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Masquerade

THE THREE SISTERS SERIES - BOOK 3

LAVERNE THOMPSON

The Three Sisters Series Book

Three

Masquerade

by

LaVerne Thompson



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Chapter One

Sydney put down the phone. First her baby sister and now Brit. Bad enough, today was her thirtieth birthday and she had no one special in her life to celebrate with her. She stared at the phone on her office desk as if it would ring again and provide some answers. It didn't. She had to face the fact her sisters no longer just belonged to her.

There were now others in their lives; others whose wants and needs came before a mere older sister. Her baby sister, Atlanta, was engaged no less, and her globetrotting, bull-running sister, Brit, was staying in Finland. Finland of all places, to be with her new man whom she met lying butt naked on the sand. A story they agreed to keep from their parents.

Dear Mom and Dad weren't even around. They were on some trek in the mountains of Morocco. At least they'd sent her a gift before they'd jetted off. What the heck was wrong with them all? What the heck was wrong with her? She should be happy for them, and she was, but she also felt an overwhelming sense of emptiness. As if she didn't belong in her own skin anymore, like her life had been on hold. But now she stood poised, balancing on the edge of change.

The flat computer monitor next to the phone pinged, indicating she had email. Sydney sighed and pulled her chair closer to the desk. It was from her client, Caine Hayden, owner of Hayden Enterprises. Smiling, she read his email.

Corresponding with Caine via email these last eight months had been her one ray of sunshine. Tomorrow they'd finally meet. Usually, she only did personal delivery for the military planes her company designed. But with Caine she'd made an exception. She would fly the plane she'd designed for his company to Islip on Long Island. Then she'd stay with him at his estate in Islip for a couple of days. Caine was a pilot too, but he was seldom behind the controls in the air. Since she had a lot of hours in the cockpit, he wanted her to show him how to fly it.

She raised her head when her assistant walked in.

"Yes Morgan, all done?" she asked.

"Yep, just wanted to wish you a Happy Birthday again, and I hope you enjoy the next couple of days. Don't worry, have fun, and I'll hold the fort down."

Syd returned her smile. "Thanks Morgan, I will. I love test flights. Although this one's already been tested, I'm just doing the delivery."

"Have a safe flight," Morgan said, "and I'll see you at the end of the week."

She waved her assistant out of the office and checked a few more emails. She loved designing planes for the military and corporate jets. But this particular plane

was her special baby. The first of its kind in private aircraft and stood to revolutionize the industry. In a way, she had Caine to thank for it.

When he had first contacted her company about designing a light plane for corporate and personal use, she already had one in mind for him. He had loved her ideas and sent her a few of his own, which opened up her thinking in a new direction. For someone who wasn't an aeronautical engineer, when it came to his comfort, he had good instincts. In truth, the end configuration of the plane was a collaboration, as much his design as hers; something they could both be proud of.

Caine may have begun the project as a client, but as they exchanged ideas via email and worked on the design together, he'd become more of a colleague.

A friendship had developed based on their shared love of flying. He wanted a plane he could fly himself on his many business trips around the country. He'd been told her design company was one of the best.

She didn't know much about his personal life, having deliberately kept their relationship fun and simple. Still, there were times she felt if she opened up, he would too, and there could be something more. But she didn't, so they remained two friends writing to each other, mostly about plane designs and the joys of flight. But things might change once they met.

Sydney replied to his email, confirming her arrival time with him at Islip, and smiled again when she got an immediate response back.

Looking forward to meeting you in person and hanging out for a few days. Will have a couple of cold ones ready. C.

Syd grinned at his reference to “cold ones.” One night they had determined they were both drinking the same type of beer. Something she seldom did, but just happened to have on hand that night, a left over from a friend’s visit. She smiled. Caine was in for a surprise. It didn’t take her long to realize he thought her a man. It amused her to have him think that. Men tended to treat her differently as soon as they found out a woman designed their plane.

But the mistake about her gender was one many in the industry made. Her name helped perpetuate it. Well, too bad. Her parents named her and her sisters after the cities they were born in. She was born in Sydney, Australia when her military parents were stationed there.

Sydney wondered what Caine would say when they finally met, if his shock would be apparent or if he’d hide it behind a calm exterior. In her ten years of aeronautical design she’d had both reactions, followed only a few times by very negative ones. Bad enough she was a female aeronautical engineer, but a black one? Bigots still existed out there who couldn’t get over themselves. Most of the people she had to deal with were white and male. But usually, after the initial shock, the overall reaction had always been positive, and she’d built her successful business

on those positive reactions. She hoped Caine's response would be along those lines; she thought of him as her friend.

In a way they were even, she didn't know what he looked like either. She had done an *Ask* search on the company and found out a ton of information — about the business. Privately owned, Hayden Enterprises had been started by Caine's grandfather, but not much appeared about the current owner. Only confirmation he was the founder's grandson, and either thirty-five or thirty-eight, depending on which of the conflicting information was accurate. And one source had him not married, but who knew. She looked forward to meeting him.

Her cell phone chimed. She checked the caller ID and saw Annemarie's name pop up.

Oh Christ!

She'd forgotten about Annie's masquerade tonight. She had been hoping to have other plans and would be able to get out of it. She loved her friend but sometimes, Annie's parties got out of hand.

Sighing, she answered the call. "Hi Annie."

"So, you're coming right?" her friend said in a rushed voice. But Annie always sounded like she had some place else to be and something else to be doing, immediately.

Sydney rolled her eyes, but the effect was lost on her friend who couldn't see it. Well why not! She deserved a little fun. After all, it's her birthday. "Yes, Annie. I'll be there. Now remind me, I don't have to wear a costume, right?" Otherwise too late to get one, and a great excuse not to go, although knowing Annie she'd have extras.

"No," Annie said. "The women just have to wear black pants—skin tight preferably—and any kind of top and mask your heart desires."

"But they will wear tops?" Syd had to ask, because knowing Annie as well as she did, she wouldn't put it past her to have a topless party. One year she had a painted party. Guests came with their clothing painted on. Sydney bypassed the party that year even though Annie assured her strips of cloth covered the really interesting parts and the paint would appropriately cover the cloth and all the rest. She also promised an artist on hand to make sure of it. Syd still declined to attend. But the party did get a spread in a New York fashion magazine for the works of art painted over various bodies.

"Of course the women will be fully clothed," Annie responded, drawing her attention back to the conversation. "But the men will wear black tuxes, and no shirts."

"Annemarie..." Sydney gasped.

“Oh, come on Syd!” Annie fired back. “They’ll be covered. They have to keep the jackets on. I promise it’ll be fine. This is a five star hotel after all, and you know how stuffy this place can be.”

“And everyone will be masked. The women may bring their own, but I’ll have plenty extras if anyone needs one. Just check in at the reception desk. The men will all be wearing special masks I’ve ordered. If they RSVP’d in time, I sent them their masks already. If not, they have to check in too, and can pick it up then.”

“What if your male and female guests run into each other at the reception desk?” Syd asked wondering aloud. “Doesn’t that take some of the fun out of the party?”

“I thought of that,” Annie said. “They go to the desk and just give them their name. The desk will send the men to one room, and the women to another one at different ends of the hotel to pick up the mask. And instruct my guest to wear their masks out of the room and into the ballroom. Don’t worry, I’m having about two hundred guests so there’ll be plenty of people roaming around with masks on. I can personally vouch for most of them or someone I trust can. I promise there won’t be a psycho in the bunch; crazy maybe but no sociopaths. So are you coming or what?”

Sydney had no choice. Either she enjoy a fun, interesting night surrounded by mostly attractive strangers, and if she knew Annie the men would be gorgeous, or a night spent at home in front of the flat screen TV, alone on her birthday. A no brainer. “I’ll be there and I’ll need a mask.”

“Great! I promise you’ll have fun. The party starts at ten. Why don’t you get here early and meet me in my room, say around nine. I’m in room eighty-one twenty-two. You can get ready with me. I have a special mask you can wear.”

Sydney thought about it for a minute. That would work. Since she had to fly out of Reagan Airport the next morning, she’d see if she could get a room at the hotel for the night. She wouldn’t have to worry about the half-hour drive home, then another drive during rush hour traffic to the airport in the morning. She’d save some time and be able to get a good night’s sleep. She didn’t anticipate staying at the party past midnight anyway.

“Okay, sounds like it’ll work. I’ll see you around nine then.”

Annie squealed with pleasure. “Oh, by the way, I didn’t forget, girlfriend. Happy Birthday!” she screamed before hanging up.

Sydney didn’t know if it was a good thing Annie remembered her birthday or not, but she had to smile at her friend’s enthusiasm. Annie had always been a full of life kinda character, ever since they were roommates back at MIT. Syd sometimes found it hard to believe Annie was a gifted architect. Easier to believe

her parents owned a large real estate development company. But Annie made her own way and carried her own weight.

Sydney hung up the phone with a smile on her face. For the day starting so grim, things were looking up. Ten minutes later found her out of the office.

A few hours after she left work, she was on her way downtown to meet Annie at the hotel; all packed for her weekend stay and already dressed for the masquerade. Tonight she wore slim black stretch jeans, thigh-high boots with four inch heels, and a sheer white pirate-style blouse with a deep plunging neckline to showcase her slightly better than average-sized breasts.

She didn't bother with makeup; she'd finish in Annie's room. Annie, who always walked with enough cosmetics to fill a large suitcase. At least her hair was done. She'd taken a quick shower and washed it letting it air dry. Right now it lay straight, hanging past her shoulders. But as it dried it would curl up onto her shoulders into small frizzled ringlets; her wild look, and it seemed to suit her mood tonight.

Sydney relaxed in the cab taking her back downtown. This way she wouldn't have to worry about driving to the airport in the morning and parking.

When she arrived at the hotel, she had no trouble getting a room; even with all the people probably already staying there and attending Annie's party. She checked into her room first and left her things before taking the elevator up one

floor to find Annie. She closed her door and stuffed her keycard in her front pocket. She didn't notice the man next door who glanced in her direction.

Chapter Two

Caine took a step back away from his door. He couldn't help but admire the rear of the woman who walked out of the room next to his. Her mane of wild looking hair captured his attention, that and a killer body. Those thigh-high boots accented legs that seem to go on for miles. He hoped she was at the hotel for the party or that he'd run into her again. He wanted to see if the front held as much appeal as the back.

Sorry he hadn't been a few seconds earlier, he slid the keycard through the slot. Opening the door, he stepped inside, dropped the card on a table and his bag on the king size bed as he continued to think about the shapely woman.

No harm done. He'd recognize her wild hair and those boots anywhere. He'd just have to keep an eye out for her.

Caine finished his business in Tampa early, glad now he'd decided to stop in DC for this party. Even though he had to catch an early morning flight home, he should arrive in time to meet his aeronautical designer, Sydney, who had agreed to deliver his new plane.

He made a mental note to remember to thank his friend, Jim, who had gotten him the invitation to the party in the first place. Both Jim and Sydney had

told him he needed to loosen up. Jim especially told him he needed a little fun in his life. Syd had recommended he take up sky driving, but he preferred to have a plane beneath him in the air. Jim's recommendation held more appeal; he needed to get out more.

Thinking about it, Caine decided both of them may have been right. He hadn't taken a vacation since his father's death five years ago. It had all been about work for him. His company was his life, and his sole responsibility. But recently it didn't seem to be enough. He couldn't remember the last time he had been on a real date. Oh there'd always been a few casual lady friends here and there whom he saw whenever, but nothing serious and nothing requiring time, effort or a commitment. He hoped he'd meet the woman next door during the course of the evening. He'd even put in an effort to make it happen.

Caine got to the party later than he had intended, having had to take care of a few important calls first. Entering the grand ballroom decorated with black and gold beads hanging low from the ceiling and draped around the ends of the tablecloths, he immediately began scanning the crowd for his wild woman. That's how he thought of her, wild and untamed.

Tonight even he felt a little wild. Dressed as all the other men in the room, right down to the mask, he fit right in. Unlike the women, the men were all in

black cat-like masks covering the upper part of their faces. There were slits over their eyes and noses. Only their mouths were uncovered.

The only thing the women present had in common were the black bottoms. Their tops were every color of the rainbow to match the types and colors of the various masks. And some of those tops left nothing to the imagination.

Walking farther into the room, Caine began to circle the crowd, focusing on the women with dark frizzy hair and white shirts, and finding it harder to tell who wore boots. He had to look closer since they were all in black.

After a half-an-hour of roaming through the crowd, he began to think his wild woman wasn't there. He drifted over to the dance floor, when a tap on his shoulder caused him to turn around. The words 'no thanks' lay on the tip of his tongue. It wasn't the first time he'd been approached by one of the women, but there was only one woman he wanted to find tonight. As he looked on her mask-covered face he didn't have to look down to check for boots, he had found his wild woman. Or rather she had found him.



Sydney didn't know what had possessed her, maybe Annie nudging her in the ribs, and practically pushing her toward the tall man with the broad shoulders and blond hair. Even in a room full of similarly clad men, he stood out. She had been watching him from the balcony from the moment he entered the room. Annie

was at her side and had pointed him out to her, but by the time Annie spotted him she had already been watching him for five minutes.

From a distance, he looked like a walking fantasy, but up close his six-foot-two or more presence invited and enticed her into engaging with him in pure unadulterated sin.

Eyes the blue of the Caribbean Sea looked out at her from a dark mask. The black satin provided an intense contrast to his thick blond hair streaked with varying shades of blond and curled around the nape of his neck. The unmasked skin around a full sensual mouth appeared slightly tanned, like he had recently gotten a little sun. His strong squared jaw line shifted slightly as he stared at her. She couldn't take her eyes off his face, what she could see of it. Then he smiled, showing beautiful straight white teeth and a small dimple appeared on one side of his lips.

A smile of her own answered his.

Without a word, he raised his arms away from his sides, as though opening them for her to walk into. The movement brought her attention to his sculptured chest. Was that a six-pack? Maybe there was something to be said for shirtless.

Taking him up on his invitation, Sydney drew nearer. She raised her hands—his jacket lay already parted—and placed her palms on what felt like granite, but he wasn't cold. He burned, and she could feel the rhythm of his heart

accelerate as he enclosed her in his arms, wrapping them around her waist; daring her closer and letting her know this was no fantasy, but a living, breathing man.

If sin had a scent it would smell like this man, spicy and dangerous. Inhaling deeply, she slid her hands over taut skin, taking pleasure in the sensation of his body and the way his stomach muscles clenched at her touch. Her hands found their way around to his back and started to stroke him. It must have been the signal he had been waiting for because he began to move. They weren't dancing, just swaying from side to side. Their bodies meeting, greeting, and welcoming each other home.

He pulled her closer to him and brought one hand up to caress the base of her neck. Without taking his eyes off her, he slowly lowered his head, but she didn't wait. She raised her face to meet him halfway as their mouths touched. His mouth felt cool, an erotic contrast against the rest of his heat, his touch all too brief but more than enough. Their worlds had collided, the rest became inevitable, and they would never be the same again.

Pulling back slightly, he hovered over her lips and finally for the first time, she heard the sound of his voice. "I want to kiss you again," he whispered in a husky tone. "But I can't kiss you here, the way I want to."

Sydney couldn't take her eyes off his full kissable mouth. "How do you want to kiss me?" she asked in a low and sensual voice she barely recognized as her own.

His lips curved into a half smile. “Something like this.”

This was no kiss, more like an assault on her senses. Potent, and he was right, definitely not the kind of kiss to be publicly shared. She felt every centimeter of his lips against her own and he transferred some of his heat into her. Sydney pulled back suddenly, knowing intuitively he held himself back. Dear God, he hadn’t even used any tongue. What would it be like if he let himself go? And did she want to know?

