

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ELLORA'S CAVEMEN

Angelia Sparrow
& Naomi Brooks

Courtney Bee

Sherry James

Fiona Jayde

Cheryl Dragon

Lyla Sinclair

Flavors
of ECSTASY
Volume 3

Cherry Tart

Angelia Sparrow & Naomi Brooks

In 1896, disgraced Chastity is sent to the New Abilene Colony on Jupiter's moon of Io. Resigned to a fast marriage in order to save her nonexistent virtue, she doesn't count on falling hard and lustfully for handsome Ulysses. During the six-month trip, the virile Outrider, whose favorite part of his job is lassoing and riding asteroids away from the ship, meets his match in this petite redhead. Chastity teaches him in delicious detail exactly why her name fits her so badly.

Climbing the Corporate Ladder Without Panties

Courtney Bee

Kate's plan to become editor at a male-dominated publishing house just suffered a major setback, and to make matters worse, the cocky but handsome IT guy is on his own quest—to make Kate his.

One night Kate succumbs to his brash charm, shocked as he loosens her prim bun and bends her over for a spanking. Ashamed to admit she's just had the best sex of her life, Kate has to make a decision—keep control, forfeiting sexual bliss for a dream career, or embark on a sexual journey where she surrenders all power.

Eight Seconds

Sherry James

Erotic writer Taylor Westfall needs fresh inspiration. Who better to help her research sexual techniques than professional bull rider Devlin McCord? Devlin's red-hot reputation proves his riding skills aren't limited to the arena. Taylor's sure he can get her juices—creative and otherwise—flowing if she can find the nerve to proposition him.

Devlin is tired of one-night stands and life on the road. He wants the girl he's loved since high school. When Taylor tells him she *needs* to have sex with him, he's ready...and he's got more than eight seconds in him.

Pitch Black

Fiona Jayde

Breathless seduction in a glass elevator above a darkened Kiev covers up the deactivation of Katherine Belaya's implanted GPS tracker. Nikolai Rostov may have just saved her life or led her into a trap set by the Russians. Her lust for him is simple nerves, adrenaline pumped high by the threat of bullets. As they fight for survival, Kate's trust in Nick may be the only thing keeping them alive.

Shifting Sides

Cheryl Dragon

In spite of being held captive by sadistic scientists, shifters Kiren and Breman forged a relationship. The evacuation of Earth forced them apart but their mutual lust never died. Now Breman has the chance to bring Kiren back to the rebel colony with him.

Cat-shifter Kiren has missed her dragon-shifter mate and when Breman catches up with her on Old Earth, their lust gets the best of them—for once without limits or spectators. Finally sharing all their secrets, Breman has a plan. Freedom and passion are within reach if they can escape the assassins in orbit.

The Johnson Obsession

Lyla Sinclair

From her balcony, Vivian secretly sketches her sexy wet neighbor while he swims and lounges at the apartment pool each evening. When he shows up at her door one night, she's sure he's there to deliver some misdirected mail. But suddenly, Duke is dominating her, carrying out sexual plans that she could only dream of—*exactly* the one's she's dreamed of, in fact. He *knows* the contents of her dirty little fantasies. But will he see it through to the ending she'd never dared ask of any man?

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Editorial Team: Briana St. James, Sue-Ellen Gower, Pamela Campbell, Helen Woodall, Shannon Combs,
Denise Powers
Cover art by Darrell King

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CHERRY TART

Angelia Sparrow & Naomi Brooks

Chapter One

Chastity Millwood set her embroidery in her lap and raised the parchment shade over the brass porthole. There had been nothing to see, really, since Mars had dropped away a week ago. Aunt Prudence sat facing her on the red velvet seat, her clear pince-nez on since she was embroidering with colors, the gaslight turned up as she delicately added a French knot to the handkerchief.

Chastity sighed softly and ventured another glance out. The trip from Earth to Io was six tedious months, fully half of the year 1897. Four long months remained for her to fill with embroidery, knitting and self-improvement, rather than following the kinetoscope and aetheric news of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Worse, because lady immigrants were required to stay for five years, she would miss the turning of the new century as well.

She drew back as a boulder hurtled past them. The rock was too far away to harm them. As she watched, one of the Outriders in his self-propelled suit lassoed a very small asteroid with a wire loop shot from a sort of gun. He pulled it away from the ship.

Chastity put her hands on the side of the porthole and watched eagerly. The Outrider saw her. She watched him settle the asteroid between his knees, touch his helmet as if tipping his hat and steer the rock away from the ship, riding it as if it were a horse.

She couldn't see his face, but she knew he'd seen her. Oh, she hoped he was one of the good-looking ones. There were a dozen Outriders, some gorgeous, some badly scarred and hideous. The journey from Earth had been dreadfully boring. Her Aunt Prudence rode tight herd on her, keeping her from talking to any man under the age of fifty. But she observed the men anyway.

Luna City had been almost like Earth. It reminded her of nothing so much as Kansas City, where she'd traveled once with her father. Bustling, busy and on the edge of the frontier, but still civilized, Luna City was the last stop where Earth goods could easily be gotten. The men there had been older, sober and hard working. They reminded her of her father.

Mars had been more exciting, with its prospectors and energy miners and men bound to the Line. Three great Liners had been in port at Redtown the week they were there. Parties and handsome young men, who were a little wild and frightening, abounded. Not that she'd been allowed out without a chaperone. But Aunt Prudence had to sleep sometime and Chastity was an accomplished sneak.

She'd enjoyed Redtown port and the company of the junior officers, mostly Outriders. There had been dancing and strange wines that made her head spin and

lovely painted ladies she knew were not nice but who laughed and were such fun. Chastity had given up on niceness and proper behavior after William betrayed her.

Thinking of William soured her mood as it always did. The Outrider was probably cut from the same cloth as all the other good men she'd met. She pulled the shade and shifted, her bustle squeaking as the gold taffeta day dress rustled. Aunt Prudence looked up sternly.

Although Prudence was only twenty-five, she looked older. Chastity hated the way she always wore dove grays, shell pinks and sickly lavenders, which didn't suit her. She pulled and pomaded her rich auburn hair into a strict bun from which no tendril dared escape. She hid her vibrant green eyes behind green spectacles or her pince-nez. She laced her corsets loosely, so as not to emphasize her shape.

Mr. Millwood had decided that his dowdy sister who was emigrating to New Abilene on Jupiter's Io Colony would be the perfect chaperone for his wild, willful and scandalous daughter. He had been right. Chastity sighed softly and picked up her tea towel. Aunt Prudence had seen the journey from Boston to Io as a time to fill Chastity's hope chest rather than a last gasp of freedom for the girl.

The weight restrictions on the Liner limited them and their household goods, but Aunt Prudence should have been a Spartan. A barely furnished house awaited the schoolmistress in New Abilene, so she had devoted much of her allotted weight to making sure Chastity had a wedding dress and hope chest along. She'd filled the chest before leaving Earth with cloth, linens, towels and such, then added as much knitting wool, embroidery floss and other such fripperies as she and Mr. Millwood had been able to buy.

Chastity had sulked at first but finally resigned herself to four more months of hard needle labor and then a fast marriage to a man she didn't know. She didn't care anymore. One man was like another and her husband would be no different than William, taking what he desired and then sneering at her for allowing it.

She wasn't going to live in her aunt's shadow for the rest of the trip though, being scowled at every time she arranged her own coppery curls to draw men's eyes and going to church every day. Once a week was plenty, but Aunt Prudence liked to pester everyone, including God.

Chastity went to work, stitching fantails onto the towel.

At least the food was good, even in second class. It wasn't the first-class' seven-course dinners at the captain's table but the soup was hot, the meat was nicely seasoned and the bread was fresh.

Aunt Prudence always insisted they dress for dinner in the dining room. Chastity hated wearing silk. It made her nervous and she'd nearly dripped oxtail soup on her green basque.

A waiter set a small cherry tart in front of her. She saw him tuck a note under her dish, carefully concealing it from her aunt. As he straightened up, he gave her a smile.

She matched his smile. "Thank you." She palmed the note, making sure he saw her do it and that Aunt Prudence did not.

He sketched a small bow and moved on to serve the rest of the table. After three bites, Chastity excused herself to the necessary room.

Once away from her aunt's eyes, she looked over the note. "Dear Lady, after seeing your pretty face at the porthole this afternoon, I knew I had to see it in person. Forgive the imposition and my forward nature. I will await you at the promenade. You'll know me because I've stolen a bit of dessert while bribing the waiter." After half a moment's indecision, she hurried to the promenade to meet the mysterious man.

He stood near the great transparent wall of the hull, nibbling a cherry tart. He wore brown pinstriped trousers, a red-and-tan-striped shirt and red tapestry suspenders. When he saw her, he made a small bow.

"You're here," she gasped, trying to catch her breath after hurrying. For once, she wondered if Aunt Prudence had the right idea about loose laces.

He smiled down at her and licked a flake of pastry out of his mustache, his handsome face making her dizzier than ever. "I said I would be, didn't I?" He finished his treat in two bites and licked his fingers.

The promenade wavered in and out then went gray. Chastity knew she was about to faint and positioned herself so her good-looking swain could catch her.

She came to lying on the ground with him lifting her head and fanning her.

"Darling, are you all right?" he asked as her eyes fluttered open.

She nodded and sat up the rest of the way, slowly. "I fear I made too much haste." Upon realizing what he'd said, she glared at him. "I don't believe we're quite at that level of familiarity, sir." Aunt Prudence would have been proud of the ice in her voice, which was quite at odds with the heat his strong arms inspired by simply lying under her shoulder.

"My apologies, miss. You had me worried. I wasn't thinking."

She gave him a small, saucy smile. "But you were catching. So you're forgiven."

He returned her smile with one that promised pure deviltry. Chastity had seen that on many male faces over the years. Whether it was slipping frogs into her desk and snakes down her dress or catching her alone for kisses, the look was always the same. She loved it.

"Miss Chastity Elizabeth Millwood." She extended one hand. "I'm traveling with my Aunt Prudence to the Io Colony."

"Ulysses Carter, Miss Millwood. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance." He shook her hand gently.

"You're an Outrider. That's so very dangerous," she said as she tucked one hand into his arm. "Are you bound to the Line?" she asked. His shipboard uniform would have told her, with blue cuffs for a career officer, but red ones for a bound man. She liked his off-duty clothes better.

Binding to the Line was the most common way for men to emigrate. Only certain jobs paid bounties for traveling to Io or Ganymede or even Mars. Most men took work with the Line for five years or ten and the Line made sure they were settled in the colonies. Women always emigrated free, but they could not leave the colony for five years.

"Indeed I am, but this is my last voyage. Nine years and eight months I've sailed back and forth from Jupiter." He gestured at the stars outside the wide panes of thick glass that lined the promenade. "Now I have a little ranch waiting for me outside of New Abilene. House is all built, just waiting for me."

"Ulysses," she tasted the name. "It suits you, wandering among the stars for ten years to find a home." She giggled. "Pity Father's naming traditions won. Mother wanted to name me Penelope."

They reached the end of the promenade and turned to walk back.

Ulysses looked down at her. "I like your name. Does it suit you as well?"

Chastity looked up and rolled her eyes in a gesture so unladylike her mother would faint to see it, were she not six years dead. "Dreadfully." She cast her eyes down and made her mouth small and modest. "I'm a scandal. Hence my being packed off to the Colonies with my auntie, rather than left on Earth to blacken the family name."

Ulysses' smile was pure wolf and heartbreaker dimples flashed in his cheeks. "And have you promised to mend your ways already, or not until we arrive?"

"I have mended but not by my choice. I never promise anything I am uncertain I can fulfill."

"I see." He sounded thoughtful. "You did respond to the note, however."

She winked and ducked behind her fan. "That was no promise. It was only...investigation."

"Has the lady detective found me to her liking?"

She lowered the fan. "You are a fast thinker, too clever by half and very handsome."

"Thank you. And you are lovely. So lovely. May I kiss you, my pretty, scandalous Chastity?" He paused them near a small alcove.

Etiquette called for her to scream and beat him until help arrived. Instead, Chastity gave him wide green eyes that never failed to tempt a man more and rapped his arm with her fan.

Ulysses kept smiling. "Yes?" He leaned closer, his mouth not far from hers. She gave a small nod. He tucked her into the alcove, shielding her from passing eyes with his own large body and pressed his lips to her own.

The sweetness of the kiss took her by surprise and she melted under it. His arms went 'round her waist and hers went around his neck as the kiss deepened. It filled her whole world and when his tongue entreated for entrance, she granted it.

No one had kissed her with such passion, exploring every corner of her mouth, savoring every instant. The honorable suitors back home had stolen chaste, sweet pecks

of her lips. Those with less honor had taught her too much, but had been furtive and nasty about it. And William...but she shoved the thought of her treacherous fiancé away.

As the passions welled in her, she grew aware of wetness between her thighs and the way her corset restrained her bosom. She pulled away from the lips that were near to scorching her own, a little frightened of her own desire and patted herself back into some semblance of presentability.

"Very nice, sir." She watched him catch his breath and hid her smile at the stirrings she had caused within him, made clearly visible by the tightness of his trousers.

"I'd ask you to go dancing, but I'm not allowed on your deck." He hadn't released her waist.

"Have you something nice to wear?" she asked, thrilled by the idea. Chastity loved dancing, especially with very large men. The knowledge there had been dancing every other night had been a torment to her.

"Not very nice. I have a suit, but it's old."

She gave him a wicked look. "Steal something. There's a gentleman about your height in first class. He's older and never goes out. Borrow his suit and return it unharmed and no one will notice. Look like you belong somewhere and with me on your arm no one will question us."

"I'll find what I can," he promised, releasing her and bringing both her hands to his lips.

"I'll be in the Gold Salon at ten. Now I must go or Auntie will worry." She looked up at him. "One more kiss."

He gave it, more briefly than their first, but with even more heat behind it. She decided she liked Mr. Ulysses Carter a great deal.

"Now you know why I'm a scandal," she said and hurried back to her stateroom.

Chapter Two

Chastity pled an unhappy tummy to her aunt and escaped the musicale in the Silver Parlor. She hated listening to instrumental music, much preferring to dance. Once Prudence had left the stateroom, she hurried to the Gold Salon and found a bench just outside to wait for Ulysses. She tapped her new black dragonling-leather pumps as she listened to the mazurka from inside.

When he turned a curve in the hallway, her eyes went wide. He'd been good-looking enough in his own clothing. Now, in someone's stolen tailcoat, he looked like a prince in a storybook, his strong jaw, thin mustache and sharp nose setting off his sensual mouth and changeable eyes. He'd dressed his fair hair, smoothed the unruly wave near his face into pomaded flatness.

She bounced off the bench and gave him a little curtsy. "You look very handsome, Mr. Carter."

He bowed over her hand. "And you are stunning, miss. As always."

"Oh, a waltz!" She smiled up at him. "Shall we dance?" She took his proffered arm and let him lead her to the floor. The other couples whirled through in a flurry of color. They found a place on the edge and gradually worked their way into the dancing. Chastity discovered her partner, although capable enough, had no great love of the waltz. When a more lively schottische played, he swung her through it with zest.

She was gasping for breath so he led her to sit and brought her a cup of the punch. They watched the Virginia Reel. She turned to him.

"So, Mr. Carter, what is your situation once the Line frees you? What will you raise outside of New Abilene?"

"Black dragonlings."

She gave a little gasp, since the flirting seemed to call for it. "I've heard of them. Terribly fierce. You're awfully brave."

He almost preened. "Dangerous work. But I think it'll be worth it."

She raised the hem of her skirt, showing precisely three inches of her new shoes. She could tell he knew what type of leather it was. "Aunt Prudence is the schoolmistress at the New Abilene settlement."

"Is she now? We'll be nearly neighbors then. My ranch is just out of the town."

Chastity gave him a naughty smile, one that always got men to do exactly what she wanted. "I suspect I'll see a great deal of you. I think I've had enough dancing, Mr. Carter."

He nodded, his own face eager. "I certainly hope so." He led her to a deserted service gangway and dogged both hatches, drawing down their little green shades. "We

can have some privacy here," he said. He turned to her and reached out a hand. She stepped toward him and he twined one finger in her red curls. She moved close and he took her hands in his face. The strong, warm hands against her cheeks made her smile as he bent and kissed her.

His kisses were as passionate as the first had been and his mouth only seemed to grow hotter, searing the taste of him into her memory and onto her skin. His grip on her waist made her head swim and when he pressed a burning trail of kisses down her neck, she did faint.

"You must stop lacing so tightly, my dear," Ulysses grumbled as he brought her around by rubbing her wrists and ankles. "While I adore women in lovely attire, swooning does inhibit kissing you."

She opened her eyes when he paused and smiled at his hand on one of her ankles. "You are too kind." She clicked the heels of her dancing shoes, careful not to catch his fingers. She wanted those fingers on her calves as well, and maybe even higher on her legs. She covered the naughty thought with small talk. "It's such a lovely leather. I have a valise of it as well. What do you plan to make of it?"

"I have heard rumors that the young ladies are using it for corsetry," Ulysses said, running one thumb down each side of her rib cage which made her stomach flutter.

"Do dragonribs replace whalebone?" It was all she could think of to ask. His hands spanning her waist along with his thumbs rubbing and rubbing were making her lightheaded although she could breathe perfectly well.

"Oh yes. How lovely one would look on you. So dark against your skin." He kissed her neck again, making her shiver.

"It takes a great deal of boning to keep me curvy." Chastity knew it was no longer flirtation now. She was into it, like the scandalous little strumpet her aunt believed her to be. Well, in for a penny's worth, in for a pound, as her father always said. She knew what Ulysses wanted, for it was exactly her own desire as well. He was handsome and kind. Perhaps he wouldn't turn traitor as William – she stopped the thought again.

The look of pure lust on Ulysses face was one she'd never seen turned on a woman of her station. She'd seen it often enough as men watched the bad women of the city.

"Show me how much...boning?" The expression made her realize she was no longer talking about corsets, but using very crude slang.

Chastity laid a finger over his lips, smiling at the way his thin mustache tickled. "It's a long trip." She guided his hands back to her waist and smiled as he touched fingertip to fingertip around her body. "We'll have plenty of time." The sensation of his hands on her waist made her want them on her arms and shoulders and legs, perhaps even her bosom.

He kissed her neck again and the top of her corset was far too constricting as her bosom tingled. She wanted him to take the kisses there, perhaps even – oh daring thought! – onto the breasts themselves. Instead, she caught his mouth and gave him a

long, deep kiss, one that made her toes curl and littler shivers run over her arms and thighs.

"I'm not certain I can wait the entire trip." His words sounded almost like a groan.

"You won't have to. I just want to see if you're willing to wait until tomorrow, or if some other pretty chippy will turn your head." She kissed the tip of his nose. "Besides, after lunch Auntie always has a two-hour nap. I will have plenty of time for you. Tonight would be too hasty."

Ulysses seemed to melt with relief. "I only have eyes for you, darling."

"I'll be free at thirteen. Where shall we meet?"

"At the salon." He made no bones about looking down the front of her dress. "To start." His hands slid upward from her waist and Chastity shivered with wanting before catching them and draping his arms around her neck.

"One more kiss, please, my dear Mr. Carter, and then I must get back to my stateroom before the musicale ends."

This one surpassed the others, as his mouth devoured hers with a hunger she had never felt from a man. One hand slipped up from her waist and stroked the outside of her bosom, making her tingle even more. His tongue in her mouth seemed to promise more interesting ways of combining their bodies.

She parted from him, wide-eyed and breathless, her heart pounding and her skin all-over gooseflesh. She could feel herself blushing and her lips felt very large and hot. A delicious feeling, one she'd never had before, coiled beneath her navel and made her want to squirm. Tomorrow couldn't come fast enough, for it would bring more of those kisses.

He gallantly helped her to her feet and undogged the hatch. "Until tomorrow, my dear Chastity."

She hurried back to the stateroom, took off her dress and loosed her stays. She was almost asleep, reliving the kisses, when Prudence came in from the musicale.

Ulysses sauntered back to his own quarters, sometimes catching a glimpse of himself in the polished brass fittings of the Liner. Chastity. What a lousy name for a gorgeous, sexy lady. She wasn't a virgin, he was sure of that. He relived kissing her, feeling his already uncomfortable "borrowed" formalwear grow even tighter.

