry, a man—and only patron—stood at the counter, leering at the young lady behind it. He leaned heavily on his arm, making eye contact with her breasts instead of her face. He turned when the door chime sounded, and Marion's heart dropped into her four-inch heels at the sight of Ethan. He looked over his shoulder, his lascivious grin turning into a grimace.

Graeme squeezed her hand, as if in reassurance.

Ethan tossed a bill onto the counter and grabbed his sack of donuts. He glanced at Graeme before sauntering toward them, one hand shoved deep into the pocket of his jeans.

"Hello, again, Marion," Ethan greeted. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were stalking me."

She laughed out loud then said, "Maybe you're the one who's the

stalker." She squeezed Graeme's hand back.

"Ha. You wish, darlin'."

Marion ground her teeth, wishing she had enough balls to smack him the way she really wanted to.

He gave her a once-over, quirking a brow. "A little overdressed for the occasion, don't you think?"

"Why don't you move along, Ethan?" Graeme suggested. "Mind your own business."

"Marion *is* my business." He swiveled his glare to Graeme.

"Since when?" she demanded. "Since you decided to come crawling back to me?" For someone who wanted her back so desperately, he sure wasn't winning any brownie points.

"You've always been my business, Marion. Didn't you know that?" He stepped toward her, getting a little too close for comfort. She could smell whiskey on his breath.

"Don't you get it?" Her anger flared as she stared at him, loathe to even look at him. "I don't want you anymore. Leave me alone."

Ethan ignored her, his gaze on Graeme. The two men sized each other up, both with the rooster crest cocked and ready. Heavy tension hung in the air between the three of them, and Marion wasn't exactly sure what would happen next.

"You really shouldn't be hanging around this loser. Hasn't he told you about his seedy business dealings yet?"

Graeme released her hand and clutched Ethan's collar in a lightning move. So fast, Marion didn't have time to react. She had seen him do this once before—outside the bookstore the day she and Graeme reconnected. A thick chord in Graeme's neck stood out, and she could clearly see the vein pulsing at his temple.

"So you haven't told her." Ethan's grin was wolf-like. Despite the fact Graeme had him by the neck, he sounded at ease. As if Graeme wasn't a threat at all.

"Nothing regarding Marion is any of your concern," Graeme said, his voice frightfully low. He shoved Ethan back hard, making him stumble toward the counter. "Stay away from her. And me."

"Quite the valiant knight in shining armor, aren't you? Coming to her rescue and trying to protect her from me."

"I don't need protecting," Marion snapped.

"Oh, I think you do." Ethan glanced back at Graeme. "Maybe you should tell her she's just one of many in a very long line of women. And that your business operations give you free access to any model or *entertainer* you want." He waved quote marks in the air as he said the word *entertainer*.

"I don't believe you," Marion said. Even so, a sick feeling crept over her. Her stomach knotted and suddenly, she wasn't hungry anymore.

"Hasn't he told you he makes quite a pile of money from his Web design business?" Ethan asked.

"Shut up, you son of a bitch." Graeme's hand fisted.

"He's mentioned his business, yes," Marion said. Her throat stung. Was she about to hear something she wouldn't like?

"Has he also mentioned he designs porn sites?"

"*What...?*" The blood drained from her head as she breathed out the word.

Graeme designed porn sites? No, he'd never mentioned it. Must have slipped his mind.

"And he's dated most of the star players on those sites," Ethan said. He folded his arms over his chest, looking quite smug.

As if in slow motion, Graeme pulled his arm back to connect with Ethan's nose. But he didn't stop with one punch. He hit him again with his other fist, and before she knew it, the two were in a full-blown fistfight. Right in the middle of Jason's Donuts. The girl behind the counter shrieked and shouted for someone from the back.

*Oh, shit.*

She wasn't sure what to do or how to stop them. She certainly couldn't get in between them.

Graeme shoved Ethan backward, and they landed on the glass display case with a crunch. She could hear the splintering of glass beneath Ethan's body as Graeme continued to pummel his face. The girl that had

been behind the counter had disappeared and returned with who Marion assumed was the owner.

"Stop! Stop it, both of you!" Finally, Marion found her voice, but it was too late.

The man wore an apron splattered with chocolate and the name Jason stenciled at the top. He was a big, hulking man who pulled Graeme off Ethan with ease. He shoved Graeme backward, putting himself between the two men. Ethan wiped blood off his face with the back of his hand.

"One of you will be paying for that," Jason said, pointing to the broken display case.

"My pleasure. Just send me the bill," Graeme said then glanced at her. "I'm sorry, Marion."

Ethan reached for a paper napkin to wipe away the blood. Graeme's knuckles were red and split, and Marion couldn't stop the fury welling inside her. The two of them fighting over her and everything else was beyond stupid.

"So am I," she said.

She spun on her heel and left the donut shop—and Graeme and Ethan—behind. She was finished with both of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Graeme couldn't stop himself from attacking Ethan. He'd taken all he could stand. The man's jealousy went beyond trying to break things up between Graeme and Marion. He was playing dirty, and Graeme wasn't going to take it anymore.

He watched Marion walk out of the donut shop and out of his life. Possibly forever. She was angry and had every right to be. He'd blown it. He couldn't go after her, not yet. He wanted her to cool down, but maybe letting her walk was the wrong thing to do. He'd probably regret that later.

And he especially didn't like that Ethan couldn't wait to tell Marion his sordid past. He'd gotten into the business with Ethan to make money



only so he could start his artistic career. Painting was all he ever wanted to do. He didn't want to spend his entire life slaving behind a desk for a company who neither appreciated him nor paid him for what he was worth the way his father had.

"You jackass," Ethan said. "You're letting her get away. Even after all this." He waved toward the broken case.

Graeme turned away, watched her walk down the sidewalk toward the heart of downtown.

"And you said you loved her," Ethan said.

Graeme winced, remembering his drunken confession to Ethan the night before the wedding that never happened. Even then, they'd fought over Marion, and Graeme had made the grave error of blurting it out. Why the hell had he told him that?

"Stay away from her, or you'll have me to deal with," Graeme had told him.

"Yeah, right. You're no threat. What's your interest in her anyway?" Ethan asked.

"Unlike you, I do love her."

But even then, Graeme didn't chase her as he'd chased—and gotten—so many other skirts. Marion was worth more than a conquest.

He did love her, damn it. He did. There was nothing he could do about it. She had walked out, and he'd let her.

Graeme whirled on Ethan. "I should tell her the truth about *you*."

"As if she'd believe you," Ethan said coolly. "She'll think you're making it up to cover your ass."

"Not if I give her proof of the business records. I can show her it was *yours* to begin with."

Ethan stepped closer to him and lowered his voice to a quiet, dangerous tone. "Are you threatening me?"

"She already knows you cheated on her with a stripper," Graeme continued. "What makes you think she'll come crawling back to you after everything you did to her?"

"Because I've changed." He gave Graeme a wolf grin. "I just haven't proven it to her yet."

"Oh, right." Graeme rolled his eyes. "So showing up with a bimbo on your arm the other night is showing her you've *changed*. What's your interest in Marion, anyway? You only wanted her before for the conquest. She's nothing but a trophy to you."

"And I nearly married her because she was such a good fuck and a helluva trophy. She'll look shiny and pretty on my mantle, don't you think? So you stay out of my way."

Graeme balled his fist but refrained from punching him again by shoving his hands deep into his pockets. He'd done enough damage for the day.

Ethan poked him hard in the chest. "You're the chicken shit now for not going after her."

Graeme was, too. That was why he shut himself off from the world when he painted her. Why she was only real to him in his dreams and imagination. And why he never allowed himself to get involved with a woman longer than a few months. If he couldn't have Marion, he didn't want anyone. And no one was as good as Marion. He had to figure out how to get her back.

She rebuffed him after the bad break-up with Ethan. He had tried to be a friend, but they drifted apart. Perhaps because she didn't want to be reminded of anything of her past life.

Seeing her in *The Bitter End* that morning gave him hope for a second chance. And he still blew it.

"She doesn't deserve either one of us," Graeme hissed. "Least of all *you*." He glowered at Ethan, resisting the urge to punch him again.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ethan had the gall to feign innocence.

"You left her at the altar. You blew it six months ago. And if she's smart—and she is—she won't take you back."

"We'll see about that."

Ethan charged out of the donut shop, and Graeme didn't stop him. He let him go, knowing he would catch up to Marion. It was out of his hands now.

"So are you going to pay for this or what?" Jason, the owner, asked.

He must have been a witness to the entire conversation. Somehow, Graeme really didn't care.

Sighing, he reached for his wallet and pulled out a business card. "As I said, send me the bill. I'm good for it."

After tossing his card on the counter, he stepped outside, got into his car, and drove away. He knew Marion was smart enough not to believe anything Ethan told her. And in a few days, this whole thing would have blown over and they'd be talking again, and everything would be forgotten. At least, that's what he hoped.

## Chapter Thirteen

Graeme didn't even come after her. He didn't even try. The more steps Marion took away from the donut shop, the angrier she got at both of them for fighting and taunting each other. Men acting like boys. It was infuriating. She fought back the tears, but it was a losing battle. Her breath hitched and suddenly, they were pouring down her cheeks. She clutched her handbag under her arm and hurried down the sidewalk as fast as her heels would take her, looking for a place she could dive into to collect herself.

She saw a storefront up ahead and went inside, wiping furiously at the tears on her cheeks. It was a boutique carrying women's clothes. She interested herself in the front window display, sniffing and trying to get herself under control.

"Can I help you find anything, miss?" the sales lady asked.

Marion could hear her heels clicking on the shiny marble floor as she approached. "No. Just browsing, thanks." She sniffed.

She didn't want the sales woman to see her tear-streaked face. As she glanced down, Marion saw she still wore her heels and cocktail dress from the night before. She wiped her face, took a deep breath, and turned. "Actually, yes you can."

Thirty minutes and three hundred dollars later, Marion had changed into a new outfit from the boutique. Yes, she had managed to do some damage to her credit card, but shopping always made her feel better. It would soothe her frayed nerves for now. Like putting a

Band-Aid on an open wound.

The sales lady neatly folded her cocktail dress and placed it in the shopping bag along with her heels. Marion thanked her, took the bag, and departed the store, feeling lighter in the pocketbook and heavier in the heart.

Her head pounded from serious caffeine deprivation. The Starbucks next door was calling her name.

"Marion?"

She froze. What the hell was Ethan doing here? Turning slowly, she spotted him leaning against a tree. He had managed to get most of the blood off his chin and nose, but it was still clear he had been in a fight.

"Can I talk to you?" He smoothed his bloodstained shirt, looking forlorn.

"No." She turned and headed down the street, her coffee fixation quickly forgotten. She needed to get away from him and fast.

"Please, Marion."

He had caught up to her and was keeping stride with her. Damn the man for having those long legs. She increased her pace, trying to get away from him.

"Look, I know you said those things just to hurt Graeme, and I'm not interested in hearing anything else you have to say. So shove off."

"You're absolutely right," Ethan said.

That stopped her dead in her tracks. That and the fact the Don't Walk sign was on. She cursed herself for not planning better.

"I can't stand seeing you with him," he said. He actually looked humble and sounded sincere, but she wasn't so sure she bought the act. Maybe he really was. Then again, maybe he was bullshitting her again.

"Oh, so insulting him and getting into a fistfight with him is how you show it?" She gave him a sidelong glance. She had to admit, he was still attractive, even with the bruised and bloodied face.

She reminded herself he had hurt her deeply and there was no going back to him. Ever. Even if he was giving her that puppy-dog look. The son of a bitch.

Remorse flooded his face. "I shouldn't have taunted him," Ethan

said.

"No, you shouldn't have. And making up lies about him is really low." She glanced around, looking at anything and everything to avoid eye contact while waiting for the damned light to change.

"Everything I told you was true."

She couldn't believe it. Hearing him say it was true gave her an odd twinge of disappointment. There was no way Graeme was a womanizer. Not the man who had so gently made love to her the night before. No way. No how. She wouldn't believe it.

Despite her wish not to, she glanced his way to see his mouth clamped and his eyes fixed on her. She searched his gaze, and nothing about his look told her he was lying. He seemed to be telling her the truth.

"Yeah, right."

The Walk sign finally flashed, and she started across the street. Ethan stepped off the curb with her. She was ticked he still followed her and tried to convince her Graeme was a bad guy. She was ticked Graeme hadn't bothered to follow her and tell her wasn't a bad guy. At this point, she wasn't sure what to believe anymore.