He must have been reading her mind ‘cause he said, “That’s only a small taste. Come with me, beautiful lady. Come be with me tonight and for as many nights as you want me.”

Shocked, Sydney realized how much she wanted to go with him, needed to go with him. What the hell was wrong with her? She hadn’t drunk anything tonight other than a small bottle of water she opened herself, so she couldn’t blame her behavior on alcohol.

“I-I’m sorry,” she stammered trying to return to herself. “But, I...can’t. I normally don’t do things like this.”

“Neither do I,” he replied in a beguiling voice.

“Am I supposed to believe you?”

Without pause he replied softly, “It’s the truth.”

“Even so...”

“Don’t say that. Because it is the truth for both of us, and I think we need to be together tonight.”

“And what about tomorrow?”

This time he hesitated before he replied. “I want to see you tomorrow too and many more after.”

“Let’s just make it through the night.”

“So are you coming with me, beautiful lady? What’s your name?”

Feeling the kind of adrenaline rush she got before stepping off a plane, thirty-thousand feet in the air into the nether, with nothing to depend on but her skill and the parachute on her back, she leaped into the great unknown. “I must be crazy, but yes I’ll come with you, but no names, for now.”



Not taking the chance she’d change her mind, Caine moved away from her but only far enough to be able to take her hand. He led her out of the crowded ballroom. When they reached the plush lobby with its burgundy carpeting, high-back leather chairs and sofa, she tugged on his hand.

“Wait! Where are we going exactly?”

He slowed his stride a little to look at her. “I have a room here,” he said as he headed over to the four elevators. The one nearest to them opened and they got on.

As soon as it closed, she turned toward him as he began to lift his mask. But she stopped him by placing her hand on it.

“No,” she said. “Don’t take it off. Let’s wait.” She didn’t want to take a chance and be disappointed in this night in any way. She couldn’t face him yet. This was her fantasy and she wanted to make the most of it.

He grinned. “All right.” He reached in front of her to hit the button. When the elevator stopped, they got off. As they headed toward his room, she pulled against his hold on her hand again.

“It’s okay. You have nothing to fear. My room’s just down the hall.” He told her his room number, and she nodded. He had forgotten she had the room next door, but best not to mention the fact he had seen her leaving earlier. He didn’t want to spook her or have her think him some kind of nut; even though his actions so far were completely nuts and out of character. But from the moment he’d seen her he’d been gripped by one thought—he had to have her. He didn’t give a damn about her permanently darker than his own skin color.

Thoughts of having to return home in the morning made him wonder if he could talk her into going home with him. If not, he’d have to make arrangements to try to stay in DC a little longer. All his life Caine had followed his instincts and as a result had made his family business even more successful. Maybe it was time he pointed those instincts in the direction of his personal life because instinct drove

him now, hard and in her direction. The only thing he knew for sure, whatever was happening between them, he wanted more than one night to explore.

They stopped in front of his room and he used his keycard to let them in. Pushing the door, he entered first and could tell the maid had been there. The taupe colored bedcovers on the king size bed were turned down and on the center pillow sat a piece of silver foil wrapped candy. He turned the light off in the entryway but the lamps on either side of the bed were on, and the drapes were open overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue. He paused at the foot of the bed, and turned to face her. As he began to lift his hand to remove her mask, she again halted him.

“No, not yet. This is my fantasy too you know,” she said.

“Okay,” he acknowledged, but reluctantly. He wanted to see her face. Releasing her hand he walked over to the opened drapes and drew them closed, effectively blocking out any outside light. She walked over to the lamp closest to the bed and turned it off.

“One sec, be right back,” he said and walked past her into the bathroom. When he came out, she stood on the other side of the bed, beside the only remaining light. He carried his toiletry bag and placed it on the nightstand.

“What’s that for?”

“Your protection.”

“Oh.”

Caine removed his jacket and tossed it on the chair behind him. “Are you going to tell me your name, now?”

“Beautiful,” she said drawing the word out.

He smiled. “Mine’s...”

But she never let him finish. “Fantasy. Until morning.”

“How can I refuse you anything? Okay, until morning, my Beautiful One.”

She reached to turn off the light but he raised his hand up to stop her. “Oh no, if I don’t get to see your face until morning, I at least get to see the rest of you as you undress.”

She hesitated, but then dropped her hand. “All right, together then.”

Already shirtless, he watched as she pulled her shirt up and over her head, revealing the white lacy low cut bra cupping firm breasts so lovingly; the way his hands ached to cup them. He unbuckled his belt, but continued to watch as she seemed to pause after unzipping her jeans.

“I’m going to need help getting out of these boots.”

“Mmm, I love those boots, but I see the problem. Another time I’d like you to wear a skirt and only those boots.” With the bed between them and masks on, he still felt the look she gave him push his blood to a boil.

Caine came around to her as she sat on the bed. He knelt at her feet and removed her boots and short hose, pausing to caress the dainty feet he found within. He stood up and she lay back on the bed. Using her elbows to prop herself up, she raised her hips so he could remove her jeans, leaving her in only the white lacy thong and matching bra, complementing her darker complexion. He groaned his appreciation.

“I could so get used to white underwear,” he said before standing to his full height. He removed his trousers, revealing gray briefs beneath, along with a healthy bulge.

His wild woman sat up and turned off the light, plunging the room into darkness and plunging them both into a feast for their senses.

Chapter Three

He stood in shadow in front of her. As she removed her mask she could see his movement where he stood mimicking her actions. The only light in the room came from the faint blue glow of the clock on the nightstand and a glimmer, maybe from a nightlight in the bathroom. Neither allowed her enough of the visual she craved. Straining her eyes, she followed the movement of his silhouette as he bent to remove his briefs, before straightening again. Damn, maybe she should have waited a moment to turn off the light; too late to turn it back on now.

Sydney felt rather than saw him raise his hand to her face and she leaned into his caress. His hands were large. They weren't soft but they weren't calloused either. He traced her face as though his fingers were memorizing every feature. When his thumb rubbed against her lips, she opened her mouth. He stuck his finger into her warmth and she clamped her full lips down around it. He moved it in and out as she sucked and swirled her tongue around it. The deep moan she heard erupting from his throat only urging her on.

Her fantasy man removed his thumb from her mouth, and then bending over her he touched his lips to hers while using the movement of his body to glide her

farther up the bed, until she lay flat on her back. Then he blanketed her body with his. Not once did he release his mouth from hers.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and inhaled him, pulling him closer still. Their skin fusing wherever they touched, as she felt the hardness of him pressing against her softness. Releasing his lips she whispered into the night, “Good God,” as a sensation she’d never known shook her world. And he hadn’t done anything other than give her a bone melting, soul-stealing kiss.

She felt his warm breath when he opened his mouth more and she stuck her tongue in it as he welcomed her, swirling and sucking her tongue like his favorite lollipop. “Mmm, good,” he rasped. Then he moved his head away from her mouth and began to suckle her chin, then her neck. Somewhere along the way she lost her bra. When his lips kissed her breast, she felt the burn of his touch on bare skin.

She couldn’t see him clearly, but who needed to see when you could feel. And she felt him, all sleek lean hard body of him. She felt his hot mouth as he took her nipple inside. The heat gathered in her belly causing her stomach muscles to clench, and she felt the wetness pooling in her core, weeping to welcome him, to ease his way home.

Sydney had never been passive about anything in her life, so she had no intention to just lay moaning in mindless pleasure. She wanted him with the same kind of hunger she felt radiating from him, and wanted to let him know it.

Her long fingers raked over firm biceps and down his back to get his attention. Moving the other hand farther down between them until she could caress his chest, she passed her thumb back and forth across his nipple. It only took a second to harden into a peak for her. When he groaned and raised his head up, arching his body into her touch, she used his motion to put him off balance.

Rolling him onto his back, she rolled with him. Lying on top of him she laved first one nipple then the other with her tongue, while he massaged skilled fingers through her hair.

“I love this hair.” His voice sounded husky to her ears against the night. “It makes you look like a wild woman,” he continued. “And you are a wild woman. My wild woman. I want to lie between your legs and I want you between mine.” He rolled them again, but this time, they lay side-by-side but only for a scant second. With his hand on her side he turned her body, but she already understood the position he wanted her in, and willingly shifted.

With touch alone she found the full thick length of him. She didn’t need light to tell her his size matched the rest of him. She rubbed the tip of his flesh with her thumb and felt some moisture escape. Well that won’t do, she thought before she clamped her mouth around the head pulsing against her hand. At the same time his warm breath fanned her nether curls before the swipe of his tongue had her sucking in air, causing her mouth to tighten around him.

In response, he plunged his long wicked tongue deeper into her and swirled it before nipping on her bud. Using her teeth, she gently scrapped his skin. He replied with a long ragged sound from the back of his throat as he squeezed her thigh and rammed his tongue into her again and again. She welcomed him by sucking harder. Abruptly pulling himself away from her, he flipped her around onto her back.

“Oh, don’t hurt yourself,” she said smiling, even though she knew he couldn’t see it.

“Not hardly, babe,” he said lying beside her.

She saw his outline rise up a little before turning away from her then back. His hands were moving between his legs; he’d put on a condom. She relaxed into the pillow behind her head as he covered her with his body once again. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she raised her hips to meet the strong thrust of his as she stretched around his maleness and he filled her completely. Raising her legs she tangled them around his waist, pulling him tighter to her, drawing him deeper, making him a part of her. Making him her own.



Caine could feel himself coming apart and he didn’t care. The woman was beneath him, around him, cradling him, very much in him, and a part of him; he was never letting her go. His body forbade it and his mind couldn’t fathom such as

thing. Moving at a tempo that out did the rhythm of his heart, she matched him beat for beat. Until together they plummeted into the abyss of their passion.

Mere moments or an eternity passed after he came as he never had before, but then again he had never lost himself in an orgasm before. Not where he couldn't remember his own name. At last he felt able to open his eyes, and found his mind his own again. He knew he was too heavy to lay spread eagle on top of her, but he hadn't the strength to move. Slowly, he raised his chest off her and looked down toward her face, or where he knew her face to be. He was sorry now he had agreed to let her keep the mask on until the lights were off.

He wanted to see her face almost as badly as he had wanted to make love to her. No matter how hard he stared he could only make out the outline of her face, her nose. He wasn't even exactly sure about the color of her eyes. He shifted onto his side and placed his elbow beside her head. With one finger he traced her features.

"You are so beautiful," he said. "And you're mine."

She didn't say anything at first; she too traced his features with her fingertips. He hoped she liked what she felt. Finally she spoke, "And you're my fantasy."

Hmm, he thought, not sure he liked the sound of that or not. What they had just shared was no dream; it had been very real. He had all night to convince her.

“But this fantasy is very real.” He took her hand from his face and kissed her fingers before placing it over his heart. “Feel,” he said, “it beats, for you. I am real. What we just shared and we’ll share even more, was very real.”

Caine put his head down on the pillow beside hers and gathered her into his arms. He began kissing her hair, content to relax and let her rest a little. But when she raised her head, he kissed her forehead before being drawn to her mouth by the memory of her full lips. He placed his mouth over hers and inhaled her. For the second time that night he willingly lost himself in the softness of this woman.



Sydney’s internal clock woke her up. She never overslept. If she had to wake up at a certain time she just did. Usually earlier than she needed to, this morning being no exception. She felt the warmth of a body beside her before she opened her eyes and saw him.

He lay on his side; his face turned away from her. But the room had enough of the early morning light sneaking through the gaps in the curtains for her to see better than she had last night. The cotton sheet wrapped low around his trim waist, and one long muscled leg lay above the covers. The contours his body revealed to her were as much a feast for her eyes as it had been for her other senses.

She raised her hand to touch him, to wake him, to claim him in the broad revealing light of day, but quickly pulled it back. What had she been thinking?

Reality intruded. This was just a night fantasy, her own personal birthday wish, and the night was over as was her birthday.

He was a stranger. It didn't matter she'd had the best sex of her life with him. It mattered even less they connected on a level she'd never felt with another man. It was only an aberration. She had a better understanding now of why people risked one-night stands. Knowing you'd never see someone again allowed you to open yourself up completely. To do and say things you may not have otherwise done. But a little voice buried deep inside her kept trying to tell her she was wrong. This was something else. Easing off the bed, she ruthlessly squashed the voice.

She quickly gathered up her clothes and put them on. Her mask lay on the floor too close to his side of the bed. She had to leave it. She didn't want to take a chance and wake him up, regardless of the temptation to get a peek at his face. She didn't dare. Better this way. She found her keycard and quietly opened his door and went into her room.

Wasting no time she took a shower and washed her hair. She used the mounted hairdryer in the bathroom to blow dry and straighten out her unruly curls. The night was over; it was back to normal. Her wild hair along with her wild behavior tamed once again.

Syd pulled her hair back into her trademark ponytail. She finished packing and left her room, but before she rounded the corner by the elevators she heard a door open down the hall. She continued walking, rounding the corner never looking back. The elevator opened and she stepped on, already running through her preflight check in her head. However, the exercise didn't occupy her mind for long. Before the cab pulled up to the airport she had replayed various parts of her one incredible night.

She could still feel his touch on every inch of her skin, in the delicious ache between her tightly clenched thighs. Even though she had taken a shower she could smell him on her skin, his flavor in her mouth, no water could ever get rid of it and she hungered for him. She knew it would be a long time before she forgot her fantasy lover — if ever.

A very attractive airport security guard smiled at her as she walked through the security gate, like a man smiles at an attractive woman. He looked more like a male cover model than a security guard and she found herself comparing his smile to her fantasy's. It fell far short of heating her blood. In fact, it left her downright cold. She didn't smile back. She finally got to her plane and began her preflight check, all thoughts of her wild night pushed to the background. For now.



Heart pounding against the wall of his chest, Caine got up abruptly. Adrenaline coursed through his system. He didn't have to look around to know *she* was no longer in his room. Fine, he knew where to find her.

She didn't believe him last night. He meant everything he'd said to her. It wasn't over between them. What they had shared was meant to be shared for a lifetime, not just one night. He knew that with every fiber of his soul. He got up and placed his feet on the carpeted floor. When he looked down he saw her mask. Picking it up, he smiled. He didn't really know what she looked like, but he knew her body, and he would know her anywhere.

Caine quickly jumped in the shower and got dressed. Leaving his room he took the few steps toward her door. He caught a glimpse of someone in the hallway just before a jean-clad leg rounded a corner. But he didn't pay much attention to the person; only one person held his interest. His wild woman.

And God she was wild, he couldn't have been happier. During the first of hopefully their many nights together, she had met him thrust for thrust. Just thinking about her made him hard, again. He lost the grin on his face after he knocked on her door twice and got no answer. He went back to his room and tried to place a call to her room, still no answer. Finally, he called the front desk and they informed him she had checked out, but when he tried to get a name they couldn't give out that information. He hung up.

“Damn!” he cried out loud. “Shit!” He saw the mask on his bed and picked it up. Clearly not a store bought mask. He didn’t know the hostess of the party personally, but his friend Jim did, and he hadn’t been around the party long enough last night to meet anyone other than his beauty. He called Jim. He could put him in contact with his hostess Annemarie St. John, and maybe she would know the woman in the mask.

Jim gave him Annemarie’s cell phone number, but when he called, it went straight to voicemail. He left her a message, and made another call. He was going to miss his flight, but he’d take the next one and hopefully arrive in Islip shortly after Sydney, his aeronautical designer. Syd would understand his delay. He wanted to talk to Annemarie before he left. He made a few business calls, and just about gave up on getting his call returned before he left when his cell phone went off. He recognized the number as belonging to Annemarie.