He changed back into his clothing and hastened to return the suit before either the cleaners or Mr. Donovan in first class could miss it. When he got back to his cabin, his bunkmate, Paul, had just come in.

"Hey, Bangup," Ulysses greeted him as he sat down and unlaced his shoes. Paul had the most rotten luck ever and managed to get himself banged up at least once every run. Ulysses' nickname had stuck since that very first trip.

"Uly. You're up late. Why aren't you asleep, old man?"

Ulysses rolled his eyes. Bangup had taken to calling him that when they'd first drawn each other as bunkmates on the Liner. They'd shipped together for almost ten years, never separated since most captains were loath to break up a good team.

He grinned at Paul. "I was out dancing."

Paul stripped out of his work coveralls and climbed to the top bunk. "Yeah? Steerage get up enough energy to have a party?" He rubbed the inside of his thighs and his arches, the places where their powersuits put the most strain. "This is one Outrider who'll be glad to get past the asteroid belt and back to inside duty." He stretched. "Getting old already." The Outriders usually preferred being outside in their powersuits to standing around in their uniforms as security.

"Nah. Get this. Second class."

"Playing way outta your league there, Uly." Bangup waggled his eyebrows.

"She doesn't think so. She's already let me kiss her. Several times."

"Either she's a hussy or you're a mesmerist."

Ulysses shrugged and climbed into his own bunk. "Maybe a little of both."

Paul leaned over the edge. "Is she pretty?"

Ulysses grinned up at him. "Gorgeous. Unbelievably so."

"Lucky you. Sure wish I'd gone dancing instead of blocking ten asteroids. Hey, does she have a sister?"

"Alas, just an auntie who's very strict. Perhaps you should introduce yourself." Ulysses favored his buddy with a smirk. Paul's tastes ran to more notional and domineering women than his did.

"Strict how?" Paul's grin was wicked as he reached for the light. "Mean riding crop?"

"Meaning church. Every day."

Paul shrugged and snapped the light. "I can do that. Is the church-loving auntie pretty?"

"Oh yes. Redhead, green spectacles, nice figure. Not even thirty."

"Mmm, bet I could teach her to pray really well. What say, Uly? If I can get a kiss out of the stern prune, what'll you give me? Maybe a partial share of that ranch? And if I don't, you get a partial share of that store I'm getting."

"All right." Ulysses sat up and turned on the light. He went to the desk and got pen and paper. "What's the share? A quarter?" They'd spoken before of investing in each other's stake as insurance against one of their ventures failing. This just made it formal.

"Sure."

Ulysses wrote up the wager contracts, then handed them up to Paul to sign. "Good luck." They shook hands. No gentleman would fail to honor a written bet contract.

They each sealed the other's contract in their footlocker and went back to bed.

Paul rose with Uly's alarm and dressed for morning chapel. He wanted to have a look at this strict lady for himself. He walked in on the first hymn and found her there, already completely engrossed. She wasn't difficult to find, being the only person under sixty in the room on a weekday morning. He smiled at her dark red hair, so tightly caught back, and wondered how it would look spread out on a pillow. From the size of her bun, she had a lot of hair.

He pretended to pay close attention to the service, but studied the lady every chance he could, being careful not to stare. She was pretty, with a long nose and a mouth that looked to be nicely full, if she ever smiled. He definitely wanted that kiss.

As they finished the service and turned to leave, he gave her a small bow and a smile. She returned an odd look, as if she was trying to place him.

Tempted though he was, he didn't brush against her in the aisle. He just nodded a little and said, "Have a blessed day, ma'am," before heading the other direction. He felt her watching him as he went.

At naptime, Chastity feigned sleep until her aunt was snoring, then she scooted out to see Ulysses. She waited on the bench outside the Gold Salon, reading *Pilgrim's Progress*, glancing up after every page.

She had just reached the Vanity Fair when Ulysses came around the corner. She looked up at him with a large smile.

"Hello, Mr. Carter."

He bowed over her hand. "Miss Millwood."

She closed the book and tucked it in her reticule with a grimace. "Dry stuff, but it's as close to a novel as I'm allowed." She beamed up at him. "So are we to have an adventure?"

He offered his arm as she rose. "Perhaps."

"Then lead on and I shall stuff my ears with wax or sail betwixt Scylla and Charybdis for you," Chastity teased, tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow. She felt the warm, strong muscles under her palm.

She was sorry she'd been so flippant when he took her belowdecks to the crew quarters, hurrying her through service corridors before anyone could see her. She knew what was coming next, but the bunk beds gave her pause.

"You share quarters? We won't be intruded upon, will we?" She covered her mouth in horror. Any nice girl would have been shocked and horrified to be taken to a man's bedroom. Her first concern had simply been interruption.

Ulysses' smile was not at all genteel as he said, "No. He works the afternoon shift. I work mornings."

She smiled. "All right." As Ulysses drew her close for a kiss, she laid a hand on his chest. "Oh, wait a moment." She cleared her throat and pounded lightly on his chest with her small fists. "You brute! You brute! You dreadful vicious brute!" When he let go

of her, she pressed her wrist to her forehead and turned away like the ingénue in a melodrama. "I am overcome by your superior strength and manliness and faint at your feet, imploring your nonexistent mercy upon my helpless state." She faked a faint right onto the bottom bunk.

Ulysses climbed into the bunk, kneeling over her. He unfastened her dress and loosened her stays in the pretense of getting her some air. Her bared skin chilled in the cool air, but seemed to sizzle under his touch, which drove all the coldness from her.

"Oh dearest. How can I revive you?" He kissed her, rubbing her wrists and then her arms, moving gradually up to her shoulders.

Before he could chafe her breasts under the guise of awakening her, Chastity threw both arms around his neck and pulled him down to kiss her with those hot, melting kisses he'd given her the previous night.

"Convention is satisfied," she explained when he let her breathe a little.

"Oh good. At least we'll be proper in one thing today." He stole a quick kiss of her lips and sat up on the edge of the bed. "You have the daintiest feet," he said as he slipped off her shoes and stroked her ankles. She felt that coiled squirminess start again. He began rolling up her skirts and rolling down her stockings, sliding thick, gentle fingers under the delicate, crocheted garters to loosen them. Soon, he kissed her knees, running his tongue behind them, which made her legs tremble.

"And what satisfies an intemperate man of your passions?" she asked, feeling as if he were doing all the work. He left her feeling worshipped and delighted, not shamed.

"Pleasing lovely redheads in every way imaginable." He kissed her thigh near the knee, just above her rolled-down stocking.

She smiled at him. "Ulysses, I am more than willing."

He rolled her skirt to her waist and parted her open drawers. She could feel the hot press of his hands through the cotton as he held the sides apart, looking upon her secrets. He just looked for so long she grew worried.

"Ulysses?" Perhaps he thought her ugly here. She suspected it wasn't a pretty part, but she'd never looked.

One big hand carded gently through the soft triangle of hair and she heard him inhale deeply. "So lovely. It's been a very long time." He placed a small kiss on her lower lips, sending shocks all through her. "I'd like to kiss you more, my dear."

Chastity felt herself getting too warm all over, the blush on her face creeping down until even her legs felt hot. Her secret parts felt hottest of all. If Ulysses kissed them, they would burn his mouth. She wanted another kiss more than she'd ever really wanted anything. More than she wanted a husband, and definitely more than she'd wanted William, who'd caused the whole scandal by doing nothing nearly so warming and naughty.

"Please," she whispered, almost afraid of what came next.

His lips touched her again, sending little tingles all over her body. His tongue stroked along her pussy, opening her, letting him see and taste all her secrets. He licked again, harder this time, seeming to search. She thought she would melt from that alone.

She shuddered as he stopped in one very sensitive spot and played with it. She wanted him to never stop, but feared if he didn't, she would explode, bursting her corset and dress and maybe her skin as well.

The spot seemed to grow larger and he drew it into his hot, wet mouth. She gasped at the pleasure as he flicked his tongue over it. She grew quite damp and the ball of nerves at the pit of her stomach extended to all her limbs, tensing her muscles convulsively as the sensations seemed to peak, making her whole world turn into the stars outside the ship.

She opened her eyes, gasping and rocking on his face. He pulled away and gave her a smile, then winked as he licked his mustache and returned for a second round.

This time he ran his tongue over the edges and into all the folds before thrusting into her. She rubbed against his face for that, wanting more and more that she had no names for. She never wanted to move again, only to lie here with his mouth on her forever. She rubbed against his tongue, hoping she knew how to ask.

"Fill me," she said softly. "Fill me or I'll die of wanting you."

Ulysses came up and kissed her mouth with salty, wet lips. She could feel the ridge in his trousers, like William's, which had been awkward in her hand. But this one lay along the cleft between her legs, feeling as if it fit there, and she rubbed against it unconsciously as his tongue slipped into her mouth.

"One moment, sweetling." Ulysses got up and she nearly cried with frustration. She had been close to another of those inner explosions. She rolled onto one side and unlaced her corset for more room to breathe as she watched him dig through drawers and start in on a trunk labeled "Danvers".

He paused in his searching to stare at her breasts before redoubling his efforts. At last he found a little case and took something out of it. He dunked it in the washbasin a few times and then unfastened his trousers.

Chastity stared, eaten up with curiosity. She'd never actually seen a man's cock under the light. Certainly, she knew they had them, having helped with her baby brothers, but a man's was distinctly different than the tiny pink spout that had once fountained all over her and her nana. William had insisted on darkness so she had never had a chance to see. Ulysses stood before her in full light, looking amused at her curiosity and letting her look her fill.

She stared more, taking in the size of Ulysses' cock, the pendulous sac at the base, the hair that started at his navel and spread wide at the fork, continuing down his legs, but most of all, the proudly jutting organ itself.

She watched as he rolled a thin sheath over the long, darkly flushed shaft. "What's that?"

"An English riding coat, for safety in damp climates, my dear." Ulysses kissed her, a sweet light buss, and rolled her back onto her back. He nuzzled at her breasts. Her nipples, already tight, seemed to make her quim quiver when he kissed them. She shivered when he did it again.

"I knew you'd be sweet," he said, closing his lips over a nipple and sucking it, rubbing it with his tongue. She groaned and her hips tilted up of their own accord. He laughed and then, before she could grow fearful, he was sliding in, slowly, easing her into the feeling.

He was big, much larger than William, and the sheath seemed to tug at her skin. He kept sliding and his lips never left her nipples and throat and breasts, except to find her lips and make her melt all over again.

Then he was in, filling her to the top and she breathed out a sigh.

"I'm not hurting, am I, Chastity?" Ulysses' concerned face greeted her when she opened her eyes.

"No," she said, mostly truthfully. It hadn't hurt, exactly, but it didn't feel as William had, with pain melting into a fullness, or as wonderful as Ulysses' tongue had felt. She suspected that little device was to blame.

He kissed her again and again and the discomfort vanished with her increasing wetness. Soon there was only the joy of being filled again, of having a man atop and within her. She had only experienced it once before but she had craved it ever since.

Her hips moved again, traitorous wanton things they were. Nice ladies lay still and quiet and let the man have his pleasure. She rubbed anyway. He looked down, amused.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and got the motion she wanted, the one that tripped that sweet spot which made her go all to flinders for a moment. She gasped, this time more intense than the others.

He kissed her, whimpering with the effort of staying still.

"Ulysses, darling," she whispered, "you don't mind that I'm a round-heeled tart."

"Nonsense. You're my cherry tart. Ripe and oh-so sweet, you naughty girl." He could resist no longer and thrust into her, moving steadily but not hard. He kissed her as he did and she gasped with the need of more.

When he ran one thumb over her hard nipple, she climaxed again, bucking beneath him like a wild horse. She twisted and thrust, wanting more of his cock, more of his mouth, more and more, more of everything until she couldn't breathe or think for the pleasure.

He spent within her, nearly roaring with his own desire, and held himself above her, shuddering for long minutes. He withdrew, removed the device and fastened his trousers. She caught a last glimpse of his organ, flushed no longer, but pink and quiescent as he closed up.

He lay back down beside her, drawing her close. William had risen, looked upon her as if she were soiled and left. Ulysses cuddled her, kissing her neck and playing in her disarranged hair.

"You're wonderful," Chastity sighed as he stroked her back. "I'm so pleased I won't have to leave you behind entirely once we get to New Abilene."

Ulysses kissed her. "As if you could, my darling. I'll certainly come courting, if your aunt will allow me. If she won't, we'll elope and you can be a scandal again."

"Are your intentions honorable, Mr. Carter?" she teased, hoping he really did mean what he said, that she wouldn't be just a shipboard fancy.

He put on his gravest and most solemn face. "Entirely."

She kissed him then, comforting and without much passion. "I'll happily be Mrs. Carter if there are such nights with it and if you'll have me." She looked away. "I was...no innocent."

He tipped her face back and kissed her. "I know that and I will have you anyway. I have never enjoyed one so eager or so delightful. Innocence is fit for children. You, my dear one, are a woman. I'll have you for my own, once we've settled a bit."

She sat up suddenly, seeming to realize what disarray her clothes and hair were in. "Ulysses, I've had a lovely time, but I must get back. Auntie doesn't nap all day. Tomorrow?"

He beamed. "Yes, sweet. Meet me at the same spot? Would you like a wash?" He rose and drew water into the basin for her.

"Yes, please, to both." She washed her flushed and sweating face, neck and chest. She wet her hair and took his offered comb to reconstruct her chignon.

At last she looked presentable. As she turned, she could see Ulysses was lying on the bed, grinning like a fool, clearly thinking of nothing but mussing her again. He kissed her deeply one last time and she hurried off.

Chapter Three

Chastity slipped out to meet Ulysses every afternoon for the next week. The second day, he'd fitted her with a pessary so he didn't have to keep plundering his roommate's store of French letters. The wax and linen plug was far less uncomfortable than the rubber sheath. They made love every afternoon.

Afterward, they would lie together, talking of their plans for Io. Ulysses told her about the house that was already half-furnished. She told him about the unrelenting needlework. At his request, she embroidered braided wheat stalks on the next set of pillowcases after the peacocks were done. She showed him when it was finished and he demonstrated his pleasure with a very long kissing session, one that left her barely able to walk for the chafing of his unshaven face on her thighs.

The week after, she met him, but did not go with him to his room. They walked the promenade instead. As they watched the Outriders lasso the few asteroids that were threats and send them on a different course, they talked of work. He told her of the powersuit and riding a chunk of hurtling rock like it was a runaway bronco, of long days aboard ship keeping the peace among the debt-servants and the undesirables in steerage. The life of a junior Line officer fascinated her. In all her travels, she'd never heard tales like his.

She told him of her family, of her dead mother and her father's family who named all the women after virtues. She spoke of Grandmother Faith, Aunt Constance, Aunt Prudence and her own sisters, Hope and Patience.

They played backgammon in the coffeehouse, Chastity wicked with the doubling cube and Ulysses her equal at strategy for getting his pieces off. They ended the week with her ahead by five hundred and twenty-seven points to his five hundred and twenty-one.

He beat her at shuffleboard and checkers, but could not master chess, no matter how many lessons they tried. He taught her to play poker, a most unladylike occupation, but one she took to with more relish and skill than tiresome old whist. When he started keeping a point tally and the winner began collecting in kisses, Chastity suddenly became a very bad poker player.

They kissed in the alcoves, frustrated that they could have no more. The following week, they resumed their lovemaking, starved for the touch of each other's body after the time apart.

As always, Chastity hurried back to her stateroom before her aunt could wake from her nap. One afternoon, she was piecing scraps from the rest of the work into a quilt top

when Prudence awoke. Prudence immediately began tidying herself up, after an approving glance at Chastity's industry.

"Did you have a nice nap, Auntie?" Chastity asked.

"No, Constance, not really."

Chastity hid her frustration as she bit down on her thread. Prudence always did that. Constance was Prudence's dead sister, lost at the age of fifteen to scarlet fever. Chastity had resigned herself to be called Constance for the rest of her life.

"What's the matter, Aunt Prudence?"

Prudence brushed her hair back into its bun. "Nothing. Just a strange man from morning services." She mumbled, more to her hairbrush than Chastity, "He was so handsome."

"What did he do? Did he harm you?" Chastity really looked at her aunt for the first time in weeks. Large dark circles under Prudence's eyes were not the mark of a woman who slept all night and had an afternoon nap as well. Her aunt had grown thin recently. Chastity suspected it was not only that morning that the stranger had disturbed her aunt.

"Oh, no. I think he was flirting with me." Prudence blushed bright red and dropped the hairbrush with a clatter.

Chastity smiled. "You should be flirted with. You're as lovely as Grandmother was." Prudence blushed more and Chastity pressed on. "You're not so very much older than me, only five years. Besides, if he goes to church on a Tuesday, he might make you a good husband."

Aunt Prudence sat down, took up her embroidery and put it down again. "I don't think... No, that's silly!" She took it up again to hide her flustered state.

Chastity scooted closer to her on the bench. "No, it's not."

"I never intended to marry. It..." She absorbed herself in satin-stitching a leaf. "It frightens me," she whispered.

"If he's there tomorrow, say hello. It can't hurt," Chastity said.

Prudence dropped her handwork in her lap and clutched Chastity's hands like a drowning woman. "Will you come with me, Constance?"

"Yes, of course." If she could stand being Constance, she could sit through an extra church service. She gave her aunt a smile to take her mind off the impending encounter. "Tell me about New Abilene." Chastity had shown no interest in her new home and decided now was a good time to start. She kept piecing.

"Now you understand I've never been." Prudence calmed as soon as she started lecturing. "But in emigration information classes they showed us magic lantern shows about it. There are volcanoes and the energy harvesters live short and dangerous lives. Most of steerage is going to be doing that. The city is small, not much there yet. But there are lots of horrid beasts."

"Dragonlings," Chastity said and Prudence nodded. "You teach school. What will there be for me to do?" She gave her aunt a perky smile. "Maybe I can marry a rich rancher."

"From all I hear, the ranchers are sometimes less civilized than their dragons."

Chastity burst into giggles. Prudence looked at her sharply. "I had the funniest thought. The dragons sitting in the parlor while the ranchers drink from the water trough outside." She giggled again.

Prudence giggled too, her sternness falling away. Then she covered her mouth with her hands. "I wouldn't be surprised if I saw it."

The next morning, Paul came in from riding just as Ulysses was suiting up to go out. "She done with the curse? I noticed you haven't been in my stuff."

"Stuff yourself. We used one." Ulysses made sure his second layer of underwear was unwrinkled. It was cold in space, but the close-fitting powersuits made any little crease a knife-cut.

"Still can't believe you got into her knickers so fast."

"I did. I'm gonna marry her too."

Paul laughed, shaking his head. "Uly, Uly. You promise to marry her to get her into bed. You don't get her into bed and then promise to marry her."

Ulysses shrugged. "So I'm backward. Either way, she agreed. And I'm going to need a wife soon, so why not the loveliest one I've seen in a decade? How's the auntie coming along? You'll be needing one too, you know, and women aren't that common in the colony."

"Very nice indeed. She's not taking the nap you think she is, Uly. We have tea in the canteen and sometimes read in the library." He made a face. "She's partial to Dickens' treacle."

"You can read?"

"Very funny. Get riding, Ulysses. I need a nap before church." Paul bundled up in his blankets as Ulysses headed out to work.

"I'm going to enjoy having a quarter of that store." Ulysses grinned from the doorway.

"You don't have it yet," Paul grumbled. "Of course, having it means you have to work it two days a week."

Ulysses turned out the light. "Until later, Bangup."

Aunt Prudence pointed out her man discreetly at the service. Chastity watched the sleepy-looking blond man and could tell that he was no more interested in the finer points of Ezekiel than she was.

After the services, he held the chapel door and shook Prudence's hand. "And this must be your lovely niece Constance, the one you've spoken of." He shook Chastity's hand.

"Knowing Aunt Prudence, it's all about how gray I'm making her. My name is Chastity."

"Paul. Paul Danvers." He walked with them to the dining room. "I understand you ladies are heading to Abilene? I have an interest there and a bit of a store going up."

Chastity nodded. Aunt Prudence turned red as Chastity's bombazine dress. "Yes we are. My aunt teaches school." Chastity tipped her head to one side. "A store? I don't suppose you'll be needing some help with that?"

Paul smiled. "I can always use a pretty clerk. You'd draw in the trade just to watch you measure cloth and scoop sugar."

"Constance!" Aunt Prudence snapped. "Your dear father would be horrified if you went into trade!"