She was so enraged, she turned on Ethan and gave him a violent shove backward. "Leave me alone!"

He stumbled a few steps but maintained his balance. His face fell, and he looked completely destroyed. "I swear it's true."

Turning, she darted away, hurrying faster and reaching into her handbag for her phone.

"Marion, I'm not lying. Not this time." He snagged her arm and pulled her to a stop, holding her in place. His expression stilled and grew serious. "Graeme's had a string of girlfriends over the last few years. They never last more than a few months. He gets tired of them and breaks up with them before they can get serious."

That lump formed again in her throat. She swallowed hard, forcing it away. Ethan's voice was starting to get on her nerves. She wanted away from the leech because he was sucking all her energy dry. She couldn't stand to be around him another second.

"Well, then, congratulate yourself for telling me the truth and

saving me from becoming another girl on the list."

Shoving him off of her, she turned on the toe of her brand new black flats and darted back up the street.

"Marion!" he called.

"No!" she shouted back over her shoulder. Glancing behind her, she could see he was still following her. Couldn't the man take a hint?

"Marion, let me at least take you home." To her horror, he trotted after her, putting a hand on her shoulder to stop her.

She shrugged him off.

"No way. You're not getting within a foot of my house. You stay away from me." She poked him in the chest with all her anger, making him wince and step back. He looked so hurt, so lost. But she wasn't going to fall for it. Not again. "I'll call a cab or something. And thank you very much for all the information you've given me today."

She sped up, walking as rapidly as she could in the early heat of the day. Ethan lagged behind finally and stopped. She saw him looking forlorn as she rounded a corner and stopped, pressing her back against a building to catch her breath.

Humiliation, anger, frustration...all these emotions ran through her. Her head fell back against the hard brick of the building and suddenly, that's all she wanted to do—pound her head against the wall.

Her breath hitched as she reached into her handbag for her cell phone. The only person in the world who could understand was her best friend. As Delilah's phone started to ring, the tears started to flow.

"Mar? What's up?"

But her only response was a hitched sob.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It's too damn bad we can't kill the bastards." Delilah plucked the olive off the toothpick that had only moments ago resided in her dirty martini.

Marion had told Delilah the whole sordid tale over dinner at their favorite Mexican restaurant. She swirled her straw in her frozen margarita

and pushed the last two bites of her chicken flautas around on her plate. She had just finished pouring her heart out to her best friend and sucked the remaining frozen treat from her glass. The waiter walked by, and she flagged him down to order another round.

"It really is," Marion agreed. She had thought the very same thing herself.

"Assholes," Delilah said around a mouthful of olive. "Both of them." She took a healthy swig of her martini before forking up some rice and beans. "I sure hope Ethan is proud of himself for telling you Graeme's romantic history."

"The thing is...I think he *was* proud of himself." Marion pushed rice around on her nearly empty plate. "The whole time he was following me through downtown, he had this sad-eyed look on his face. Like he was sorry he said anything but not sorry enough."

"And probably even sorrier you didn't come running back to him. That prick."

Delilah was never one to mince words. She always told it like it was, and everyone knew where they stood with her. One of her favorite sayings was, *Everyone is entitled to my opinion*. And it was very true of her best friend.

"Do you think he made the whole thing up about the girlfriends?" Delilah asked. "Just to get back into your pants?"

"That's the thing. I think he really *was* telling me the truth about Graeme and his string of women," Marion said. "That's why Graeme punched him."

"I would have given my left arm to see that." Delilah sighed wistfully. "So, what about Graeme?"

"What about him?" Marion shrugged. She didn't see any point in trying to contact him anymore.

"You know what about him. You're going to see him again, aren't you?"

"I don't know."

"Mar, just because he's had a very active relationship life doesn't mean you guys can't have some fun together. And who knows, maybe



you're the one he's been waiting for all this time. Maybe you're the one who can tame the beast, so to speak."

Marion's fork clattered to the plate as she stared across the table in disbelief at her friend. "Who are you again?"

Delilah sipped her drink, refusing to answer.

"This from the person who didn't want me to get involved with him," Marion said. "What gives?"

"Nothing. I think you would make a nice couple. That's all."

"Okay, that's the nice fluffy answer. Now stop with the bullshit and tell me the truth."

Delilah put down her glass and leaned forward. "I saw you two at the gallery. The way he looked at you, and the way you looked at him? Girl. Sparks. So many sparks in fact, I thought the whole place was going to catch on fire." She exploded her hands to animate her point.

Marion sat back in the booth, crossed her arms, and pursed her lips. "I am somewhat less than amused."

"Girl. He's so hot for you, it's not even funny."

"But he lied to me about his Web site business." She learned forward, glaring, feeling that anger again. She wanted to know *why* he'd lied.

"A minor technicality." Delilah waved it away as if it were nothing.

"And his past history with girlfriends."

"So?"

"But—"

"Mar, I'm sure there is a perfectly good explanation. He probably didn't want to tell you about the business because maybe he's a little embarrassed about it. Obviously, he makes good money at it. And obviously, he's gotten some great sex with hot broads from it. But so what? You're no prude by any stretch of the imagination. And besides, are you going to deny it wasn't the most exciting sex of your life?"

True, she wasn't a prude, but she couldn't deny the fact that it did bother her that he designed those sorts of Web sites for a living. That, and that he seemed to hide it from her. Even though with everything else, he was completely open and honest with her.

Maybe, she mused, he was waiting for the right time to tell her. To let her in on the secret and explain why he wanted to keep it under wraps. Maybe his artist personae didn't quite match his Web site personae and there would be dire consequences if the two worlds collided. She quickly shoved away that thought as too melodramatic. She'd have to think on that more later.

And okay, so he had quite a few girlfriends. And he seemed to practice safe sex...except with her that first time. And then, well...he had slipped inside her without a rubber. She shoved away that thought immediately. She wouldn't think about that. Not right now.

"Anyway, I'd kind of like to see these Web sites of his." Delilah gave her a devilish grin.

"Delilah!" Marion couldn't pretend for one second she was scandalized by the thought. She knew her friend all too well.

"Wouldn't you want to see them?" she asked.

"No!" Marion shook her head.

Delilah chuckled, and then said, "By the way, how *was* the sex? You never bothered to give me the juicy details."

Marion made sure to leave out all the details of their encounters, especially the tidbit about him sketching her naked. The memory of their night and morning flashed through her mind now. Graeme on top of her, rising up ever so slightly to look down between them and see him sliding in and out of her...

She shook her head, pushing away the unwanted image. "It was fine."

"Liar." Her friend leaned forward. "You promised me all the details. Remember?"

"That was before."

"Before what? Before you decided he was unworthy?" Delilah looked disappointed. "Come on, Mar. I haven't had sex in nearly three months. I'm hard up. Please share."

"What about Mr. GQ?"

"That guy at the gallery?" Delilah asked, and Marion nodded. "A dud." She waved her hand, dismissing him. "Couldn't kiss for shit. If he

doesn't know his way around my mouth, then he won't know his way around my clit."

"Nice." Marion scowled but couldn't stifle the grin that crept over her face.

"I'm waiting."

Heat rose to Marion's cheeks. How could she tell her friend about the incredibly hot sex followed by a morning-after sketching session and then even more hot sex?

Delilah leaned across the table toward her. "You have a dreamy look on your face. So spill it."

"It was great, actually." She could remember the way he smelled as if he were right next to her. "He's good at it."

"And...?" she prompted, one tawny eyebrow raised.

"And he made me come six times."

"Only six?" Disappointment flooded Delilah's face.

"I stopped counting, actually." Marion flushed, her face burning hot with the memories.

"Better. What else?"

"And he...does this thing with his tongue that's fantastic."

"On your—"

"Yeah."

"Right." Delilah sat back again, expelling a breath. "There's nothing hotter than a man who knows how to do that *just right*."

"And I let him sketch me." There. She said it. Blurted it out actually, without letting herself think about it too much.

"You did?"

Marion swirled the straw in her glass. She couldn't stop thinking about slipping his sketchbook out of his hands and then sitting on his lap. She glanced across the table at her friend, who didn't seem the least bit surprised.

"Well? You're not surprised?"

"Not really."

"Ooo-kay."

"Mar, are you daft? Didn't you realize that one painting in the

gallery called *Black-Eyed Girl* was you?"

Marion was too startled by the statement to object. She remembered the painting quite clearly. It was the one Jon tried so valiantly to sell her. The one that was so different from the others. Marion would have thought Delilah was kidding, except there wasn't even the hint of a smile on her face. A cold shiver crept up her spine.

"Seriously?" Her voice nearly came out a squeak.

Delilah rolled her eyes. "You didn't notice?"

"No..."

"Oh, girl. How could you not? It was so obvious to me that was you."

"How would he...I mean, the man at the gallery said it was one of his earlier works."

They stared at each other in silence, each processing the information. If Graeme had painted that a year or two ago, then...

"Oh, my God!" Delilah said, her voice nearly a shout. "He's in love with you!" She clapped as if cheering for the big L-word.

"No way!" Marion dismissed the thought with a shake of her head. "There's no way in *hell*, Delilah. I was engaged to his best friend. I've known him for years."

"And it makes perfect sense, too, now that I think about it. You three were inseparable. You, Ethan, Graeme. You'd tell me how the three of you went to the movies or dinner or whatever. And that Graeme would visit you two a lot. Yeah?"

"Well...yeah."

Marion had never thought much of Graeme hanging around. She thought he and Ethan were the two that were inseparable. He was going to be the best man in their wedding, until...

"Don't you see? He painted you from his memory." Now Delilah had that dreamy look on her face. "I think that's incredibly romantic."

"And...he painted me naked..." Marion's heart tripped in her chest as she propped her elbows on the table and put her head in her hands.

"Well, you weren't completely naked," Delilah pointed out. "Before yesterday had he ever seen you—"

"God, no!" Marion's head snapped up, staring at her friend.  
"Never. Ever. Only Ethan."

"Hm. Then I guess he has a vivid imagination. So, what are you going to do?"

"You and I are going to that gallery tomorrow and buying that painting. That's what."

## Chapter Fourteen

Marion made plans to meet Delilah early the next morning to drive to the gallery and purchase *Black-Eyed Girl*. She hoped it was still there. In fact, she knew she would worry about it until she stepped foot in that gallery and had it safely purchased, wrapped, and brought back home. Then she planned to shove it in the back of a closet, never to see the light of day again. She didn't want anyone seeing that painting again.

She and Graeme were history anyway. He hadn't tried to call or to come by, and she wondered what the hell he was up to. Where did he go after the donut shop incident?

Trying not to dwell on it, she decided a hot shower would be good to wash away the day's events. She needed to relax.

Just as she was about to turn on the water, the doorbell rang. Her heart leapt. She hoped when she flung open the door, Graeme would be standing on the other side.

Checking her hair and makeup quickly in the mirror, she headed for the entry. However, the person standing on the other side...was Ethan. Holding a large bouquet of pink roses.

"Ethan? What are you doing here?" And, more importantly, why was he there with roses?

"I came to apologize. Can I come in?"

Her first response was not only no, but hell no. But he still looked like shit from getting beat up. And he had that lost puppy-dog look, and she really wasn't in the mood to be bitchy. Instead, she took pity on him

and stepped aside, holding the door open for him.

"Nice place," he said as he came in and surveyed her small house. "You've done well, Marion."

"Thanks." She shut the door, locked it.

"These are for you." He extended the roses. "Two doze, pink. Your favorite."

Of course, he would remember. Even though they ended on a bad note, things were not always unhappy between them. They had actually been in love once. Or so she liked to think.

"I'll just...find something to put these in." As she took them from him, he brushed his hand against hers. She knew he did it on purpose, and she ignored it, feeling nothing at all.

Ethan followed her into the kitchen. She pulled over a dining chair and stood on it to reach the cabinet above the refrigerator.

"So what are you apologizing about?" She opened the door, looking for a vase.

"The spectacle we made of ourselves earlier. You know we were fighting over you, right?"

Marion was glad she wasn't face to face with him. Her first reaction was to laugh out loud. She bit her lip. "Me? Yeah, right."

"He knows I want you back. Don't you know that?"

Marion did, but she didn't want to think about that.

She finally found a vase, but it was way in the back. As she stood on tiptoe to reach it, the chair began to wobble, her balance crumbling. She gasped as the chair tipped backward and she started to fall.