“Ms. St. John,” he said. “You don’t know me. I’m Caine Hayden, a friend of Jim Collard. I was at your party last night.”

“It’s Annemarie. Caine Hayden, hmm, of Hayden Enterprises?”

“Yes.”

“Well I hope you had fun? Tell Jim I missed him last night.”

“Yes I did enjoy your party and I’ll bet Jim’s sorry he missed it. I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to meet last night.”

“Me too. What can I do for you Caine?”

Caine hesitated, but never one to back down, especially from something he really wanted. And he wanted his wild woman. “There was a woman...”

“Ah ha,” Annemarie purred. “There usually is.”

“This one is a very special woman. She wore an expensive custom made silver and black mask. She forgot it last night and I want to return it to her. I thought you might be able to help me find her.”

“I might. What’s her name?”

“Well, that’s part of the problem. I don’t know.” He winced admitting that, but grateful Annemarie didn’t see it.

He never made mistakes, and it had been a mistake on his part to wait to make everything clear in the morning. But then, his behavior last night wasn’t like him. Yet when he let go he had experienced the most incredible moment, rather moments, of his life with the woman who spent it in his arms. He wanted to experience those moments again, by not letting her go. Not without a fight. Now that was more like him.

Annemarie gaffed into the phone. “Okay, so you didn’t get her name. Maybe she didn’t want to give it?”

“Maybe, but I still want to find her, if only to return her mask,” he added quickly.

“Fine, well what does she look like?”

He didn’t want to tell her his mystery lady had kept her mask on, so he described her as best he could. “She’s about five-nine, and she had on black boots and a sheer white shirt.”

“You’re describing about a fourth of the women there last night Caine.”

“Oh, she was black, had long curly wild hair and brown eyes, I think.” At least he thought her eyes were brown.

Annemarie laughed. “Ya think?”

“Look it was dark and the shape of the mask kinda hid her eye color, but I’m pretty sure they were brown,” he said exasperated with himself.

Annemarie paused a moment before she replied. “You said her mask was black and silver, is there an inside tag?”

Caine picked up the mask from the bed and examined it. “Yes, as a matter of fact, it says, Masquerade. Is that one of yours, provided for the party?”

“Hmm, that’s the designer I used, but so did a lot of people. There were a lot of women there I didn’t personally know. But I think I saw the woman you’re describing. Let me make a few phone calls and see what I can find out.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it.”

“Now, I may not be able to find her,” Annie warned.

“I have a feeling you will.”

It took Annemarie all of two seconds to disconnect the call with Caine and call Sydney. As soon as he mentioned the hair and mask, she knew immediately whom he had been referring to. Even if he got the eye color wrong, but sometimes Syd's amber colored eyes would darken when she got angry. So maybe they darkened when she was turned on too.

Caine must have been the hot bod she had seen Syd leave the party with. But if Sydney didn't give him her name, she wasn't going to. But Annie decided to call her friend to let her know about Caine's phone call. Then Syd could decide for herself what to do.

When the call went directly to voicemail, she left her a message. Annie knew Syd was delivering a plane this morning so her phone would be off. But Syd was good about returning calls as soon as she got the message. Annie smiled, stretching on her bed like a cat and hoped her friend had fun last night. Because it sounded like she'd sure made an impression on Caine.

Chapter Four

Sydney made a textbook three-point landing. Touching her index finger to her lips, she placed it on the control panel. A ritual she performed the first time she flew any plane. This plane had been specially designed to make a perfect three-point landing more often than most, in spite of the ability of the pilot.

She got further instructions from the tower and taxied over to the private hanger belonging to Hayden Enterprises. There was already another plane parked there, a bigger corporate jet. She pulled in and parked in the empty bay next to it. The plane flew like a breeze, but it had already passed its test flight. This was just a pleasure trip on Sydney's part, and a chance to spend time with a new friend. She hoped Caine wouldn't be too disappointed to find out the person he'd been corresponding with all these months, and becoming friends with was a woman. Once they found they had a shared interest in flying and aeronautical design, they had become friends.

She released the door lock and did a check of all the systems. A few moments later the door opened. She glanced over her shoulder as two men came on board. She turned to greet them, expecting one of them to be Caine Hayden. Both men appeared to be in their forties, the portly one wore a uniform

proclaiming him to be part of the airport personnel. The tall lean man in jeans and a polo shirt, held her attention. He had short, cropped red hair, green eyes and the freckles on his face contributed to an overall boyish appearance.

The men introduced themselves, she found herself disappointed the man with the airport official wasn't Caine, but one of his assistants and a pilot himself, Donald Stevenson. Only there to meet her and relay a message from Caine, who was going to be a little late. He had to take a later flight and would arrive in an hour.

"He's sorry about the mishap," Donald said.

"Not a problem."

After she signed all the paper work for the official, he left. She accompanied Donald to a private lounge while the mechanics did a check on the plane and they waited for Caine. It was clear to her Donald was surprised to see a woman flying the plane; his raised eyebrows and opened mouth were a dead giveaway. But then he smiled and once they were seated in the lounge with a bottle of water in front of them, he began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Sydney asked.

"I'm sorry; I'm not laughing at you," Donald said with a smile on his face lighting up his eyes. The crinkles around their corners and the corners of his mouth told her he smiled often. "But I don't think Caine knows you're a woman."

She matched his smile. “The ignorance of most men has always been their down fall.”

He held up his hand in mock surrender and she noticed the worn wedding band around the third finger of his left hand. “No argument there,” he said. “Caine had nothing but great things to say about your designs and he couldn’t wait to get his hands on the plane. And he wanted a chance to meet you.”

“I know. That’s why I flew it down here for him.”

“Now, don’t take this the wrong way,” Donald began. Sydney just raised one eyebrow, and waited for him to continue. “But why airplanes?”

Sydney countered, “Why not?”

“Well why not an astronaut?”

“Don’t think I didn’t think about it. But space isn’t for me. I like to see the clouds when I fly or the ground beneath me. I don’t need to touch the stars.”

He smiled again. “I see. Makes sense.”

Donald’s phone rang and when he excused himself to speak to the person on the other end, Sydney used the time to check her messages. She had a message from Annemarie asking her to call, and she ended it by saying, “Your hot bod is looking for you.” Sydney smiled and texted a message to her friend. “Not interested.” Still smiling, she knew it for the lie it was. But right now her life felt too unstable to start a relationship only meant to last for one night. And she was

unstable. My God, look at what she did, slept with a stranger! A masked one at that! It didn't matter if she wished things were otherwise, just bad timing.

Maybe what she needed was another one-nighter, where she could abandon herself and give into nothing but her emotions. But deep down she knew it wasn't the night, but the man. A night that could never be repeated with anyone. Part of her subconscious whispered in her head, *except him*. What the hell had she been thinking? She must be losing her mind. What she had done was dangerous not to mention incredibly stupid, she had gotten very lucky. In more ways than one, she smiled at the memory of how many times her luck held last night.

Donald got off his phone call and came back over to her. "Caine's plane just landed and he'll meet us over in the hanger."

"My stuff's still on the plane," Sydney said. "I figured he'd want to go through the plane before we left."

"You got that right. Caine's going to want to walk over every inch of his plane with you." Donald moved off toward the door and she followed. When they got to the plane, she ran up to the cockpit to get her checklist for Caine to go through and sign. They would start with the exterior and work their way to the interior. She grabbed her folder then stopped in the open doorway. She didn't know what made her pause, maybe the man who stood at the bottom of the stairs.

Caine froze in his tracks. He couldn't move. The woman staring at him from the doorway of the plane was stunning. Then she began to move again down the stairs toward him. He followed every lift of her long jean encased legs down the steps, and every time she inhaled he could see the outline of her perfectly shaped breasts through the blue t-shirt she wore, rise and fall. She stopped in front of him and continued to stare at him as intently as he had at her.

"Do we know each other?" Caine asked, feeling his face crinkle, probably reflecting his bewilderment.

The woman before him smiled, and Caine didn't think he'd ever seen anything more beautiful in his life. She held out her hand to him and her lips moved, maybe she said something, he couldn't hear because of the rush of blood flooding through his brain. He had automatically raised his hand to meet hers. The moment they touched he felt heat, heat scorching through his body and firing his soul. The same kind of heat he felt from the woman last night.

He scanned the features of the beautiful woman before him. She had a toasted almond complexion, and bright large amber colored eyes and her mouth...God the same lush mouth. Mesmerized, he watched her tongue flick out and wet her lower lip. The same tongue he could swear had been stuck down his throat, when it hadn't been wrapped around other parts of his body, last night.

But something wasn't quite right. He shifted his gaze to her hair and frowned. No wild mane. Unlike his wild woman, whose hair lay in a riot of curls, this woman's hair sat straight and tamed, pulled back into a ponytail, and the end of the tail rested on her shoulder. This woman also barely reached his shoulder.

It wasn't her.

He released the unknown woman's hand, but he could still feel the warmth of her against his palm.

"Who are you?" The question came out gruffer than he had intended, his level of disappointment staggering. She wasn't the one. This wasn't the woman he'd spent the night with, it couldn't be. Yet something sparked, some sort of recognition passed between them.



"Caine?" He heard confusion in Donald's voice, probably caused by his own confused manner.

But the woman answered. "I just told you. It's nice to finally meet you. I'm Sydney Reese."

Caine's eyebrows tried to rise to his hairline, clearly shocked. "You!" he said disbelief evident in the tone of his voice. "You're Syd, Sydney Reese? Who designs planes?"

"According to my mama and papa, and my degree from MIT."

And then just like that his demeanor changed, he grinned. “I bet you get that a lot. It’s nice to finally meet you and now it makes sense.”

“Makes sense? What?” Syd asked confused.

“Why I feel as though I know you. I do.”

Funny, Syd felt the same way too. And she had a sneaking suspicion they did know each other, and not because they exchanged emails. They may have exchanged a whole lot more! And her suspicions were confirmed as soon as his grin turned into a full-blown smile. A lone beguiling dimple appeared at the right corner of his mouth. The same mouth had tasted every inch of her body less than fifteen hours ago.

She felt light headed and had to take a deep breath so she wouldn’t pass out, but Sydney didn’t think he recognized her. It had been dark and her hair had been different. Now what was she supposed to do? She forced herself to focus on his questions about the plane. She noticed after his initial shock, Caine seemed to take her gender in stride.

“Is that for me?” he asked pointing at the list in her hand.

“Oh, yes...yes,” she said, handing him the checklist they had previously exchanged online. After he took it, the three of them walked around the exterior of the plane. Caine and Donald were very impressed with some of the additions she’d made to the exterior design. But every now and then she could feel Caine’s eyes on

her. She only turned to look at him once, the first time she felt the intensity of his gaze. The fine hairs on her body sat up and took notice. She wasn't brave enough to do it again, but those hairs stood at continuous attention.

Pure male appreciation sparkled in his eyes, a reoccurring reaction from men, but one she usually ignored. She was having a hard time ignoring Caine. She had thought him handsome with his mask on, but now knowing he also possessed drop dead gorgeous looks, like those sharp cheekbones to go with his killer body, made it more difficult to walk away. She had known his eyes were blue, but she didn't know that in the light without a mask to cast shadows they were even more vibrant than the color of the sea. She had admired his ingenuity as a client, but found herself more turned on by him as her lover. No, she couldn't think that way; one night did not make them lovers.

Besides, he didn't know who she was.

But no doubt an attraction was there. She would just have to work on tapering it down. He was a client; she was just there to teach him about the plane. She ignored the fact they had become friends, and she ignored the fact that with each glance she could feel herself remembering their night together. She had to keep clenching her lower muscles, their lingering soreness a constant reminder.

She also caught a hint of confusion in his glance but no real sense of recognition. She was uncertain how she'd handle things if he did recognize her, and did she want him to? Also, why didn't he? She did.

Sydney showed them around the interior of the plane and some of the more practical changes she had implemented on the control panel. All of which made it easier for one person to fly. Caine, in a hurry to have his flying lesson on his new plane, had already made arrangements for a test flight. Donald strapped into one of the eight comfortable looking ivory stained leather passenger chairs in the middle of the plane and Caine took over the controls at the cockpit, while Syd sat in the copilot's seat.

After a thorough run through of the equipment, Caine radioed the control tower. He got clearance for a test flight. She hadn't known he had already made arrangements for this until she saw the plane being refueled. Given his excitement over his new toy, she should have known he wouldn't be able to wait.

"Hang on," he said as the nose lifted and in moments they were airborne. "Oh, baby. She's smooth." He glanced over at her and winked. "We work well together." She nodded in agreement.

An hour later they were taxing back down the runway. Sydney could feel Caine's glee in the plane and his love of flying evident as well as his skill as a pilot. "You're very good," she said finally turning to meet his gaze. She made it a point to

try not to look directly at him during their flight. Even now, she couldn't quite bring herself to meet his eyes. Not until she decided what she was going to do.

The look he gave her, even a blind man could interpret; he wanted her.

She quickly averted her gaze back toward the instruments. She didn't want him to see the answering look in hers. Maybe if he didn't recognize her, she wouldn't have to worry about his attraction. Something told her it wouldn't matter. A current of physical awareness already pulsed between them, and every time he looked over at her she knew damn well he felt it too.

So much for the night he spent with her. Now he was making eyes at someone else the very next day. Didn't matter if the *someone else* was her. She put her hand to her forehead and squeezed. Oh, this was too confusing and she was tired.

Of course he noticed. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Just a little tired." Maybe after a good dinner and a night's rest she could put it all into perspective.

"Well don't worry," Caine said. They still sat side by side in the cockpit, even after the plane was parked and shut down. Donald stood in the doorway and Caine asked him to get the car and bring it around.

Sydney found herself alone with her fantasy man, and his full attention had zeroed in on her. "I promised you three relaxing days with only a few hours of

flying time and I'm a man of my word. Let's get you settled in and we can have a late lunch."

Sydney heard his words but his eyes were saying something else. Oh yeah, definitely saying something else and she could interpret them perfectly. She had seen that look on the dance floor last night just before he kissed her. And he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her mouth.

Chapter Five

What the hell was wrong with him! Caine couldn't believe he'd almost kissed Sydney. Syd his friend! It would have been so inappropriate. He never would have thought his designer was a woman, and a very beautiful one.

Hell, he'd had a hard on since he'd looked up and seen her standing in the doorway of his plane. He couldn't believe how hard, just glad when she got up and left the cockpit first, giving him a chance to calm himself down. Which he did — barely. At least it was manageable. He could walk. He suspected as long as Syd stuck around he'd remain in a semi-aroused state. Unless he did something about it.

This wasn't like him; he'd just had the most incredible night of his life with a woman he wanted to spend many more nights with. Like as in for the rest of his life, yet a few hours later he was lusting after someone else. What the hell was wrong with him? Neither reaction was like him.

“Well did it perform as you expected?”

It took him a second for his brain to register Sydney had asked him a question. “Yes, yes it did. Beyond my expectations.” He wasn't talking about the plane. She didn't respond, just moved to the exit. He watched her walk away from

him, mesmerized by the sway of her hips in those tight jeans and thoughts of him covering her from behind had him hard as stone again. Stifling a groan, he adjusted himself, counted to twenty before he followed her out of the hanger.