Chastity smiled up at Paul. "I'll be happy to work for you, Mr. Danvers."

He gave a bit of a bow. "Splendid. I do hope to be seeing more of you during the journey. Until tomorrow, Miss Millwood." He raised Prudence's hand to his lips.

Once he had gone, Chastity pulled her aunt into the ladies' washroom and applied a cool cloth to her face, trying to take some of the blush out of it.

"Auntie, you have to act a bit less like a schoolgirl. How do you ever teach the older boys if you blush when a man says hello?"

Prudence took a drink of water and mopped her face again. "Boys are one thing. I can always take a ruler to them."

Chastity shrugged. "Well, he's nothing more than a boy gotten tall."

"So I can take a ruler to him too?" Prudence's laugh sounded more nervous than usual.

"Of course. I hear some men like that." Chastity giggled. Prudence blushed even more furiously, so Chastity set to work with the cloth again. "Well, next time you want to get all bashful, just imagine him a foot shorter and barefoot, with his books in a strap, bringing you an apple."

"Maybe I will..." Prudence had another drink of water and returned to her usual coloration.

"That's how I handle men who flirt. I remember they're just bigger versions of the little monsters who called me carrot-top and dunked my hair in the ink."

Prudence looked stern. "But I won't handle him too much, because what you do causes a scandal."

Chastity tried looking demure. "I'm sorry, Auntie. I do like being kissed, and dancing all night. I can't help that Father's so old-fashioned he sees dancing every dance as being a hussy." She sincerely hoped Prudence did not know the whole story of her swindled virtue.

Prudence softened. "I haven't danced with a man since I was a little girl. Your uncle Justin used to watch our grownup siblings and imitate them. He was always Clement and I was your mother. She wore such beautiful ball gowns."

Chastity never had heard that wistful tone. She dangled some bait. "There's dancing in the Gold Salon every other night. I heard the waltzes."

"No, I couldn't. You go, dear, and enjoy yourself."

Chastity knew why her aunt had been pliable. It was a small ship. All the men in second class were already married. They might dance once with her, and even twice, but not a third time. They were no danger to her slightly soiled virtue. Used to taking her liberties where she could find them, Chastity leaped at the chance.

Chapter Four

They had two days left in the belt and the asteroids were growing thin. Soon they'd be back in normal empty space for the last leg to Io and the colonies. That meant Ulysses would be back aboard full time.

They celebrated that afternoon in Ulysses' room. He had her sit while he pretended to dig in a drawer. He took out a box and knelt in front of her to slip a plain gold band onto her right hand.

"My mother's wedding ring will serve as an engagement ring. When you become Mrs. Ulysses Carter, I'll move it to the left, along with your own."

She kissed him at that. "Soon, I hope."

"We have been hastening the pleasures of marriage. Now let's hurry the marriage."

That day, for the first time, Chastity took off all her clothing. Ulysses looked at her long, his hands gentle on her soft skin, his breathing fast.

When he ran his hands over her bottom, he groaned. "So perfect. It belongs bent over my knee." He seated himself in the one chair and beckoned. Chastity draped herself over his knee.

"Now whatever did I do?" she smiled over her shoulder, wondering if he really would do what he was teasing.

Ulysses planted one kiss on the curve of a pale cheek. "Nothing. You're simply too pretty to remain unspanked."

Chastity smiled and wriggled her ass a bit. She yelped when his hand came down in a light swat. It felt nothing like the spankings from her nana for stealing apples or getting dirty. This blow made her belly coil and her quim feel as if it were inflating like a dirigible. "Oh! Darling, that's..." Unable to come up with the right words, she wriggled a bit more, inviting another swat.

"That's...?" he repeated, giving her a harder swat.

Chastity gulped for air, the sting of her lover's palm on her ass sending tingles over her whole body. The pain faded into a warmth that drained straight into her pussy, making that one little button stand straight up and beg for attention.

"Don't stop," she whispered. The third swat left her damp and by the fourth she was wet enough to feel it dripping onto his trousers.

Ulysses spanked her, his big hand hard and stinging, until she felt as if her whole bottom was afire. She squirmed over his knees, trying to get away from the swats while lifting her ass to them at the same time.

When the long fingers slipped between her thighs to pleasure her further, she exploded, yelling. Uly's fingers made sloppy sounds as he worked them into her, settling her pessary and preparing her for his cock.

She could feel it pressing against her side as he rocked his hips against her. "Yes, please. Uly, please, more."

He helped her stand and bent her over the back of his chair. Something very gooey spread over her pussy and she smelled cherries. Crumbs filtered over her and she knew what he'd done. "I'm to be dessert?"

"My favorite type of cherry tart," Uly said softly and began licking her clean. She didn't fight the peaks, knowing he loved her flavor as much as that of the pastry. He took a long time. Her arms and legs wobbled before he was done and she felt near collapse from pleasure.

He helped her up and undid his fly. He sat, held out his arms and she looked at him for a moment. Then she understood and straddled him, kissing him as she took him in with wet slurping sounds.

His hand came down again, just sharply enough for her to yelp and ride him harder. She loved the new position, which let her do the moving, and put Uly right between her breasts. She shivered as he teased her nipples. The lightest nibble of his teeth on the sensitive point sent more little shocks down to make her squirm with desire on his thick shaft.

She was moaning loudly when his door hissed open.

"Mr. Carter, we need you..." The Lead Outrider stood in the door, the gold braid on his blue uniform gleaming under the lights. He turned a deeper shade of scarlet than Aunt Prudence ever had. He turned his back hastily. "There's been a complaint about your behavior, which I now see is completely justified. Also, Mr. Danvers has been injured."

Ulysses swore under his breath and reached for the blanket off his bunk to throw over Chastity. "Is it bad?"

"He blew an asteroid and got hit with shards. Two broken bones and he's fortunate he didn't depressurize." The Lead cleared his throat. "The charges against you are far more serious, Mr. Carter. If you and the young lady will dress, I'm afraid I must take you to the brig."

"Yes, sir," Ulysses said in a meek tone that Chastity hoped to never hear again.

Chastity was still on his lap and facing the door. "Aunt Prudence!" she gasped as her aunt walked in and saw her straddling a man, her breasts barely covered with a hasty blanket.

She got up quickly and bundled herself into it. Prudence scowled as Ulysses pulled on his clothing. He didn't turn around but the Lead did.

"Mr. Carter, for gross impropriety, debauching of a young lady and general immorality, you are hereby under arrest and remanded to the Liner's brig until such

time as a tribunal can pass sentence upon you," the Lead read, the irons dangling from his hand. "Miss Millwood, on behalf of Colonial Lines, we apologize for our bond-man's misbehavior."

Chastity looked abashed. "I encouraged him. It's not his fault."

Prudence kept her eyes averted from Ulysses as he finished dressing. "Constance! Hush!"

That was the final straw for Chastity. "My name," she threw on her chemise and pantalettes, "is Chastity!" She pulled her corset on. "You always mangle that, Auntie."

The Lead looked genuinely unhappy about this arrest, realizing she was quite willing. "Come along, Carter. We'll get the tribunal together as quick as we can."

"Could we see Danvers on the way to the brig?" Ulysses walked to the Lead for his irons. He shot Chastity a wink to let her know he'd be all right.

"I don't think anyone will mind." The Lead took him away.

Chastity caught that last wink, but in her current mood it was only one more enragement. "Or is it that my bad behavior is so constant and my chastity so nonexistent?" she demanded as she pulled her stockings on.

"Hush, you. Get dressed."

Chastity slipped into her shoes and presented her laces to Prudence for tightening. "Of course, Auntie," she sneered, "because I'm so busily doing the Lancers Quadrille right now." Her gibes were cut short when Prudence laced her to a sixteen, the tightest she ever wore for formal occasions. She coughed. "Do stop that. The dress is only a seventeen." She pulled it over her head and did up the buttons.

"Come along. I can't believe you've done this to me again." Prudence caught her hand and almost dragged her out of the room.

"I didn't do it to you the first time," Chastity protested, her aunt's rapid loose-stayed pace made it hard for her to talk and walk at the same time "If William wasn't a prig, he'd have married me after he seduced me and not run whining to Father. At least Uly proposed."

Prudence stopped in front of a porthole and Chastity saw her face was white with fear. "And you think he'll still mean it when you're off the ship? Men say anything."

Chastity showed her the ring. "He means it." She had calmed enough to realize what was troubling her aunt. "You're worried about your Mr. Danvers, aren't you?"

Prudence nodded. Chastity, less defiant and more worried herself now, took her to sit on a bench. Her aunt wept softly into a handkerchief.

"It's all too much at once, my dear. I knew you were spending time with Mr. Carter, but I had no idea...until I asked a maid and she said you went off with him every afternoon. I just knew he was compelling you with threats. And now Paul—"

Chastity handed her aunt her own handkerchief since Prudence's was quite sodden. "There were no threats, Auntie. No compulsion."

"Do you love him?" Prudence asked.

Chastity smiled. "As you love Mr. Danvers."

"I don't..." Prudence began to protest. Then she glanced out the port as another asteroid crossed it. "Oh my poor Mr. Danvers!" she wailed and covered her face with Chastity's hankie.

"He'll be fine." Chastity stood up and followed a very young housekeeper down the hall. "Where is the hospital for injured crew?"

"'Tain't a place for payin' passengers, miss," the girl protested.

"Where is it? My fiancé is there." Technically it was true, since that was Ulysses' last destination before the brig. The girl told her and she went back to Prudence.

Her aunt had regained some control. Chastity sat down beside her and took her hand.

"Do you want to go see him?"

Prudence just nodded, still a bit too overcome.

Chastity hesitated. "You don't hate me for my Mr. Carter, do you?" She felt like a very little girl asking that question. Prudence squeezed her hand gently.

Prudence sighed. "You could have done far worse, I suppose."

Chastity tilted her head, then asked the question that had troubled her since they left Luna City. "Auntie, do you know what happened on Earth?"

Prudence shook her head and looked stern. "Clement told me you'd become over-involved and your fiancé had broken the engagement."

Chastity nodded. "They would say that. William wanted a virtuous, virginal bride and spent every instant we were together testing me. He spent months trying to seduce me. One evening, I was tired of fighting with him about it, tired of moving out of his hands and I said yes. I never expected him to accept the yes. He took advantage and then ran to tell Father I was shameless and no better than I should be. I'm sure he made no mention of his tormenting me."

Prudence's eyes were wide by the end of the story. "This one is better?" she asked.

Chastity nodded. "Much." She showed her aunt the ring again. "It was his mother's. He gave it to me today. I'll be Mrs. Carter as soon as we can manage it." She stood and offered her aunt her hands. "Now let's see how damaged your Mr. Danvers is."

Paul lay flat on his back in the sickbay, his ribs taped and his left arm in a cast. Ulysses had just been taken to the brig. Didn't seem fair since the girl was very willing. He ached.

"I'm sorry, ladies. Mr. Danvers is sleeping and no visitors are allowed."

He heard a woman's voice that he didn't recognize. "Not even his fiancée?"

"Oh, that's a different matter," the nurse admitted. She led them in. "Now if he is asleep, you will tiptoe out quietly, yes?"

"I'm awake." He smiled to see Prudence. Her niece was quite the bold bit of fluff. From what Uly had said, they'd all had a trying afternoon, to put it very mildly.

Prudence dashed to his side. "Paul, how bad is it?"

"Broken arm, couple of broken ribs. I'll live."

She took his hand and Paul smiled. Nothing earned a woman's touch like winning her sympathy. "I was dreadfully worried."

"I'll be fine. But I have a question." He'd decided to propose as soon as he'd heard about the incident with Ulysses. He liked Prudence and every shopkeeper needed a wife.

"Yes?"

Paul took a deep breath, a bit nervous at the enormity of what he was asking. He held her hand in his good one. "Miss Millwood, it cannot have escaped your notice how my affections for you have blossomed during these months."

Prudence saw what was coming and her eyes went big and round behind her green spectacles. "Mr. Danvers..." He laid a finger across her lips to silence her. If she interrupted, he'd lose his nerve and never get done. He'd planned all the words before that fateful asteroid exploded all wrong and hit him.

"I am a lonely man, about to embark on a grand adventure on a world where I know almost no one. I would face the trials more gladly with a loving wife by my side. Will you join me on this great undertaking?"

Prudence stammered as Chastity grinned at them. Prudence stammered more, and finally managed to say, "I believe in long engagements."

Paul kissed her hand. "Only consent and I shall wait as long as you ask."

"Yes," Prudence said, her voice very faint. "Yes."

Paul kissed her hand again and then tugged her down to brush a light kiss over her lips. "My dear Prudence, when I am released, we must resume our afternoon walks. We have much to discuss."

Prudence gave him a real smile, not one of her usual sickly simpers, and she didn't blush. That had to be a first. He was looking forward to finding out how far down the blushes went.

The ladies took their leave, not wishing to tire him. He lay back, thinking of all the changes, hoping Uly would be all right in the brig.

The impact jolted him out of the thin doze where he'd been dreaming of kissing Prudence over the counter of his store. He had sat up and reached for his shirt before his ribs reminded him that the now-sounding all-hands klaxon did not apply. He expected Uly had hit the bars of the brig before realizing the same thing.

He made his way across the listing sickbay by holding on to the wall with his good hand. The nurse met him at the door.

"Mr. Danvers, you should be in bed."

"We were hit. That was an asteroid hit. They need me."

"You're in no condition. The laudanum alone makes you unsafe to operate any machinery. Go back to bed, Mr. Danvers."

A small explosion rocked the ship. "Damn! That was the engines!" He glanced at the nurse. "Begging your pardon for my French."

"Back to bed," she ordered, putting her hands on the breaks and pressing until he gasped in pain.

"Ministering angel, my Aunt Fanny."

"We do what it takes, Mr. Danvers." She guided him back to the bed as the ship righted itself.

In the brig, Ulysses tumbled from the sleeping shelf to the floor, landing with a yell of pain. He knew immediately what had happened. "Let me out! You got a breach and you need every hand. Not like you can't put me right back in!"

The Lead checked on him on the way down. "Carter, hush. We can hear you outside the brig."

"Let me out. I've handled breaches."

"Carter, I'm not sure I can."

"Johnson," Ulysses gripped the bars, "I'm begging. I'm the best you've got—"

The explosion from the engines cut off the rest. Johnson said nothing more but thrust the key into the lock and opened the door. "I'm trusting your perfect record, Carter. No trouble when it's time to go back, now?"

"Promise," Ulysses said as they headed down to clean up the mess.

In the lower decks, pandemonium reigned. Steerage passengers ran hither and tither, stevedores fought small fires and smoke made traversing the decks difficult.

"Get the passengers into a safe lounge. Take 'em up to third class if you have to," Johnson barked at two of the largest stevedores.

Ulysses kept his head, though worried for Chastity. She should have been safely in the second-class areas of the ship. There was no earthly reason for her to be down here.

They suited up a deck above and found the breach. The hydraulics had sealed off the engine chamber so no air was being lost. The fires had burnned themselves out in the void. They sealed the corridor and opened the chamber.

Two suited engineers were already shaking their heads over it. Two other Outriders were cutting at the hull to get an asteroid the size of a stove loose. Johnson and Ulysses went over to help them.

Two hours of backbreaking labor, inching it forward and back, carving a millimeter here and a centimeter there, the rock was freed. The three armed men took great delight in blasting it to component elements and Ulysses wished mightily he had his own gun.

The rebuilding and air-sealing of the chamber took hours. Ulysses worked hard and silently, missing Paul. Finally, they allowed air in again and it held. Everyone took off his helmet with a sigh of relief. Ten hours in the powersuit was almost too long.

The engineers chattered back and forth in a language so technical Ulysses was sure only every fourth word was English. They directed the Outriders to hold things and reach things and join other things, but never explained why.

They tried starting the engines and tinkered more when the steam heads did not build as they should. Johnson yawned hugely.

"Gentlemen," he said to the engineers. "Gentlemen! My men aren't trained at this. Let us go to bed and you can get some engineers and other people who know engines down here."

The engineers agreed and Ulysses let himself be escorted back to the brig. With weary gratitude, he fell onto the sleep shelf and was out before the door locked.

Chapter Five

Chastity, as Ulysses' fiancée, was allowed to visit the brig every other day. She told him that the ship was delayed. They couldn't make the needed repairs on board. Ceres Station wasn't equipped, so a fast tug was on its way from Ganymede. The trip would be three extra weeks.

His face fell at the announcement. This would go hard with him at the tribunal.

"It's all my fault. I shouldn't have been seeing you that afternoon. I didn't think the swarm was that bad and swapped out with Fredericks on the experienced rider call."

Chastity gasped. Things were worse than she'd thought.

Uly shook his head and stroked her face. "I should have answered the call and been out with Paul. Then he wouldn't have gotten hurt. Fredericks would have been safely aboard instead of trying to wrangle an asteroid that size on his third trip."

Chastity held his hands through the bars. She'd heard all this several times already. They sat quietly, stealing such kisses as they could until she had to leave.

The next visit, she found Ulysses lying on the shelf, his face turned away from the door. He made no noise, but his shoulders shook every now and then.

"Uly? Darling?" she called softly.

He waved her away.

"I'm not leaving. You come over here and tell me what's going on." She stared at his red, tear-streaked face when he rolled over and rose slowly.

He gave her a wry smile, scrubbing at one eye like a little boy. "Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Carter." He kissed her through the bars and she felt the tears wet against her face. "I got my sentence."

"Oh!" She pulled back and held his face in her hands. "It must be a dreadful one."

"They're extending my bond. One more trip."

"A whole year," Chastity gasped.

"Will you wait for me?" The hopeful look on his face made Chastity's heart ache.

"Why should I wait?" she asked. When his hopeful face collapsed into the saddest look she'd ever seen, one that reminded her of a scolded puppy, she added, "I meant, why wait? Marry me now and know I'm waiting for you on Io."

He kissed her hard for that and showered more kisses over her whole face. She laughed when he came up from kissing her hands. The marks of the bars on his face made him look like a zebra. He laughed with her.

He wasn't laughing on the next visit. Paul had arrived an hour before Chastity's scheduled time, bearing Ulysses' dress uniform and a toiletry kit. Ulysses had washed

often and tried to keep clean, but he knew he was growing a beard, since they allowed him neither razor nor mirror.

"Bangup, what's going on?"

"Wedding day, or so I hear. Your bride wants you presentable."

Ulysses smiled. "I've heard of surprise birthday parties, but never a surprise wedding." He washed up and let Paul shave him. Then he got into the uniform, which hung on him. "Lousy food. I'll be skin and bones by the time they let me out."

He was quite presentable by the time Chastity, her aunt and the chaplain showed up. Chastity was more than presentable. The deep turquoise silk of her dress made her hair flame and her skin glow. She smiled at him so gorgeously he thought he would die on the spot of joy. The bustle was done to look like peacock feathers and she carried a fan of them. Her aunt wore Chastity's green dancing dress, her corset laced tightly enough that it fit.

He heard Paul gasp. The pair of them would rip the heart out of a man with their beauty. And these magnificent creatures, these most beautiful women, had consented to be theirs. He saw the ring on Prudence's hand and suspected he'd lost the bet. It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was the small hand creeping into his, the warm, silken body pressing as close as she could to him through the bars and those deep green eyes, as deep as the sky over Ganymede.

He barely heard the chaplain. He was far too busy drowning in those forest-pool eyes. He managed the right responses and when Chastity kissed him as his wife, it was all he could do not to let out a whoop of triumph. After a moment, he realized Paul was saying something.

"You get a three-hour pass to consummate your marriage. After that, one-hour conjugal visits every other day." Paul held up a set of irons. "Sorry, old man, but rules are rules."

Ulysses glared at them. "Do they come off? It'll be an interesting consummation otherwise."

"Oh, do leave them on," Chastity teased.

Paul stared at her and then nodded to Ulysses, who let his partner chain him and lead him out, just grinning at his new bride's wildness. Chastity threw her arms around him as soon as he was out of the cell and refused to let go, despite Prudence's promptings.

"She doesn't have to let me go," Ulysses grinned.

She didn't.

The rest of the extended trip passed with excruciating slowness for Chastity. She wanted to be with her husband, but the visits were limited. There was so much to say, so much to learn about her new home and, of course, a great deal of love to make. They had to lay up enough memories to last them through the year apart.