"Marion!"

The chair smacked the tile floor, and she ended up in Ethan's arms. He had caught her mid-fall. Their eyes locked, his a deep dark brown she remembered so clearly. His mouth quirked in a grin. She tried hard to not gag.

"It sure feels nice to hold you again."

That snapped her back to reality. She shoved him away and regained her footing. "Thanks for that."

Turning away from him, she picked up the chair stood on it again.

"You're trying that again?"

"I can reach it," she said, her stubborn streak surfacing. She snagged the vase and stepped back down, this time without falling. "See? All is well."

Turning to the sink, she unwrapped the roses and put them in the vase. As she turned on the water to fill it, Ethan slipped his arms around her waist.

"Ethan..." She put her hand on his arm, tried to push him away.

"Marion, please." He nuzzled her neck. "I've missed you so. And I've behaved badly these last few days."

"Yes, you have," she agreed. "And more like two years, not days."

"I've never stopped thinking about you." His lips brushed her neck. His breath whispered over her skin. "Seeing you with Graeme made me jealous."

"Then why did you leave me?" This time she managed to push out of his arms and turn to face him.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he turned away. She sensed he didn't want to make eye contact now. "I was scared." He glanced at her over his shoulder, giving her a sheepish grin. "Life with you was so perfect. Marrying you would have been perfect. We'd have the perfect life, the perfect house."

"Would that have been so bad?" Tears clotted in her throat. Finally, after all this time, he was telling her the truth.

"No, I suppose not." He shrugged. "It was as though I saw my entire life flash before my eyes that morning in the church. A life that was already set in stone just by saying 'I do.' My father says marriage is a wonderful institution, but who wants to live in an institution?"

"Ethan, you sound like marriage is some sort of prison." She looked at him, finally seeing him for what he truly was. "You walked out on me. You humiliated me, and you didn't even have the courage to break it off yourself."

"I know. But all I could think was my life was ending. I guess that's why I did what I did. Leaving you, I mean."

"And cheating on me was another side effect of being scared?" she



asked, fixing him with her best glare.

At least he had the good sense to look embarrassed. "About that..."

"Save it. I don't want to hear your excuses or lies."

"It was a stupid mistake, Marion. You're the only one I want. That other girl was..." He paused, his hands in his pockets.

"She was what?" she demanded. "And what about that other broad I saw you with on the street? Your behavior then was no better."

"She meant nothing."

"I don't know why men say that and believe it's okay." She huffed out an exasperated breath and shook her head. "And she was the only one?"

"I swear," he said, nodding. "She was. Besides, no one compares to you."

"What about your current girlfriend? The one I saw you with."

"Starr and I broke up." He gripped her hands in his then, holding them tight. "Would you...I mean, I wondered...could we try again?"

"Ethan..." But the words died in her throat. She pulled her hands away and turned toward the sink.

She knew, deep down, Ethan didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of getting her back. She *knew* that. Despite his sincere words, and his apologies, and him finally telling her the truth. Despite all that, she knew she couldn't—and wouldn't—trust him again. He had hurt her so badly before, and now he was asking for forgiveness and a second chance?

And what about Graeme? What if what Delilah had said was true? What if he really did love her? She had experienced so much with him in so little time.

As she stood there contemplating, she could see becoming a couple once again with Ethan. It would be so easy. They would fall back into those same familiar patterns. They would probably get married, have kids, a house. All she had to do was say the word...

The difference this time around, though, was that there would be no Graeme. Because he would certainly never speak to her again if she got back with Ethan. And that hurt her more than anything. How could she stand never seeing him again?

Her mind shouted *no* to Ethan and a very resounding *yes* to Graeme.

"I know it'll take time for you to trust me," he said. He settled his hands on her shoulders. "But I'm asking you for another chance. I still love you."

A pang of longing went through her, hearing those long-forgotten words. A few months ago, she would have done anything to hear him say that.

"How do I know you won't hurt me again?" she asked.

He moved closer, pressed into her. "How does anyone know it'll work out? Or that they won't get hurt?" He turned her to face him. "There are no guarantees, Marion. Not in anything, and especially not in life."

But one thing she could guarantee was that she was completely at ease with Graeme. And never so with Ethan. She pushed him away and slipped out of his grasp.

"Let me take you to breakfast at Bonjour Café," he said. "Like old times. We can talk and get to know each other again."

His offer was more tempting than she wanted to admit. She was tired of being alone. It would be nice to share some time with someone. But she would rather have breakfast with the devil himself than Ethan.

"Sorry, can't. I have other plans with Delilah."

"Some other time then. In the meantime, why don't you think about us?" he suggested. "Let me know in a day or two. Okay?"

"I'll think about," she conceded. "But I'm not making any promises."

"Fair enough."

He took her chin in his hand then. She knew what he was going to do, and she knew she was going to let him. Ethan leaned in, tipping his head to the side. Their lips brushed in a soft, gentle kiss. Just like she remembered. Just like before. It was the kiss that could always bring her to her knees. Except this time...well, she wasn't sure she felt much of anything. She would have thought that after all this time, Ethan could still kiss her and make her want him.

Instead, the only man she truly wanted wasn't speaking to her.

*Damn him.*

She shoved away thoughts of Graeme and focused on the kiss with Ethan. Familiar, comfortable, sweet. Certainly not earth shattering like with Graeme. Nothing like Graeme.

Ethan's hand trailed up her arm to her elbow, and she had a sudden fear he was going to try and embrace her. She quickly pushed him away and stepped backward.

"I think you should go now," she said.

Nodding, Ethan turned toward the front door. "The decision is yours, Marion. I'll accept whatever you decide."

And with that, he opened her front door and was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following morning, Marion met up with Delilah to drive to the gallery in Dallas. After a quick stop for coffee, they were on their way. Marion let Delilah drive, and as she sat in the passenger seat watching the world pass by, she wondered if she should tell her friend about Ethan. She dragged her bottom lip through her teeth.

"I know that look," Delilah said, breaking into her thoughts. "What gives?"

"Oh...nothing. Just thinking."

"About...?"

Taking a sip of coffee, Marion knew there would be no peace if she didn't tell her. "Ethan came to see me last night."

"Whoa! What?"

"He brought roses."

"Seriously?" Delilah gave her a quick glance of surprise before she turned her attention back to the road. "I hope you tossed him and his damn roses out of the house."

"Actually..." Marion's words trailed off.

"Girl, no!" Delilah said. "What happened?"

"He said he wanted to apologize, that he behaved badly. He finally told me the truth about why he left me that day." Marion paused. She

didn't want to go on, but she knew she had to now. Delilah would demand the entire story.

"Okay, and? I hope he had a serious excuse. Like death or something."

"He said he got scared."

"Oh, Jesus Christ! Mar, a man doesn't ditch a woman on their wedding day because he *got scared*. That's the lamest excuse I've ever heard."

"I don't know. He said it was as though his entire future flashed before his eyes. That's why he couldn't go through with it."

"What a bunch of bull shit. I hope you didn't fall for it."

Marion was silent. Deep down, she knew she shouldn't. She knew she should forget Ethan and move on with her life. But something kept nagging at her. Like there was something left for her to do. Like she still needed some sort of closure. She dragged her bottom lip through her teeth.

"Marion, no. Tell me you're not considering it."

"Well..." Considering, yes. But it wasn't for the reason Delilah thought.

"Oh, girl!"

"He said he wanted to try again. He wanted a second chance and that he still loved me." And it would be so easy to go back to that.

"I think you'd be an idiot if you went back to him. Especially after what he did to you," Delilah said.

She made a lot of sense. Marion couldn't deny that. Still, she had tossed and turned most of the night thinking about what he said. And she was starting to bend a little, giving in to him.

Marion wasn't stupid. She knew she wouldn't get her happy ending with Ethan. She *knew* it. That was why she had to go to him and tell him once and for all it was over and done with. And then she would figure out a way to get Graeme back.

"He nearly destroyed you. I can't stand by and allow him to do it again, Marion."

It was true. Every word Delilah said. Marion knew it as well as her

friend. And that was exactly why she had to go one last time. "He won't do it to me again. And I'm going to tell him so. Then maybe he'll learn he can't push me around anymore."

It was probably the first time in their entire friendship Delilah didn't have some snappy comeback. Or at least something to say. Her reply was silence.

"And who knows? Maybe it'll work out. Maybe we'll make it, after all." Marion gave a half-hearted chuckle.

Still there was silence.

"Delilah, don't be mad at me. I can't help it. I have to do this. It's important to me."

"Mar, may I remind you Ethan is a spoiled, rich kid from Westover Hills with nothing better to do than spend Daddy's money?"

Marion was well aware of his roots in the very affluent area with their multi-million dollar houses and country club. Ethan and his family came from old Fort Worth money.

"But I think he's changed."

"Ha! Men don't change, ever. It's women who change, and I think you're insane to even entertain the idea," Delilah said. "It certainly doesn't explain why we're driving to Dallas to buy a painting by a man who seems to be madly *in love with you*."

"Um...because I don't want my face or my body hanging on anyone else's wall."

"Sure. Whatever you say." She had a look of distaste on her face.

Marion winced. "Please don't be angry."

"I'm not angry. I'm just disappointed. Here you have this incredibly handsome painter, and you're throwing it all away. And on what? A man who broke your heart six months ago? A man who can't keep promises *or* his dick in his pants? A man who is so slick at what he does that he's managed to reel you back in a second time."

"It's not like that at all," Marion said, wincing, yet determined to keep her plan to herself. "Ethan didn't *reel* me into anything. He loves me." It was all she could do to keep her coffee down on that last lie.

"Oh, please. Ethan loves himself and no one else."

"If you think that, then why were going to be my maid of honor at the wedding? Why didn't you say something then?"

"Because I didn't want to rain on the Perfect Bride's parade," she snapped. "I was trying to be supportive of your decision."

"Wait a minute," Marion began. "Are you telling me you've never liked Ethan?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you. You're too good for him, and you can do much better than him." Delilah kept her gaze on the road ahead, not making eye contact with her or even glancing her way.

"And I suppose you think I should pick Graeme." Marion folded her arms across her chest.

Delilah sighed. "I think you should pick whoever makes you happy, Mar. Here we are."

It was a pat answer. And perhaps Delilah was trying not to pick a fight with her when they would be confined to the car for another hour drive back home. It was probably a good thing they arrived at the gallery when they did. Otherwise, they would have a full-blown argument, and the drive back would be excruciatingly silent.

"Let's get this over with," Delilah said as she cut the engine.

Marion wasn't sure if she meant buying the painting or just getting the entire ordeal done with.

Silence still between them, they entered the gallery. They seemed to be the only customers and were greeted cheerfully by a young, smartly dressed woman.

"Good morning. How can I help you ladies?"

"Hi," Marion said. She glanced at Delilah, who stood with her arms folded across her chest, looking bored and annoyed. "Um, I was at Graeme Butler's opening the other night. I'd like to purchase one of the paintings."

"Wonderful! Which one were you interested in?" She gestured toward the exhibit room.

"*Black-Eyed Girl*," Marion said.

"Hm," she said, looking thoughtful. "I'm not familiar with that one. Let me look it up."

"It's different from his other work." Marion trailed after the girl as she headed toward a large desk.

"He's a great artist, isn't he?" The girl's fingers tapped on a computer. "We sold a lot of his work, but I certainly don't recall seeing this one."

"It's rather...unusual," Marion said. The entire time she stood waiting, her heart pounded fiercely in her chest. If she didn't get that painting...

"Ah, yes. Here we are. I'll just get it ready for you."

"Thanks."

Relief flooded her.

Unfortunately, it was short-lived. She could hear Delilah's heels clicking a fast cadence as she headed toward her, a worried look on her face.

"Um, Mar—"

But that was as far as she got because just then Graeme and a man she didn't know rounded a corner. The stranger was tall, darkly good-looking, and deeply tanned. There was something about him that exuded money and European classiness.

Marion's heart hadn't had time to recover from her fear of not being able to buy the painting. Now it was throbbing painfully in her chest. Sweat broke out all over her—even her palms. And there was nowhere to hide. She was standing in the middle of the gallery. Trapped. As if she had been caught red-handed.

Graeme made eye contact with her then. The last person on the face of the planet she wanted to lay eyes on was him. Now would be an excellent time for a black chasm to open up and swallow her whole.