Thank God they didn't have to wait long before Donald pulled the car up to the exit. Still, he had to sit next to Syd in the back. The backseat of his S-Class Mercedes wasn't as wide as some of his other cars and he was tall. He couldn't help it if he had to spread his legs wide. But wait, she was scrunched up against the other door. *Damn*. He knew she sensed his interest. She'd have to be blind to miss the looks he'd been sending her way, and the woman wasn't blind. Right now her body language screamed not interested. Yet, when ever she looked at him, if those eyes weren't telling him something else.

So what? Conflicting signals meant no. *Damn*.

Then his cell phone chimed. Normally he wouldn't bother to answer it but he needed something to get his mind off his sexy aeronautical designer. He pulled his phone out and checked the caller ID. It was Annemarie. "Sorry I have to take this," he said before answering the call.

The call only lasted a few minutes, but long enough to ruin his mood even more. Apparently, Annemarie couldn't find his mystery woman, and she was his only link to her. Unless he wanted to use the private detective agency his company

sometimes used to try to find her. How far did he really want to take this? If she had wanted to see him again, she'd have given him her name.

Caine sighed and turned to look at Syd, studiously staring out the window. Maybe this was meant to be; maybe he couldn't find his mystery woman because he was really supposed to be with Syd. Although, she didn't seem to want to be with him either. This was like one big cosmic joke.

But Syd was here. What if he could change her mind? After all, over the last few months they had become friends; it could be a short leap to take them to lovers. Strong chemistry already existed between them. He couldn't believe he was even thinking about it, but he couldn't seem to let go of the thought. The first thing would be to have her look at him, get them back to the feeling of camaraderie they shared online.

"When was the last time you went skydiving?" he asked, knowing it was a favorite pastime of hers.

At the sound of his voice, Syd had no choice but to look at him. Damn, still fine, especially in such close quarters like this. He shifted in his seat to face her, bringing his knee a little closer to her leg than she liked, while he raised his arm and rested it at the back of her seat. He leaned toward her causing his long reach to land just above her shoulder. She tried her damndest not to turn her head and look at that hand, that talented hand. It had even more talented thick blunt fingers

attached to it. She kept her eyes glued to his face, not hard to do at all. The man had gorgeous eyes. She blinked, when she realized he had asked a question requiring a response.

“Ah...last week,” she said.

“Would you like to go tomorrow?”

“What about your flying lesson? We covered a lot today, but there are still a few things I need to go over with you.”

“How about you extend your visit another day?” he asked.

“I...I’m not sure if I can. I’ll have to check my schedule.”

“You do that and let me know.”

It wasn’t long before Donald pulled the car off the road and onto a private driveway. “We’re here,” Caine said.

Syd looked out the window. She could see the water in the distance beyond the beautiful tree lined grounds. She couldn’t see the house yet, but she knew it would be spectacular. Caine had told her he was the third generation to live there. She wasn’t sure what to expect exactly of his home in Islip, but she was not disappointed.

The white washed brick house stood at the end of the long drive. The classic colonial style front had four towering columns wide enough to wrap her arms

around. Instead of a front porch, there was an oversized front stoop, and three wide stairs led to it.

The car pulled off the paved driveway and onto a stone paved circular drive, stopping in front of ten-feet tall dark brown double doors. She didn't have to touch them to know they were some kind of solid wood and they'd be heavy.

Caine got out first and she followed, but once he stood by the car door, instead of moving aside he offered her his hand to help her out. This time when they touched, like last time he didn't immediately let her hand go. She could feel his thumb rub briefly across her finger before he released her. "Welcome to my home, Syd," he said. "I promise to make your stay an enjoyable one."

Their eyes locked. She got Caine's message loud and clear. He wanted her. *The bastard!* She almost melted at his feet. The sound of the trunk popping open broke the connection, returning reason to her senses and allowed her to stop staring at Caine and move away from the car. Caine shut her door as Donald got out of the car and both men went around the back to get the suitcases. Donald closed the trunk and moved past her. Caine gestured for her to precede him as his assistant opened the front door and led the way into the interior of the house.

"I'll show you to your room and let you get settled first," Caine said behind her. "Then we can have a bite to eat. After that I'll show you around."

Donald stopped and turned. "I can have something whipped up in about half an hour."

"Thanks," Caine said. "Place the suitcases at the foot of the stairs and I'll take them up." Donald did then walked down a hallway and disappeared through a door.

Syd came to a stop and could only nod. Traveling all over the world, growing up with her parents, she had seen some beautiful places and homes, but this place was stunning. She thought the interior would look like some kind of museum, but what she could see of it, the place looked comfortable. The mustard colored walls and the large stuffed couches in the first room on her right looked inviting. Lived in. Even the cushioned bench in the hallway looked like it could be sat on, as opposed to 'look but don't touch.' She stood upon a polished grainy dark wood floor but with texture, so it felt okay to walk on it with heels. Scuffmarks wouldn't show.

After a few moments glancing around, she moved out of the way for Caine to precede her. He headed directly for the stairs on the left and in front of them, just slowing down to grab their bags. Syd's gaze followed the rise of the steps. It looked like something Scarlett O'Hara would have walked down in *Gone With the Wind*. The stairs were wide and the wood floors gleamed. Running her hands along the smooth wooden crafted railing matching the floor, Syd followed her host.

At the top of the stairs, he turned left and faced closed double doors. Opening them he stepped through and she continued to follow him farther into the house. They past a couple of closed doors and went down yet another short hallway. He stopped in front of a door. "This is your room," he said before pushing the door open. He walked in and dropped her suitcase on the floor, just as her cell phone rang.

She pulled it out of her bag, the caller ID showed Annie's name. She began to press the ignore button but Caine said, "I'll leave you to relax and unpack. I'll come get you in about half an hour." With his suitcase still in his hand, he left. Syd answered the phone before it transferred to voicemail. "Hold on a sec, Annie," she said by way of greeting. She closed the door and put her suitcase on the bed to open it up. "Okay, I'm back. Did you get my message?"

"Yes and I called your admirer and told him I didn't know who you were, so your little secret is safe. But if you ask me, you're nuts to turn a guy like that down. He sounded like he really wanted to see you again. Do you know who he is? Ca..."

Syd cut her off in mid-speak. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do know who he is and I've changed my mind."

Syd wasn't sure when she changed her mind or if she was just admitting to what she already knew she was going to do. She told Annie about her working relationship with Caine and that she slept with him last night, and was thinking

about doing it again. Annie squealed in delight. Syd knew Annie would approve. But when she told her the rest of the plan, for the first time in years Annie was speechless. But it didn't last.

“Oh my God!” Annie cried. “You sound like me. I absolutely love it! How can I help?”

“Well for starters, give me his number.”

Annie gave it to her. As soon as she disconnected the call, Syd sat on the poster bed. She glanced around the room, loving the pale peach hues used on the walls, the matching satin floral quilt and pillow shams on the bed. Looking up she thought the ceiling must have been a good ten feet, and a frosted glass pendant-shaped chandelier hung in the center of the room. A beautiful Oriental rug, in a darker shade of peach with green and blue, covered most of the floor but it enhanced rather than detracted from the lighter shades on the wall. The room exuded fine taste, and seemed to mix old world and contemporary luxury well. Done admiring the room for now, Syd decided to put her plan into action. She called Caine.

It still smarted he didn't immediately recognize her. Not only did he not recognize her, but he outright flirted with someone he thought was another woman. So much for wanting to find his mystery lady. He was like all men, just out for whatever he could get.

Well she was going to teach him a lesson. One he'd not soon forget, and she'd have a little fun in-between. She grinned as the phone began to ring. She hoped he'd answer; she had turned on the blocking feature so no caller ID would show up.

The sound of his deep-throated hello almost made her purr. So she did. Let the games begin.

"I hear you've been asking around for me," she said deliberately lowering the timber of her voice.

"Who is this?" Caine asked.

"Who do you want it to be?" she countered.

"Are you my masked lady?"

"Mmm, you called me wild woman last night."

Chapter Six

At the first sound of her voice, Caine knew who it was. The last voice he'd heard before he fell asleep just before dawn. He had been about to leave his room but stretched out on his bed instead. One Armani loafer-clad foot lay on the cover, the other on the floor, to talk to the woman constantly in his thoughts since he'd first laid eyes on her.

"Hmm, yes you are," he replied and couldn't keep the huskiness out of his voice. "And yes, I have been looking for you. Why did you run out on me this morning? I wasn't done."

"Well, I wasn't sure," she said. "People say a lot of things in the middle of the night."

"I don't. Besides, I said those things in the wee hours of the morning too. And if you had waited, I'd not only still be saying them to you, I'd be showing you."

"Oooh," she purred. "I like the sound of that."

"So are you going to tell me your name now?"

"Beautiful One."

He chuckled. "Will you tell me how I can reach you? You obviously know who I am and how to reach me."

“Yes, I’ll give you a way to reach me.” Sydney gave him her pager number, which she’d forward to her cell number. She seldom used her pager anyway so he’d be the only one to use it. Plus he wouldn’t recognize the pager number like he might her cellular number. Syd had given it to him in their last email when she had agreed to meet him at the airport.

“So Beautiful One,” he said, “what’s your name and when can I see you again?”

“Soon...I have to take care of a few things first,” she answered.

“Hmm, promise?”

“Promise,” she replied.

“Well hurry up. I really wasn’t finished with you.”

“That’s good. ‘Cause I decided I wasn’t finished with you yet either.”

Caine took a sharp intake of breath. “Sorry you ran out on me this morning, are you?”

“Oh, yeah,” she moaned. “I didn’t get a chance at all to see what I had down my throat last night.”

Caine pulled another pillow up behind his head and kicked his shoes off, bringing his foot up from the floor and placing it flat on the bed. “I can arrange for you to see that. In fact, I can be back in DC in two hours, for your thorough inspection.”

“Now why would you do such a thing?”

“Just to see you and grant your wish.”

“Mmm, I like the sound of that. But...I’m not in DC. And two hours is too long anyway. I think I need a little something to take the edge off right now.”

“I’m anything but little.”

“I know.”

He groaned. “Baby, you’re killing me here.” He shifted on the bed, his eyes on the bulge between his legs. “Do you know what I’m doing right now?” he asked, unzipping his pants to make room for his organ outgrowing its covered space. He placed his hand over himself just for a little relief.

“I hope thinking about being deep inside me,” she whispered. “I want to touch you. But I can’t.”

The image she painted in his head he couldn’t ignore; he didn’t even want to try. Placing the phone between his shoulder and his chin, using both hands, he opened his pants more and pulled his underwear down, enough to release himself.

“God, yes,” he rasped as he widen his legs on the comforter and wrapped one hand around himself, moving slowly up and down imagining her hand on him.

“Really, are you sure that’s what you’re thinking about?” she whispered again.

“Yes...yes, I’m sure,” Caine rasped, finding it a little difficult to talk and breathe at the same time.

“Well I’m thinking about you all the time,” she admitted. “I’m thinking about you on top of me, behind me. Or me on top of you, riding you, until I have you bucking against me.”

He couldn’t stop what happened next. Not after the night they’d shared, not after been so damn hard all day. With a haggard groan and the force of an oncoming train, he came and came and came all over his hand and underwear. He knew she knew, and he didn’t give a shit. “I’m gonna make you pay for that,” he growled.

“Promise.”

“I swear it!” he growled again.

“I’ll let you go now and get cleaned up. Call me later tonight. I’ll expect you not to be so selfish, next time.” Then the line went dead.

Caine had her number. He could call her back. The bitch, she knew exactly what she had done. He smiled. Two could play at this game. He almost called her back but, he had a houseguest and he needed to get cleaned up. He would call her tonight, when he had more time to play with her, and this time he’d make her scream his name into the phone. By tomorrow morning he fully expected to be on his way to her.

He got off the bed and stepped into his bathroom. He was a mess, in more ways than one. Turning his shower on, he took off his clothes and threw everything in the hamper, while the water got good and hot. Man, he was a piece of work, thinking about sleeping with one woman in his house, then allowing another one to make him cum with just her words.

But more than just her words had done it; he'd made love to his wild woman. They bonded last night. She was his, and she would be again. He knew what she felt like, the taste of her skin, knew her scent mixed with his, how magical they were together. Her sexy voice and his memories of her made him cum, and want her again, badly. Knowing he would have her again, and the fact he'd already been horny as hell being around Sydney, had been enough to send him over the edge. Sydney sort of reminded him of her, it might explain his attraction.

"Sydney, oh hell!" he cried.

Naked, he jumped into the shower. His intent to take a quick shower to clean himself up but as he washed between his legs, he thought about taking a shower with Sydney this way. A vision popped into his head of his mystery woman and Sydney, they somehow got mixed up and fused into the same person. He placed his head under the falling water, braced one hand on the wall while he squeezed himself with the other. He came again, even harder than before.

“Oh bloody hell!” He adjusted the water temperature to cold. By the time he had changed and knocked on Sydney’s door, over an hour had gone by.

“Sorry I’m...late,” he said as the door opened.

The woman who greeted him on the other side of the door had his hunger immediately rising again. She too had changed. Where before she had stunned him in tight blue jeans and a t-shirt covering breast he knew would fit in the palm of his hands, now, she was absofuckinglutly gorgeous in a lime green, thigh high, spaghetti strap sundress that hugged her petite figure. It showed off every curvy nook and cranny he wanted to touch and taste.

His eyes roamed hungrily over her then back toward her face, but her hair captured his attention. He couldn’t stop himself from doing what he did then if his life depended on it. He raised his hand and touched her hair. “Beautiful,” he whispered as he rubbed the loose strands hanging over her shoulder between his thumb and forefinger.

She had released it from its tight bun and it hung loose and straight down, way past her shoulders. Her sable locks felt silky and soft to the touch, like he had felt them before, but they shouldn’t be straight. He shook his head to help clear his mind, because clearly he must still be hallucinating. Wishful thinking. His wild woman had a head full of tight curls hanging to her shoulders. Curls he spent half the night wrapping around his fingers.

He inhaled sharply and the scent of coconut and chocolate filled his head. He wanted to eat her up. "I'm sorry," he said looking down into Sydney's beautiful amber eyes. "I shouldn't have done that." He noticed again how much shorter than him she was. But he still hadn't released her hair and had even taken a step closer to her.

"It's okay. I don't mind," she said as her body leaned closer to his.

Her voice sounded huskier than usual and familiar. "Oh." Then he did something again out of character. In truth, he hadn't been thinking straight since last night. There were two women causing him to act like a teenager whose hormones were out of control. He leaned toward her, keeping his eyes on hers and felt rather than saw her draw back.

"I'm hungry," she said in a more normal tone. "Lead the way."

He stared at her mouth for a full minute before stepping back and reluctantly releasing her hair. "Come on, I'll show you the house after we eat." God, what the hell was he doing? What was wrong with him? He'd been asking himself those questions since last night, and he got no answers, just more questions.

Without thinking he took her hand and threaded their fingers together. Immensely pleased when she didn't pull away. But he had to touch her; he craved it.



Sydney had been holding her breath the entire time he'd been touching her hair. She knew he wanted to kiss her. She also knew she couldn't let him. At least not yet, maybe never again. She had to remind herself he just had phone sex with another woman. Even if that woman was her, he didn't know. Then an hour later he's trying to kiss her. What a bastard! She had to keep reminding herself he was just another player.

But damn it was hard to keep her distance.

Caine led her down the rear stairs directly into a large country styled kitchen with copper pots and pans hanging from iron rungs over a center island grill. Donald had just put plates on a table, near a picture window, set for three.

Glad for Donald's presence, Syd found him to be a lot of fun during lunch. He also provided a buffer between her and Caine. The awareness between them never went away, merely dimmed. The banter between the two men showed a friendship beyond mere employer and employee. Donald and his wife lived in a caretaker's house on the grounds. She was at work as a schoolteacher.