She wished the journey would be over and that it would never end. But at last, they touched down on Io, three weeks late. Paul escorted Aunt Prudence down the ramp, a free man with a future ahead.

Chastity hung back. "Darling," she took another kiss, "come back safely."

Ulysses nodded. "You have the key to the house and all the paperwork. My pay has been forwarded to you, so you can get it ready. Oh Chastity!" He clung to her, heedless of the bars between them. He kissed her, making sure to catch her tears. "It's only a year." He tried for a smile. "Imagine Bangup, engaged for a whole year, his lady there and not able to do anything."

She just held on, smelling him, feeling him, until the last whistle sounded. "I love you," she said. She took a quick kiss and hurried off to her new home.

The trim little house reminded her of Uly everywhere she turned. He'd selected some furniture, including a large cannonball bed, but most of it had been left to her. She set the daguerreotype of their wedding beside the bed, where she could see him every night and morning, and set about making the place a proper home for a hard-working rancher.

Epilogue

One Year Later

The Liner touched down, steam issuing from vents and ports along its great brass body. Chastity shifted from foot to foot, trying not to be impatient. The paying passengers had to disembark first, then their luggage and then Ulysses would be free.

She tried not to torment herself with the horrid thoughts that had given her nightmares so frequently in the last year. There was no way to communicate with a Liner except wireless telegraphy and that was for use only in direst emergencies. She didn't even know if he was still alive. At least her father had been able to write to her mother during the War. There were so many ways to die in space.

The passengers ambled down the gangway, staring at their first glimpse of Io, exclaiming over the lower gravity. One headstrong youngster managed to bound out of his mother's grip and vault over the four-foot-high railing, landing on his feet. Chastity grinned as she thought of Aunt Prudence trying to teach that one.

She wanted to shout at the passengers and stevedores, moving the baggage oh-so slowly. She wanted Ulysses. Finally, after all the passengers were off, the criminals who had been sentenced to the energy mines in the Volcano Range shuffled off under guard. They knew it was a death sentence, as surely as a noose in Old Abilene.

Then she saw him. Ulysses, his footlocker on a cart behind him, his jacket slung over one shoulder, ambled down the ramp, searching the crowd. Chastity bounced, trying to make herself visible by waving her green parasol. He looked a little older, a little more battered, but her handsome husband was home.

Ulysses dropped everything as he left the ramp and ran to her, scooping her into a hug that pulled her off the ground and twirled her around. She kissed him, his mouth and cheeks both, laughing and crying at the same time.

He set her on her feet, ignoring the clucking of the older ladies. "That was the longest trip yet. How I've missed you."

Chastity held her breath as he looked her over. She knew she was thinner, stronger than she had been. She hoped he liked the new changes. Then she noticed a scar above his eye and ran her fingers over it.

He gave her a half smile. "I had a little bad luck with my helmet. Let's go home. I want to kiss you all over."

She kissed the scar and helped him load his gear onto her bicycle. "I hope you like what I've done."

They walked the mile and a half out to his ranch, catching up. He told her about the grass-green partner who had almost gotten him killed a dozen times. She filled him in

on Paul and Prudence and their very long engagement. He laughed when he saw the cherry trees blooming along the front walk.

Once inside the house, Ulysses looked around and Chastity chewed her lip. She'd been frugal, buying just enough to make it comfortable. She relaxed when he swept her into another embrace.

"Oh, darling, you've done wonderfully." He kissed her. "I can't wait to try that big chair. Well," he kissed her again, "I can."

She smiled. "I just tried to think of what you would like."

"It's beautiful. Not as beautiful as you." He dug in his pocket and pulled out a small box. "I promised..." he said as he slipped the small diamond ring onto her hand.

"But I wear your mother's," she protested. That plain ring had been her comfort in the long nights and dull evenings.

"You need your own. From me."

She kissed him. "You didn't have to."

"Yes. I did. Thought about you every day. And every night. And every second in between." He punctuated the time periods with more kisses and then scooped her into his arms.

She squirmed like a happy puppy as he carried her to the bedroom. "I missed you so! I fear I developed an unnatural affection for the bedpost. That big wooden cannonball on the footpost is perfect."

He dropped her on the mattress, clearly startled by her shameless admission. "Show me," he rasped, desire in his voice as he started stripping her out of the bicycling bloomers and her corset.

"Oh, Uly, I'm not taking it in! I'm just rubbing. It was a long year, but not that long."

"Oh good." He kissed her breasts, one hand stroking the bedpost.

She got up on her knees and settled herself to rub against the smooth fist-sized wooden ball. Ulysses watched for a bit, his eyes getting larger and larger as she rubbed harder, moaning a little. He got down close to the ball for a good view and then stuck his tongue out.

Chastity shuddered with an orgasm and then saw what he was doing. She moved from the hard wood onto her husband's handsome face, letting his soft tongue drive her to more pleasure as it had so often on the Liner. She had missed this terribly.

He pushed her back onto the bed and tipped her hips up so he could kiss her more. Everything melted, her bones, her mind, and the universe swirled into a thousand stars until she screamed, afraid she would die if he stopped, afraid she would die if he didn't.

"Ulysses!" she begged, needing more.

He came up and stripped off his trousers. She reached up and pulled him down atop her, shoving against his hips and the erection that stood there for her. He kissed

her and she wrinkled her nose, the desire settling from a full rolling boil to a lower simmer.

"Tastes funny," she said. "Oh dear. You've come home to a wild wanton maenad, ready to rip you apart."

Ulysses just laughed. He slipped into her very carefully, stretching her as she hadn't been opened for a year. "Good. I'd hoped I would."

He moved slowly, but each thrust seemed to fill her fuller, building the desire again until she cried out under him. He spent within seconds, her desire feeding his own.

They lay together in the big bed, the wheat wreath pillowcases cool in the afternoon heat. Ulysses ran one hand over her hips and then up to cup her breasts.

"I like the bloomers. You have such lovely legs and seeing them was a pleasant treat after so much time in space."

Chastity giggled. "I'm a scandal again because of them. But the old hens haven't thrown me out of church or the reading circle or the sewing circle, so I suppose I'm all right." She whispered, "Aunt Prudence has a bicycle too, and you should see Uncle Paul watch her ride it."

Ulysses laughed and the sound filled the bedroom. Chastity basked in it until she felt a warm hardness against her hip.

"Again?" she asked eagerly, rolling him onto his back.

"A lot of lost time, dear," he said, lifting her to straddle his hips.

Just as she took him in, they heard a rattling and a clatter from the back of the house, mingled with squeaky roars.

Chastity thrust small fists down on Ulysses' chest in frustration. Ulysses startled. "What's the noise? What's wrong?"

"Oh, of all the times for them to deliver the damn lizards!" she groaned, moving to get off him.

Ulysses laughed. "They can wait. I can't." He pulled her down for more kisses.

Chastity decided he was right. Work could wait. It wasn't every day a woman got her handsome husband back from space.

***CLIMBING THE CORPORATE LADDER
WITHOUT PANTIES***

Courtney Bee

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Armani: GA Modelfine S.A.

Cosmopolitan: Hearst Communications, Inc.

Polaroid: Polaroid Corporation

Salvation Army: Salvation Army, The

Chapter One

Eep! She felt the heat creep across her cheeks when she realized that he'd caught her. She thought she'd been subtle. Her head was turned just slightly from her computer, a quick glance had turned into a long stare. And the long stare must have shown what she was thinking, because Brad's head snapped toward her and suddenly he was shooting her a wicked grin.

"Don't flatter yourself," she said in a fierce whisper. "I was staring at...at a huge ink stain. It's very unsightly."

His grin widened. "I see. And does this ink stain happen to be located on my ass?"

"Just fix the printer."

"Yes ma'am."

"And don't call me ma'am. Old ladies with porcelain cat figurines are ma'ams."

He bent over the printer, giving her another fine view of his ass. She quickly turned back toward her computer.

"You may not look like a ma'am, but you're starting to acquire the persona."

She growled audibly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, dear Kate, that you need to lighten up."

She grabbed a pen and jabbed his smug ass with enough force to produce an "ouch!"

He turned and offered another maddening grin. "Someone's got quite a bit of pent-up energy today. I can help you release it, if you're so inclined."

"I'm not. Never will be."

It had become their daily routine ever since Brad joined the office's tech team. Kate's initial shock over his rugged brown eyes, rebelliously shaggy hair and infectious grin quickly gave way to annoyance. He was always trying to make her laugh, always looking at her, always saying something just subtle enough not to qualify as sexual harassment but wicked enough to make her blush. He was, admittedly, rather clever with his little quips, but definitely annoying. Cocky. He was always giving her this "admit it—you like me" look. Which only made her more furious. Besides, even if she did like him, he was a fellow employee, and therefore off-limits. As an assistant editor—okay, intern—at the male-dominated *Money Matters* magazine, she had it hard enough without Brad swaggering around and causing her concentration to falter.

"All fixed," he said, patting the side of the printer.

"Good. You obviously didn't fix it yesterday. Hopefully it'll last a little longer before breaking down again."

He rolled his eyes and fished something out of his pocket. He handed her a barrette—her barrette.

"I found this jammed inside."

She swallowed hard. It must have slid from her hair when she'd leaned over to refill the paper cartridge. Crap.

"Yes, well, that'll be all. You may go, computer boy."

He bowed. "Yes, Sheba. Let me know if there's anything else I can do for you. Perhaps remove a lipstick tube from the copier? A bracelet from the coffeemaker?"

"Smart ass."

As he turned to leave Kate got a good look at his outline—broad shoulders, strong arms, and a walk that conveyed natural confidence. He was handsome in a Cro-Magnon sort of way, she supposed. But not her type. Kate had her life perfectly planned—get promoted to features writer and eventually editor, meet equally successful and ambitious male and form a timely union, and then, providing it wouldn't interfere with her skyrocketing career, have a child or two. Her plans did not include a cocky tech support guy with bedroom brown eyes.

The first step in her perfect life plan was about to come true at 4:30 today. She'd worked her ass off for nine long months as a paid intern with the hopes of transitioning into a fulltime writer. She'd gone on rain-drenched coffee runs, come in on weekends to assist frazzled editors with looming projects, and handled demeaning tasks that ranged from picking up dry-cleaning to babysitting an editor's ill-tempered terrier. Yesterday she practically begged Richard to promote her, promising to do whatever it took to prove she had the substance to become part of the creative team. And lo and behold—he told her they would discuss her ambitions in greater detail the next day—accompanied by several editors.

Throughout the day Kate made a special effort to avoid staring at Brad—his ego didn't need any more stroking. When four thirty came she flew from her cubicle and bolted into the bathroom to give herself a quick once-over. Her dark hair had maintained its neat chignon and her light eyes were a little work-weary, but still gleaming. She'd chosen her most professional-looking suit—something that screamed "promote me, dammit!" Her curves were hard to hide—the jacket clung to her high breasts and nipped in at her small waist. The pants drew subtle attention to the hips that completed her hourglass figure. She looked polished and ready to be welcomed into the staff brotherhood.

She entered the small conference room and was surprised to find not just Richard, but several other editors and staff members—all male—seated around the table. Kate held her head high and tried to project warmth and confidence. Instead she trembled her way into a vacant seat.

"Right—Kate." Richard set down a small file and looked at her with scrutiny. "We were just discussing your future here."

She perked up in her chair, scanning the faces for a sign of optimism. Instead she found grim expressions.

Richard's tone had the softness of a doctor about to deliver a cancer prognosis. "Kate..."

Oh no – don't you dare! she thought in a wave of panic.

She blanked out after the words "not promotion material yet" and "maybe in another six months". Richard offered her a feeble bit of encouragement and adjourned the meeting. Kate wandered into the hallway, her body hollow as she walked back to her desk. The office had cleared out for the day, save for a few stragglers chatting near the elevators.

"Kate," Richard called as he jogged toward her. "Alex forgot to finish the pre-edits for the stock market article. You mind staying a little late and wrapping that up?"

Great, she thought. *Don't promote me – just give me the rest of the staff's grunt work.*

"Sure!" she replied with forced gaiety. "No problem!"

"There's our go-getter," he smiled. "You'll make staff writer – just keep at it."

"Righty-o!" she said. *Go to hell,* she thought.

The angry clack of her fingers on the keyboard echoed throughout the quiet office as dusk seeped through the window. She was alone, correcting the grammatical mistakes of a man who misspelled the magazine's name and used words like "awesome" to describe the real estate market. When the computer screen's glow started to strain her eyes she took a break, wandering through the office.

She stared at the vacant conference room. Without thinking she hopped inside and climbed onto the table. With the thrill of doing something unruly running through her veins she stood tall and cried, "What's that, Kate? You've been working for us for almost a year and you want to be promoted? Well, I just gave my nephew who graduated with a C average the open writer's slot, and as for any editing positions..." He voice grew louder. "You see, Kate, what it really boils down to is that you have these—" She grabbed her breasts. "And that—" She grabbed her crotch. "Due to these unfortunate attributes, we think you're incapable of becoming a fulltime staff member at our testosterone-drenched company. Perhaps you should try *Cosmopolitan*."

She flipped off the mirror across the room.

"Armani-suited bastards!" she yelled.

It was then that she saw Brad's smiling face in the mirror's reflection. She yelped and spun around, horrified to see him leaning in the doorway.

"Don't stop," he grinned. "You were having a real Norma Rae moment."

She swallowed hard. "How much of that did you hear?"

"Relax. You think I'd snitch on you? You think I'd jeopardize the position of the one person I look forward to seeing on a daily basis?"

"I – what the hell are you doing here?"

She climbed down from the table. Her embarrassment turned to fury.

"Monthly system maintenance," he said. "Once a month I stay after hours to update the software and test the —"

"Great, great. Fantastic coincidence."

She walked toward the door. He blocked it.

"Do you mind?"

"I do."

She shot him a glare. "I'm not above kneeing a grown man in the crotch."

He pressed his face forward until she felt hot breath on her skin.

"Try it," he said, "and I'll do something you've deserved since the day we met."

She hadn't expected him to challenge her. She waited, hoping he'd move, hoping he didn't notice the way she tensed her hands. He didn't move. His eyes had an intensity that made her nervous.

Deciding to end her day on a high note, she lifted her knee and swiftly drove it toward the vulnerable spot between his legs. He grabbed it. Held it in the air. She offered a feeble smile of apology.

What happened next was a blur that left her mind in shock. Brad spun her around, grabbed her arms, and dragged her toward the table. Before she could snarl out a curse word he bent her over the table. Her breasts pressed against the smooth surface. Her ass tilted upward. He delivered a spanking that caused an explosion of adrenaline. She felt his hand singe her flesh beneath her pants, felt a wave of shock as he did it again. She wasn't sure if she was flushing from shame or...something else. The gnawing heat between her legs horrified her.

It took her a moment to realize Brad had released her. She stood up and turned slowly toward him. He studied her face with intensity, looking for something.

Kate said, "That's what you've wanted to do since the first moment you met me?"

"Among other things."

"How dare you! How fucking dare you! When I tell management about this you'll be selling oranges on the side of the freeway by the end of the week!"

His grin wasn't subtle. "It's not sexual harassment if you enjoy it."

She gave a cry of outrage.

"Tell you what—slip off your panties. If they aren't a little wet, I'll give *myself* a pink slip."

"I—that's ridiculous!"

He stepped forward. Kate stepped backward.

"No!" she said. "My panties—which are none of your concern—are dry as the Sahara. Fuck off!"

"Ooh. Resorting to obscenities, hmm? Now how do you expect to climb the corporate ladder with such a dirty mouth?"

Kate felt a twinge of bitterness. "What do you know about my ladder?"

He softened a bit and said, "I know why you didn't make staff writer."

Kate forgot her momentary outrage.

"What?" she said. "What do you know about it?"

"Some of the guys were talking in the break room yesterday..."

"Yeah?"

"They wanted to start a collection for your operation..."

She looked at him with confusion.

"An operation to remove the giant stick up your butt."

"That's it!" she yelled. "I've had it with this place!"

"Don't be like that, Kate."

"You don't understand," she fumed. "I've been here almost a year, working diligently, paying my dues. I've watched yuppies get promoted to staff—yuppies who've been here for mere weeks! I've tried so hard to be the best and what does it get me?"

"You are the best," he assured her.

"It's sexism—it has to be," she said. "I don't see any other reason."

"No," said Brad. "You still don't get it. It's your attitude."

"My attitude?" she roared. "I've got a wonderful fucking attitude!"

He smiled. "And it shows."

Her shoulders slumped forward in despair.

"You're the most serious, professional person in this office, Kate. But that's the problem. The diehard prim-and-proper thing scares the shit out of people. You've got your nose pressed so hard against the grindstone it's starting to get raw."

"I thought—I thought if I showed them how seriously I took my work they'd be eager to promote me."

"Good idea—bad execution," Brad said. "You're taking life *too* seriously and it shows. The black suits, the hair—what's with the headmistress bun, anyway?"

"I'm trying," she growled, "to dress like the professional I want to be someday. And my look is polished. Work appropriate."

"If you're a funeral director."

"I can't believe I'm taking career advice from someone who just left a red handprint on my ass!"

"You needed it."

Kate stared at him incredulously. "I what?"

"You needed it." He took a bold step forward. "You're a control freak. You've been wound so tight for so long that you've forgotten how good it feels to let go."

"And that requires a spanking?" she glared.

"Well, that was more of an impulsive personal desire on my part. But yes—you need someone to seize control. You need to feel powerless and succumb to the will of somebody else. Independence and tenacity are wonderful things, but you've taken them to the extreme."

She rolled her eyes dismissively.

"You eat lunch alone—"

"I'm reading the market reports. I need to prove I'm on top of things."

"You refuse to accept any help whatsoever."

"I'm more efficient on my own."

"You come across as a corporate bulldog."

She wailed in despair. "I don't mean to! I just want people to take me seriously!"

"Time to loosen up, baby."

He looked at her sympathetically as his words plummeted her into further misery.

"You know what," he said, walking toward her until he stood by her side. His hand clasped her shoulder. "I bet you want to let loose more than anything—you just don't know it. For example..."

His hand dipped down to gently trace her collarbone. She didn't move it.

"I bet," he said, "that underneath this rigid, conservative suit you're wearing something sheer and lacy that begs to be admired."

She tilted her head to give him a curious stare. She hadn't realized how close his face was to hers—dangerously close.

"Lucky guess," she said.

There was a glimmer of triumph in Brad's eyes. "And they're probably a color no one would ever guess—pastel perhaps? Something...pink."

Her eyes fluttered with surprise. "How did you—"

"Like I said," he replied. "You're aching for somebody to see another side of you—the side that's neither serious nor prim and proper. My guess is that you can be quite the little sex kitten...with the proper encouragement."

His hand grasped her breast lightly. Brad smiled when her eyes closed just a little.

"Ready to give up control?" he whispered.

Kate flinched as his fingers grazed her nipple beneath the fabric. She tried to say no but all that came out was a breathy sigh.

"A horny moan constitutes a yes," he said, spinning her around to stare into the gray eyes that were glazed with sex.

He didn't give Kate time to argue her way out of it, to do the sensible, professional thing and push him away. He pulled her to him, pulled her close until her lips were forced to collide with his. They stood motionless for a long, aching moment. She could feel the hot blood pulsing beneath his lips. He opened his mouth just enough to let the

warmth of his breath sear her lips. Kate was frozen like a deer in headlights—she decided she wanted to get hit by the car.

She pushed her body against him, diving into a kiss that startled her with its rawness. Brad's hands clasped her waist, drawing her hips against his pelvis so Kate could feel how quickly she'd aroused him.

"Just so we're clear," said Kate, her nerves on edge as his hands dipped down her back to give her ass a firm squeeze, "If what I think is about to happen does happen, I want you to know that I still think you're a cocky, arrogant—"

"Shh." He silenced her with a soft kiss, then whispered, "I guarantee you won't hate me an hour from now."

"Only an hour?" she smirked.

"That's when the night janitor comes."

"Ah."

Kate gave a little yelp as he lifted her off the ground. She wrapped her legs around his torso for stability, which made him smile. He carried her swiftly toward the conference table.

"We can't!" she said as he set her on the table. "Not in the conference room!"

She squealed as his hands moved to the buttons on her jacket.

"That's uptight Kate talking," he said. "Uptight Kate doesn't have screaming orgasms. Now feisty, uninhibited Kate on the other hand..."

He freed the last button and his eyes lit up at the sheer pink bra glistening underneath the black jacket.