But he didn't stop talking with the man. In fact, he never paused as he continued to walk through the gallery and into the exhibit hall where his paintings hung.

Marion was stunned. He had made eye contact with her the entire time he walked through the room, but he refused to even acknowledge she was there. He didn't stop to say hello or anything. He didn't even look happy to see her.

"That son of a bitch," Delilah said, standing next to her.

Marion couldn't have said it better herself. Her shock quickly went to humiliation. Tears clogged in her throat, and she knew any second she would cry. That painting didn't matter so much anymore.

"Come on, Del. Let's get out of here."



## Chapter Fifteen

Marion was in a serious quandary. She never thought she would be in a position to decide about Ethan. At least, not now after everything she'd been through with him and Graeme.

Calling Graeme crossed her mind numerous times. But the way he had looked at her in the gallery that day had kept her hand firmly away from the phone.

On the drive back to their side of town, Delilah had ranted about him. She called him all sorts of names she could think of—some were creative inventions. Marion had never heard a few of those expletives put together. It was true Delilah fashion. Their earlier feud forgotten, she was clearly disenchanted with the painter. Delilah and angry didn't mix.

"I can't believe he walked right by you without even stopping to say one word," she'd said. "What an asshole. And that look he gave you!" She thumped the steering wheel out of aggravation.

"Yeah, I saw," Marion had said.

"I hope that bastard misses you for the rest of his miserable life."

Marion somehow managed to keep the tears at bay, agreeing with her friend about the wrongfulness of the situation. She had never been so humiliated or hurt in her life. And even though she didn't want to agree, the thought of Graeme missing her eased her pain.

And because Graeme had dismissed her so coldly, she had been driven to meet with Ethan and put her plan into action. She had picked up the phone several times but quickly hung up before the call could go

through. Ethan had seemed so sincere, as if he meant everything he said. As if he really was willing to give it another shot.

He would never be expecting the blow she'd hand him.

So that Saturday morning, nearly a week after the fateful day in the gallery, Marion came to terms with the men in her life. Graeme would be no more, it seemed. And as for Ethan...she would dismiss him once and for all.

She didn't love Ethan. Maybe she never had. Maybe she wanted that fantasy of a happy home with the white picket fence, and she thought Ethan could give it to her. He had promised her that and more. He had told her he would give her anything. A shopping spree at Neiman Marcus anytime. Any kind of car she wanted. A house in Westover Hills near his parents, or even Colleyville or Southlake.

She should have known he was trying to buy her love with the nearly two-carat diamond ring, which now resided in the black velvet box, shoved into the bottom of one of her dresser drawers. She couldn't stop thinking about sitting down to a dinner with him, alone. Not to reconcile, but to end her suffering.

It would mean closure. She could finally put those feelings aside and move on with her life. With or without Graeme.

As she reached for the phone to call him, it rang. She dare not look at the Caller ID because if it was Graeme then she might chicken out. So she took a deep breath and answered.

"Hello, Marion, dear."

"Mom. Hi." She released a pent-up breath.

Marion made it a habit to not call her mother on a consistent basis. In fact, she had avoided her for a month or two after *that day that won't be mentioned*. It was what her mother called it.

"How are you? You haven't called in a while."

"I'm great. Never better." The less information she gave her mom, the better.

They continued the small talk for another fifteen minutes. Her mother asked how things were at the gym, her painting classes.

"Any new beaus?"

Marion rolled her eyes. "No, Mom."

"Marion, dear, I really think you should try to date again. It's been six months since that day I won't mention. I know it's been difficult—"

"Yes, Mom, it has."

And despite her efforts *not* to mention the day, her mother always managed to bring it up. Marion sighed.

"You should really get out there and try again." She paused, and Marion twisted the phone cord around her forefinger, wondering what was up her sleeve. "Have you spoken to Ethan?"

If she didn't know any better, she could swear she heard hesitation in her mother's voice. "Why do you ask?"

"Well...I thought since it's been only six months...that maybe there was some hope of you two reconciling."

"Mother..." Marion said on a sigh.

"He's such a nice boy," she continued. "And he comes from such a nice family."

*And such nice money.* She knew that was why her mother pushed for the match in the first place. And Marion had blindly gone along with it. "He cheated on me, Mom. Or did you forget?"

"Oh, honey. Mistakes happen."

"Mistakes?" Marion repeated. "You think me finding him naked with some other girl was a *mistake*?"

There was a long pause, and Marion knew she'd offended her mother. She bit her lip to keep from going on the rant. There were so many things she wanted to say to her but didn't. Things she wanted to tell her about Ethan and his women.

"I think you should talk to him," she said.

"I have an idea. *You* talk to him."

"Actually, dear...I have."

Marion's heart lurched. She should have seen that coming, and she wondered if Ethan's sudden urge to get back together had anything to do with Amanda Parker and her meddling ways.

"I ran into his mother at the country club a few weeks ago and..."

Marion stopped listening and mentally kicked herself for allowing

this conversation to go any further.

"Mom—"

"And she mentioned to me how forlorn he's been, Marion. She said he mopes around like he's lost his best friend in the world. And he has. He's just devastated without you."

"Devastated?"

Marion found that hard to believe, especially after the display of his newest squeeze in front of the coffee house that night. What was her name? Stacy? Stephanie? Starr...that was it. What a ridiculous name.

"That's what Mrs. Baxter said. I really think you two should try to get back together."

Her mother was a Southern girl through and through. So calling Ethan's mother Mrs. Baxter was completely normal for her. Marion, though, had never thought of Elaine that way. And she had to admit, she missed Ethan's family.

"Will you at least consider it?"

As she sat holding the phone, squeezing the receiver hard, Marion knew she'd have to appease her. "Yes, Mom. I'll consider it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Graeme flung his paintbrush across the studio in a fit of rage. Nothing was coming out right. It was as though he couldn't paint anymore.

He sank into the sofa that not long ago Marion lay on while he sketched her lithe body. He glanced toward that sketchbook now and briefly thought of ripping all the pages out of it and burning them. She was all he could think about. She haunted his dreams and was in the back of his mind every waking moment. Working was impossible.

How could he tell her she *was* his art? How could he explain that she was all his inspiration? That every woman he ever painted *was her* in some form?

Every time he picked up his paintbrush and lost himself in his art, Marion was his soul, his creativity. Marion was the reason why he

continued painting, why he continued to lose himself in his fantasy world day after day.

He had tried updating Web sites for a few clients. Not even that could distract him. And when a tempting ex-girlfriend called him and offered him a night on the town, he had refused. Told her he was on a tight deadline and couldn't take any time out. It had been a lie. Because all he could think about was Marion.

Looking back, he knew he shouldn't have lost his temper and punched Ethan. Breaking the display case was a thousand dollar mistake; though hitting him gave Graeme a sense of satisfaction. And allowing Marion to walk out of his life was just stupid.

And then she had to show up at the gallery. He had wondered why she was there, but he had been too much of a coward to talk to her. He saw the emotions pass on her face—first shock, and then hurt, when he continued walking through the gallery, not stopping to talk to her. But what could he say to her?

*Sorry, Marion, I've been a total asshole and haven't had the nerve to call you.*

Yeah, that'd go well.

Besides, having a confrontation with her in front of a man who was interested in commissioning quite a bit of his art would look bad. If the deal went through with the man from Amsterdam, he would be able to quit his Web site business for good and live off his art. It was a dream come true.

Then he'd found out from the salesgirl at the gallery that Marion had asked about the painting, *Black-Eyed Girl*. She said she had intended to buy it, but left without completing the purchase. He knew because he had been a dick, she'd fled the scene before she could see him again. He couldn't blame her.

But it was a warning signal. If Marion had returned to purchase that painting, then she had to know it was her. *She had to*. Why else would she want to buy it?

It gnawed at him like some bloodthirsty creature in the night. He wanted to explain to her why he had painted it in the first place. But

admitting to himself—and especially to Marion—that he was madly and undeniably in love with her would be difficult for him to do. He had buried those feelings after she and Ethan were no more, only to have them resurface again on that morning at The Bitter End.

So he did the only thing he knew to do—he shoved those feelings down once again into the dark, deep recesses of his psyche. He told himself he would never allow them to come back.

But it was no use. He knew this. She was immortalized in his sketchbook, in every painting with a female in it. He would forever look at them and see Marion. And in *Black-Eyed Girl* which now resided in his studio, buried deep in the stack of canvases and hidden away from the world. Away from him.

He ran his hands through his hair out of frustration. He hadn't bothered to shave in a few days, and his cheeks were scratchy with stubble. All he could think about was seeing Marion and wanting her. One night with her was not enough. He needed more. He *wanted* more. He wanted to feel her, smell her, see her. He wanted her moaning underneath him. He wanted to feel her tight warmth wrapped around him. Hell, he just wanted *her* back in his life again, hearing her laugh and seeing her smile.

In that instant, he made a decision. He wanted Marion. He was going to get her if he had to crawl over shards of broken glass on his hands and knees to get her.

But first...there was something he wanted to do. Thinking of the painting gave him an idea. He shoved the canvases out of the way until he came to *Black-Eyed Girl*. Smiling, he gently placed it on his drafting table and then dug out some brown wrapping paper. Perhaps sending Marion the painting would send the right message, once and for all. Once he'd wrapped it and addressed it, he bolted down the stairs, leaving his studio behind. He'd figure out how to ship it later. Right now, he had to get to Marion. After a hot shower and a shave, he planned to go see her. Even if she didn't want to see him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marion wasn't home. He had tried pounding on her door to no avail. And like a crazy person, he intended to hunt her down. The first person he called—who he knew would know where she was—was Delilah.

"Hello?"

"Delilah, you have to tell me where she is. I have to see her."

"Graeme?"

She sounded confused and probably with good reason. He didn't sound quite right even to himself. More like a frantic person looking for a missing loved one. "Where is she?"

"I don't think I should tell you," she said. "I'm not sure she wants to see you."

"I'm not sure she does either," he agreed.

"In fact, I don't think she *should* see you."

"But I have to see her, talk to her. I've been an asshole."

"Yeah, I'd say that day in the gallery you had your ass hat on," Delilah agreed.

"I had my reasons," he said, his voice gruff. That still pained him to think about. But he didn't have time to explain to Delilah right now why he did what he did.

"She knows about the painting."

"I thought so, since she was there that day. The girl told me she had intended to buy it." He ran his hand through his hair then clutched the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. Sitting in his car, he stared out at the balmy summer night, watching as the street lamps lit as dusk neared. "Please, Delilah. Tell me where I can find her."

"No."

"Don't make me beg."

"I really think you should. It would make me feel so much better."

He could hear the chuckle in her voice, which infuriated him. "Delilah, I *need* to talk to Marion. Now, if not sooner. And in person."

"I hope you're planning to apologize for your abhorrent behavior."

"Yes," he snapped.

"And grovel for forgiveness."

"Yes!"

"Because I don't want to have to put a stiletto in your ass."

"Delilah!" He was quickly losing patience.

She sighed heavily. "Okay, but you're so not going to like it." She paused again, and he waited the excruciating moments for her to spit it out. He almost lost his temper when she said, "She's sort of at dinner with someone."

*Someone.* It sent up a big red flag. "A man?"

She *ahemed* on the other end of the phone. "Um. Yes."

His first thought was he'd break his neck if the man laid a hand on his Marion. "Who?"

"Ethan."

*Red hell and death!* Rage flooded him. How in the hell had Ethan managed to talk her into going to dinner with him? That man must have really been smooth to get her to agree. He punched the steering wheel. He should have never let him go after her that morning.

"Dammit!"

"I knew you wouldn't like it."

"Where are they?"

"Oh, nu-uh. I am *not* going to tell you that. No way."

"Delilah, maybe you've forgotten Marion has a GPS on her cell phone and I know my way around the inside of a computer? If I wanted to really find her, I could. I thought it would be faster if you helped me. Clearly, I was wrong."

A long silence stretched, and for a minute, he thought the call had been dropped. "Hello?"

"Yeah, I'm still here. If I tell you, are you going to go get her?"

"Yes. Absolutely. I love her. I want her."

"That's what I needed to know. And I'm coming with you."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Graeme said as he pulled into the



parking lot. "Don't we need reservations for this place?"

"I know the owner," she said, checking her lipstick in her compact. "And I dated the bartender."

"You certainly get around," he muttered.