"This salmon salad is fantastic," Syd said to Donald.

He held up his hands. "Oh I can't take the credit for it. Everything was already done. I just had to take things out of the refrigerator and reheat the salmon a little on the grill." He explained that they also had a live-in cook, or rather Caine had a cook/housekeeper, but he and his wife usually ate with Caine. "Milly, had a

little family emergency and will be gone for a few days so I offered to help out. Caine here is useless in the kitchen.”

Caine laughed at Donald’s story about how he almost blew the house up trying to cook a roast once. “Okay, that’s enough,” he said pushing his chair away from the table.

“I can completely understand why you decided to keep him away from objects that catch fire,” Syd teased, and watched the dimple appear on the side of Caine’s mouth. Oh-oh, she had to tread very carefully. The man was too handsome and charming. What possessed her to start what she had? Unfortunately, she wasn’t going to end it. Not quite yet. He didn’t know she was his mystery woman, so she still had the advantage. She’d play things out and see where they led.

“Come on,” he said breaking into her thoughts. “Let me show you around.” He stood up and pulled her chair out for her.

It took half an hour just to go through the interior of the house. She lost track of all the rooms, and caught glimpses of beautiful grounds and the ocean from the windows. Finally they came to a sunroom with two sets of French doors. Beyond the doors she spied the pool she had seen from her bedroom window. It had been designed to look like a waterfall draining into a lagoon, and beyond the

pool area a sandy beach led to the water. She opened the door and walked out to the edge of the pool and stopped.

Bending at the knee she placed her hand under the waterfall. "This is beautiful. It's like something from one of the Fiji Islands."

"Yes, it's a replica of a place I saw once. Have you ever been to Fiji?"

She straightened up. "Yes. I think I told you I was an army brat. My parents were stationed all over the world and took us with them. By the time I was seventeen, I'd seen half the globe."

Caine headed over to two of the lounge chairs placed together at the side of the pool. "Ah, that's right, you did tell me." He gestured for her to sit down on one and he sat on the other. "That's how you got your name. You were born in Sydney, Australia."

She stretched out on the cushioned chair, enjoying the sun on her face for a moment before she turned her head to look at him. "Yes, and I have two sisters, Brittany and Atlanta."

Caine smiled. "I love it." He didn't lie back on the lounge. Instead he sat on the side of it, his back to the sun blocking some of it from her face. "You all must have had an interesting time. I envy you. I have no siblings."

Sydney answered his smile with one of her own. "I don't know what I would have done without my sisters. We loved traveling together with our folks."

“Are they still on active duty?”

“No, they retired from the Army a few years ago and live in San Diego, but they still travel quite a bit.”

“Do your sisters live in San Diego too?”

“No. We’re all over the place. Right now my youngest sister, Atlanta, just got engaged. I’m not sure where she’ll settle. Out of all of us, she’s always had gypsy feet, constantly moving around. My middle sister lives in New York, but she’s in Finland right now, and recently met someone. It’s serious so she won’t be back anytime soon either.” Sydney wasn’t sure why she was giving him so much information about her family, but he seemed easy to talk to.

“Are you close to your sisters?”

“Very, we’re like the three musketeers. But I guess that has to change.”

“Not really,” he said. “It just won’t be the three of you anymore.”

Sydney stared at him and got the impression he tried to convey more in his statement than appeared on the surface. She tested him.

“I suppose so, there’s always room for two more.”

He didn’t hesitate. “Or three.”

Chapter Seven

Sydney wasn't sure how to respond. He'd confirmed what she had been thinking. So to avoid responding, she placed her arm over her face to cover her eyes, as if the sun were bothering her. It did, but not as much as the man. "I think I need my shades."

"Did you bring some? If not, I have extras."

"Thanks, but I've got a pair upstairs in my purse."

"Okay, why don't you go get them and if you brought a bathing suit, go ahead and change. We can just hang around here and relax for awhile."

"That sounds like a plan." She sat up, but before she could rise he stood and took her arm to help her up. The second he made contact with her skin, she froze. His hand lay just above her elbow and he gently tugged to get her to stand fully. They stood toe to toe staring at each other for what felt like an eternity. Yep, there was such a thing. Time can stand still; it did for her. Donald suddenly appeared, interrupting their almost kiss. But Caine didn't step away from her, he merely tilted his head at Donald.

"Sorry Caine," Donald said, "but Foster's on the phone."

“Damn, I have to talk to him.” Donald returned to the house, and Caine raised his hand and ran it across her cheek. “This should only take a sec. I’ll meet you back here after you’ve changed.”

As soon as he stepped through the French doors, Syd took her cue to get the hell away from there, fast. Too bad she could only go as far as the guest room, in his house, conveniently down the hall from his bedroom. Oh yeah, when he had given her the tour he had pointed out his room to her. There were only two doors at the end of the hallway: one led to her room, the other his. She could run but she couldn’t hide.



Finishing his call, Caine returned to the pool area, but Syd hadn’t returned yet. He wondered if she would or if she packed to leave. Not likely, she was no coward. He felt the energy between them and from the way her pupils dilated and the bumps raised on her skin when he touched her, he knew she damned well felt it too. He walked over to the pool house to change into one of the swim shorts he kept there, and also to grab a few towels for them.

Caine placed the towels over the backs of the lounge chairs, straightening up as Syd came through the doors following the stone path toward him. God, she was beautiful. A little package but what a package. Even in the long mesh black cover-up, he caught interesting glimpses of her curves. There were slits up both

sides to her thighs and every step she took showed off slender well shaped legs. She stopped in front of him but her dark sunglasses hid her eyes.

“Which chair’s mine?” Syd asked since he stood between the lounges.

“Either one.”

“Okay, I’ll take this one.” She held a bottle of sunscreen in one hand and placed it on the chair in front of her. Bending a little to grab her cover-up at the sides, she pulled it up and over her head, revealing the ribbon of orange bikini she wore underneath. Which left nothing to his imagination.

His legs gave out at the sight of her, and he fell on his butt right onto the chair. He couldn’t take his eyes off her belly button. She had a ring pierced there, but dangling off the ring swung a small golden airplane lying against a flat taunt stomach, with diamonds for a window that flashed in the sun as she moved. He continued to watch as she sat down and began to rub lotion all over her already permanently tanned complexion. As her hand skimmed over her arm, it glistened.

A groan began to emerge from deep in his throat, but he quickly stifled it down. Without saying anything, he raised his hand to take the bottle from her. She released it without protest as though she understood he had to touch her skin. “Here,” he said hoarsely in a voice he barely recognized. “Lie down, let me get your back.”

She raised her eyes to his. He knew she saw the lust in them. He couldn't help it, nor did he want to. He seemed to be doing a lot of things and damning the consequences, recently. Still watching him, she blinked and silently stretched out on her stomach. She folded her arms and rested her head on them, turning her face away from him.

He couldn't sit beside her on the narrow chair so he grabbed his towel, folded it and put it on the hard stone. Kneeling at her side he poured the lotion into his hand, and starting at her shoulders, began to massage it in. The groan he had successfully stifled earlier snuck out. There was a slight stiffening of her shoulders before she relaxed down into the chair.

Caine continued to rub the lotion on her back. When he got to the bra ties he undid them, pushing the strings aside; his movements went unhindered. He stopped to put more lotion on his hands, but paused. Pouring the lotion onto one hand, he pushed the bottle he held in the other between the joint of her closed thighs, causing her to separate them. Not much but enough. He grinned at her immediate response.

Still smiling, he rubbed his hands together and returned to her back. Returning to the center where he stopped, he began making circular motions, each motion causing his hands to move a little wider. There wasn't much to her but what there was felt soft and smooth. To him she felt like heaven. A heaven he

wanted to sink into. Slowly, he moved his hands down to her sides, then up until he skimmed the edges of her breasts.

“Raise,” he whispered near her ear. She arched her back. Without touching her he leaned over her so he could rub the lotion into more of her breast. They weren’t small, but ample enough to fit in his palms without spilling over. This time the groan emerged from her throat. He moved his hands back to her spine and she lowered her body flat onto the lounge. He watched her body pressing into the cushions and his breath caught in his throat.

He stopped and got more lotion, this time when he placed the bottle back between her thighs, she opened them a little wider. He smiled again, even though she couldn’t see him, he knew she was as aware of him as he was of her. He massaged the lotion into her until he got to the top of her barely there bikini bottom. Pulling them down, he revealed a perfectly shaped rounded butt, slightly lighter than the rest of her body. Telling him she never tanned in the nude. He wondered how soon he could change her mind.

He found himself leaning forward until he placed a butterfly kiss on her luscious ass. Then he began to massage her, kneading her firm flesh until they were both breathing hard. Abruptly, she twisted and grabbed one of his hands. “Your turn,” she said.



Her body on fire, Sydney couldn't take it any more. This wasn't supposed to happen. He was the one who should be hot, bothered and frustrated, not her. She could not, would not, give into her body, his body. Aaargh, she was in a hell of her own making, but at least she got him to stop.

His eyes rested on her exposed breasts and continued to do so even as he moved away from her and lay on the other lounge. As she had done, he folded his arms and placed them under his head, but his gaze never left her chest. He wore no sunglasses so she could see the intense blue of his eyes. They followed her every move. She retied her bikini strings and pulled her bottoms up before she did anything else. Sitting up, she found the lotion on her chair and collected it. Grabbing the towel he used, she moved it closer to his chair. The thick towel provided a nice cushion for her knees; she poured sun lotion in her hand and began at his shoulders.

"Mmm, that feels good," he said. His eyes finally began to drift closed.

She leaned over him to cover the full expanse of his shoulders. There was a lot of shoulder. He was broad at the top and tapered at the waist. She had to press into him to make sure she rubbed the lotion into the tops of his biceps. He was no muscle-bound wrestler, oh no. While his muscles were probably as hard they were more the muscles of a swimmer. His entire upper body held the kind of strength

designed for the butterfly stroke. The thought flashed across her mind, the kind of strength she loved having wrapped around her.

“Did you used to compete?” she asked thinking out loud.

He twisted a little to stare at her before she pushed him back to lay flat.

“Why?”

“I ask because you have the body of a swimmer.”

“Yes, I used to compete, but haven’t done it in years.”

“But you still swim?”

He chuckled, and the sound vibrated through her fingers up her arms. “Yes,” he said. “Hence the Olympic size pool.”

“Did you compete in the Olympics?”

“No. I didn’t have the time to devote to that kind of training.”

Sydney didn’t ask why, it was probably because of his family business. She stopped to reach for the lotion she had placed on the ground. As her hand touched it, his hand covered hers. “Don’t forget my front.”

“You only did my back.”

“But I would have also done your front. You didn’t give me a chance, but I still can,” he said rubbing his thumb back and forth across her hand.

Taking a firmer grip on the bottle, she pulled away from him. “Let me just finish your back.”

He released her and relaxed his body down into the lounge chair. Instead of putting his hands back under his head, he reached down and pulled his long trunks down until they were around his muscled thighs, revealing a set of the finest tanned gluts Sydney had ever had the pleasure of seeing. She was in so much trouble.

It took her a second before she could rub more lotion across his back. The man's body was a work of art. Finally, she began to steadily move her hands down kneading said finest gluts. He flexed, pushing his hips into the cushions. She couldn't breathe, knowing the power behind such movement and her lower half clenched in response. She couldn't take any more, and slapped his ass.

"I'm done," she croaked out before standing up and jumping right into the deep end of the pool. She began swimming toward the waterfall on the other end. After she resurfaced under the spray of water, she heard a splash off to the side. She looked beyond the water and saw the empty lounge chairs. She could see black swim trunks lying beside the towel on the ground.

Movement under the clear Pacific island blue water told her he would come up right in front of her. She remained treading water under the falls, while he rose up towering over her. The only thing stopping him from looking like Poseidon rising from the ocean would be the missing trident in his hand, and the fact they

were in a pool and not in the middle of the ocean. But the man was no less potent than the elemental god he resembled at that moment.

He didn't say a word, just lowered his head down to her and wrapped his arms around her as he covered her mouth with his. Once their legs stopped moving they sunk like a stone to the bottom of the pool and he literally became her air, breathing life into her deprived lungs. When his air finally depleted, he pushed them off the bottom with a powerful thrust of his feet. Working in sync, without unlocking their arms from around each other or their mouths, they kicked to the surface. As soon as their heads broke above the water, Syd pulled back.

Gasping for breath, she said, "That should not have happened."

"Are you sorry it did?" he asked tilting his head a little as though curious as to her response.

"Let me get back to you on that."

He smiled and bent his head to her again but she put her fingers against his mouth.

"I think I need to get out of the pool."

"Are you sure?" He spoke against her fingers, each word a caress of his lips against the pads of her fingertips.

"No. But I will."

Sydney turned within his embrace and he released her. She swam back to the shallow end and walked up the stone steps. Her towel lay on the chair. She picked it up then dried herself off before grabbing up the sunglasses she had hastily dropped on the lounge when she dove into the pool. She pulled the cover-up on over her still wet bikini and wrapped the towel around her hair.

The sound of his hands slapping on the side of the pool had her stomach muscles tightening. “Stay,” he said softly.

“I’ve got a few calls to make.” They both knew she lied. Her back to him, she wouldn’t turn around to look at him. She didn’t want to take the chance he would get out of the pool. She was so confused it wasn’t funny. Her strongest emotion a desire to get away from him, she had to think. She needed to call her sisters.

“Don’t run from me, Sydney.”

“Who said I’m running?” Without turning around to look at him, she calmly walked back toward the house. But every instinct she possessed screamed run.

Chapter Eight

“Damn,” Caine said, hitting the water with the palm of his hand. He had made a mistake. Two in twenty-four hours. This had to stop. Using just his upper body strength, he pulled himself up out of the pool and towed off. Stepping into the pool house to take his third shower of the day, the second cold one.

He changed but remained at the pool. Laying on the lounge, he pulled one of the umbrellas over to keep him under the shade until the sun went down. He had to think. What was it about these two different women that pulled him to them? He couldn't stop thinking about either one of them. If Sydney hadn't gotten out of the pool they would have made love. He sighed.

Sydney was here, and the attraction between them very real. But he had to go slower with her. Which immediately had him thinking about his mystery woman, the one he hadn't had to go slow with at all. The one who could make him cum with only her words. Just thinking about her had him hard again. Groaning aloud he placed an arm over his eyes. This was ridiculous. He couldn't have them both. How could he make love to one woman one night, and lust after another one the next day? He was no playboy and he didn't like his behavior one damn bit.

Only a few hours had gone by since he'd spoken to his mystery woman, but he couldn't wait any longer. Needing to hear her voice, he pulled his phone from his pocket. He needed to know who she really was and if what they had shared last night was real or just his imagination. Or if his feelings for Sydney were real.

She picked up on the third ring.

"It's me," he said.

"I know, but I didn't expect you to call me so early. I thought you were going to call me later tonight."

God her voice sounded so familiar, he didn't realize how much he needed to hear the sound of it in his ear. "I just needed to hear the sound of your voice." It was true.

She laughed, he realized in all the time they'd spent together last night, he'd never really heard her laugh. He loved the sound of it. It washed across his skin like a warm breeze on a summer night. But he also needed some answers from her. "Are you married?"

"What kind of person do you take me for?"

"Someone I think I can care about, and you didn't answer the question."

There was a pregnant pause for so long he was afraid he had scared her and she was going to hang up. Maybe she was married and the reason behind her

secrecy. His stomach muscles cramped. When she spoke again, he hadn't realized he had been holding his breath until his chest rose and fell in an exhale.