"Uninhibited Kate," said Brad, "doesn't give a damn."

She shivered as his hands grazed her breasts.

"Uninhibited Kate wants to get fucked—not made love to—fucked."

She felt her cheeks flush at the word fucked.

"Uninhibited Kate," he said, "is a very...dirty...girl."

Something about his tone secretly thrilled her. She'd never had a guy look at her with such carnivorous lust. And she'd never had a guy so determined to coax out her dirty side.

"Maybe..." She paused, taking in the sensation of his warm palms cupping her breasts. "Maybe uninhibited Kate just needs the proper encouragement."

Brad gave her a kiss that was more than encouraging. His fingers snaked beneath the sheer fabric of her bra until they met with soft flesh. Her nipples ached at the gentle teasing, growing hard, until Kate felt a sensation that bordered on painful. As if sensing her torment, Brad yanked down her bra and pressed his lips to the exposed flesh. A low shiver made its way up her spine as he kissed the curves of her breast, kissing the sides, the smooth flesh between them, the top where they met with the sensitive flesh on her collarbone. He teased around her nipples, trailing his tongue and nipping lightly until

she practically begged for him to take a throbbing nipple between his lips. She uttered a moan that was a cross between pleasure and vexation.

"What is it, Kate?" His tongue flicked between her cleavage. "Is there something you'd like me to do?"

His tongue trailed toward her nipple, then stopped sharply, less than an inch away from the rosy nub.

She made the sound again, this time with more agitation.

"Tell me," Brad said.

She stiffened. "Tell—tell you what?"

His hot breath wafted toward her nipple, making her flesh throb.

"Tell me what you want," he replied.

As if she hadn't blushed enough in the last ten minutes, Kate felt a twinge of embarrassment.

"No," she said quickly. "I can't. I can't say that stuff! Please, Brad, just—"

He shook his head firmly and Kate made a little whimper when he removed his lips from her breast. His eyes flickered with an intensity that filled her with dread. He was dead serious. He wasn't going to soothe her ache until she voiced her wants.

"I—"

Brad gave an encouraging nod.

"Could you please—?"

"Don't ask," he said. "*Tell* me what you want."

Kate sucked in a sharp breath. "I want you to suck on my breasts."

Brad grinned and lowered his head to oblige. His tongue swirled around a taut nipple, bathing it in liquid warmth. She felt his teeth gently graze its tip, sending every tiny nerve reeling. Heat pooled between her legs. She could feel the moisture soaking through her panties, shocking her by how quickly Brad had managed to ignite her juices. He teased her breasts with slow licks then ravenous sucking, until she squeezed her legs together in an attempt to soothe her throbbing pussy. This didn't go unnoticed by Brad.

"Is there something else you want?" he said softly, staring at the damp spot on her crotch.

She nodded.

"Say it then."

She closed her eyes, forcing the words out. "Lick my pussy, Brad."

He smiled as she unzipped her pants, sliding them down to reveal delicate pink panties. Brad admired them, but only for a moment. He quickly yanked them down to reveal the faint triangle of hair tapering like an eager arrow toward wet, pink flesh.

Kate felt his breath first, a warm burst that caused her to spread her legs. Brad's tongue glided across her tender flesh as if it were caressing precious silk. He paused for

a moment to take in her scent. Kate gripped the edge of the table as the pointed tip of his tongue pressed firmly against her clit, jolting it to life. He was precise, methodical in his torment, flicking in quick little pulses then slow, taunting strokes. She could see the corners of his mouth creep toward his cheeks, a content smile of carnal bliss. Kate must have been sporting her own trancelike expression, because when Brad lifted his head to meet her gaze his smile widened.

"You see?" he said, licking her juices from his lips. "Ask and you shall receive."

"I didn't say stop."

"Yes, mistress!"

Brad lowered his head, pressing his tongue to her with an enthusiastic vigor that made her hips quiver. He gripped her waist with his hand, drawing her closer until she was overwhelmed by the intensity of his rhythm. She squirmed as his tongue catapulted her body toward the brink of orgasm. She felt the verge of an explosion and cried, "You've got to stop or I'll come too soon!"

Brad lifted his head just slightly. "And that's a bad thing?"

Before she could protest, his lips pressed against her clit, giving it a soft kiss. And then his tongue fluttered against her in hot little beats, forcing her into spasms that shocked her with their suddenness.

The volume of her moan was like choir music to Brad's ears. He paused to savor it. He kept his lips pressed against her, enjoying the way her hips rocked against him as she rode the orgasm until she was left a panting mess.

"I—I came too soon," she stuttered. "We didn't even have sex yet."

He climbed on top of her with an energetic smile. "That's something uptight Kate would say. Try again. What would dirty Kate say?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Dirty Kate says that's only round one."

"Thatta girl!"

"Dirty Kate," she said, a bit more boldly, "wants you to make her come again. And this time using another choice body part." She paused and added, "Run down the block to the pharmacy and go buy a condom so I don't have to worry about bearing your demon child."

"Already thinking about children, eh? Easy, Kate. First I have to fuck you so that you can fall madly in love with me. Then we can talk marriage and children."

He left, sprinting like a racehorse, to buy condoms. The ache between Kate's legs remained, and she found herself stroking it with her fingers, pacifying the painful desire until Brad returned. And when he did return, his eyes still had the sparkle of a lottery winner.

Brad tore off his pants with breathtaking speed then dove on top of her. He tore open the condom wrapper like a feral animal and slid it down his cock. Kate gasped at the sharp penetration. He drove himself inside her with such swiftness her back arched involuntarily, pressing her breasts against his chest. A low moan rumbled from his

throat as he took in the feel of her, a wet, hot sensation that engulfed his cock and spread like fire through his veins.

Kate's body melted into the desk. Her limbs went slack. She felt her pussy open for him, urging him deeper. He didn't move. Didn't thrust. Brad's expression told her that he was savoring the slick feel of her. Kate didn't realize she'd closed her eyes until she heard Brad whisper, "Look at me."

Her eyelids fluttered open and Kate found herself staring at the brown eyes she'd never seen glisten with such purpose.

"Don't be shy, Kate," he said. "Having a hard cock inside you isn't the time for inhibition."

"Why don't you stop lecturing me on inhibition and start fucking it out of me?"

Brad didn't waste a moment. He pulled back slightly, sliding his cock slowly until only the tip was inside her, teasing her, and then he thrust with force that wasn't so gentle. Kate stiffened, screamed. The feeling of being pierced quickly gave way to an explosion of raw sensation. Nerves deep inside her body were awakened with one swift motion. His thrust—so hard it gave her a feeling of bittersweet pain—sent her pussy pulsing with life. She clenched down, hugged his cock and took in the feeling of fullness, of hunger satisfied. She smiled when Brad made a low growl.

He got her panting with slow, languid thrusts. Just when she thought she could anticipate a steady rhythm, his hips juttied forward and their pelvises crashed together. He went so deep that Kate's shoulders rose from the desk and she clung to him in a startled daze as he pummeled her with thrusts that quickly brought her back to the verge of climax.

"Oh god," she said. "I'm—I'm going to come again."

"That makes two of us!"

She felt the pressure build until it made her flinch with unbearable urgency. But when Brad suddenly stopped, his cock motionless and teasing inside her aching walls, Kate released an animallike cry.

"What are you doing? Oh, no—please don't stop! Please!"

A bead of sweat dripped from his forehead and onto the bow of her lip.

"Tell me what you want," he said.

"I just did!" Kate yelled.

Brad smiled at the frenzied expression on her face. "Kate, be my dirty girl—tell me what you want. Say the word."

She knew what he wanted and she gasped.

"I can't now—my Catholic guilt is suddenly creeping in."

"Catholics have quite a few children," he smiled. "And they're *very* familiar with that word."

Kate growled and rocked her hips, encouraging him to keep pumping. Brad laughed and shook his head.

"Say it, baby," he said. "Say 'fuck me, Brad'."

"Fuck you!"

"Close. Say it, Kate."

"No!"

He slid his cock slowly out of her, causing a wild panic to overtake her pussy. Just as his tip started to caress her lips, making its teasing farewell, she said, "Fuck me, Brad! Please fuck me!" They were both startled by the fierceness of her voice. Swimming in adrenaline, Kate said, "Get that hard cock back inside my pussy and fuck me until I come again!"

A look of joy transformed Brad's features. He slid his cock back into the pussy that was still wet, still hot, still hungry. She clenched down hard, squeezing a low groan from him.

"What are you waiting for?" she whispered. "Make—me—come."

Brad's surprise in her sudden dirty demeanor was quickly replaced with an eagerness to follow orders. He thrust, and only when little gasps of air streamed from her lips did he feel a sense of satisfaction. She panted—the uninhibited pants of a woman desperate to come. He could never have imagined the lovely face that made his blood rush just a little faster through his veins the first time they met would be sweat-covered and flushed beneath him, her luminous eyes silently begging for release.

When he felt her pussy tighten and twitch against his cock he knew she was on the brink, and as the first spasm shook her hips, his cock exploded, releasing the hot liquid torment she'd created.

He lowered his face to kiss her wet forehead. Kate's eyes were clouded with the aftereffects of orgasm, but her blissful smile was quite coherent. She almost looked as if she were about to say thank you, but her smile turned wicked and she said, "I'll admit that was pretty damn good. But are you a one-trick pony, I wonder?"

Brad was amused by her sudden cockiness. "You just said fuck today for what I presume was the first time ever and you're already challenging me to up the ante?"

She closed her eyes as Brad kissed her neck and replied, "I think I've found a way to keep work interesting. Let all those no-talent peons have their promotions. I'll be too busy coming all over their desks."

* * * * *

Kate liked to lay out her outfits for the week in advance. There wasn't much variance—black suit, striped black suit, long black skirt, buttoned white blouse. But the next morning she woke up with a sexual energy that invaded her wardrobe. She ferreted through her closet until she found the short red skirt and silky blouse she purchased months ago but never found the courage to wear. She slipped the skirt over

her legs and smiled at the way it brushed against her bare skin. The blouse was a constant caress whenever she moved. By the time she left for work she was feeling confident and just a little bit flirtatious, her hair spilling down her shoulders in loose waves. *Fuck these chumps*, she thought. *In a couple months I'm outta here. Until then I'm going to enjoy tech boy's talents.*

Her heels put an extra bounce in her step as she got off the elevator and strode into the office. Heads turned to stare at the coworker whose conservative outfits and quiet demeanor normally went unnoticed. But today she welcomed the astonished stares. *That's right*, she thought as Richard swiveled his body to take her in. *If you can't beat 'em...make 'em squirm.* And squirm they did. She felt an exhilarating sense of empowerment as she walked toward her cubicle. Brad's lower body—great ass included—was sticking out from under her desk. She heard him tinkering with the wires and watched for a moment, taking in the view. When he scooted backward to get up, his eyes met with the length of her legs. "Shit!" he cried, bumping the top of his head against the desk.

"A little distracted?" Kate said as he rose to give her an approving grin.

"I—wow," he muttered. "Did you dress like that to reward me or punish me for last night?"

"A little of both." She had a bold idea and said, "No need to stop what you were doing on my account. Why don't you continue...and I'll just work around you."

At first he didn't understand, but as he crouched down and crawled beneath the desk Kate lowered her body into the chair and slowly scooted toward him. As he turned his head toward her his breath wafted across the bare flesh of her legs. A low growl of longing rumbled through his throat as Kate parted her legs just a little, giving him a glimpse of pink between her thighs.

"Wednesday's my no-panty day," she whispered. "I hope you aren't offended."

"I can't believe you," he said. She couldn't see his grin but she could hear it in his voice. "You're giving me an extremely painful hard-on right now. I won't be able to come out from beneath this desk for quite some time."

"Poor computer boy," she teased. "Whatever will you do?"

A coworker strolled by and she fumbled with the keyboard, making it appear as if she were diligently working. When Brad's tongue slid between her thighs she stifled a yelp of shock.

"What's the matter?" she heard him whisper, his hot breath wafting toward her pussy. "You can talk the talk but can't walk the walk?"

"I—"

"Kate!" The voice made her freeze. She turned her head to see Richard strolling toward her. "Have you had a chance to look over those proofs I emailed you?"

Oh god, she thought, horrified as Richard stood next to the desk. *Brad, I'll kill you if you even think about*— Her body tensed as the pointed tip of his tongue burrowed toward a sliver of exposed pink, caressing it with a long, taunting stroke.

Kate glanced down and was relieved to see that Brad wasn't visible from beneath the desk. But what he did next nearly caused her to melt onto the floor.

"Oh—the proofs," she smiled, nodding at Richard. "I was just going to get on top of that. I'll have them edited by lunch."

Her toes curled as Brad's tongue found the rounded curve of her clitoris, tickling it like butterfly wings.

"Oh god!" she blurted, her hands clenching the edge of the desk.

Richard's eyebrows scrunched with concern. "You all right, Kate?"

She gritted her teeth and said, "Uh huh! Great!"

"Because you're looking a little out of sorts."

She tried to knee Brad in the chest but he grabbed her leg, pinning it to the chair. He quickly continued his torture, teasing her pussy in firm, pressing strokes.

"I think I may have a—ahhh—a touch of the stomach flu," she said, struggling to keep her voice steady.

"Mm. It's been going around the office apparently."

Kate squirmed and muffled a squeal when Brad's tongue burrowed between the lips of her pussy. He thrust it up her pink walls, the warmth of his saliva mixing with her own wetness. Before she could stop herself a low moan oozed from her throat.

Richard narrowed his eyes. "You don't sound too good, Kate. Are you sure you're all right to work today?"

Brad's tongue slid from her pussy and he teased her clit again with its moist tip.

"I'm fine!" Kate said with an enthusiasm that seemed to startle Richard. "I'll have the proofs done by lunch!"

"Alrighty. Happy editing, Kate. And keep that chin up—you keep plugging away and the next promotion is bound to come your way."

Kate smiled awkwardly as he walked away. When Brad's hot breath streamed between her thighs, she was jolted from her daze. She tried to kick him away but he whispered, "No, you don't!" and gripped both knees firmly.

"What are you doing?" she hissed. "You have to stop! People are—mmmmm..."

His tongue slipped back into her pussy and she was momentarily incapacitated.

"Brad," she said, her eyes darting nervously around the office. "You have to stop now!"

"Not to sound like a bad sexual harassment video, but baby, you can't dress that hot and expect me to keep my distance."

Kate's voice took on a desperate tremble. "But what if I—"

"Come all over my mouth? That's the goal." He heard Kate's horrified gasp and said, "You're the queen of self-control, remember? Just try to be quiet..."

She struggled to squelch a series of moans, swallowing the spontaneous sounds caused by Brad's insistent tongue. His rhythm became faster, more demanding. Kate felt her body tense in anticipation. A flood of heat pooled inside her pussy, pressing like an unbearable weight she felt powerless to conquer. The first spasm hit and she bit her lip so hard she tasted a tiny drop of blood. Her hips rocked, though she tried to stop them, and she closed her eyes, begging her body to be still, be quiet. She could feel Brad's lips against her, curling up into a smile as he savored the flood of sweet juices that scorched his tongue.

Kate's body continued to shake as she rode the crest of her orgasm. Little gasps flew from her lips in an uncontrollable pattern.

A coworker walked by the front of her desk, and as he passed, said, "Someone's got a major case of the hiccups!"

Chapter Two

"No! It's too risky," Kate said. "I can't do this. I need this job. I need a promotion. I can't risk throwing all my hard work down the toilet for some computer boy's monster cock."

Brad grinned. "It is big, isn't it?"

They were at his simply furnished apartment, a ten-minute walk from the office. It was a location Kate had become very familiar with over the past several days. Brad was lying like a cocky jungle cat on his leather sofa as Kate nervously paced the room.

Kate stared out the window, watching cars rush through the street below.

"We're going to have sex, you know," Brad said casually. "In ten minutes, tops."

"You aren't listening! I'm trying to tell you we can't keep screwing like horny teenagers—especially at work. I've got goals. A plan. I can't get distracted."

Brad rose from the couch and walked toward her. "Kate, having great sex doesn't mean the end of your career aspirations. If anything I would think it would make the journey more pleasurable."

Kate turned toward him with conflicted eyes. "You don't understand. All my life I've worked so hard to garner respect. You have no idea. I just want people to take me seriously—to look at me as strong and capable. If the office found out I was fooling around with a coworker, how do you think that would make me look? I've got it bad enough without being fodder for the water cooler."

"But Kate—"

"It's against company policy," she said, her voice growing feeble. "Coworkers are forbidden to date."

Brad snaked his arms around her waist, prompting her to cry, "It's in the manual! Somewhere toward the back!"

"Shhh."

He silenced her with a kiss that melted her protests. By the time Kate pulled away she'd nearly forgotten everything she'd said. With half-closed eyes she said, "I changed my name."

Brad cocked his head. "You what?"

"In college I changed my name. My real name is Katie." She looked a bit embarrassed and averted her eyes. "Everyone always looked at me as soft and cute—like a baby chick or something. People called me Katie Bear and cutesy things like that. I decided to change my name to Katherine so people would take me seriously. Like

Katherine Hepburn or Catherine the Great. Katie isn't a power name, a respected name. It's definitely not a CEO name. So I changed it."

Brad took her hand and squeezed it softly. "It isn't your name that takes you places. It's your persona. You need to take charge of your career destiny and refuse to settle for anything less than what you've earned."

She looked hesitantly into his eyes.

"You practically run the place," said Brad. "You work harder than any of those chumps on the fulltime staff. You're smarter, nicer and far more likeable. But you know what you're not?"

Kate shook her head.

"Insistent. Richard and the rest of management know you'll do whatever work they assign you. They also know you'll accept whatever wages, hours or lack of benefits they give you. That's why they haven't promoted you. You accept whatever you're given."

"But—but I don't want to lose everything I've been building toward."

"You won't. You need to stand up for yourself and accept nothing less than what you're worth."

Kate felt a surge of emotion, of agreement, but the voice of doubt in her mind caused her to say, "But what if they don't give me what I've earned? What if they let me walk?"

"Then you'll find an environment that doesn't take you for granted."

Kate looked at him in mild puzzlement. "Why are you so interested in my career success?"

He groaned and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Kate," he said, "in case you haven't noticed I kind of have a thing for you. I want you to be happy. And to do that you need to let go of your inhibitions—work-wise or...in other realms."

She hated to admit it but she felt herself agreeing.

"Well," Kate said, a smile snaking through her lips, "the office is closed for the rest of the day, but perhaps we can work on these 'other realms'?"

Her skirt was long, covering her knees, but she slowly hiked it up until the hem brushed the crevice between her thighs. Through her sheer black stockings the outline of a thong was visible. Brad's reaction was immediate.

"I won't make you tell me what you want this time," he said, his eyes unblinking as she slid the skirt up her hips. "This time I'm just going to take."

Kate's eyes widened as he seized her by the waist, pulling her body against him. His lips were achingly close to hers. She tilted her chin, waiting for him to kiss her, but what he did next made her cry out in surprise. Brad hauled her over his shoulder with the ease of a fireman and walked with firm, determined steps toward the bedroom. He gave her ass a good squeeze before tossing her onto the bed. She didn't have time to protest. His body covered her like a wave. His lips pried hers apart. Through the fabric

of his pants she could feel his erection, nudging between her thighs and teasing her pussy. Without thinking she opened her legs wider, eager for more contact. This didn't go unnoticed by Brad. A pleased moan rumbled up his throat.

"How much do you like this skirt?" he whispered.

"Huh?"

"Would you miss it?"

"I..."

He grabbed the waist of her skirt and yanked so hard the silky material parted from her body in one clean rip. She didn't care. She even helped him tear her stockings, shredding them with her nails until they peeled off her legs, leaving just a tiny thong. Brad paused to admire it. Then he slid it down slowly, revealing the soft triangle that framed tender petals of moist pink flesh. He kissed her there, letting his lips glide over the folds already warm to his touch.

Brad paused and suddenly, very seriously, said, "Enjoy what I'm about to do to you with my mouth, because very shortly you'll be screaming."

Her eyes flickered with confusion.

"Uninhibited Kate," he said, "is going to scream for me like a banshee from hell — because I'll be fucking her so hard she'll have no choice."