"Watch it," she warned. "I'm helping you, aren't I? And anyway, I have good friends in high places. Or at least the places that matter." She winked and opened the car door. "Just remember the plan and try to stick to it."

"Yeah, yeah." Slamming the door, he fell in step beside her.

He had to admit, Delilah was a girl who knew how to dress. Wearing an electric blue dress that clung to every curve, and four-inch, electric blue heels, she looked amazing.

"And, uh, *try* to at least look like you like me," she said, grabbing his hand and putting it around her waist. She looked up at him and flashed a smile. "There. That's better."

The closer they got to Kiyoshi Steakhouse and Sushi Bar, the more he was beginning to think this was a horrible idea. He should have never let Delilah talk him into this crazy scheme.

At the hostess stand, Delilah slipped out of his arm and leaned casually toward the girl. "Hiya," she greeted. "Is Jack here?"

"Delilah Storm, aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" a voice boomed before she could reply.

She turned and greeted him with a hug. He kissed her loudly on the cheek. "Jack, how *are* you?"

"Missing you, apparently. Where have you been?"

"Work has kept me busy," she said. "This is my very good friend, Graeme Butler."

As she introduced him, Jack stretched his hand to Graeme. The two men shook.

Then she said in a rough whisper, "He's sort of a famous painter. I was hoping you'd have a spot for us? Even though we don't have reservations..." She almost purred as she placed one hand on his perfectly crisp dress shirt and then ran it down his red silk tie.

"Of course, I do. And the first round of drinks are on me."

She smiled demurely. "You're so good to me, Jack."

Damn, she was good. Jack waved them toward the dining room.

She leaned toward Graeme, her voice low. "See? I told you. And it looks like the love birds are already here."

To Graeme's complete and utter horror, Jack was leading them to the very same hibachi as Ethan and Marion. He grabbed Delilah by the arm and pulled her to a stop.

"*This* wasn't the plan. We were supposed to go to the bar."

"Relax," she grinned. "Everything will work out just fine."

But Graeme wasn't so sure.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marion couldn't believe what she was about to do. After her mother's phone call, she had finally made up her mind that closing the door on her past relationship with Ethan was what she needed. And dinner alone with him would be the only way she could get that.

The only person she mentioned it to was Delilah, and even then she didn't tell her the whole story. She only said she had agreed to dinner. Not that she was going for her own personal agenda. Marion waited until she was moments away from leaving her house to meet him so Delilah wouldn't try and talk her out of it. Because, to Delilah, once she broke up with someone, they were dead to her.

Ethan eagerly accepted her suggestion of dinner and allowed her to pick the restaurant. Probably because he thought she had intended to entertain the idea of getting back together.

So she picked Kiyoshi Steakhouse and Sushi Bar, a swank Japanese restaurant on the edge of downtown Fort Worth. She hoped the sounds of knives chopping and slicing would be the proper background for the big break-up/fuck-you scene she'd planned in her mind all day. She wore her favorite black shirt, a pair of jeans, and her silver heels. Nothing too flashy, and certainly nothing that would give him the wrong idea. She hoped.

The only way she would agree to see him was if she met him at the

restaurant. He was already there waiting for her. He greeted her with a smile and a wave.

"They wouldn't seat me until you arrived." He kissed her on the cheek. "You look amazing, as usual."

"Thanks." Calm and cool. Just like she had planned.

The steakhouse was a hot spot. There were ten hibachi areas, and all of them populated with patrons but not quite full to capacity. Of course, the cook wouldn't arrive until each seat was taken. Only two empty chairs remained after they arrived at their table.

He ordered a gin and tonic and she a glass of white wine. As they waited for the drinks to arrive, she wondered what to talk about. She opened her mouth to come up with some benign question when she suddenly froze. She couldn't believe her eyes.

Graeme and Delilah were walking toward their table. She blinked, hoping she imagined it. But no. There they were. And the worst part was...it looked like they were on a *date*.

## Chapter Sixteen

"What's wrong?" Ethan asked. "Your face just paled."

Their drinks arrived the same time as her traitorous best friend and the asshole she thought she was falling for. The asshole she had allowed to sketch her. The same asshole that cut her to the bone.

"Nothing." She forced a smile, reached for her wine glass, and took a sip. But her stomach churned, and the wine tasted like acid in her mouth.

The way Delilah kept giving Graeme adoring looks as they walked toward their table made her sick. And then Delilah feigned surprise as she looked at the two of them.

She narrowed her eyes and got to her feet; Ethan followed suit. What the hell was Delilah up to?

"Marion and Ethan," she said, putting on her best faux smile. "Well, this *is* awkward." Somehow, Delilah managed to draper herself over Graeme, as if she were the latest fashion accessory, and gave him adoring looks.

"Ah, that's nice. You folks know each other?" the man who'd led them to the table asked.

"Oh, sure. We're old friends." Delilah winked. At him, Graeme, or her, Marion couldn't be sure.

"Delilah, what are you doing here?" Marion asked through gritted teeth. Her friend knew she'd be here with Ethan, so why the fake surprise was beyond her.

Ethan craned his neck to see the two standing behind Marion. He gave Graeme a once over and glanced at Delilah long enough to take her in, but he said nothing. His face said it all though. He had a clear, *See? Your friends suck*, look.

"I'm having dinner with an old friend, that's what." She slipped her hand in the crook of Graeme's elbow and smiled up at him, batting her long lashes.

"You folks enjoy, then."

"Thanks, Jack," Delilah called as the man sauntered away.

But Marion knew that *come hither* look all too well. She nearly laughed out loud but clamped her jaw shut. Despite the fact she hadn't spoken a word to Graeme in nearly a week, she was very curious to see how Delilah was going to play this one out.

Marion focused her attention away from her best friend to Graeme. He hadn't taken his gaze off her. He looked quite dashing in a white dress shirt, no tie, and the collar open at the neck. She tried very hard not to look down, but she did note he wore gray slacks. He looked freshly shaved, his hair neatly combed. Not that he wasn't ever neat or well groomed—he was. But it seemed as though he had taken extra effort tonight.

And he smelled *really* good. She could smell the faint scent of that cologne she loved so well.

Anything she had to say to Delilah died on her tongue right there.

"Marion," Graeme said with a nod. "It's good to see you."

He sounded as though he meant it, and to her surprise, her heart lurched, and her stomach plunged to her toes, and all she wanted to do was fall into his arms.

Was it her imagination or did he lean toward her? "Graeme, I—"

She couldn't stop looking into those delicious pale blue eyes. And she wasn't exactly sure what she was going to say. It was as though the entire world fell away and they were the only two people standing in the middle of the busy restaurant. The din of voices had shushed, the clang of silverware silent, and the clink of glasses gone.

Her heart was in her throat, pounding a mad tattoo. Marion could

swear he leaned toward her, his scent wafting over her, pulling her in. Beckoning her closer. His lips parted ever so slightly, his lids half-closed. Any minute now, he was going to—

“Sit down, Marion,” Ethan said, his voice flat and demanding.

And just like that, the spell was broken. Graeme pulled his chair out, the legs scraping on the floor, and sat down. He fluffed out his napkin with a snap of cloth and placed it on his thigh, as if nothing had happened at all.

Up until now, Ethan had been silent. Almost as though he ignored the fact Graeme, the man who gave him the bruises that were still fading on his face, and Delilah were taking seats right next to them. Swallowing the lump in her throat, Marion sat. She instantly regretted doing what he asked. Already she fell back into those old patterns.

“Hello, Ethan,” Graeme said. He leaned forward slightly, trying to make eye contact with him.

But Ethan would have none of it and continued to ignore him. Marion, though, found it rather interesting that Graeme chose to sit next to her on her left, Ethan on her right. And Delilah on the other side of Graeme, checking her lipstick in her mirror. She crossed her long legs and looked completely drop dead gorgeous. Most of the men at the table couldn't keep their eyes off her.

With her stomach in knots, Marion wasn't sure she would be able to eat. She made a silent vow to make sure Delilah suffered for putting her in this position.

The waiter arrived, and they ordered drinks. Marion's leg bobbed up and down at a furious rate—a sure sign of her nerves. Her heel clicked a rapid beat on the floor. At last, the chef arrived and started firing up the hibachi grill and taking orders.

“I hope you don't mind, Mar, us showing up here,” Delilah said in her singsong voice.

Marion wanted to smack her. “Mind?” she asked smoothly, her voice a low sultry whisper. “Why should I mind?”

“Oh, good.” She leaned on Graeme, one hand slipping across his thigh. “Graeme and I haven't had a chance to play catch up like you two.

Have we, Graeme?"

Marion gritted her teeth, wanting to smack her best friend silly. What sort of game was Delilah playing? Graeme, at least, had the good sense to look uncomfortable. He placed his hand over Delilah's, gripped it, and then casually moved it off his thigh. Marion knew he was trying not to let her see, but she did.

It was a small victory. But it didn't phase Delilah one bit. She continued to smile, making sure her full, red lips looked as inviting as possible. She flipped a strand of long wavy strawberry blonde hair over her shoulder in one of her more sultry moves.

"No, we haven't." He sounded less than thrilled at the prospect, too, and Marion suppressed a giggle.

"I don't know why you're giving either of them the time of day," Ethan said. "Clearly, they're up to no good."

Boy, did he sound like a stuffy asshole. Marion decided she could play their game, too. The chef had moved to the couple next to them, sharpening his knives and chatting with them. Something he said made them laugh.

"Oh, I don't know, darling. Perhaps it's just a coincidence they're here at the same time."

As the word *darling* crossed her lips, Ethan's head snapped up. He looked at her as though she'd grown a second head. Marion had never called him anything but Ethan in the two years they'd spent as a couple. Graeme, in the meantime, was staring her down with a heated glare.

"You and I both know this is no coincidence." Ethan sounded downright accusatory.

Marion gave him a sidelong glance. "Just as you and I know my mother calling me about us getting back together is no coincidence."

"Your mother called you?" Graeme asked.

"I don't know what you mean." Ethan reached for his gin and tonic and took a healthy swig. The ice tinkled against the glass as he drained it.

"Yes, you do," she snapped. "My mother told me she ran into yours and you've been *so forlorn* without me. That you were *devastated*."

"Finally, this is getting good," Delilah said, leaning forward on the

table to get a good look at the action.

"I *was* devastated." He looked hurt, giving her those sad, brown puppy-dog eyes.

Well, it wasn't going to work this time. "Oh? So devastated you fucked some other girl in *our* bed?"

Silence descended on the crowd. The Japanese chef, who had been laughing and sharpening his knives, stopped mid-sharp. Several pairs of eyes landed on Ethan and Marion.

Ethan gave her withering stare, and she was all too aware of her scathing words. Her palms broke into a nasty sweat.

"How dare you—" he began. His voice was low with warning.

But Marion would have none of it. Knowing all too well his dislike for public displays of anything, she pressed on.

"How dare I *what*? Speak the truth? Tell it like it is? Let the whole world know that you're a lying, cheating bastard?"

"I'm going to have to ask you to stop talking to me like that," he said, glancing around at the crowd.

"And if I don't?" she taunted. "You can't hurt me anymore." She flung her napkin on the table, her hands shaking. "I am such an idiot for allowing you to talk me into coming here."

Marion rose so quickly her chair scraped against the floor and nearly toppled. Graeme stood with her, reaching for her.

"Marion—"

"Just don't."

She pinned Graeme with a glare, and they stared each other down for a long minute. Finally, she snatched her purse and left the table, seeking the restrooms. Behind her, she could hear the distinctive click and flip of Delilah in her four-inch slides headed right for her.

Marion had a splitting headache. And the one sip of wine she had taken churned in her acidic stomach. She burst into the bathroom, tossed her handbag on the marble counter, and leaned over a sink, trying to compose herself.

Delilah flung open the door only seconds after her. As it banged closed, she stood there, silent. Waiting.



"What?" Marion finally said. "What, Delilah?"

"I think you know what." Delilah moved to stand next to her, staring at her reflection in the mirror. A faucet dripped nearby, the only sound in the entire bathroom. It echoed off the tile walls and metal stalls.

"Maybe you'll tell me what the hell you're doing with Graeme," Marion suggested.

"Can't you see it's an intervention?"

"I don't need an intervention. I can take care of myself."

"You're here with Ethan, aren't you? Something had to snap you back to your senses," Delilah said.

"So you show up with him, falling all over him?" Marion asked.

"That was all an act. He begged me, Mar. He said he needed to talk to you in person."