"No."

He got up off the lounge and headed for the beach, he walked down to the water's edge.

"Boyfriend? Kid or kids?" he persisted.

"No and no."

"Then why the *hell* won't you tell me who your really are? I don't even know what you really look like. But my God I know the feel of your skin, your touch, every inch of your curves. I've been all over you and you me, but I don't even know your name."

"You were never meant to, Caine," she replied softly.

He sighed. "I never wanted it to be that way."

"But that's exactly the way it was."

"What about now?" he asked.

"What about now?"

"Do you want to see me again?"

"I...I don't know."

“I guess you’ve answered the question.” The lump in his stomach told Caine what he had to do. “Goodbye, my beautiful wild woman. Just know for me it was never going to be for one night, but before I go, at least tell me your name.”

Sydney hung up the phone; she couldn’t answer him. She didn’t want to be tempted. She knew he wouldn’t call her back, but in her weird state, who knew what she would do? ‘Cause she sure as hell didn’t. Maybe he wasn’t quite the player she thought him.

When the phone rang again in her hand, she hesitated to read the caller ID, terrified he’d changed his mind and called her back. It was her sister Brittany, returning her call. When she answered it, she discovered Atlanta on the line too. They had set up a three-way phone call, just like they usually did.

She almost cried at the sound of her sisters’ voices. Even though it hadn’t been all that long since she’d seen them, she missed them terribly. A tear fell from her eyelash and as she felt it roll down the side of her face, and realized she was crying. Something in her voice must have given her away because Brittany immediately stopped talking about the fabulous scenery in Finland and asked, “What’s wrong, Syd?”

“Wrong?” Atlanta asked. “Something’s wrong with Syd? What’s going on Sis?”

“I...I did something.”

She was silent for so long Atlanta finally asked, “What?”

“I slept with a guy.”

Atlanta laughed then snorted. “Girl, is that all?”

“Shh,” Brit said. “Quiet, Atlanta. Can’t you tell that’s not all there is to it? Something’s wrong.”

“Shit, don’t tell me he’s married,” Atlanta cried.

“No, no.” Syd sniffed into the phone and the entire sorry story came tumbling out. Normally she was the one giving her sisters advice, but this time the tables were turned.

“Oh honey,” Atlanta said. “It seems you’ve confused the hell out of him and yourself. But sounds to me like he’s definitely attracted to you.”

“Yeah,” Brit said, “but which you?”

Atlanta snorted into the phone. “He’s obviously attracted to her no matter what she looks like. Look you said when he first saw the everyday you he seemed confused, like he recognized you.”

Drying her eyes with a tissue from the bathroom, Syd replied, “Yes, that’s true, he did seem confused. He asked me outright if we knew each other.”

“So see he did recognize you,” Atlanta crowed, “sort of.”

“But sort of isn’t good enough,” Brit chimed in. “He still thinks she’s two different women, and was hitting on both of them.”

“Neither of you are helping here,” Syd cried. “Besides when I refused to tell him who I was, or rather who his mystery woman was, he said goodbye. As in there was no need to call him again, ‘cause he won’t.”

“See,” Atlanta said, “that shows he does really care, it wasn’t just a hit and run for him.”

“Yeah, but he did that right after he’s still trying to hit on Sydney,” Brit stated.

Sydney sighed. “In his defense, he may be just as confused about this as I am.”

“Exactly,” Atlanta agreed. “He probably was trying to figure out what to do, and if you and him or rather the mystery you, had a real connection, he wanted it to go someplace.”

“Okay, maybe I’ll buy that,” Brit conceded, “but still doesn’t mean he wouldn’t try to date ‘em both if she’d told him who she was. ‘Cause you know damn well he’d be making plans to see his mystery woman and still trying to get into Sydney’s pants.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Atlanta said.

“Ladies, please stop,” Syd cried. “This really isn’t helping. I started this, and I have to find a way out of it.”

“Well seems like he already took care of it for you,” Atlanta stated. “You said he ended it with the mystery woman, which means he’s going after you now.”

A knock on the door had Sydney almost dropping the phone. “Hold on y’all, somebody’s at the door.”

Holding the phone at her side Syd opened the door. She didn’t know what to expect but it wasn’t the bouquet of wildflowers in her face. Caine peeked around it so he could see her. “These are for you. I’m sorry. I went about this all wrong.” He extended his hand holding the flowers toward her. She took them away from him. He had a vase in his other hand and gave it to her. But she had her hands full already with the phone in one hand and the flowers in the other.

“One second,” she said. “Ah, come in let me get off the phone.”

Caine stepped across the threshold and Sydney immediately felt as though the room had shrunk. She put the phone to her ear and just said, “I’ve got to call you back.” She disconnected the call before her sisters could ask her any questions.

“Thank you,” she said taking the vase away from him. “I accept your apology.”

He remained in the doorway, but at least he was fully dressed in slacks and a pale blue shirt. The color accented his masculinity and highlighted the deeper blue of his eyes. Plus after Sydney’s intimate acquaintance with him, the shirt couldn’t hide the hard contour of his chest from her knowing eyes. Tearing her

gaze away from him, she walked into the bathroom and filled the vase with water for the flowers. Upon her return to the bedroom, she found Caine leaning against the doorframe. She glanced at him before she placed the flowers on the nightstand.

“They’re beautiful,” she said. “Thank you.”

He shrugged wide shoulders. “I’m glad you like them. I’d like us to start over, Sydney. I’ve enjoyed our online discussions, but after meeting you, I find myself very attracted to you. You know that and I think you’re attracted to me.”

“My, you are blunt.”

“When necessary, and I think it’s necessary. I’ll let you finish your calls and I’ll come get you in say, a half an hour. I’ll take you into New York for dinner and we’ll talk.”

“Okay. I’d like that, but I need an hour.”

“You got it.”

He continued to stare at her. Frowning he left, closing the door behind him.

Sydney wasn’t sure what to make of this change in him; he seemed to be trying to pull back a little from what happened at the pool. Okay, she’d meet him halfway. But she did wonder why he frowned when he left.

Another knock on her door, interrupted her from changing again. She opened it and Caine stood in the doorway. “Yes.”

His eyes roamed over her for a full minute before he spoke. “I forgot to ask if you brought enough clothes to stay a few more days.”

“Caine, I told you I probably can’t. I’ll have to check my schedule but I’m pretty sure I won’t be able to.”

“I want you to, so check. I promise it will be worth it,” he said dropping his voice an octave.

“I’ll check my schedule.”

He continued to stare at her then abruptly turned away. She poked her head beyond the door to watch him walk down the hall.

How weird, Sydney thought as she shut the door and headed back to the closet. She didn’t pack a lot of stuff, but she did have one black and white zebra print dress with her dressy enough for most restaurants. She pulled it out of the closet and left it on the bed.

After she had blown her damp and curling hair dry, changed and put her makeup on she paused as she grabbed her purse. Had he recognized her? He did give her an odd look. She shook her head. Nah, if he didn’t recognize her before he won’t now. Men can be so blind sometimes. But she liked him, and he wanted to get to know her. She’d try too.

Chapter Nine

Caine waited downstairs in the Florida room just off the hall so he would see Sydney when she came down the stairs. He let Donald go home for the evening. He wouldn't need him to drive them into the city. Besides, he wanted to be by himself for a few minutes while he thought about what he'd just discovered. He sat down in one of the burgundy leather smoking chairs, except he didn't smoke. His grandfather used to and this had been his favorite chair. His "thinking chair" he used to call it, and Caine needed to think. If what he suspected was true, he could use a smoke or a stiff drink, but since he had to drive them into the city he would wait until dinner for that drink.

It all made sense to him now; he hadn't been losing his mind. Sydney and his mystery woman were one and the same. He smiled. He knew he couldn't have the exact same powerful reaction two different women. It wasn't possible. While he'd been very attracted to other women in his past, in all of his thirty-five years he'd never felt anything like the chemistry between him and Sydney. *She* was his wild woman. He was right about this.

The difference in her height and hair had confused him, at first. But when she had removed the towel around her wet hair and he had seen the way it curled,

he knew who she was. He thought on some level he had always known. No two women could feel the same. No two women could make him act beyond his norm.

Then he stopped smiling. But why the deceit? Why did she lie to him, and why continue lying? What game was she playing? Too many questions, and no satisfactory answers.

The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. She was playing him. Well he didn't like games. Time for him to teach her a lesson. Then he'd get his answers. She'd been playing solitaire long enough. He was an active player now.

His head snapped up as he sensed her near before he saw her on the stairs. He had angled the chair so it faced the staircase, and like a heat seeking missile, his eyes locked on hers as she came into view. For a moment, she paused in mid-step before continuing down.

Finally, he rose to his feet and met her at the bottom of the stairs. Her hair was straight again. Its silkiness beckoned him. He could no more stop the hand reaching up to touch it than he could his next breath. Yes, it was the same. His eyes feasted over her features, he traced her face with his thumb.

The top of her head now reached his nose. He stopped and stepped back to look down at her feet. She wore strappy sandals that could have a heel, but from the angle he couldn't tell. But they gave her height she hadn't had before, at least

since last night. He returned his attention to her face, and placed his thumb lightly against her lips. She kissed it. He smiled and finally spoke. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you, should we be going now?" she asked with a soft tone to her voice.

He knew that voice. What a fool he'd been, well no more. He stepped away from her and took her hand.

"Follow me," he said not really giving her a choice as he continued to hold her hand, leading the way to the garage, attached off the kitchen. They went down a short set of steps to a door at the bottom. Opening it, there were four cars parked in the bays. Walking past the first car, a silver Bentley, he walked her around to the passenger side of the second car, a silver Porsche, and opened the door. Caine helped her into the plush gray leather seat, kissing her hand before releasing it and shutting the door. He made his way to the driver's side and got in. Opening the garage door he started the engine. "I hope you like speed," he said as he peeled the car out and down the long driveway.

Sydney laughed. "You forget I design and fly planes."

God, he could listen to the sound of her laughter for the rest of his life. He grinned. "Oh yes, how could I forget, and you jump out of them too. A woman who loves to live dangerously."

"Not without a parachute," she replied.

Smiling, he reached over and turned on the iPod sitting in a built-in cradle. The pulsing base of a guitar filled the small interior.

Caine downshifted and glanced at Syd, not surprised to find her staring at him and swaying from side to side, rocking to the rhythm of the music. This was his wild woman. He shifted again to pass a car and get onto the freeway into the city. He still couldn't understand why she pretended with him. Maybe she really was a thrill seeker and he was just another ride or jump to her. Not bloody likely.

Something happened between them last night, and not just the mind blowing, shift my world off its axis sex, but something else. And it continued to happen every time they were near each other, an intense and immediate awareness of the other. Sitting this close to her in the car, inhaling her fragrance, he wanted to cover every inch of her body with his own until he bathed in her scent. Then he wanted to lick every inch of her body, again, until the only scent left on her was his.

In order to relieve some of the pressure from his groin, he shifted and gunned the engine. As the traffic thinned, he risked a glance at her. Her head was thrown back, her neck slightly raised and her eyes were closed. She seemed to be catching the wind from the open top on her face, and her look of pleasure told him how much she enjoyed the speed. He swore he'd put such a look of pleasure, and

more, on her face before night's end. And this time he'd get to see it, because he'd have every damn light in the room on, and no masks separating them.



For a minute when she had come down the stairs, Sydney thought he had recognized her. Something seemed to flash in his eyes and she held her breath waiting for him to say something, but when he didn't she relaxed. Obviously, she had been imagining things. What she'd seen, if anything, was probably his attraction for her. She decided to relax and enjoy herself. He'd asked that they start over so she would meet him halfway.

After all, he had made a decision and chosen her. This her, Sydney. The real Sydney who dressed in jeans, t-shirts and flats, and kept her hair in a ponytail to keep it out of the way. But she liked to get dressed up too, like tonight, and he liked her like this too. He said she was beautiful. She frowned, confusing herself now. Of course, he liked her in jeans and a ponytail as well as when she was all dressed up. Anyway, he had convinced her he really did care about her. It hadn't just been a one-night stand to him. Maybe it was like Atlanta said, he was attracted to all of her personas. She snorted.

"Did you say something?" Caine asked.

She turned in her seat. "Let me drive."

He laughed. Then looked at her. She stared right back. “Well why the hell not,” he finally agreed. “You flew my plane here so you can damn sure drive this car to Manhattan.”

“Great, pull over anywhere and we’ll switch places.”

Sydney didn’t have the heart to tell him she’d raced Porsches in college and had her own.

It only took him a moment to pull smoothly over to the shoulder. He got out then walked around to her side of the car, while she pulled her dress up and climbed over the consol. Her movements were undignified and he probably saw a flash of pink underwear. Well, nothing he hadn’t seen before.

“Strap in,” she said glancing over as he opened the door and bent his body to fit into the seat. She quickly adjusted the seat and waited for him to shut his door, but not until she heard the sharp click of the seatbelt locking did she check her side view mirror and dart into traffic like a bat outta hell. She didn’t have to see them to know she left burn marks on the side of the road.

She shifted and let the car ride the road. For a few moments, she lost herself in the sensation of racing the wind. Caine had been going fast before, but she didn’t have to glance at the speedometer to know she drove faster. She only knew one speed in a Porsche. Grinning, she came back to herself and risked a quick look at Caine. Very pleased to find his eyes on her, his body language relaxed, and a

sparkle of amusement twinkled in his eyes. He seemed to have complete faith in her ability to drive his car at this rate. Then all of a sudden he began to laugh.

Coming up on slower traffic, she couldn't take her eyes off the road to look at him again. Instead she asked, "What's so funny?"

"Me. I'm just laughing at myself."

"It's always good not to take ourselves too seriously, but why are you laughing now?"

"I'll tell you about it later."

"Okay." She began humming to the next song when Caine spoke again.

"So you live in DC, right?"

"Not DC exactly. I live in Tysons Corner, part of the Metro area, a combination of DC, Northern Virginia and parts of Maryland. And my office is in DC."

"I was in DC last night."

"Oh." Sydney's radar went on full alert. What was he getting at? *Calm down, he's not getting at anything.* She didn't bother to follow up, but couldn't for the life of her come up with something to change the conversation.

"Yes, I went to a party a friend of mine had been invited to," he continued.

"He couldn't go so he gave me his invitation instead."

"I see."

“Have you ever been to the Willard?”

“Of course, many times,” she answered cautiously.

“That’s where the party was. A masquerade party given by Annemarie St. James. Do you know her by any chance?”

“Annemarie? Ah yes, I know her.” *What the hell is he getting at?* Is he just making conversation or has he figured it out. No. Not possible. He’s just making conversation. She needed to stop panicking. He couldn’t know for sure, otherwise he’d be mad as all hell. She needed to change the subject and she needed to change it fast, but they still managed to talk at once.

“Were you there?”

“Where are we going anyway?”

She glanced over at him, and caught the smile on his face. “Ladies first,” he said.

“I just wanted to know where we’re going.”

“Since you told me once you liked sushi, I thought we’d go to one of my favorite sushi places, Yasuda,” Caine said.

“I love Yasuda.”

“Good.”

“I like the atmosphere, and I think they have a great selection.”

“I agree. But I still think the best sushi in America is in San Francisco,” he said.

“That’s probably true. I’ve had sushi there to rival what I’ve had in Japan, but in all fairness most of the time the chef was Japanese and trained there,” Sydney said, glad she found something other than that damn party for them to talk about.