He lowered his lips gently to her pussy and coaxed her legs wide, allowing him to stroke the sensitive flesh with his tongue. Kate's mind reeled, mulling over his words with a mixture of nervousness and anticipation. She remembered the things he'd made her say the last time their bodies locked and felt her cheeks flush. When Brad unbuttoned his pants, Kate felt herself panic. He watched her expression change and smiled reassuringly.

"I'm not going to do anything you don't want," he said. "But I know your body — it's stronger than that stubborn mind of yours. And it wants to feel alive. I want your nerves to explode. I want you to be unsure whether you're coming or dying. What do you say, Kate? Are you going to be my dirty girl? Are you going to scream for me?"

She nodded and lifted a hand to stroke his cock, still a little nervous but mostly enthralled. She wrapped her hand around it and guided it toward her pussy.

Kate held his cock between her legs. "No man has ever made me scream before," she said. "Are you sure you're up for the challenge?"

But scream is exactly what she did when he drove his cock sharply inside her. Her eyelashes fluttered in surprise. Brad tilted his chin down to suck the scream from her throat, kissing her with a desire that was neither gentle nor civilized. He filled her tight walls, staying motionless inside her until her juices drenched him.

"Take a deep breath," Brad said, his teeth lightly scraping her neck. "Once I start, you'll forget your own name."

She didn't have a chance to breathe. His explosive thrusts made her jaw drop, sending furious shivers through her body. Surprised bursts of air flew from her mouth.

And then she screamed. She couldn't have been more shocked. The sound that came out of her was a wild mix of pleasure and release. The depth of it spurred Brad to pump harder, to keep her noisy. Her pussy tensed involuntarily, squeezing his cock so that she felt every hard inch as it slammed in and out of her.

Their eyes met and Brad's expression made her suddenly feel that her cries were an ethereal choir to him, delighting him and pushing him forward. Kate gulped in a deep stream of air and as she opened her mouth to exhale, he covered her mouth with his, stealing her burst of breath. He lifted his head and let the hot air waft toward her ear as he said, "You're screaming much sooner than I expected. Are you sure you can take it? Because I have no intention of stopping."

"H-harder."

Brad looked like he wasn't sure he'd heard her right. But Kate gripped his shoulder and said it again. "Harder."

She braced herself. His cock slid out of her pussy until only the tip remained. Kate stared into his eyes, knowing that this was her last chance to change her mind. She didn't. He drove himself so swiftly inside her that her body scooted up the mattress, leaping like an electric shock. He pulled her back, using an arm to draw her hips even closer. He couldn't fuck her more deeply. Their pelvises slammed together again and again until Kate felt as if her pussy was going to split apart. Sweat dripped from his body onto hers, fusing them together in a hot sticky mess. The sensation deep within Kate was a new one. As his cock rubbed her G-spot with unyielding insistence, a surge of heat emanated from it, swirling and building in frantic pulses. She squirmed beneath him, fearing the impending release.

As Kate's breathing changed, quickening with expectation, Brad whispered, "Are you going to come for me from the inside out?"

Kate barely had time to stutter a yes. Her body went slack under the weight of an orgasm that worked its way through her entire body. She opened her mouth to scream but Brad's lips slammed against hers and sucked the remaining life out of her. As she clenched and squeezed his cock she felt him twitch inside her. She closed her eyes as his liquid orgasm fueled the powerful spasms that shook her body.

Brad kissed her until her hips slowly ceased their rocking and her breathing slowed. He didn't pull out, and Kate savored the prolonged feeling of him nestled inside her. He wiped a sweat-soaked strand of hair from her forehead and smoothed it behind her ear. As Kate lifted her gaze to look into his eyes she was surprised by the softness she saw. Moments ago he'd fucked her as if he meant to break her, and now he fussed over her comfort, stroking her cheek with his palm and whispering a stream of reassurances.

"You're incredible," he said. "You sigh like an angel or scream like a hellcat depending on how you're getting fucked."

She took a long gulp of air and said, "I-I've never come from inside like that before."

Brad grinned. "I popped your G-spot cherry?"

She smiled back and nodded. The pride on Brad's face made her giggle.

"You know..." Kate bit playfully at his earlobe. "My anal cherry is still intact... Maybe that could be our next project?"

Brad covered her with worshipping kisses.

"You're the gift that keeps on giving," he said.

* * * * *

Today's the day, Kate thought as she marched off the elevator, her high heels making determined clicks against the marble. She wore a new dress tight enough to show she was a woman but loose enough to show she was a professional. A take-charge, deserving professional who wasn't going to take any more shit. Brad had brought that out of her.

Last night, after the sweaty encounter that resulted in a noise complaint from his neighbors—they both had a smug sense of sexual accomplishment over that—Brad encouraged her to lay things on the line regarding her work situation. "You know what you're worth," he'd told her. "It's time that they get the picture too." She agreed and finally admitted it was time to stand up for herself. With Brad as her cheerleader, she felt a sense of confidence that was strangely new.

It couldn't have been a coincidence that *She Works Hard for the Money* had blared from her car stereo on the way to work that morning. By the time she reached the office her adrenaline was up. Kate didn't need this place. Sure, she wanted it, but if no one was going to appreciate her endless contributions then there were dozens of other offices that would. With that in mind, she walked briskly past the clusters of cubicles near the entrance and headed straight for Richard's office. Her briefcase pinned under her arm, she stood in the open doorway, staring down her prey.

"Oh...Kate," said Richard, looking up for his computer. "Glad to see you. I have some proofs for you to edit. They're pretty lengthy so you might have to—"

"That sounds like a job for an assistant editor. Which I'm not. Five minutes from now, however, I expect to be."

Richard studied her a moment. Her posture told him she wasn't open to compromise. In a firm but pleasant voice she said, "I've been working here for quite some time, Richard. Obviously you put a lot of stock in my capabilities, or you wouldn't consistently hand me so many important projects."

"Your work is more than adequate, Kate, but—"

"Richard, it's just you and me right now. The guys are over by the water cooler having a belching contest. Be honest with me. It's my gender, isn't it? You don't want a skirt moving into the boy's club."

Richard looked embarrassed. "It isn't that..."

"Good. Glad to hear there's nothing preventing me from moving upward. Why don't we announce my promotion during the staff meeting today? Or should I take my impeccable editing and writing skills elsewhere?"

Kate saw a fear in her employer's eyes that fueled her resolve.

"No, Kate – please don't do anything rash."

She raised an eyebrow. Richard stared at her a long time.

"You're right," he said. "You do carry quite the workload and you carry it well. You deserve an advance in your career. And I want you to stay. As assistant editor."

She smiled triumphantly.

"Truth be told," said Richard, "I always knew you were a hard worker. But assertiveness? I had my doubts. You've got moxie, Kate. Don't worry about those other lugs – you keep up this new attitude and you'll fit right in."

Kate left his office with a glow that made others pause. As she rounded a corner and walked toward her cubicle, she saw Brad talking to a coworker near the back of the room. Their eyes met and she gave him a thumbs-up. He grinned. And then, very briefly, they exchanged a look that said there would be some amazing celebratory sex later. Little did Kate know that later would come before the workday was done.

Richard announced her promotion at the staff meeting that afternoon as promised. For once Kate felt as if she were part of the team, that the guys would take her seriously. She left the meeting with a feeling of hope. And a surge of adrenaline. When she spotted Brad adjusting a computer monitor near her cubicle, she had a naughty idea. At her desk she scribbled a quick note then folded it neatly. Careful to make sure no one was looking, she threw the note in his direction. It hit him perfectly in the head and he lifted his eyes to glare at her. But his glare quickly disappeared as he opened the note. Kate thought she saw his hands tremble as he clutched the paper. She smiled and congratulated herself on the words she'd chosen. *What color panties am I wearing today? The answer may surprise you. Hint: It's a trick question. Meet me in the basement supply room in ten minutes. And be prepared to bang me like a Salvation Army drum. Wet and Ready, Kate.*

She waited awhile, watching him squirm beneath her gaze, unable to concentrate on his task. Then she winked at him and walked quietly out of the office and toward the elevator. She didn't have to turn around to know that the eager footsteps following her were Brad's. She felt his breath on her neck and tried not to smile as he panted like a dog in heat.

His voice grazed her earlobe. "Looks like somebody's decided to transfer her sexy, new, take-charge attitude into multiple arenas."

Without turning she said, "I've been on cloud nine ever since Richard gave me the promotion. I thought I should thoroughly thank the person responsible." The elevator opened and she said, "Follow me."

Brad dove into the elevator so quickly he nearly tripped. Kate smiled and pressed the button for the basement. As the door rolled closed, Kate stared at her reflection in the mirrored surface. The wall-to-wall mirrored surface. An impromptu idea caused Kate to curl her fingers around the hem of her skirt. Brad held his breath as she slowly slid the material up the expanse of her pale legs. As the elevator lurched down she let the fabric hover just beneath her bare pussy, turning her head to watch Brad's reaction. His eyes were locked like a laser beam on the space between her thighs. She pulled the skirt slowly, methodically, up over her hips, giving him a perfect view of pink. Every mirrored wall showcased a different angle. Behind her Brad saw the reflection of her bare ass. To her right was a reflection of creamy thigh barely covering a sliver of pink. Kate couldn't help but smile as she glanced from wall to wall, discovering new views of her body. Brad's eyes darted around the elevator in eager explosions, savoring each glistening image. Before he could lurch forward to claim his prize the elevator came to a rigid stop. Kate pulled her skirt down and winked at Brad as the door opened.

The supply room was a vast expanse of shelves and crates. The lighting was dim—the perfect ambiance for what Kate had in mind. Brad followed her off the elevator and down an aisle stocked with printing supplies. He started to speak but Kate silenced him with a quick "Shhh". She paused, surveying the area, and decided the coast was clear. She then turned to Brad and grabbed his cock, squeezing it through his pants. He made a sound that was something between a groan and a sigh. As his eyes closed just slightly, Kate unbuckled his belt, yanked it from his pants and threw it to the floor. Their eyes met and she gave him a look that said, "I'm going to tear you apart. Don't you dare try to take the driver's seat."

Brad gasped as she shoved him against a row of shelves.

"I think uninhibited Kate is about to make another stellar appearance," he said.

In response, Kate yanked down his pants. He didn't have time to react—her lips fused with his and demanded a fiery kiss from the depths of his mouth. She kissed him with a ferociousness that startled him, but only for a brief moment. His jaw went slack, welcoming the full force of her passion. Their mouths were pressed together so hard they began to throb, and the pulsing blood beneath their lips caused a rush of heat that made Brad feel as if he were being burned alive. By the time he lifted a faint hand to unbutton her blouse, he was surprised to find that Kate had already torn off her clothes—he must have dazed out during her kiss. But now her unclothed body pressed against him with insatiable need. She wrapped a leg around his torso and pressed her pussy against him, letting hard rub against soft. And then, in a dominating voice that left no room for protest, she said, "We've got less than ten minutes. Make 'em count."

Brad was more than ready to service, and he grabbed her waist in preparation. He tilted his hips until the tip of his cock tickled the soft flesh between her legs.

"You may be quite the commanding little minx when you want to be," he said, "but remember—I still know how to make you cry from the inside out."

"I—oh god!"

He threw etiquette aside and plunged inside her. She jumped involuntarily, but he pulled her right back onto his cock and pumped away.

"Brad, I can't—I can't—"

He put an abrupt finger to her lips. "Baby, you asked. Now receive."

He let her suck his finger as he built a rhythm that caused her body to shake with the sharpness of his thrusts. Kate had never had a quickie, and the fast and furious nature of it filled her with adrenaline. Their bodies worked in unison like feral animals, letting the primal nature of the act overtake them. There was no foreplay, no caresses—just two horny people ravenous to fulfill a primal ache.

Brad guided Kate to the floor when his merciless thrusts caused her to lose her balance. She writhed against the cold concrete, which quickly warmed beneath her body's heat. When the orgasm hit, Kate consumed it greedily, squeezing her thighs together and heightening the fervent pulses. Her fingers curled around his shoulders, digging beneath his shirt and scraping the flesh. The friction of her closed legs quickly milked Brad of every last, hot drop his body had to give. A groan thundered from his mouth and wafted onto her cheek, a low, blissful sound that echoed through the corridor. Brad rested his forehead against Kate's breast. For a long time the room was silent, except for their heavy breathing.

With sweaty lips nuzzling her cheek, Brad said, "Happy promotion day."

* * * * *

Kate's body was splashed with sweat. She sank into the mattress and let her heart rate shift back to normal. Brad climbed out of bed and ferreted through his closet. When he pulled out a camera she tensed.

"A Polaroid camera, huh? I didn't know they still made those. This doesn't speak well for you as a tech guy. And now you're bringing it toward me. Why are you bringing it toward me?"

"I'm not going to make you do a risqué photo shoot," he said. "Although if you want to steer things in that direction, you'll earn a ton of bonus points."

He raised the camera and zoomed in on her face.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "You can't possibly want a picture of me looking flushed and sweaty."

She grabbed a pillow and held it in front of her face.

"Come on," he said. "Do you have any idea how good you look right now? Your hair is wild and flowing, your cheeks have a beautiful flush and your skin is glowing." He grinned and added, "Courtesy of me."

"I don't do pictures," she said into the pillow.

"And I normally don't want pictures," he said. "But if something is monumentally important, it's nice to have one handy to capture the moment."

Kate lowered the pillow slightly. "Monumentally important?" She laughed. "We just had sex—great sex, I'll give you that. We've been doing this quite a bit over the last year. So what's the monumental part?"

"Just let me take a quick picture."

"No way! Taking a picture of someone after sex is obscene. I'm unkempt, and besides, why do you even need a—"

"Looks like I'm getting my picture the hard way."

He hopped on the bed and tugged at the pillow. Kate clutched it tightly and held it over her face, laughing at his determination. They wrestled furiously and Brad's tenacity brought Kate's laughter to a fever pitch. Finally he went in for the kill, zeroing in on her stomach and tickling her until she flung the pillow in surrender.

"That was a cheap shot!" she cried as he relinquished the tickling.

Brad kissed her cheek. "Sure was, baby. Now smile!"

Kate offered a nonchalant half-smile as Brad snapped a quick pic of her face.

He held up the camera and Kate rolled her eyes. "Is tonight my two hundredth orgasm or something? What a dirty sentimentalist you are, Bradley."

Brad shook his head and sighed.

"If you're going to be so cheeky about it then maybe I won't ask you to marry me."

"Bite me, camera boy. You can go ahead and—wait, what?" Kate's jaw went slack. "Did you just—did you just say what I think you said?"

"I don't know. Maybe you should check underneath the mattress for confirmation."

Kate practically fell off the bed as she scrambled to lift the mattress. When she did a small velvet box greeted her. She grasped it with trembling hands.

Brad watched as Kate opened the box, her face illuminated by a rush of joy.

"Kate," he said, dropping down to one knee, "naked and sweat-soaked, would you do me a big favor and agree to let me love you exclusively for the rest of our lives?" He paused. "I know you said your career comes first, but this past year has been the best year of my life. The more time we spent together, the more I realized that you've got the full package. Let's take on life together and have ambitious little babies. Let's grow old and invent new sexual positions when our hips go out. Will you marry me, Kate? I wanted to ask immediately following your orgasm so there'd be a bias."

Kate dove toward him, wrapping her legs around his torso and smashing her lips into his in a definitive yes.

Chapter Three

Katie nodded into the phone. "Yes, Mr. Phillips. If you'd like to meet with our sales department, I'll be happy to arrange it. The upcoming anniversary issue would be a perfect showcase for your ad."

"Thank you, Kate."

"Katie," she corrected.

"Yes, of course," he said. "Katie, it's been my pleasure conversing with you. In this field you get used to speaking to slick salesman and stodgy managers. Your persona is very, well, refreshing."

Katie smiled and swiveled her chair toward the window. Silver skyscrapers looked ethereal under the sun's glow.

"Thank you, Mr. Phillips," she said. "Believe it or not, my persona used to be a hindrance. But it's evolved into a nice combination of cheeriness and brass balls."

"Good for you. I'll contact the sales department in the morning. In the meantime, you have yourself a nice day, Katie."

She guided the phone back into the receiver and took a deep breath. Around her were little reminders of her accomplishments since taking over as *Money Matters* Editor-in-Chief. Awards the magazine had earned under her leadership hung near the door. The breathtaking skyline views that flooded the window were a well-earned change from her cramped cubicle days. And the best part? Katie smiled and buzzed the receptionist on the intercom. "Alex? It's Katie. I'm having a bit of trouble with my computer. Would you send in the tech manager?"

"Of course."

Moments later a familiar knock shook the door. Brad stepped into the room and raised an eyebrow. "Problems with the desktop again, Madam Editor?"

Katie gave him a naughty smile. "I don't know what's wrong with it...one minute it's fine and the next..."

He walked over to the desk, towering over her with a skeptical look. "You know I'm pretty backed up today. A lot of other people are waiting for me to fix their laptops and printers and faxes. If I find out that there's nothing wrong with your desktop, well..." He lowered his face so that his breath prickled her ear. "I might have to teach you a lesson for wasting my valuable time."

Katie bit her lip.

"So what appears to be the problem?"

"Um...the mouse is broken?"

He shook his head.

"Screensaver's busted?"

Brad's hand gripped her thigh firmly over her skirt.

"Keyboard's frozen?" Katie offered feebly.

Brad grabbed her arm and hauled her out of the chair. He spun her toward the desk.

"Hands on the desk," he ordered. "Now."

Katie placed her palms on the desk, her fingers twitching. Brad placed a hand on her back, pushing it down until her ass was raised invitingly.

"Calling me into your office under false pretenses when I'm very, very busy is not going to be taken lightly. Understand?"

Katie nodded.

She felt him yank up her skirt. Her panties were slid down abruptly, and then she felt his palm skim the curve of her ass.

"I asked if you understood. You didn't answer."

He lifted his hand.

"I under —"

She swallowed a yelp as he delivered a sharp spanking.

"I didn't quite catch that," he said, giving her bare flesh another smack.

"I understand!"

Brad ran his fingers lightly up her back and told her that he was going to claim compensation for her little fib. "I've got at least three people without functioning machines right now," he said. "So you're going to make all the complaining I'm bound to receive worthwhile."

Katie smiled as she felt his cock nudge between her cheeks.

"I'm not going to be gentle," he said.

"I know," she said softly. "That's part of why I married you."

He bent down to kiss the back of her neck. "I love you," he said, then proceeded to put her aggressively, deliciously in her place.

EIGHT SECONDS

Sherry James

Dedication

For the gals of the Prairieland Romance Writers. Thanks for all your help, support and friendship over the years. We are, indeed, a small but mighty chapter!

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Ford Super Duty: Ford Motor Company

Jack Daniel's: Jack Daniel's Properties, Inc.

The Joy of Sex: Octopus Publishing Group Limited

PBR: Professional Bull Riders, Inc.

Professional Bull Riders: Professional Bull Riders, Inc.

Trojan Condoms: Church & Dwight Co., Inc.

Chapter One

Dusk encroached upon the barnyard as Taylor Westfall trudged through the ankle-deep snow covering the path from the house to the barn. Steam rose and swirled like smoke from the two large metal buckets of warm milk she carried. The twin calves waiting for the milk had started bellowing with impatience the moment they heard the back screen door slam shut.

"I'm hurrying," she hollered into the frigid air, hoping to soothe the animals at least a little bit with the distant sound of her voice. Snowflakes drifted down from a thin cloud above, adding a fresh layer of sparkle to the white ground. It was only mid-November but already Mother Nature was putting on the hurt, forecasting another long, lonely winter for Taylor at the Rocky Creek Ranch.

"Not if I can help it," she muttered to herself. This winter was going to be different. This winter there was going to be a man warming her bed, at least for a few nights anyway, to snap this sexual dry spell she'd endured for the last two years.

Not only did she ache for the touch and blazing heat of a man thrusting his cock deep into her core but she needed some serious sexual inspiration for her writing. It seemed almost like a joke that she, a writer of erotic novels, didn't have an ounce of erotic in her life. Well, at least of the human flesh kind anyway. Sure, she kept a toy or two in her nightstand drawer but the buzz powered by a set of double As didn't quite make up for the absence of a flesh and blood man who sported rock-solid muscles, smelled like fresh air and leather and whose skin tasted salty-sweet on her tongue.

Hopefully, her luck was about to change. As soon as she could make it to town for a manicure and trim to get her unruly red hair tamed down, then she'd indulge in some new lingerie and bath and body lotions and put her plan to seduce Devlin McCord into action. If anyone could help her in the erotic department, bad boy Devlin could. And he was due home at his family's neighboring ranch any day now after clinching yet another championship on the Professional Bull Riders circuit.