"So?" she spat. Tears clogged her throat and pooled in her eyes, threatening to spill.

"So, he loves you."

Marion couldn't take much more of this. She thought her heart would stop, and she half wished it would. She could see the headline now. *Woman dies of a broken heart in swank Japanese hibachi restroom.*

Graeme loved her. It wasn't quite the same hearing Delilah say it. What a big fat *who cares*. He had his shot, and he blew it that day he gave her the cold shoulder in the gallery.

"And?" Marion asked.

"And doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"No." She pouted, sticking out her bottom lip. Should it mean something? Should she care? It was a little late for that.

"That's not like you, Mar. You usually give people a chance."

"I gave him a shot," she said bitterly. "It's over. And I can't believe you of all people would bring him here, tonight, when you *knew* I was here with Ethan!"

"I brought him here hoping you would realize you were about to make another mistake!" she shouted back. "I can't believe the person you decide to give a second chance to is Ethan. Of all people."

"Don't start with me."

"Jesus, Mar. You are so thick sometimes. Graeme is head over heels in love with you. Don't you see? When are you going to wake up and realize he's the one? He's the man you've been dreaming of your entire life."

"If he's so in love with me, then why didn't he call me after that day at the gallery?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Why don't *you* ask him?" To press her point, Marion shoved her index finger in her friend's face. "And why are you so suddenly on his side? After that day, you practically crucified him."

"People make mistakes," Delilah said. "It was poor judgment. And he has his reasons for doing what he did."

"Whatever." Marion spun back toward the sink, gripping the edge of the counter. Anger had replaced her hurt, and all she wanted to do was lash out. "You're sleeping with him."

"What?"

"That's why you brought him here. So you could flaunt him in front of me. You win!" She held up her hands in surrender, knowing even as the words spilled from her mouth she was being irrational. Still, she couldn't stop herself.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You always were better at getting the men to fall for you than I was."

"Marion, that is a bunch of bull shit and you know it."

"Uh huh." Her heart pounded furiously. It was rare Delilah used her full first name in any conversation, and she knew she must have really made her angry. At this point, though, there was no going back. "You can have him. Besides, he's great in the sack."

Delilah clutched her bag under an arm, giving her a heated look. The color was high in her cheeks. She didn't say a word as she breezed by her and left the bathroom, the door slamming closed behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Graeme watched the two ladies walk briskly from the table and rose. Ethan stood up, too.

"Give it up, man," Ethan said. He gave Graeme a self-satisfied smug grin.

"After that display, I really don't think so." Graeme's gaze flickered to Ethan, that same malcontent sweeping over him as before when he punched him in the donut shop.

"It's really no use." It sounded like a warning.

"What's your agenda anyway, Ethan? You don't love her. I know you don't."

Ethan shrugged a shoulder. "Maybe I do."

Graeme wasn't sure if he meant maybe he loved her...or maybe he had an agenda. He suspected the latter.

"Stay away from Marion," Ethan said.

"Or what? Marion is a grown woman. She can decide who she wants, and I don't think it's you."

Ethan snarled. "Maybe not. But you're not much better, and I have a lot more to offer her."

"Such as?"

"Luxury beyond her wildest imagination. I can give her anything and everything she wants."

"Those are just things. They don't matter to Marion."

"They won't if she doesn't marry me."

The light bulb suddenly turned on. "This isn't about Marion, is it?"

Ethan looked smug as he folded his arms. "No. It's about me getting respect from my father and that corner office when he retires. It's about me getting my mother off my back so she can go to the country club again. I can't get any of that without Marion."

"You son of a bitch." Graeme balled his fists.

Ethan leaned toward him, dropping his voice. "And if you tell her, I'll make sure you regret it."

"Don't threaten me." He'd kicked his ass once; he could do it again. Ethan still had the bruises to prove it. "And, oh, I plan to tell her. I'm sure it won't be too hard for her to believe since she already has a bad taste in

her mouth from you."

Graeme didn't wait for a reply and headed after the ladies. The delay was long enough to allow both Delilah and Marion to disappear inside the bathroom. The restrooms were in an alcove off the bar area. An open doorway and a short hall led to them. He leaned against the wall, his arms folded across his chest. As he waited, he saw Ethan bolt from the restaurant.

*Chicken shit.*

And he'd had the balls to call him that in the donut shop that morning. It was just like him to tuck tail and run.

Inside the ladies room, he could hear them shouting at each other. That wasn't good. Delilah was supposed to convince Marion to let him talk to her. Instead, they were fighting? A very bad sign.

A few minutes later, Delilah came busting out of the bathroom, and he stood up straight. Her face was a dark shade of red. She stopped short when she saw him.

"Good luck with that," she said, and started by him.

He snagged her by the arm. "Wait. What happened?"

"Why don't you ask your girlfriend? Because I'm done talking to her." Delilah jerked her arm free and continued walking away.

"Where are you going?"

"Home," she said over her shoulder.

"How?" Graeme started after her. She rode with him, and he couldn't allow her to call a cab. It'd cost at least sixty dollars to get home, and he couldn't have that on his conscious.

"I have a friend here, Graeme, and *not* the one in the bathroom. I can hitch a ride."

"Delilah, wait a second." He hurried after her, reaching for her and spinning her around to face him. "What did Marion say? What happened?"

Her lips parted to answer when the bathroom door opened and closed behind them. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Marion standing there with a look of distaste, hurt, and confusion on her face. Her gaze slid to Delilah, and it was one of complete and utter malice. He

dropped his hands, and Delilah spun on her heel and took off.

*Whoa. That's really not a good sign.*

Delilah and Marion had been friends for as long as he knew them. He couldn't imagine what transpired in the ladies room that would have caused such heated looks between them.

Marion shook her head and started past him, but he put his hand up on the jamb of the doorway, blocking her passage. She looked up at him, and he could see the shimmer of tears in her deep brown eyes.

"Marion—"

"Don't even bother, Graeme."

"About tonight—"

"I don't want to hear it, okay? Let me by."

"No," he said, sounding more stern than he meant. "I want to explain—"

"There's nothing to explain!" she nearly shouted.

Something inside him snapped. He grasped her by the shoulders and pushed her against the wall, pinning her there with his weight. She pushed weakly at his shoulders, trying to shove him off.

"Let me finish one mother fucking sentence, all right?"

She blinked slowly, her eyes wide and round. "All right." It shuddered out of her on a breath.

"I asked her to bring me here tonight. I wanted to talk to you."

"There's nothing to talk about," she said. Her chin quivered. She was about to lose all composure. And it was all his fault.

"I couldn't talk to you that day at the gallery. I have my reasons." He paused, and she waited.

She never took her gaze off his. "Well, what are they?"

"I can't tell you. Not yet."

"But you can tell Delilah?" she snapped. She shoved at him again, but he wouldn't budge. "Let me go, Graeme. If you want her, far be it from me to stand in your way."

"What?" His brows knit.

Is that what she thought? She thought he really wanted Delilah instead of her? Was she insane? Didn't she realize she was the only

woman he had dreamed about for years? She was the only woman he had wanted or *loved* unconditionally? Didn't she know that every woman he'd ever dated would never measure up to her?

Sure, Delilah was stunning and sassy. She could dress for success or seduction.

But Marion was the love of his life.

Marion clutched his shirtfront in her fist and gave a half-hearted shove. Tears were in her eyes now. "Please, Graeme. Let me go."

He couldn't. If she walked out that door tonight, it would seal the end of their romance forever. And he just couldn't let her go. Instead, he brushed his hand over her cheek, then swept across her neck and tangled in her soft brown-sugar hair. He put just enough pressure on the nape of her neck to make her look up at him, and then he kissed her.

She was reluctant at first, not moving, not responding. But the more he demanded from her mouth, the more she yielded. The more she forgot they were standing in front of a restroom in a high dollar restaurant.

Her arms slid around his neck, pulling him closer. He could smell her sexy perfume and feel her luscious curves molding against him. Yes, she was made for him. Just as he always knew she was.

Their tongues tangled, each trying to control the other. She kissed him back with a fierceness he never thought possible. He pushed her harder against the wall, his hand flattening against her abdomen.

He popped the button on her jeans and slipped his hand inside, just as he had that night on her front porch. She was pliant in his arms, and so willing. She rocked her hips against his hand as he stroked her hot wetness. Proof she still wanted him.

A sexy moan bubbled in her throat, rumbling against him. His cock was painfully hard with the want for her. He removed his hand and pushed his entire body weight against her, grinding his hard cock into her hips.

Marion clutched the hair at the nape of his neck, their mouths never ceasing. Her other hand pushed against his crotch, feeling his hardened length. He groaned with pleasure, annoyed with the barrier of clothing

between them.

And then, as if she realized where she was and what she was doing—or perhaps she found his weak spot—she shoved him roughly. Before he could catch her, she had slipped out of his arms and walked swiftly away.

## Chapter Seventeen

Marion knew the moment the foul words were out of her mouth, they were a mistake. But she had let anger and hurt overcome her. She stood a long moment in the bathroom after Delilah left before finally taking a deep breath and calming her ragged nerves. She smoothed her sweaty palms down her jeans and opened the door.

She wasn't prepared for the sight of Graeme holding Delilah, looking informal and intimate. Again, her logical brain told her there was nothing going on, but her emotional brain told her it was inexcusable. He dropped his hands immediately, looking guilty, as if he had been doing something he shouldn't. Which he wasn't.

Delilah took off, her heels clicking a final good-bye as she left them behind.

Marion shook her head and started past Graeme, but he put his hand up on the jamb of the open doorway, stopping her. Oh, sure, she could have ducked and gotten away, but a little piece of her wanted to see what he was going to say.

"Marion—"

"Don't even bother, Graeme." But the bigger piece of her—the bitter piece—won over.

"About tonight—"

"I don't want to hear it," she interrupted again. Her heart beat fiercely in her chest, her hands shook. "Let me by."

"No. I want to explain—"



"There's nothing to explain!"

He shoved her toward the wall, pressing against her, dangerously close. His pale blue eyes pierced her to the core, anger flashing in them.

"Let me finish one mother fucking sentence, all right?"

She knew her eyes widened with surprise, and she blinked once, slowly, never taking her gaze off his. She had never seen him look so incensed, and it made her want to recoil.

"All right," she said at last, her voice a faint squeak. She'd let him explain, if only to hear what excuse he had up his sleeve.

"I asked her to bring me here tonight. I wanted to talk to you."

"There's nothing to talk about." Nope, nothing indeed. She didn't want to hear any of his reasons why he passed by her that day in the gallery. Or why he couldn't call her to apologize. Or why he needed to talk to her in person. She suspected it had something to do with that L-word Delilah mentioned, but she was too angry and too upset to listen or accept it.

"I couldn't talk to you that day at the gallery. I have my reasons."

And still he tried to tell her he had *reasons*. She gulped hard, refusing to cry. She wouldn't let herself show that kind of emotion in front of him. He needed to see how angry she was, not that she was a weak, simpering fool who happened to be in love with him, too.

"I can't tell you. Not yet," he said.

"But you can tell Delilah?"

With weak arms that refused to cooperate, she shoved at him again, but he didn't budge an inch. He was twice her size and much stronger. She didn't really expect it to do any good.

"Let me go, Graeme. If you want her, far be it from me to stand in your way."

"What?"

His brows drew together as confusion went over his face, then dawning. His expression softened then, giving her a glimpse at what she thought he might be thinking. *You're crazy. Don't you know I love you?* And he moved closer—if that were possible.

She thought she muttered something else about letting her go, but

his hand was in her hair, tipping her head back, and then he was kissing her. Fiery, passionate, searing kisses. Their mouths fused like a soldiering iron fusing metal. It made her weak, her knees threatening to buckle.

So she slipped her arms around his neck, pulled him to her, and kissed him back, if only to keep herself on her feet. She kissed him with as much fervor and ardor with which he kissed her. She kissed him because she loved him perhaps as much as he loved her, though he had yet to announce it. She kissed him because she felt like an utter fool for thinking he could want Delilah instead of her. And she kissed him because, whether she liked it or not, he *was* the one. Just like Delilah had said. And she felt guilty for picking a fight with her friend.

All those reasons were perhaps why she allowed him to touch her, to slip his hand inside her and feel her dampness. All for him. She wanted him to know how much she wanted him. She wanted him to know how much she had longed for his touch, how much she had wished he would sweep her into his arms and take her away from this horrid place.