She didn’t want to lie to him if he asked her again if she’d been there. She’d have to say yes, but act like she wasn’t sure if they’d met or not. Crap, this is what she got for practicing deception. She couldn’t figure out how it got started to begin with, other than her bruised ego because he hadn’t immediately recognized her as she had him, but she hadn’t been fair to him.

The rest of the drive into the city was uneventful and didn’t take very long. Not with her behind the wheel, and she knew her way around the city, so had no trouble finding the restaurant. She pulled right up and valet parked the car. They moved right past the line of people forming in front of the place and into the interior. When they reached the hostess counter, the couple in front of them also had dinner reservations and Syd heard the woman behind the counter tell them it would still be a fifteen-minute wait. But when Caine gave the hostess his name she showed them right to an empty table in the crowded restaurant with a reserved card on it.

Caine sat facing her and with his back to the room. Sydney glanced around. It had been awhile since she'd last been there but the place still looked the same. She'd always loved the more ascetic look and feel of the restaurant to some of the other more showy places. A food critique claimed it was because the chef put more attention into the food than to the ambiance, but even the textured bamboo planks featured throughout the restaurant give the place a comfortable feeling.

She noticed some famous faces, but she neither stared nor looked like she recognized them in any way. Most faces she didn't recognize but there were a lot of beautiful men and women in the room. She had already noticed a number of stares in Caine's direction when they walked in.

The waiter approached and took their drink order. She had club soda and Caine ordered the same, but with a glass of California Sav to be served with dinner. It only took them a few minutes to make their selections and the waiter stood ready to take their orders. After he left, she finally turned her attention to Caine.

"Is there anyone interesting to you here tonight?" he asked.

"No, not really. A few famous faces, but no one to really get excited about."

"Right...so that's why your eyes have been roaming over my shoulders since we've been seated," he said with a self-deprecating smile.

Sydney raised her eyebrows. "I'm not sure what you mean?" Was he jealous? *Oh, please don't let him be the clingy type.* Then she saw his lips curve and his dimple peek out. "You're teasing me."

His mouth curved into a full-blown smile, making the dimple much more pronounced on his face. "Yes. I'm sorry. But you looked so adorable trying to look, but not look like you were staring."

"Was I that obvious?"

"No, not really."

"Good." She returned his grin, and took a sip of her drink. "Now, don't tell me you haven't been trying to check out some of these women here."

He placed his elbows on the table, crossing his arms in front of him he leaned forward slightly. His shirt pulled taut across his chest. "Now why would I do that?"

Remembering what the cloth covered, Sydney couldn't quite meet his eyes. "Well, because, there are a lot of beautiful women in this room."

"That may be true, but I'm sitting with the beautiful woman I want."

Her gaze clashed with his and he extended his hand toward her. He left it palm up, as if waiting for her to meet him halfway. Sydney finally took her eyes off his captivating features and placed her hand in his. Like a trap closing, his hand enfolded hers. She didn't know what else he might have done or what she would

have done because the wait staff came with their first course and they pulled their hands apart.

Leaning back, Sydney kept her eyes glued to his while the food was laid before them. Once the last dish sat on the table, the waiter and his helpers moved off, the spicy fragrance of the soup before her filled Sydney's nostrils. Looking down she also saw the seaweed salad the restaurant was known for. Picking up her spoon, she began to eat.

Chapter Ten

Dinner had been fabulous, but the company even better. Sydney found Caine as interesting in person as she'd hoped he'd be. If she hadn't already been intensely aware of and attracted to him, she would have been after dinner. He filled in a lot of the blanks for her she couldn't find on *Ask*. For one thing, the most important thing, he wasn't married, and never had been. She'd already figured that out, but it was nice to have it confirmed.

"I've never even come close to being married," he said.

"How about a girlfriend tucked away somewhere?"

He seemed to hesitate when she voiced the question, and grinned before he answered, "Ask me again later tonight." She didn't ask for him to elaborate.

After they walked out of the restaurant, instead of handing the attendant the parking ticket stub, he put his arm around her waist.

"What's wrong?" She turned toward him. If she moved her head just a little more and he moved just an inch, her lips would be locked to his. She couldn't take her eyes off them, that's the only reason she realized he spoke to her and seemed to be repeating a question.

“Do you want to walk for a bit?” He tilted his head back and glanced at the sky. “It’s a nice night.”

Sydney looked up too. There wasn’t a cloud in the earthly illuminated sky, but neither could they see any stars. Not with all the bright lights competing in the atmosphere over the city. She switched her bag to her other hand and placed her arm inside of his jacket and around his waist. He wrapped his around her, drawing her against his side. God it felt familiar; he felt so familiar.



Caine bent his head down a little to kiss the side of her head. It felt so good to hold her, like she belonged in his arms. They walked down Second Ave, not really heading in any particular direction. They had been sitting for awhile, first the drive and then through dinner and it was a long drive home. He wanted to give them a chance to stretch their legs. As much as he wanted to get her back to his house, he also didn’t want their date to end.

They continued to walk, passing other couples. When they strolled past a young couple so wrapped around each other, he couldn’t tell where one person began and the other started, his steps slowed. “You know this is our first official date, don’t you?”

She tried to pull away but he tugged her back. “Whadda ya mean date?”

“You heard me. This is a date.”

“All right. I guess it is.”

He couldn't help himself. He stopped right there in the middle of the sidewalk, turned her into the front of his body and covered her mouth with his own. If it were left up to him, he'd take her into himself so there would no longer be a Caine or a Sydney. They would be one.

“Get a room!” Someone yelled from a car as it sped by.

Caine heard the suggestion as though through a fog and couldn't agree more. It's the only reason he pulled away. The sooner he stopped kissing her the sooner he could do it again and wouldn't have to stop. “Let's get out of here,” he managed to rasp out.

Holding her hand, he retraced their steps. It took them half the time to get back to the car than it had to leave the restaurant. He was probably dragging her behind him, but he was in a hurry. He wanted her, this time in his home in his bed.

It took some fancy driving on his part to get them out of the city. They stopped once to fill up the gas tank but then they were on the highway, and he opened up his car. For a second he thought about having her drive. She was a damned experienced driver and could probably get them back quicker than he could. But decided it would be better, safer, for both of them for him to have something to do with his hands.

Damn he burned for her touch. She must have read his mind. He watched as she took off her shoes and leaned in his direction. She put the seat back in a more reclining position, and appeared to be studying him. He had to look away. If he hadn't they'd never make it home in once piece. It was going to be close.

"I want to touch you," she whispered.

"Oh God yes," he groaned, "but don't. I couldn't stand it right now. I need to focus. Why don't you find us something to listen to? Try the radio or my iPod. Or better yet, get some sleep. 'Cause you damn sure aren't going to get any tonight."

She snorted. "Don't count on..."

She never finished. He glanced at her long enough for her to see the heat in his eyes. He could see her hand tremble slightly as she reached forward to his iPod. She scrolled through the listings looking for something for them to listen to. Finally settling on something, she relaxed back into her seat. After awhile Caine glanced over to see her eyes were closed. Good, he didn't need any more distractions. He faced forward and concentrated fully on his driving.

Sydney's eyes closed but she wasn't sleeping. Every nerve ending in her body wound too tensed and energized to allow her to sleep. So she rested and bided her time. How could she want him so much? She'd just met the man and ten minutes later jumped into bed with him. At least this time it took spending most of the day

with him for her to want him. Who was she kidding? She never stopped wanting him, never stopped feeling connected to him.

It began before they'd even met, from the first time they started corresponding by email. She realized now she'd purposely kept her gender out of any of their email conversations, and why she never communicated with him by phone. Oh he'd called Syd, his designer, once or twice, but she'd always returned those calls by email and he responded in kind. She didn't want to taint the relationship in any way by letting him know her sex. Men automatically act differently toward women and she wanted to get to really know him without the genetic flirting.

They had become friends. There had been something sparking between them and it went up in flames when they finally met. So much so his touch fried her brain, the only explanation she had for her actions. But what about his actions?

Sydney felt rather than saw Caine take the exit ramp. She knew they couldn't be far from his house. Moments, seconds, minutes, lifetimes later she felt the car turn off the road and into the driveway. When she finally opened her eyes, they were pulling into the garage.

He cut off the engine and she could feel his eyes on her, but when she turned to look, he was already getting out of the car. She unhooked her seatbelt and

straightened up her seat just as Caine opened her car door, offering her his hand. She placed hers in his and he helped her out of the car.

She had expected him to bring her closer to his body, kiss her, do something to acknowledge this need connecting them. But he didn't. Averting his eyes, he stepped aside allowing her to move past him as he shut the door. With a gesture of his hand, he indicated he wanted her to precede him into the house.

She entered the door leading to the kitchen, her heels clicking across the ceramic tiles as she walked across the floor. She felt him behind her, not so close she could actually feel him, but close enough. Even across a crowded room she'd feel the presence of this man. They had left the lights on so she had no trouble navigating her way through the house to the staircase. She never looked back to see if Caine followed as she began to climb the stairs and turned into the hallway leading to her room.

The closed door of the guestroom beacons. She opened it to a dark room. She had left no lights on, and no moon could be seen in the sky to shed any light through the opened windows on either side of the bed. Leaving the door open, she took three strides toward the bathroom. But, before she reached it, the over-head light came on and Caine was on her.

Grabbing her below her elbows, he pulled her flush against his front. She could feel the hardness of him pressing against her spine and she arched further

into him. Her head tipped back and to the side as his face came down to rest against her neck. Then she felt his wicked tongue lick her and his mouth gently sucked her skin. A soft mewling sound escaped her lips, and she left them slightly parted so she could take in larger amounts of air.

His hands moved and paused against her waist as he moved them around to her front and rested them against her flat clenched stomach. He brought them up until they momentarily covered her breast. All the while she couldn't stand still. Like a cat she found herself reaching behind her to hold onto his ass as she rubbed herself up and down the object she felt pulsing against her.

He lowered his hands and grabbed the sides of her dress. She released her hold on him and raised her hands straight into the air, in complete surrender to whatever he wanted to do to her. He lifted the dress and pulled it over her head, tossing it somewhere in front of her. When she tried to turn to face him, his hold on her bare waist stopped her.

She placed her hands over his, entwining their fingers. He squeezed her hands before releasing them. Continuing to move his hands to the center of her back, he rearranged her hair so it lay over her shoulder. Then she felt him kneeling behind her. Before she could think about what he was doing, she felt him kissing and nipping at her ass cheeks. She wet herself then and there. She would have hickeys on each cheek come morning.

He rubbed his thumb across her center as he pulled her thong down her legs. She fell back against him and he had to hold her up. At some point he must have taken off his shirt, but she had no idea when because when he stood, she felt his skin rub against her own as he covered her back with his chest. She began to step out of her shoes, but his words stopped her.

“It’s too bad you don’t have your boots. Or do you?”

“What!” she cried spinning around in his embrace, and this time he let her.

Their eyes clashed and she saw the truth in the blue depths of his. Her masquerade was over, and the piper was demanding his tribute.

Chapter Eleven

He hadn't meant to bring up her boots, but whenever he was with this woman he lost all sense of reason. Hell, he lost all sense period. He slowly lowered his lashes to take in every inch of her, every inch he hadn't been able to see before. "Mmm," he said in appreciation then he returned his gaze to hers. "You heard me. I told you next time I wanted to make love to you with nothing but those boots on and wrapped around my ass."

She backed away toward the bed and sat down on the edge. "You know!" she cried, disbelief evident in the tone of her voice.

He moved over to her side of the bed and turned on the lamp. He looked at his beauty perched on the bed. "Oh yes," he said coming to stand before her.

"But...I don't understand," she said. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Why didn't you?" he countered.

He watched her expression turn into a frown. "Wait a second," she said. "When did you know?"

"Tonight, when I came up to your room earlier."

"Oh...oh."

"But you've known for quite some time haven't you."

It wasn't a question. She folded her arms across her ample chest and crossed her legs. He thought her magnificent. She sat there naked and glared at him, but he wanted her in his arms with her arms around him. But they still needed to clear a few things up first.

"I knew the minute I laid eyes on you," she said with smugness to her voice. "But you, you didn't. You didn't know it was me." She no longer sounded smug, just pissed.

He nodded in acknowledgment. "But why, why didn't you say something? Can you explain it to me? Why the masquerade?"

She just looked at him, the expression on her face trying to tell him something. But he couldn't for the life of him understand. "Why, Sydney? I don't understand."

"You had just left my bed and then you were flirting with another woman."

He frowned. Then he smiled. Then he laughed. He sat down beside her and had to take a few deep breaths to get himself under control. She scooted up on the bed and away from him until she felt the mound of pillows at her back. Pulling her knees together up against her chest, she tightened her arms around her legs. She probably thought he was nuts, but he thought he understood now.

"Sydney," he said shaking his head. "I found myself falling..." He had to stop himself. Was he really about to use the "L" word? Not possible, not after so short a

time. But he would have said his entire behavior for the last twenty-four plus hours wasn't possible.

He started again. "...falling under the same spell of what I thought were two different women and thought I was going nuts. Because I was having the identical reaction to *two* women, reactions I've never had to any woman in my life. But I kept seeing bits and pieces of both of you in each other. It's no wonder. You're one and the same. I cared about you both and didn't know what the hell was going on with me. I don't play games with people's feelings, especially my own."

He began to play with the buckle on her sandal. "Your hair and height threw me, but the feeling was the same."

"I'm sorry, Caine." She paused. "I guess I was a little hurt, then angry, and just let it get to me."

"Obviously, you didn't believe me when I told you I wanted more than just one night with you."

Watching him intently, she was quiet for a moment before she responded. "So what do you want? Two? Three nights? As long as I'm here?"

He shook his head, slowly from side to side. "No. And I don't think you want that either."

"Then what do you want?" she asked in a low sultry voice he remembered and would for the rest of his life.

Reaching out and grapping one of her feet, he removed one sandal, then the other one and pulled her to him. “You. You and only you, in all of your many guises.”

“For how long?”

“For as long as you’ll have me.” And if he had his way, it’d be a cold day in hell before his Sydney didn’t want him, or he her. Even if she didn’t understand it yet, she was his and he hers. From the first time they touched.

She lay full length on the bed. He stood up to quickly take off his pants, pull out packets of condoms, then took off his underwear. He had one knee on the bed when she spoke. “Aren’t you going to turn the lights off?”

“Oh no. I want to see all of you, my Beautiful One, all of you.” And from the way she stared at him with eyes wide open, she liked what she saw too.

He tore open one of the packets on the bed, and in moments, he covered her body with his and closed his eyes as a groan escaped his parted mouth. The pleasure of her skin against his own felt more intense than anything he’d ever known.

He opened his eyes and looked at her beautiful face. Wrapping his fingers in her hair, he said, “I love your hair, either way.” Lowering himself, he rubbed the side of her cheek with his nose. “Mmm,” he rasped, “so soft.” He kissed the side of

her face, her eyes, her nose, before hovering over her parted luscious lips. He blew gently against them and whispered, “Open wider for me.”

She spread her legs so he fit snug at her center, his tongue invaded her mouth before she had time to take another breath, but there was no need. He provided her with all she needed.

A groaning sound erupted from her throat and into his mouth. He swallowed it and at the same time, in one sharp thrust, entered her. Lifting his mouth away from hers, he said like a man giving praise, “This is where I belong, always. Now wrap those legs around me and hang on.”



Sydney did and met and matched him stroke for stroke. The rhythm of his movement increased and she pressed her heels harder into his firm butt, urging him on.