Taylor stumbled through a drift of snow and her confidence stumbled too.

"You bet," she mumbled. She, plain and unsophisticated Taylor Westfall, was going to seduce rich, handsome and charming Devlin McCord? Get real. Only once had he shown any kind of sexual interest in her and he'd been stone-cold drunk at the time. Getting bucked off by Pepper Joe, one of the tamest bulls on the Prairie Circuit—if you could call two-thousand pounds of snortin', angry Brahma tame—had stomped Devlin's pride and put a huge chink in his ego. Seeking solace for what he'd considered an embarrassing end to his amazing thirty-ride streak, Devlin had wasted no time in downing a bottle of Jack Daniel's whiskey and propositioning the first woman who'd crossed his path. And as luck would have it, Taylor had happened to be that woman.

As tempted as she'd been to grab life by the horns and indulge in the sex he'd promised that hot, sultry night on the seat of his beat-up pickup, she'd walked away, choosing instead to cling to her idealistic Devlin crush rather than become just another notch on his bedpost.

That was nearly eight summers ago and he hadn't touched Taylor since. She sighed, remembering all too well the feel of his rugged hands on her breasts and the warmth of his smooth lips against her cheek. They'd never talked about that night, and hell, he'd probably never even realized it had been Taylor's jeans he'd tried so hard to get into.

But now he was no longer the local amateur with hopes of going pro and making it big. These days he *was* the professional, a celebrity in the bull-riding world and beyond. His face graced advertisements for everything from jeans and boots to deodorant. Women from all around the country drooled over him and followed his bull-riding appearances. He had a plethora of women to choose from. He sure as heck wasn't going to be interested in her, no matter how much money she spent on fancying herself up.

Although they'd known each other since they were kids, Devlin was out of her league, out of her reach. She needed to forget about him and come up with a list of other possible cowboys who might be willing to help her and whom she could trust to be discreet.

Yeah, right. There was no one she knew who fell into both categories. That brought her back to square one—Devlin. It'd been that way since they were teenagers and she'd fallen madly in love with her big brother's best friend. From that moment on, Devlin had been the only cowboy she truly wanted. Oh, she'd tried to forget about him, even steadily dated one of the hired hands from the Black Ace Ranch for a year or so, but Devlin was always there, in the back of her mind and the forefront of her heart, wreaking havoc on her life.

And just for that he owed her. By damn, he'd give her at least one night or she'd kick his tight, sexy butt all the way to the moon and back.

At last, Taylor reached the gate to the calf pen and set the warm buckets down in the snow. A small herd of hungry, meowing barn cats hopped over the drifts and attacked the buckets while she unlatched the gate.

The sound of a pickup in the distance caught her attention and she turned in time to see the swoop of headlights cut through the thickening snow as a rig turned into the ranch drive. Her brother, Jake, had recently moved to Texas with his new wife to work on her family's cutting horse ranch so it wouldn't be him. With no hired hands employed during this time of year, Taylor knew of no one who'd be stopping by at chore time in a building snowstorm. The approaching visitor had to be lost.

The purr of the diesel engine grew louder as the pickup approached, covering the cries of the hungry calves in the barn. A brand-new, deep blue Ford Super Duty pickup with in-transit stickers still in the windows headed in her direction. Definitely, someone was lost. As the pickup turned, the headlights focused on her for a few seconds and she hoped she looked at least halfway decent to offer directions. Thank goodness her knit

stocking cap kept her corkscrew curls in check and her insulated coveralls and chore coat hid her tattered jeans and worn flannel shirt.

The headlights cut across the barnyard as the truck turned farther to the right and pulled up beside her. The window rolled down to reveal a black cowboy hat and Elvis-like smile.

"Hey, Tomboy," the driver said.

Devlin.

Taylor's breath froze in her throat. Devlin was back too soon. And he was here, seeing her as the tomboy he'd always teased her about being. Taylor's toes scrunched in her boots and her fists tightened as she wished she could disappear beneath the snowdrift behind her. This wasn't how she'd envisioned their first meeting in nearly eight months would play out. She was supposed to have that new haircut, that manicure and be feeling sexy and daring in that skimpy lingerie she had yet to buy. Seeing her like this, with her coveralls covered in snow and manure and smelling like a barn, he'd never agree to her request.

"Hey," she managed to say. Even though she was excited to see him, a huge wave of disappointment crashed over her, knowing her one and only opportunity to prove she was a woman and not just a rancher beneath all the denim and flannel was gone.

"I hear you've been asking about me," he drawled. He gave her a wink and cut the engine.

Taylor's heart stopped. He knew? In spite of the cold, her cheeks warmed. She wanted to turn away, hide her makeup-free face from his gaze but he was just so darn handsome she couldn't take her eyes off him. There was a new crescent-shaped scar to the right of his mouth, she noticed, yet his eyes were still the same deep shade of mahogany they'd always been. His cheeks were just as chiseled, his chin just as strong and determined as ever. His lips mesmerized her the most, though. They were smooth and tipped up in a sexy grin that made her heart kick into overdrive. What she wouldn't give to feel those lips covering her own in a hard, demanding kiss, then trail lower to tantalize every erogenous zone on her body.

Taylor's knees quivered, bringing her back to the reality that she was standing out in the cold, her tongue practically hanging out. Shifting her weight, she realized her nipples had peaked and not from the chill of the approaching night. She needed to get rid of him before she did something foolish, like yank him out of the pickup, throw him down into the snowdrift and rip open his clothes.

She turned toward the gate. Her foot caught in the drift, bringing her to her knees.

"Whoa. You all right?" he asked.

Taylor heard the concern in his voice but her panties pulling tight between her thighs, highlighting the dampness that pooled there, distracted her. All of these physical reactions were hitting her because she'd been staring at him? Wishing? Dreaming?

Boy, she had it bad. *All the more reason to send him on his way.* If she botched this meeting any further, she'd never get up the nerve to follow through with her seduction plan later, when she was ready.

"I'm fine," she said quickly. She braced her hands in the snow, pushing herself to her feet. Devlin's subtle musky scent teased her nose, awakening every nerve in her body to full-blown desire for physical contact. He now only stood a few inches away. And his hand was wrapped around her left arm to boot. Her breath hitched. She hadn't even heard him get out of the pickup, let alone heard his footsteps crunching in the snow as he walked over to help her. What the heck was the matter with her?

Daring to look up, she saw the darkening sky and his black cowboy hat shadowed much of his face but there was no mistaking the sexual heat smoldering deep in his eyes. Confused by what she saw, by what she felt, Taylor wanted to pull away and press her body into his, all at the same time.

With his other hand, he brushed the back of his gloved fingers over her cheek. The leather was soft, smooth and cold, but the caress felt as hot and intense as a glowing branding iron. Her mind reeled, wondering what was going on. Devlin had never touched her this way but her mind wasn't worried about the rationality. She let her eyes flutter closed, silently begging him to never stop the simple, yet electrifying touch. A heart-wrenching ache for more pulsed through her veins, making her weak. She shivered from head to toe in naughty anticipation.

"Cold?" he asked, his voice deep and husky. His warm breath turned frosty white in the night air.

Could he really be interested in her as a woman and not as his best friend's little sister? No. The freezing temperature and swirling snow had to be affecting her brain. He'd simply helped an old friend. She opened her eyes to make sure this was real and not her overly romantic imagination playing tricks on her. She studied his face and reminded herself that in all the years she'd known him, other than that one night after the summer rodeo, he had never shown any real interest in her beyond bestowing her with a round of teasing, or a joke here and there.

So, what had prompted this? He didn't look or act as though he'd been drinking this time.

"I...uh." Her tongue felt thick in her mouth. Her heart still pounded in her chest. The calves began another round of bellowing, forcing her to remember the buckets of milk she'd set in the snow, no doubt now cold. "I need to finish chores." She turned to step away. He held fast, refusing to relinquish his hold. Even through his gloves and the canvas of her heavy chore coat, she could feel the heat of his touch.

"Don't go."

Taylor looked over her shoulder at him, more confused than ever by this side of Devlin that she'd never seen.

"But —"

"I hear you've been asking around about me. Wondering when I'd be back," he said with a hard edge. "Why?"

Oh God. What should she say? What could she say? *I wanted to know because I want you to fuck my brains out? Strictly for research purposes, of course.*

"Just curious," she lied. His eyes narrowed, obviously not buying it. "Since you've won another PBR championship, I was curious if you were coming home for the holidays, or planned on celebrating in Vegas or someplace tropical. That's all." She shrugged, working like hell to make her ruse seem more legitimate.

Was it possible that *he* wanted something more from her than just a casual friendship? No. She wouldn't let her heart go there.

"With Jake in Texas," she said, "I'm alone here...now." She swallowed hard, searching for courage. "The cattle market bottomed out this fall, but I still could use some help...around the ranch. I thought you might be interested, to keep your muscles limber and ready for next season."

He still didn't loosen his hold, telling her she wasn't giving him the answers he wanted.

Taylor let out the breath she'd been holding, relieved to have her purpose, even if it wasn't the complete truth, off her chest. She tried to smile and act nonchalant but she could see in the soft glow of the mercury vapor light shining from its spot at the peak of the barn that his body remained rigid. Large flakes of snow covered the top of his hat, turning it from black to white.

He lifted his fingers then squeezed her arm again before letting his hand fall away.

Taylor mourned the loss of his touch. Under normal circumstances, Devlin never touched her—not even in a friendly, buddy-shove kind of way, or as a teasing tug of her ponytail. It was if he always purposefully avoided any kind of contact between them.

So why now?

Her heart did a flip in her chest. Did she dare hope that maybe all that time he had felt a little something for her, as she had him? The thought gave her courage she didn't know she possessed. She would tell him the truth. And tell him now, before that courage decided to duck tail and run.

"You'd best get those chores done," he said, interrupting her thoughts and failing to give her an answer. He turned and walked toward his pickup, taking her chance with his every step.

"Devlin, wait," she said, a crack sneaking into her voice. She wanted to go after him but her feet wouldn't budge. He stopped with his hand on the door handle, keeping his back to her. As cold as it was, beads of sweat still trickled down the skin between her breasts. "There is another reason why I was asking about you. The real reason."

"Real reason?" He turned his head a fraction and studied her out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes. I—" One of the calves bellowed again, his cry cutting through the frosty night air like a knife. "We've known each other a long time. You're a good man. I trust you." She wrung her gloved hands, squeezing so hard her fingers cracked.

Oh, just say it.

"I need to have sex with you. I mean...I need your help with research. Oh, dammit." She was botching this, big time. Even in the dim light she could see his shoulders stiffen beneath his heavy denim ranch coat. Taylor squeezed her eyes shut, trying to force back the tears of humiliation that threatened to stream down her face. She should have kept her mouth shut, found another way to solve her lack-of-sex problem.

She turned away, embarrassment burning her face. The night was so quiet now she could almost hear him breathe, adding to her agony. She ached from head to toe, wishing she could make him understand.

"What I meant to say is," she fumbled, "that I write erotic romance novels. I've hit a dry spell and need some help—"

"With sexual research?" he asked, his voice hard and unforgiving.

Taylor took a deep breath. "Yes."

She heard the sound of his feet in the snow and expected him to leave without another word between them. She chanced a look over her shoulder and saw instead that he strode toward her. He looked mad as hell and she took a step to get away but before she could take a second, his hands clasped her upper arms in a tight hold.

"You want to fuck me, Taylor? Is that what you want?" He shook her as if he were angry and frustrated with a disobedient child.

"I—" her voice cracked and died in her throat. A mixture of apprehension and excitement fueled her heart, making it race.

He pulled the stocking cap from her head, letting her hair tumble down around her face. The snow fell heavily now, dusting her lashes, cheeks and lips with its icy sweetness. Unconsciously, she licked the cool wetness from her lips.

His gaze darkened, turned ravenous even as he watched her.

"Dammit," he said, gritting his teeth. "Dammit." His lips came down on hers in a hard, unrelenting kiss that stole her breath away.

Chapter Two

Years of pent-up desire exploded inside Devlin's body as fast as hellfire, making his chest and his jeans tighten with aching need. He inhaled and caught the subtle hint of tangy spices and cold country air clinging to her hair and skin. The combination was intoxicating, pushing his senses to the breaking point. He deepened their kiss and squeezed his arm around the small of her back, pulling her as close as their heavy coats would allow, the layers of material failing to hide the amazing feel of her curves melding against his body.

What he wouldn't give to feel their bodies skin to skin. His cock inside her pussy, her sweet legs wrapped around him, pushing him deeper and deeper.

By damn, he was going to make it happen or his name wasn't Devlin McCord.

No one stood in their way this time. Her brother, Jake, was down in Texas. And Taylor was a grown woman, capable of deciding whom she slept with. Devlin no longer had to worry about Jake, no matter how good-naturedly he threatened to have Devlin's balls for breakfast if he messed around with Taylor.

And this time he would come onto her for the right reasons. Not because his pride was hurting and he needed a diversion.

He plunged his tongue into the depths of her mouth, exploring, tasting and savoring the sweet nectar of her lips. She responded with wild abandon, making him feel as possessed and determined as a man consumed by the pull of aged whiskey, desperate for one more drink. One more drop.

Heaven help him, it seemed as though he'd waited a lifetime for this moment.

Devlin yanked off his gloves and let them fall to the ground, forgotten. He tunneled his fingers through her thick, soft mass of curls, dampened by the falling white flakes. Ever since she'd stopped wearing her hair in braids he'd started fantasizing about running his fingers through the sexy tresses. And he'd wondered more times than he could count if the curls between her legs matched the fiery red color gracing the top of her head.

Now was his chance to find out. If she'd let him, he'd devour her right here in the snow, strip away the layers and expose her curves for him alone to enjoy. Just the thought of watching her nipples harden under his gaze made his body throb with need. The winter air would give him one hell of an excuse to cover her body with his and warm away the chill—one kiss, one stroke at a time.

He'd waited years for this and he wanted the first time with Taylor to be perfect. She deserved to be romanced with a bottle of wine, a warm fire and a soft bed. Not a quick tumble in the cold, falling snow.

She deserved perfect.

I need your help with research. Her words seared through his mind. Devlin broke the kiss and pushed back, letting his hands fall to his sides. Hell. *Needed? For research purposes?* She didn't want him in the way he'd hoped, longed for. She wanted to use him, just like the women he encountered on the road.

A frigid wind zipped through the space between them.

But what the hell had he expected? For her to come out and say she'd missed him? Wanted him? Loved him?

He let his gaze fall to hers and he saw confusion fill her eyes, contrasting with the suppleness of her freshly kissed lips.

Perfect? Yeah, it would be perfect between them if she wanted him for the right reasons. He fisted his hands. He should be smart and offer her all the research assistance her sexy little body could handle. Any sane man worth his salt would jump at the chance to warm her bed, or wherever else she wanted to do as *research*.

Devlin had no doubt he could give her a few new ideas for her books. And while he was at it, he'd help her discover how hot, wild and *perfect* it could be between them. He wanted to be the one to make her cry out in unadulterated pleasure as he took her again and again, pushing her to orgasmic peaks that would rock both their worlds.

Damn. He didn't want *just* sex with Taylor. He wanted Taylor to want him for him—not as a celebrity, not as a sexual tool. Just him, Devlin, the man she'd known for years. He'd had enough of one-night stands on the road and was tired of the sex-for-sex-sake routine. He wanted more.

After secretly watching her break out a cantankerous colt with patience and finesse this past spring, his head had realized what his heart had known all along.

He loved Taylor.

At that moment he'd made a vow that when the time was right, he'd tell her how he felt. Since that day, Devlin hadn't been with another woman. All these past months on the road the opportunities for sex had been there. The temptation hadn't been.

When he'd arrived home and heard Taylor had been asking about him, he'd believed his chance had finally come to tell her the truth—how he really felt.

How wrong he'd been.

"If you need help with research, go buy a copy of *The Joy of Sex*, or something," he said. Even in the dim light he saw her face blanch. Immediately he regretted his stupidity for the caustic remark and didn't have the foggiest notion how to fix his screwup.

"I have plenty of sex manuals on my bookshelf. If that's all I needed to solve my problem, I wouldn't have bothered asking you."

Now it was Devlin's turn to feel the cut of icy words. What an idiot he was. Somehow he needed to turn this back around, return them to the opportunity she'd offered him.

"Why are you doing this? Writing erotic novels?" he asked.

"It takes the pressure off the ranch's finances." She lifted her chin and he knew she'd just swallowed a huge chunk of her pride to admit the ranch was struggling. But he couldn't help wondering if money was the only reason she wrote about sex.

He was determined to find out. And once he had her in his bed, in his arms, he'd have plenty of time to show her that there could be so much more between them than the friendship they'd shared. Maybe, in time, she could grow to love him too.

All he needed was a little patience. Admittedly, patience had never been one of his strong suits but years spent climbing on the backs of bulls had taught him that taking his time and consistency helped bring home the gold buckle.

"Fair enough," he said, hoping the quiver in his stomach didn't reflect in his voice. "You've got yourself a research partner."

"I do?" Taylor stammered, not believing her ears. Devlin was actually agreeing to help her? Sure, the kiss they'd shared was hotter and more passionate than any she'd dreamed up for one of her novels but the feelings were one-sided. Weren't they?

She'd be lying to herself if she didn't admit there was a little lust on her part, yet the passion that had exploded from every nerve ending in her body had proved how intense her feelings for Devlin really were.

Did she dare let herself hope he felt the same way, even a little bit, and that was why he'd agreed to help her?

Or was it simply the chance for some quick, no-commitment sex that had him saying yes? He was a man, after all. And a man who made his livelihood on the rodeo circuit where the temptations of pretty women and one-night flings came with the territory.

"Let's get started," he stated. He shortened the distance between them and gave her one of his killer smiles, proving the Devlin she'd always known was still here. He *was* interested in only the sex.

"Started?" she asked around a lump lodged in her throat.

"Yeah. No time like the present." He took another step.

Taylor took two back.

"I've always wanted to try out that rustic pine bed of yours," he drawled. "It looks mighty comfy. Nice and big." A sensuous grin tugged at one corner of his mouth.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart. More than anything she wanted to have sex with Devlin, yet she couldn't help feeling disappointed that the sex was all he was interested in. This was happening so fast and she was so unprepared.

"How do you know what kind of bed I have?" she asked, trying to stall for time, yet curious to find out how he knew such an intimate detail.

"I know lots of things about you." He lifted a lock of hair off her shoulder and rubbed the tresses between his fingers. He bent close and pressed the strands to his nose. "Mmm," he said, taking a deep breath. "Spicy cinnamon, just like I remember."

"Remember?" she asked, breathless. All this time he'd known such a basic thing as the fragrance of her shampoo? How could that be?

A twinge of apprehension and disbelief swarmed in Taylor's brain and told her to back away, yet she couldn't. Devlin was telling her things she'd always hoped he would and for thousands of nights she'd dreamed of kissing him and feeling his hard body next to hers. Even if it was all just a part of his seduction, did she dare let this chance slip by because she couldn't believe he'd actually noticed her?

Maybe, in his eyes, there *was* more to her than her tomboy ways?

"Yeah, remember." He eased his hand up to cup her jaw, his calloused fingers warm and mesmerizing against her skin. Their gazes locked and held as he lifted her chin. He bent lower, the brim of his hat brushing across the top of her hair as he moved to kiss her.

Taylor held her breath. Yes. She wanted this kiss and a million more. She wanted to sleep with Devlin—to make love under the warm, soft quilts covering her bed until the sun broke over the snow-encrusted horizon. And she didn't want to do it for any damn research, either.

It was just that this was all so unexpected and overwhelming for the girl who'd loved the rakish cowboy, from afar, for so long. Maybe she was dreaming. Since when had her dreams about men—about Devlin—come true?

"I have chores to finish," she said, pulling back, hoping to find safety in distance. Turning away, she grabbed the bucket handles and immediately regretted losing the feel of his fiery touch. Tears stung the back of her eyes. What a fool she was. The man wanted her in spite of her unruly hair and lack of fancy lingerie. She should go for it and jump him right now. For once she was close to getting what she'd wished for.