Marion clutched the thick hair at the nape of his neck, her hand slipping between their bodies and feeling his hard cock through his soft, gray slacks. He ground against her, wanting her as much as she wanted him.

And if she hadn't been a total bitch and said the things she had, or thought the things she had, maybe they had another shot. Instead, she managed to finally shove him away and slip out of his arms. She hurried as fast as she could away from him, feeling as though something had been ripped from her when she left him.

A cold fist had closed around her heart, shattering what resilience was left.

She tried hard to rein that in so Ethan wouldn't see. But as she approached the table, she noticed he was gone. She stood there staring at his empty chair with the napkin haphazardly flung on the seat, trying to comprehend. His gin and tonic was empty, the ice melting and the glass sweating. Her wine still sat untouched, the glass frosty with condensation.

"He left, ma'am." It was the voice of the waiter behind her. Adding insult to injury, he called her *ma'am*. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"Did he pay for the drinks?" Her voice sounded distant, hollow, as though she were in a long tunnel, the light closing in on her.

"No, miss."

*That bastard!* "How much?" Yes, how much more of this emotional rollercoaster could she take?

"I'll close you out."

Oh, it would be excruciating having to wait for the check. "Just a minute." She reached into her handbag, pulled out a twenty, and shoved it at him. "Is that enough?"

He stared at it dumbly before finally nodding and taking the bill. "Yes."

She didn't waste another minute. She headed for the door as fast as her legs could take her. On the way out, she saw Delilah sitting at the bar, her long legs crossed, sipping a martini and flirting with the bartender as she flipped her hair over her shoulder. Graeme was nowhere to be found either.

As soon as Marion was outside the restaurant, she burst into tears.

\* \* \* \* \*

The peal of the phone ringing woke Marion out of a dead sleep. She forced her eyes open to the gray light filtering through her bedroom windows. The phone rang again, and her head throbbed painfully with the sound. She couldn't bring herself to pick it up.

When she finally got home last night, she'd taken a hot shower and fell into bed, crying herself to sleep. She last glanced at the clock shortly after four in the morning. Now, the red numbers told her it was half past nine.

She lay back and closed her eyes, the phone ringing once more. Her answering machine finally picked up, and Ethan's voice sounded through the speaker.

"Marion...pick up. I know you're there." Pause. "I want to talk to you about last night."

*Yeah, right.* As if she wanted to talk to *him* about that. What was to

talk about? He left her there. She got the closure she needed. Ethan was still the same. He hadn't changed.

"Whatever Graeme told you about me isn't true."

Her eyes popped open, and she sat straight up, her head objecting to the sudden movement. Ethan had paused again as she stared at the extension in her bedroom, indecision gripping her. She should pick it up? What did he mean by that?

"I really need to talk to you. I'll be at the Bonjour Café in an hour if you want to meet me."

There was a click and then he hung up. Stunned, Marion blinked to clear her head. What did he mean, whatever Graeme said wasn't true? He never mentioned Ethan, perhaps because she wouldn't let him talk in the first place. And perhaps because she had let him press her into the wall and kiss her senseless.

And, God, she had so loved those fiery, passionate kisses.

She slid to the edge of the bed, her legs dangling over as she contemplated. She could go, find out what he had to say? Because if she knew Ethan, he was trying to cover up something Graeme should have told her yesterday.

If she hurried, she could make herself presentable in time for the meeting.

\* \* \* \* \*

Forty minutes later, she headed toward downtown and parked in a nearby lot. She waited in the car, counting the minutes until she collected her nerves long enough to get out and walk toward the café. She wanted to make sure Ethan was there before her, so she wouldn't have to sit alone.

He outside, the intermittent sun shining on his white, wrought iron table. He read the Sunday newspaper, and in front of him had a cup of coffee and a glass of water with condensation running down the sides. He'd been there a while. Good.

Through her dollar store shades, she kept her gaze pinned on him

and took a deep breath. She had to play this just right to get him to tell her exactly what he thought she already knew.

Marion paused at the edge of the table, just as he had that morning he interrupted her brunch. He hadn't seen her yet.

"Hello, Ethan."

He lifted his gaze and gave her a faint smile before he folded the newspaper and set it aside. He rose and reached for her, intending to hug her hello, but she backed up.

"Fair enough," he said. He motioned to the chair opposite him and took his seat.

Marion remained standing, hesitating, before she finally sat down. The waiter came over and asked to take her drink order. She waved him away. No, she wanted to get to the point and get this over with.

"Well?" she prompted.

"Thanks for coming." He picked up his mug, took a sip of coffee.

"Will you take off your glasses so I can look you in the eye?" he asked.

"No." There was no way she'd give him the satisfaction of seeing her puffy, red eyes. "Get on with it."

"About last night, Marion..." He paused, his words trailing away.

"Are you going to say you're sorry?" she asked. "Because I'm getting damn tired of hearing everyone say that to me."

His gaze flicked up to hers, and he said nothing. She huffed out a breath. Suddenly, she didn't really give a fig about any plans to coerce information out of him. It was time to end this nonsense once and for all.

"I'm sorry, too," she said. "I'm sorry I allowed myself to get sucked into your life. I'm sorry I nearly allowed you back in a second time. I'm sorry I thought we could have a nice future together. I'm sorry I don't love you the way you love me—or think you love me."

"Marion—"

"I'm sorry you think I'm the prize, chasing me all over town with these sad-eyed looks, hoping I'll cave." She leaned forward on the table then. "So why don't you tell me, in your own words, exactly what this is all about?"

He looked stunned. As if this was a Marion he never knew existed. And maybe she didn't until now. Maybe it took two years to find her courage to stand up to Ethan Baxter III.

After a long silence, he finally said, "My father told me I had to marry you. I had to find some way to get you back. He said if I didn't, I could forget getting promoted in the family business."

The family business was one of the top money-management firms in the Fort Worth area. His father was CEO, and Ethan had been in the business, groomed for an executive-level position, since he graduated college. She hadn't realized his father controlled that much of his life.

And now that she thought about it, she wondered if her mother had something to do with it, too. *I ran into his mother at the country club...* Her words came flooding back to her, and it all made sense to her then.

"My mother says she can't show her face at the country club," he continued, staring down into his coffee. "Like she's disgraced or something."

"I guess they were tired of your porno girlfriends, then, huh?" Marion said. "Is that what Graeme was going to tell me?"

His head snapped up. First shock then rage filtered over his features. Those brown eyes widened and then narrowed. And she wasn't the last bit frightened of that look anymore.

"No, he didn't tell me," she said before he could say a word. "I didn't give him a chance. I wish I had, and I won't make that same mistake again." She stood up, then, looking at him for the last time. "We're finished, Ethan. Forget my number and don't ever come looking for me again. Got it?"

As she walked away from the Bonjour Café, he shouted at her back, "He'll never be good enough for you, Marion!"

The weight finally lifted off her shoulders. *Closure*. She had it and was finally free.

## Chapter Eighteen

The only person in the world that would love her victory as much as she did...was Delilah. Unfortunately, she was too embarrassed to call her, despite the fact she owed her a huge apology. There had never been this type of silence between the two of them, and it hurt. She had held her cell phone in her hand and looked at her address book on numerous occasions.

Two days had passed since that night in the restaurant. Finally, Marion sucked it up and called her. She needed to apologize and get it over with. It wasn't worth losing her friend over.

"Mar," Delilah answered, her tone cool.

"Hi," she said. She didn't want to admit she was a bundle of nerves. "I was thinking maybe we could meet for coffee?"

There was a pause, and for a moment, Marion thought she would turn her down. But surely, her friend would realize she was trying to reach out to her.

"At this late hour?"

"Sure, why not?" Marion said, casually.

"Mar, you know what it'll do to my nerves this late," Delilah said.

Marion could definitely sense the brush-off. "There's always decaf." Another long silence, and Marion huffed. "I'm trying to make amends, so please don't make this harder on me. Meet me for girl talk and a big fat apology, okay?"

"Where do you want to meet?"

Marion tugged on her lower lip. Where, indeed? They could go to their usual Starbucks, but that was...blasé. They needed to mix it up and try something different.

They needed the Bitter End Coffee House. *Bingo!*

"The Bitter End in downtown. Do you know where that is?"

She gave Delilah directions, and they set a time. When she hung up, she knew she was headed to the Bitter End for a reason other than meeting Delilah. And that reason was a six foot, blue-eyed one named Graeme.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marion got to the Bitter End first and ordered a grande latte. She sipped it while she waited and perused the latest array of magazines on a nearby table.

Not long after that, Delilah arrived, looking stunning as usual. Her long, strawberry blonde hair was pulled back in a sleek low ponytail. She wore a turquoise, off-the-shoulder top and faded blue jeans with turquoise strappy sandals which, Marion knew, would be some big name couture like Christian Louboutin or Manolo Blahnik.

"Mar," she greeted with a nod.

"So, what are they?" Marion pointed to her shoes. "Louboutin or Manolo?"

"Giuseppe Zanotti," Delilah answered. She still regarded her coolly.

"Right." Marion dragged her bottom lip through her teeth before launching into her planned apology. "Delilah, I'm a total bitch." When Delilah started to agree, she held up her hand. "Don't. I have a speech, and if you talk, I'll forget. You were so right about everything. Ethan is an asshole, and I broke it off with him. I told him to forget he knows me. I'm so sorry about everything. Can you forgive me?"

Delilah bit her lip, mulling it over. Marion could see the look of *I told you so* in her emerald green eyes.

"Go ahead. You know you want to."



"I told you so." Delilah looked rather proud of herself. "And I forgive you. You know I can't stay mad at you." She put her arm around Marion's neck and hugged her hard. "Besides, we're best friends. There's no sense in ruining a good fifteen-year friendship over some dumb boy."

Marion laughed. "You're right." Though she wasn't sure if she meant Graeme or Ethan.

"What about Graeme? Now that you've come to your senses, I'm assuming you're going to get back together with him."

"I don't know yet. I thought maybe you could help me work that out. But first, I want to buy you a coffee."

Delilah settled for the coffee of the day with a decaf espresso shot, and as they stood at the cream and sugar bar, Marion watched Delilah pour packet after packet of sugar into her coffee.

"I've never quite understood why you like your coffee that sweet," Marion said.

"Hey, I like a little coffee with my sugar." Delilah reached for the cream. Marion watched as she poured enough to turn the coffee a light taupe and shook her head.

"Blech," Marion said, staring at the concoction.

"I know, I know. And I like a lot of cream, too. It's the mixture, Mar. The mixture."

"And it tastes good?"

"It's my thing, okay?"

They headed for a quiet corner where they both curled up in the oversized leather furniture—Delilah in a chair and Marion on the love seat. As they sat, Marion held her half-empty latte in both hands and scanned the coffee house, looking for Graeme and hoping she'd spot him. No such luck.

"I shouldn't have said those things to you in the bathroom," Marion said. "I didn't mean them."

"I know you didn't." Delilah sipped her drink. "And enough lamenting over it already. Why don't you tell me why you really agreed to meet Ethan that night?"

"I wanted closure." Marion shrugged. "I thought maybe if I got

him alone long enough to talk to him, I could get over it and finally move past the entire break up."

"Not the brightest of plans," Delilah said. "But then you had no idea I would be dragging Graeme there."

"No, I didn't." Marion winced, remembering the encounter. She ached for him and wished she had been in her right mind to listen to him. "I love him, Del. I really do."

"I hope you mean Graeme and not that other slimy bastard."

She laughed, happy to be back on good terms with her best friend. "Yes, I mean Graeme."

Delilah looked thoughtful. "When did you tell Ethan to shove off? Because I saw him bolt from the restaurant before you came back from the bathroom."

"Sunday morning."

Delilah's eyes widened, and her eyebrows shot up.

"He called me, woke me up from a sound sleep. Said he wanted to talk to me about that night and that whatever Graeme said about him wasn't true."

"What did Graeme say about him?" she asked, hanging on the edge of her every word.

"That's just it. Graeme never mentioned Ethan to me. In fact, I didn't let him do a lot of talking." Marion couldn't stop herself from glancing at the door every time a new customer walked in. "Anyway, I was curious. I figured since I didn't get my closure at the restaurant, I could this morning."

"You agreed to meet Ethan, then?"

"Yes, at the Bonjour Café up the street. He was already waiting for me when I got there. He finally came clean about all this getting back together business. He said his father told him if he didn't marry me, then he would lose his promotion in the family business. He also said his mother couldn't show her face in the country club. I guess rumors are flying."