Their arms were wrapped tightly around each other and their tongues engaged in the same duel the rest of their bodies danced in. Then taking each other higher until they had no choice but to release the inferno of their passion, but still together they clung and they climbed. At last reaching the summit, she let go screaming his name as she came, again and again leaving her body nothing more than one trembling mass of sensation.

Before the last tremor died, and just as the final neuron fired in her brain, she heard him cry her name. His release shot out of him with a force that ripped into her very soul and vibrated into all aspects of her being. He felt full in her, , and her inner muscles continued to squeeze him, greedily striving to drain every drop of his essence out of him.

His body lay limp on hers. Sydney found she didn't have the strength to even lift an eyelid, much less try to move anything else.

"Sydney, I find myself falling for the same woman twice now."

"What!" She had heard him say he was falling under her spell before, but this sounded like more. Like he meant it to mean more, and that scared her to no end.

"You heard me." His head turned to face her.

Sydney tried to push him off her, but he wasn't budging. "Caine, great sex doesn't equal anything other than great sex."

"I can personally attest to that fact. I also know what we shared wasn't just great sex. It was more and you damn well know it."

"But..." she began but he didn't let her finish.

"Tell me you've slept with some guy you'd only just met before. Tell me you'd do it again? No, I take it back. I damn well know you're not gonna do that again."

This time she pushed his shoulders hard enough so he'd know she meant business, while at the same time she said, "Get off me." He rolled off her, and remained on his stomach but with his hand holding up his head and the other around her waist.

She turned her head to him, fearing where this conversation might be headed. "First of all, please don't start trying to tell me what I will or will not do. Second of all, I admit what I did was wrong and not something I'm gonna repeat anytime soon, if ever."

"No you won't," he said leaning forward to kiss her shoulder then her neck.

"Caine are you even listening to me?"

"Yes, love, I hear every word," he mumbled from the side of her neck where his lips began to suck.

A moan emerged from her as her lashes fluttered, and she tilted her head pushing into the pillow more to give him better access. "Go on," he said.

"And...and..."

"And you want me just as much, too."

Her eyes flew open as she pulled away from him to stare into his eyes right there, in front of hers. Looking into them she knew he meant every word. "This is not possible," she said. "It couldn't be. People don't fall...like this." But a little voice in her head reminded her it's the way her sisters fell in love and the way her

parents fell in love. They were married three months after they met. According to her father, only because it took the paper work that long to go through in the army, otherwise he would have married their mother an hour after they met.

Syd moved her head from side to side. *This cannot be happening to me.* “I need time, Caine, please. Just...just give me time to think. I’m tired, I’d like to go to sleep now.”

“Shhh, I can be patient.”

“And I think it’s best if I sleep alone.”

“No baby. Now that I’ve found you, do you think I’m going to let you go?”

“Caine...”

“One sec.” He got up and went into the bathroom to get rid of the condom. Returning to the bed, he climbed in and pulled her to him. “I just want to hold you. I promise that’s all. I want to hold you while you sleep. I need to wake up with you in my arms, okay.”

He had her. She nodded and turned until she faced away from him. He kissed her shoulder and wrapped his arm around her waist. “Sleep, baby, sleep,” he said as he curled into her body.

She could feel him behind her, engulfing her. An overwhelming feeling of serenity came over her. She nestled her body against his, and surrounded by his warmth, she felt cherished and safe and maybe even for the first time, could believe

she was falling in love. Was this the change she sensed coming in her life? With that last thought and Caine's arm around her, she found she had no trouble falling asleep.

The shrill ring of her cell phone jarred her awake. The arm slung over her waist and cupping her breast, as well as the leg trapping hers in place stopped her from getting up and answering it. "I have to get that, Caine," she mumbled.

"They'll leave a message."

"That's my office ring. I have to answer it. My secretary wouldn't call unless it was important."

Groaning he rolled over and she got up, and grabbed her purse where it had fallen on the floor. By the time she got the phone out, the call had already gone into voice mail. She had her back to him as she listened to her message.

Without glancing at Caine on the bed, she made her way into the bathroom. She looked at herself in the mirror. There were marks all over her body and — she turned around—sure enough, two big hickeys on her butt cheeks. She sighed, and put her head in her hands. She looked like a woman well loved. 'Cause of course he couldn't just let her sleep through the night. In truth she wasn't sure exactly who reached for whom, she just knew she couldn't get enough of him. This was all so wrong, but felt so right.

Time, she needed time. She'd take a shower then come out and explain to him why she had to cut her trip short. Something had come up. All of which was true, but she could put it off for a few days. She didn't want to. She needed time away from Caine, time to think. And the only way she'd be able to clear her head was away from him.

Caine watched as she walked naked to the bathroom. Even though they hadn't gotten much sleep for the last two nights and he had given them both quite a work out, judging by the way the sheet was tenting, he was still rearing to go. God, what has she done to him? He had no idea, as long as she kept doing it again and again. He lay on his back staring at the ceiling thinking how much fun they'd have spending the day in bed together when he heard the click of the bathroom door lock. Then moments later the shower came on.

He sat up. "What the...?" He got out of bed and walked over to the door. His hand hovered over the doorknob, but he pulled it back. He knew what he'd heard; she was trying to run again. Not this time. He'd be damned if he let her leave him twice.

Chapter Twelve

Sydney stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel. She quickly dried herself off, and wrapped one towel around herself and the other around her hair before she opened the door.

She half expected Caine to try to come in and wasn't sure what she would have done if he had insisted she unlock the door. When she exited, she was surprised to find the sheets rumpled, and the bed empty. She wasn't going to question her luck. She grabbed her suitcase and returned to the bathroom to finish changing.

Half an hour later when she emerged, there was still no sign of Caine in her room. She finished packing the few things she had taken out and closed her suitcase. Looking around the room once more, her eyes landed on the bed and she felt a tingle along her spine. Closing her eyes only enhanced her senses. Their mingled scents were still in the air like a potent aphrodisiac, and brought all of their love making back in vivid detail. He had been right. It wasn't just sex. Whatever *it* was it still scared the hell out of her.

She made it out of her temporary room and halfway down the stairs she spotted him. He stood in the same room from the night before, and like her, he had

changed. He moved forward and met her at the bottom of the stairs. Like adversaries they stared at each other. She found the words hard to say. "I have to go. It's business."

"Running again," he said, making it a statement.

She briefly glanced away. "Maybe, but at least this time I'm saying goodbye."

"For now."

"We'll see."

Without touching her, he leaned forward and she felt herself leaning toward him. Their lips met, then fused. The case she held in front of her didn't provide much of a barrier, but it was all she had. She gripped it hard to keep herself from touching him, especially once she felt his arms pull her even closer to him. "Don't go," he whispered.

"I have to. I'm...confused," she finally admitted to him.

He rested his forehead against hers and lowered his lashes. "Now you know how I've felt."

She pulled away from him so she could see him. "And you're not any more?"

"No. Not after last night. I know exactly who I want."

She took a deep breath. "I...I have to go. Time, just give me a little time. I need to think."

"I'm giving you twenty-four hours and then I'm coming for you."

She stepped away from him then, pulling her suitcase with her. “Oh please do not give me ultimatums. I’ve never responded well to threats.”

“No threat, babe. A promise, from me to you.” He reached down and took her suitcase from her. “Come on, I’ll drive you to the airport. Did you have a chance to make flight reservations?”

“I figured there’d be no need. There are pretty regular flights to Washington, DC.”

“You can fly my plane back, that way you can return to me much faster.”

A flabbergasted Sydney stuttered, “I...can’t fly your plane back! I have no idea how long I’ll be.”

“I already told you how long you’ll be.”

Sydney gritted her teeth and counted to ten. “See this is why we both need space and time to think. We do not know each other. If you knew me at all, you’d know I don’t take orders well. I watched my parents taking them for too long and decided early I wasn’t going to. Why do you think I’m my own boss?”

He reached out one hand and wrapped it around her neck using his thumb to rub the side of her jaw. “Believe me I understand all about business obligations.” He smiled. “I know a little something about running a company. I’ve been doing it for years. But I think, no I know, we have a lot in common already. That’s why I’m letting you go. So okay, take a commercial flight. I also know it’s time we did

something for ourselves. So I will come for you, and flying my plane there will get me to you faster.”

“Caine...this is crazy.”

He bent his head again but didn't kiss her, instead he said, “Baby, we'll have fun learning about all the craziness one day at a time. Now think about what I've said on your flight back, and then go home, take care of your business and get your ass back here in twenty-four hours. Or I'm coming for you.”

His mouth covered hers before she could respond. The man kissed like no one else. He was marking her, making sure she would return to him. When he finally pulled away, she reluctantly took her arms from around his neck and followed him out to the garage.



Sydney always thought those people she sometimes saw clinging to each other at airports were pathetic. Come on, either get on the flight together or go home. Then she found herself doing the same thing. She was wrapped so tightly around Caine, he had to pry her hands from around his neck and give her a gentle push in the direction of the counter. The last to board the plane, she stepped away from him but before she turned around to give the hostess her boarding pass, she heard him say, “Twenty-four hours.”

The cab pulled up in front of her townhouse in Tysons Corner. Early in the day, not many people were around. She paid the driver and went into her house, straight to her room and changed. She spent about an hour on her computer working on the design plans her client had called about. Sydney checked her watch. She had agreed to meet the General in a little over an hour. She grabbed her car keys and headed to the garage, she had just enough time to get to her office and grab a sandwich before her meeting.



Caine went into his office after seeing Sydney off at the airport, but he couldn't get anything done. He found himself staring out of his fourteenth floor window, not really seeing anything beyond it because his vision was aimed inward. He had already told his secretary to reschedule his appointments for the next couple of days and field his calls to Donald, except for Sydney's. He missed her. He had put a part of himself on a plane earlier and he'd never be whole again until he had her back in his arms. He had no idea how it happened to him, but it had.

When he called Donald to tell him what he planned to do, his friend laughed.

"I'm not surprised. This company has been the center of your life for too long."

“My grandfather worked hard to build this company. I could do no less than he or my father did.”

“Well you’ve succeeded,” Donald said. “Now it’s time to do something for yourself.”

He was right. The company stood at the point where it didn’t really need him to focus on it twenty-four/seven anymore. It would explain why he’d been so restless lately. The next deal or newest project didn’t excite him as much as it used to. He needed something more in his life. He needed a life beyond his work. That’s one reason taking such a hands-on approach to designing his new plane energized him so.

“You’re right, man. Working with Sydney on the plane has been the most fun and exciting thing I’ve done in the past few months.” And here he’d thought he’d only been making a new friend. In some ways, he shouldn’t have been surprised to find out his friend was a woman. Even through their electronic communication a friendship bond formed. Hence his invitation to have her deliver his plane and hang out for a couple of days. But he’d still needed a distraction, and going to Annie’s party had been a huge one.

“Well, Syd’s something else,” Donald continued. “Don’t worry about a thing. I can hold things together for a few days. Good luck. Not that you need it.” They hung up.

Of course there were women. There had always been women willing to provide him with a distraction. But he needed more. And one night out of character for him had brought him just what he needed, Sydney. His friend and his mystery woman were one and the same. And he must have been out of his mind to let her get on that plane without him.

Caine grabbed his phone again and dialed a special number at the Islip airport. An hour later, he stood in the hanger where his plane sat, fueled and ready for his pre-flight check. Forget the twenty-four hours. He'd given her enough time already, half of the day. He wanted, needed to be with her now. They had a whole lot of time to make up for. He refused to be separated from her any longer than he had, not until they both knew where they stood.

He grinned once he finally got clearance. He'd been floundering for years since his father died, in a sort of limbo. He built the company up just as his father and grandfather would have wanted him to. Donald was right, time he did something for himself, like go after his wild woman and not stop until he had her back where she belonged. *With him.*



The General had just left her office and Sydney felt glad she'd come back today to deal with him personally. He was after all a good friend of her parents and had helped to get her first contract with the military. But that's all he'd done,

helped to get her in the door. The rest had been entirely up to her. Military contracts were difficult enough, but almost impossible for a black woman with a small venture to handle on her own. Well, all ancient history now. She'd more than proven herself. She wondered what Caine would make of her accomplishments. She smiled. He wouldn't be at all surprised and he'd be proud of her.

Caine. He never strayed far from her thoughts. No matter how much she tried to deny or downplay what happened between them. He'd been right, something happened between them, beyond just sex. She'd *fallen* as he'd put it, for him too. She appeared to be no different from the rest of her family after all. When it was right, it was right. The buzzer on her phone announcing a call from her secretary brought her out of her reverie.

"Yes, Morgan, what is it?"

"There's someone out here to see you."

Before she could ask who, she knew, somehow she knew who it was. "Send him in."

He didn't bother to knock. He just opened her door and closed it behind him.

"I couldn't wait."

She grinned getting up and walking around her desk to meet him in the middle of her office. He opened his arms and raised them away from his sides.

Without pause she walked into them, and wrapped her arms around him. “What took you so long?”

“I should have never let you leave. We belong together. We’ll work out everything else as we go along.”

Sydney’s responded by covering her mouth with his and accepting him into her life as he willingly accepted her.

Epilogue

The phone rang. A gruff male voice grunted, “Hello.”

Sydney had completely forgotten about the time difference. She had been so excited to talk to her sisters. It had been a couple of months since she’d relocated to Islip and moved her office to New York. Her parents thought she had lost her mind, and Annemaire delighted in telling her she was acting more like her, and warning Caine he’d better treat her right. She knew people who could make him disappear.

Well, Caine treated her just fine. But her sisters gave her the most support, but then again, they were women in love too. So they understood perfectly how she felt.

“Oh, Sebastian.” Sydney returned her attention to the call and her reasons for it. “I’m so sorry to wake you, but I need to speak to Brit.” He may as well learn time held no barriers for the sisters.

“Who’s this?”

“It’s Syd.” She heard rustling sounds like the phone being passed around then her sister’s sleepy voice.

“Syd,” Brittney said, “is something wrong?”

Sydney laughed. “No Brit. I just have some news.”

“What is it?”

“Hold on a sec. I have to connect Atlanta too.” Sydney felt her lover’s breath on her shoulder, and had to wave her hand at him to get him to stop distracting her as she dialed her youngest sister’s number. Atlanta answered on the second ring.

“Brit, you still there?” Syd asked as she connected all three of them together on a conference call.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Oh, a three-way,” Atlanta laughed.

“Hi, Sis,” Brit said. “Syd has news for us.”

“What? Did she get laid again?” Atlanta asked. “Who’d you pretend to be this time?”

“Not funny.”

Both sisters giggled. “Just listen. Caine and I are going to fly down to see you, Atlanta, in a day or two and we wanted to come to Finland next week, Brit, to visit you guys there.”

“Wow,” Brit cried.

“This is serious,” Atlanta exclaimed.

A butterfly kiss on her shoulder had Syd turning her head and looking into startling clear blue eyes, eyes that held her future, so she didn't really hear the rest of her sisters' questions.

Caine placed his hand over her phone. "May I?" She placed the phone in his hand.

"Hello Sydney's sisters."

A chorus of two voices repeated his greeting.

"I'm looking forward to meeting you both, but Sydney can't speak to you anymore right now. But, we'll be seeing you both soon and you can finally grill me in person. Just so you know, I love your sister." He hung up the phone.

"I love you too." The five-carat diamond he had placed on her finger earlier caught the sun, as she turned into his embrace.

The End

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LaVerne Thompson is a wife, mother and former intellectual property attorney. An avid reader and multi-published author, she writes about what she loves to read most contemporary, fantasy, and sci/fi romances. To learn more about her work visit her website at lavernethompson.webs.com or check out her blog at isisindcblog.blogspot.com to learn more about her.

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