"A-ha!" Delilah exclaimed. "I knew that rat bastard had ulterior motives."

"I suppose he needed a respectable wife instead of a porn star." Marion shrugged. "So I told him Graeme never mentioned any of that to me. You should have seen the look of horror on his face when he realized I didn't even know and he'd spilled his guts."

Delilah laughed. "Damn! I wish I could have been there to see that."

"It was priceless." Marion smiled. "Anyway, then I told him to stay away from me."

"Good for you, Mar. I'm proud of you, girl, for standing up to him. Finally! Jesus, it only took you two years."

"I'm glad it's over." Marion ran her finger around the rim of the lid on her cup, still scanning the coffee house for her handsome painter. "Now I don't know what to do about Graeme. Last night, at the restaurant, he said he had his reasons for ignoring me at the gallery that day."

"But he didn't tell you?" she asked.

"No. He told you, though." Marion didn't want to accuse her of knowing before she did, but she couldn't help it.

"He wants to tell you himself, and I think he should. It's not my place to."

"Delilah, we've never kept secrets."

"It's not a secret," she said quickly. "It's news Graeme needs to tell you. Trust me on this."

"All right." Marion huffed out a breath, defeated. "He never told me he loved me."

"He was hurting for you. And you two are both too stubborn to kiss and make up."

"Not the New Marion. I'm going to call him."

"Good!"

"I just don't know what to say."

"Well, I'm sure you'll think of something."

"Come on, Del. Help me. You're the one that knows how to talk to men." Another patron entered, and Marion glanced over to see if it was him.

"Ha! You give me too much credit, Mar."

"But—"

"Okay, listen." She put her cup down and leaned forward. "If you really want to get him back, I suggest you put aside your pride and your ego, and you tell him exactly how you feel. If you really are the New Marion, you'll go after him if you really love him like you say. And just *who* do you keep looking for?"

Marion blinked. "Nobody." She focused her attention on Delilah and swiftly changed the subject. "Should I go to his place?"

"Meet him on neutral ground if it makes you feel better." She grabbed her cup and leaned back into the cushioned chair.

The mere thought of calling Graeme and asking him to coffee, or drinks, or whatever, made her stomach knot. In fact, it made her want to throw up. Or maybe that was still just the emotional hangover she had from the other night's crying jag.

She mulled this over. Would he even give her a chance after her awful behavior? She could imagine it now...calling him up and him answering.

"What am I going to say to him?" Marion asked. It was more of a rhetorical question.

But Delilah answered nonetheless. "What about... 'Can we forget about the other night? I was a total idiot, and by the way, I love you.'?"

"No," Marion said, shaking her head. "That's lame." And it didn't sound like something she'd say anyway. "How about, 'Graeme, I love you. Can we start over?'"

Delilah giggled. "And he'd say, 'Marion, I love you. Thank God you lost that loser!'"

They laughed so hard they were both crying. As Delilah wiped the tears from her eyes, she glanced up and froze. Her eyes widened with shock.

"Don't look now," Delilah said on a breath and reached for Marion. She clamped a hand on her arm, her mouth in a wide triumphant grin.

"Ow!"

But she followed her gaze to see what Delilah saw...and nearly

fainted. Graeme walked through the door. It was as though the universe heard their conversation—and her thoughts—and played a really sick joke on her. She never expected him to show up; it was only wishful thinking. Well, she got her wish.

Marion's throat constricted, her breath hitched. There he was, standing at the counter, looking as though he just rolled out of bed. His shirt was untucked and wrinkled, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He had on a pair of faded jeans and black boots. She could see paint still on his hands. He hadn't shaved, and his cheeks looked scruffy.

He'd been painting.

She sighed wistfully.

"Mar, now's your chance."

"Are you nuts? I look like hell." She fussed with her hair, smoothing her hand over the locks and reaching for her handbag. Digging through it, she came up with her compact and checked her eye makeup, smudging away any smears.

"He doesn't look much better," Delilah pointed out.

She was right. He didn't. He looked like death warmed over.

"I can't."

"Sure you can." Delilah stood up then. "Hi, Graeme!"

"What in God's name are you doing?" Marion said through gritted teeth.

It was too late. Graeme looked over, shock making his face pale a sickly gray shade. Delilah waved cheerfully and ran over to him. He gave her a wary look then glanced at Marion with that same wary look.

It made those knots in her stomach tighten even more.

And then, to her utter horror, Delilah took Graeme by the hand—after he'd managed to get his coffee from the barista—and headed toward her!

*Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God!*

"Look, Mar. It's Graeme. Can you believe it? What a coincidence, huh?"

Marion couldn't speak. She and Graeme stared at each other in shocked silence. Clearly, neither expected to see the other so soon. Thank

God for Delilah, who continued to chatter.

"You kids have a lot of catching up to do. So, I'm just going to grab my bag and scoot."

"You're leaving?" Marion shot to her feet, panic welling inside her. She couldn't be alone with Graeme. Not yet. She wasn't ready!

"Mar, it's getting late, and I have a very busy day tomorrow. I told you that." She picked up her coffee. "A manicure, a pedicure, a facial. Shopping."

"But tomorrow's Wednesday," Marion pointed out crossly.

"I'm taking the day off," Delilah said and flashed a bright smile. She could always think fast on her feet, damn her. Delilah leaned toward her to hug her good-bye then whispered, "Take pictures of the make-up sex."

"Delilah!"

"See you crazy kids later!"

Before she could protest, Delilah was out the door of the coffee house, leaving Graeme standing there in front of her looking quite uncomfortable. Marion sat back down, sinking into the soft leather, and reached for her cup again. He never took his eyes off her.

"What are you doing here, Marion?"

"I came for a latte." She held up the nearly empty cup. "I never expected to see you here."

Okay, that was a teensy lie. She half-hoped she'd see him here. It was exactly why she picked the place. After all, he lived within walking distance. The odds of him showing up were good. He continued to stare at her with red-rimmed eyes. Perhaps, like her, he hadn't been sleeping well. Perhaps he'd been wondering if he should pursue her anymore.

"You look like shit, Graeme."

"I feel like shit," he agreed.

Was he waiting for an invitation? Why did he continue to stand there? Finally, she waved to the chair next to her that Delilah had been sitting in. "Want to sit and talk?"

He hesitated, indecision flashing across his face, before he conceded. He put his cup on the table in front of them and then propped

an ankle on his knee. She could see splotches of red and blue paint on his hands.

"Been painting?" she asked.

"Yeah." His voice sounded gruff, and he didn't elaborate.

So Marion tried again. "Been having a few late nights then, huh?"

"Mmm." He reached for his cup, took a sip.

She huffed her frustration. "Graeme, I'm working my ass off here. You want to help me out?"

"What do you want from me, Marion? You didn't want to hear anything I had to say the other night. Should tonight be any different?"

*Ouch.* His words stung and cut deep. She tried not to wince but couldn't help it. He was right. Why should she expect him to do that for her now? Repairing the damage she'd done might be harder than she thought.

Tears stung her eyes, and she swallowed hard, trying to keep them at bay. She took a sip of cold coffee to busy her hands.

"You're right," she whispered, staring down into her lap. "If I could take it all back, I would. All of it. But I can't. About the best I can do is tell you I'm sorry and hope you forgive me."

"I forgive you, Marion." His voice was dark and rough around the edges.

He hadn't even hesitated when he spoke. As though he was ready and willing to accept her apology. She looked up, met his piercing blue gaze, and her heart melted a little. He looked awful, for sure, but she knew under all that stubble and fatigue was the handsome man she had fallen in love with. She couldn't help but smile. *She loved him.* Maybe she always did a little.

"What?" he asked, his brows knit. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

She couldn't tell him the truth, not yet. So instead, she opted to veer left a little, saving face. It was her little way of protecting herself from rejection.

"I couldn't bear thinking you were angry with me. It hurt so much. And I really couldn't bear seeing you with Delilah last night." She blinked

away the tears and swallowed hard. She so wanted to get through this without being emotional.

He reached for his coffee, took a sip, and looked at her thoughtfully. She could only wonder what was going on in that head of his.

"You think I liked seeing you with Ethan?"

"No." She kept her eyes down, not wanting to see his fiery gaze. She was afraid he would be looking at her the way he had before when he was so angry with her. When he shoved her against the wall and—

"He's using you as leverage to get what he wants from his father, Marion. That's all."

"I know," she said. "He slipped and told me everything." He interrupted her thoughts, thank goodness. She didn't want to think about their interlude at the bathrooms of Kiyoshi. At the time, it had never occurred to her they might get caught.

Finally, she lifted her gaze and met his. His hard look softened. "He never appreciated you."

"I know that, too. I told him to leave me alone."

"I hope he really is miserable without you."

"I'm sure he will be." Now was as good a time as any to find out Graeme's big secret. "Delilah said you had news about the gallery."

He blinked surprise. "Did she tell you? Since you two seem to be back in good graces."

"Yeah, we made up. And no, she wouldn't tell me." She shook her head.

"The man I was with that day you came to the gallery is from Amsterdam. He's commissioned quite a bit of art from me. So much, in fact, he gave me an advance."

"Really...?" Her mouth went dry. What exactly was he saying?

"The rest he'll pay when I deliver."

"How many paintings?"

"Let me just say enough to keep me busy for the next six months. He owns several galleries across Europe, and he wants to do an unveiling when I'm finished. The first opening will be in Amsterdam."



"So you'll be traveling?"

"I'll be out of the country for a few months, yes. I wasn't going to tell you until I knew for sure, and now I do. I'd really like you to go with me."

She blinked. What...did he just say? He wanted her to travel with him? To Europe?

"Graeme...I..."

"I know it's sudden, but I can't imagine anyone else being there with me. It's my big break, Marion. I think it could finally launch my art career, and I can get out of Web design once and for all. I knew the Web design business was only temporary, and I've hated it from the start. It was a means to an end. It was a way for me to pay the bills and still paint. So... what do you think?"

"I think...I'm in love with you." There. She'd said it without even missing a beat. It was out in the open, and there was no going back now.

Graeme was silent as he looked her over. He very slowly placed his cup back on the table and stood. Her heart was in her throat as she watched him, waiting, holding her breath to see what he was going to do next. She wondered if he was going to walk out on her now. If this was it. She had professed her true feelings, and he was dumping her for good.

Of course, that was the emotional side of her brain. If she had been listening to the logical side—and what Graeme had just asked of her—then she would realize he wasn't walking out on her.

No, instead, he walked around the table and sat down next to her. He cupped her chin, turned her face toward him, and gently brushed his lips against hers.

"You know, Delilah is a lovely girl, but she's not my type." He smiled then, his eyes finally twinkling with life.

"So...what is your type?" Her heart beat a rapid pace as she waited. She thought she knew the answer, but she wanted to hear him say it.

"Haven't you figured that out yet?"

"I..."

"A certain black-eyed girl is definitely my type," he teased.

"About the painting, Graeme—"

"It's yours, Marion. I want you to have it." A slow smile spread on his face. "I love you. I always have. Ever since the day I first saw you."

"Really?" She squeaked the word since tears—damn it—were burning the back of her throat.

"Really. Take me, Marion. I'm yours, if you want me."

"I want you, Graeme." Leaning in, she put her lips against his and muttered, "You're the only man I want."

She pulled him to her, kissed him soundly on the mouth. It kept her from bawling like a baby. When he pulled away, he brushed his hand over her hair, looking at her so tenderly it gave her the heart squeeze.

"Does that mean you'll come with me?"

"Yes. I'd follow you to the ends of the earth and back again."

"I'm glad to hear that." His hands were in her hair, tilting her head back. His lips flittered over her brow. "Because life sure would be lonely without you."

The End

### Author Bio

Michelle Miles started her semi-prolific writing career in junior high, when she and her best friend created their own *Indiana Jones* escapades and *Star Trek* adventures. She moved from fanfic to medieval princesses and handsome princes who always saved the day. Her favorite stories are those told of faraway lands, where the men are hunky and the damsels are always in distress.

You can visit her Web site at [www.michellemiles.net](http://www.michellemiles.net) and follow her daily her blog, Ye Olde Inkwell. For all the latest info, sign up for her monthly newsletter, The Monthly Grind, at her Web site. When she's not writing, Michelle drinks too much coffee, buys too many shoes, and watches a lot of hockey.