But like a coward, she fled through the deepening snow, questioning her sanity. Her heart pounded against her chest with each laborious step she took, making her insides burn. At last she reached the barn door and hurried into the warmth and dryness that the antique structure provided. The familiar scents of sweet hay and animals filled her nose, relaxing and soothing her nerves.

Could Devlin McCord really want her? Not just any woman—her? And she'd blown it. She squeezed her eyes shut against the realization that had sent her heart on a ride wilder than any unruly bronc could ever dish out.

The calves bellowed and pushed against the boards of their pen, reminding her of her responsibilities. She went to work filling their milk buckets and hooking them onto the fence. They wasted no time wrapping their mouths around the large rubber nipples on their respective buckets and sucking with starving urgency.

"Kind of makes you think of something else, doesn't it?" a husky voice asked from behind Taylor.

Startled, she jumped and nearly dropped the half-bale of alfalfa she'd picked up to toss into the feed bunk. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Devlin leaning against a

support post, a maverick smile covering his face. Heat rushed to her cheeks in reaction to his sexual innuendo. She had to admit, she liked it.

One of the calves tugged hard on a nipple, jerking the metal bucket against the fence with a bang. Taylor told herself not to look but she couldn't stop and found herself watching the calves work the nipples in their mouths, squeezing and sucking to release the good stuff they held inside. A blaze of heat burned between her thighs as she realized for the first time how that cream-colored nipple *did* resemble a certain part of the male anatomy.

Taylor took a deep breath as an image of a naked Devlin filled her mind—he stood tall and proud before her, the sinewy muscles in his arms rippling beneath his tanned skin. She let her gaze drop lower to his torso where a sprinkling of dark hair dusted his chest, then to the washboard abs that she knew came from hours of hard ranch work and riding cantankerous bulls. Unable to stop her fantasy, she let her gaze drop lower still, to where, in her mind, she saw his penis, thick and throbbing with need, beckoning her to take him deep into her mouth.

And, oh, how she wanted to oblige. She'd kneel before him and tease and torment his hard, velvet shaft until he begged her to stop, or she turned to nothing but a puddle of molten heat, whichever came first.

"The real thing is better than any fantasy," Devlin drawled suggestively, his warm breath brushing against her ear and bringing her back to reality. She inhaled sharply, mortified that he could tell she *had* been fantasizing.

"I— What makes you think —"

"That shade of red in your cheeks isn't just from the cold." With the tip of his index finger he slowly traced a seductive trail along the line of her cheekbone.

"That's crazy." Saliva pooling beneath her tongue made it difficult to talk. She swallowed hard, hoping to regain some composure. And her control.

He cupped her chin in his hand, turning her to face him. He looked deep into her eyes, his own dark with desire and intent. "There's a hunger in your eyes. Let me satisfy it."

Taylor's breath quickened and her senses raced headlong into dangerous territory. "But I thought...you didn't really like the idea of being my research project," she stammered, at a lost for words. Finding the right words for her novels was never this difficult but when she wrote she never had a living, breathing hunk whispering in her ear, making every nerve in her body spark with desire.

"There's more than research between us. You know it. And I know it." He brushed the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip and she hoped he didn't feel the tremble there.

"Yes," she said, not much above a whisper.

A low chuckle escaped his throat. "I figure you being the erotic romance writer means you know more than you're lettin' on. 'Sides, I'm a liberal man. I don't have a problem with the woman taking charge."

“That’s very...open-minded of you.” Taylor sneaked a deep breath, relieved and scared to death that Devlin was giving her a second chance.

Chapter Three

Taylor flung her arms around Devlin's neck and planted one hard, hungry kiss on his lips. The action was bold, hot and shocked the hell out of him, knocking him off balance mentally and physically. He reached for her waist to keep them from falling but there was no stopping the backward momentum the unexpected embrace and scorching kiss created. His back slammed into the barn wall and even through his heavy coat he could feel the edge of a stout two-by-four pressing against his spine.

"Whoa. Take it easy there, Tomboy," he said, more than a little winded from the combination of her kiss and the blow of the unforgiving wall. "Does this mean we're goin' for it?"

"Who needs satin and lace anyway?" she purred between the smoking-hot kisses she placed on his cheek. Devlin's erection pulsed inside his jeans in spite of the tone in her voice, making him wonder if she was trying to convince herself more than him.

Who was he to question? He was a man. And she was a woman. A sexy, *willing* woman.

Life was good.

"What about satin and lace?" he teased, curious to find out what kind of game she had in store for him.

Taylor gave him a sly smile and a wink. Her warm, soft lips and exquisite tongue met his cheek again and worked their magic along his jaw and down to the hollow of his throat, intoxicating him with searing desire. Shit, if she could make him rock hard with just a few kisses, then what the hell would she do to him if she went down on him, filling her mouth with his cock?

He had to find out. And quickly.

Taylor slid her hands down his arms and reached up under his coat for his belt, telling him he wasn't going to have to wait long. Grabbing the large buckle he wore, she unhooked it as easily as if she'd done it a million times.

Her hand cupped his erection. His breath hitched. Even through the denim of his jeans he could feel the fire and demand of her touch. Slowly, she moved her hand down. Then up. Then down again, tormenting him and making promises at the same time. The basic, age-old rhythm made his dick swell and thrust against the restrictions of his jeans.

"Shit. Keep that up and I'll explode inside my shorts."

"Would that be so bad?" she giggled against his throat. The tip of her tongue flicked against his skin and sent another wave of desire surging through his veins. Before he

could answer, she nipped playfully at his ear and then sucked the lobe into her mouth, tugging and teasing.

Son of a bitch. If her basic foreplay was making him as randy and impatient as a wild buck, then what the hell would fucking her do to him? Blow his brains out through every follicle on his head?

"Trust me. It would be," he groaned between breaths. He needed release. Soon. Now.

"Well, we wouldn't want that, would we?" She gave his dick a firm yet gentle squeeze, proving what she was capable of doing to him. Devlin felt his insides quiver in anticipation. All these years he'd wondered how it would be between them. Now he was finding out.

Only not fast enough.

He'd waited too long, fantasized too many nights to take it slow this first round. There would be plenty of time for slow, for soft sheets and warm fires, later. Right now they just needed to fuck like rabbits and get it out of their systems. His gaze locked with hers and he realized when it came to Taylor, he'd never get anything out of his system.

"Enough with the torture," he growled. Pushing away from the wall, he spun her around and reversed their positions, trapping her. He unzipped her heavy chore coat and shoved it off her shoulders and down her arms. With her coat out of the way, he focused on her brown insulated coveralls. In spite of their bulk, they did little to hide the round fullness of her breasts.

"I have to touch them," he said hungrily. He maneuvered the second zipper open and yanked the straps down her arms, pinning them at her sides. The heavy straps pulled at the fabric of her shirt, exposing the creamy expanse of her throat and just a hint of breast.

Devlin watched her work her bottom lip between her teeth, a nervous fixation she'd had since they were kids. The habit had never looked as sexy as it did now. He swallowed hard in anticipation.

"Do you know how long I've waited to touch you?" He reached for the top button of her flannel shirt and opened it.

"No," she said, barely above a whisper. Her chest rose and fell beneath the blue-and-red-checked flannel in a precipitous rhythm, proving she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

The swell of the breasts he'd dreamed about for so long came into view as he hurried to open the next button. His fingers fumbled and he tried to switch his focus to the task and away from the pleasures he knew lay beneath.

It wasn't working.

"Ah hell," he grumbled in frustration. Impatient, blood pounding in his veins, he grabbed the front of her shirt and ripped open the remaining buttons and sent them popping in different directions.

Taylor gasped and moved to cover herself. Devlin wouldn't have it.

"Whoa. I want to see all of you." He shoved the shirt off her shoulders and down her arms. Goose bumps prickled on her skin as the cool air whispered over her. He rubbed his hands up and down her arms to ward off the chill, feeling the silkiness of her skin and the muscles underneath, earned from hours of hard work on the ranch. His gaze dropped to her bra and he noticed it didn't sport an inch of frilly stuff. "No satin and lace," he said as he hooked a finger under the strap, now understanding her earlier comment.

"Do you...mind?" she asked, a hint of apprehension in her voice.

"Do I look like I mind?" He winked, then hastily stripped off his coat and tossed his hat onto a nearby hay bale. Without hesitation he popped open the clasp on her bra and brushed the garment aside, fully exposing her breasts to him and the winter air. He slipped the straps down over her arms, his fingers lightly touching her smooth skin here and there, tempting and teasing them both.

This time she made no move to cover herself, allowing him to drink his fill of the luscious sight of her. He groaned deep in his throat as his cock hardened and pulsed with need. But he reined in his eagerness to ravish her, refusing to miss the amazing sight of her nipples hardening and peaking right before his eyes.

Like any hot-blooded American cowboy, he appreciated the rounded and curved attributes of a woman and *especially* Taylor's attributes just begging to be explored by his fingers and licked by his tongue.

She took a series of deep, ragged breaths, making her breasts rise and fall, tempting him to drive his shaft deep into her core and ride her until she cried for mercy. It was amazing how the simple movement was enough to push him over the edge, say to heck with savoring the moment. And if he had his way, there'd be plenty of time for savoring later. Right now he was a man with a dick as hard as stone. He needed release.

Impatience and hunger overtook any rational thought he might still possess. He ran his hands over her smooth shoulders and down to her upper arms. He squeezed and pulled her tight up against him. The contact pushed his body to the brink of explosion. He wasn't waiting any longer. Fourteen years was more than any man should have to endure.

Cupping her buttocks, he lifted her up off the floor, not stopping until she'd wrapped her legs around him, her crotch pushing against his erection. The urge to buck against her, make her sweet juices flow, drove him near insanity. But he dredged up the last ounce of restraint he possessed. No way, no how, was he going to miss out on the chance to draw down on one of those sweet n' salty nipples. He lifted her higher still, until her breasts were at eye level and marveled at her beauty. They were so round. So perky. So damn sexy.

And they were all his for the taking.

A long, deep moan of desire escaped his throat as he flicked his tongue around and over the dark tip, playing and teasing. She gasped from his touch and her body

trembled. She arched her back, thrusting her breast deeper into his mouth, clutching the folds of the shirt still covering his shoulders.

A smile tugged at his lips and he began to suckle the taut peak. He felt her hands skate over his shoulders and up his neck. When her fingers tangled in his hair and she mumbled two words on a ragged breath, he knew the greatest ride of his life awaited him.

"Uh...no," Taylor managed to say as Devlin's warm breath brushed the sensitive tip of her nipple. *Thank God, he doesn't mind*, she thought as his tongue played across her skin with long, mind-numbing strokes. This was her fantasy come true.

He cupped and massaged her other breast. Every caress, every lick sent a scorching fire thrumming between her legs, making her quiver and writhe, desperate for more. Within seconds he'd worked her body into a wild frenzy of need.

She dug her fingers deeper into his hair, savoring warm softness. Thrusting forward, she silently begged him to take her breast even deeper into his mouth. He answered her request, sucking and laving her with gentle urgency.

Taylor's head fell back against the rough wall as bright points of pleasure flashed behind her eyes. Her legs weakened, yet she managed to keep them locked tight around his waist—not wanting to let go of this, let go of him.

"Devlin, please," she begged.

He splayed his hands over her back and slid her down the length of his body until her core brushed over his hard cock once more. Her panties, wet and slick with her desire for this man, intensified the contact and she could feel the hard length of his erection throb, delivering massive pulses of pleasure. Her pussy contracted and ached with a need so intense she thought she'd die if she didn't feel Devlin buried deep inside her.

And soon.

She groaned and thrust her hips against him, begging for and demanding more at the same time. Taylor bucked again. And again. If he could pleasure her so intensely with their clothes on, she couldn't wait to feel the fire they could stoke by being skin to skin.

"It's time, sweetheart," he whispered against her ear, his warm breath caressing and erotic. He unwrapped her legs from around him and set her feet on the floor. Her legs, weak with desire, trembled and she felt herself slipping. Devlin stopped her descent by clasping her shoulders and capturing her lips in a hard, unrelenting kiss. He thrust his tongue into the depths of her mouth, taking away what little breath she had left.

They groped and tugged at each other's clothes, both starving from their long-denied passion. He unzipped her jeans and tugged the denim and the loose-fitting coveralls just low enough to give him access to what she had to offer. Taylor shivered in anxious anticipation.

"Cold?" he asked.

"Yes," she lied, not sure she was ready to admit how much this man affected her. Had always affected her.

Her heart beat erratically in her chest as she struggled to regain an ounce of control.

"Bet I can warm you up," he said. His smoldering gaze locked on hers while he splayed a roughened hand over the flat of her belly. The sweet, fiery heat of his fingers made her forget all about maintaining control.

He drew slow, easy circles on the sensitive skin, making Taylor suck in a deep breath. His fingers inched lower and lower until he reached her inner thigh, all the while his hungry, intense gaze never leaving hers. Taylor's body trembled in anticipation. She swallowed hard as he urged her legs apart. He hooked her panties with his finger and pulled them aside. She held her breath as she waited for what was to come. He slid the tip of his finger over the pulsing flesh of her clit. The touch was as explosive as matches to kerosene, making her breath catch in her throat and her chest tighten.

He groaned as he played and stroked, driving Taylor's heart to beat at an insane pace. Heaven help her. He knew exactly all the right places to touch and applied just the right amount of pressure to drive her to the brink of madness. She writhed beside him, grasping at the wall, at his shirt and anything else she could find. He watched her struggle to catch her breath as he drove her higher and higher, to the peak of orgasm.

"That's it. Come for me." He plunged his fingers into her core while his thumb gave full attention to the tiny nub of her pleasure.

In a haze of rapture, Taylor heard a whimper and knew the sound had come from her own throat.

"Ah. So wet. So slick," he said softly against her ear. His fingers continued to work their magic, pushing her to the agonizing edge of climax. "And so ripe."

"Devlin, please," she begged again. She threaded her fingers through the softness of his hair, pulling him closer, reiterating her need.

One last powerful stroke and his hand pulled away, leaving her breathless and desperate for more.

"No...don't...stop."

"Like that, do ya?"

Taylor nodded and licked her lips.

Devlin smiled, his eyes gleaming with a possessive hunger. "The best is yet to come," he said as his mouth came down on hers in an intense kiss that promised the moon.

The faint sound of his zipper sliding open registered in her mind and she about lost it knowing what she'd been waiting for, for so long, was hers for the taking. She kicked off one muck boot and shook her jeans and coveralls down her leg.

Devlin slipped his fingers under her black panties again and with one yank the thin cotton gave way. He chucked them aside.

Half naked, she was able to widen the space between her legs. A low growl escaped his throat as he let his gaze fall over her. "My billfold," he said, "back pocket."

She reached for the billfold, letting her hand linger over his tight ass for a few seconds before pulling it from his pocket.

"There's a condom under the left flap."

With trembling fingers, she found the foil package.

"Can you take care of business? My hands are kind of busy." He squeezed her butt and she let out a yelp.

"Devlin McCord, you're still as ornery as ever." She smiled and tossed his billfold over by his hat.

"Yep," he drawled. "Hurry now, darlin'. I'm not sure how much longer I can wait."

"Anxious?"

"Aren't you?"

"Maybe," she teased. He pinched her butt and she jerked forward. His erection pushed against her tummy and sent another wave of heat rushing through her. "Okay. Yes. Yes." Ripping open the package, Taylor pulled out the protection. It was slippery between her fingers and she prayed she wouldn't drop it in the hay.

She looked down and for the first time saw his cock standing tall and erect. The tip glistened with a bead of moisture in the dim light of the barn, proving he was ready for her. She paused, remembering the countless nights she'd dreamed of this moment with Devlin, wondering exactly how it would feel to be his lover, his woman.

"I promise it won't bite," he drawled, interrupting her thoughts.

Taylor's cheeks warmed. He'd caught her staring. Embarrassment threatened to rear its ugly head but she shoved it aside. She was practically naked and about to have sex with him while her livestock watched. To hell with embarrassment.

She placed the rubber over the tip of his cock and took her sweet time rolling it down his length, deciding to explore, enjoy and tease him as he'd done with her. She marveled at how hard and solid his shaft was, yet sensitive to her every touch. She wrapped her hand around him and felt the blood pulsing through his veins at a frantic pace.

"Shit," he moaned. He bestowed on her another mind-numbing kiss, putting an end to her playtime. Their tongues plundered one another with intense urgency, finding satisfaction, yet seeking so much more. He grabbed her bare butt and kneaded her flesh as he lifted her up to meet his thick, rigid erection. The tip of his cock brushed against her folds, tormenting and promising. Then with one hard thrust he entered her, taking control.

Taylor heard her cry of pleasure. Was it real, or imagined? Her feverish skin tingled from her head to her toes, heightening her awareness of this cowboy filling her body with his own.

"Yeah...so wet. So sweet." He thrust again and again, her back pounding against the crude wall with each stroke. He was strong, commanding and powerful—like the bulls he rode. Searing heat burst behind Taylor's eyes, raced down her neck and over her breasts, making them tighten and thrum. Blood rushed through her veins as her clit throbbed with an aching need so intense she thought she'd explode from the sweet torture.

"Oh," she moaned against his lips. "Devlin..."

He pushed deeper, taking her like a man possessed. With one last thrust, he carried her over the brink and to full-blown orgasm. She cried out, this time so loud she knew the sound wasn't imagined. Her toes curled. Her eyes rolled back into her head.

Taylor struggled for breath, her gasps filling her nose with the musky scents of this skin and their wild sex, confirming her intoxication of Devlin McCord.

Chapter Four

Taylor shivered. The chill of the barn felt even colder now on her damp skin. She couldn't remember ever breaking out into a sweat while making love, even in the heat of summer. But then no man had ever affected her as Devlin had.

"We should head for the house," he said, brushing his hand over her shoulder. "We have more research to conduct. Catching a cold isn't an option." His eyes gleamed with a trace of mischief as he draped her shirt over her shoulders. A new surge of desire made her stomach flip.

The question was, could she handle more sex tonight? Especially sex with Devlin? It had been so long since she'd made love that she'd almost forgotten what it felt like and this...this sex they'd shared was unlike any she'd ever experienced. This was wild. This was spontaneous. And out of control.

And she wanted more of it. So what if she was sore and could barely walk tomorrow? It would be worth it.

Once again bundled in their winter garb, they opened the large barn door and saw the snow had increased to a blinding level.

"Looks like you won't be going anywhere tonight," she said.

"You won't get any complaints out of me, sweetheart."

Taylor's heart paused. For only the second time in her life he'd called her sweetheart. She smiled, a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment swelling her heart.

"Is there some place I can park my truck?" he asked as they struggled through the deepening drifts.

"The machine shed." Taylor latched the corral gate and pointed across the drive to the large metal shed that was obscured by the heavy snow.

"You head for the house. I'll meet you there in a few minutes."

"Okay." His truck roared to life as she reached the back door. She stomped the snow off her boots the best she could before entering the warmth and coziness of the kitchen. Before tucking her gloves into her coat pocket, she pulled out the bra and panties she'd stuffed there before leaving the barn. She stared down at the garments in awe and amazement. Her legs, still weak from their wild sex, shook beneath her.

Devlin had wanted her. Had taken her.

Taylor was still blown away by the fact that he'd agreed to her request, even without the help of her seduction plan and a trip to the salon.

And holy smokes, had he delivered. He'd satisfied her in a way no man had ever done before. Could it be that he felt a little something more for her than casual

friendship? There was an intense passion brewing between them, a type of passion that normally took years to cultivate. She wanted to hope he saw her as more than a means to sexual fulfillment but she cautioned herself against letting her emotions enter into the mix. Keeping a certain amount of distance was a safer bet for her heart.

Shedding her winter clothes, she hung everything neatly in its place near the door. Tossing the bra and panties onto the pine table, she crossed the kitchen to the corner near the stairs where the old-fashioned cook stove stood emanating its heat. Taylor grabbed a few smaller logs from the wood bin and stuffed them into the stove's firebox, stoking the glowing embers for the long, chilly night ahead.

The back door opened as she finished her task. She turned to see Devlin's hat and shoulders completely covered in white.

"Did you get that fancy new pickup put to bed all right?" she asked, secretly hoping he still planned on putting her to bed as well.

"Yep." He shrugged off his coat and hung it next to hers. The common image made her pause. She'd never shared this home with a man other than her brother and dad. She'd become accustomed to seeing only her things, and the few items her folks had left when they had retired to Arizona, fill the rooms.

Devlin's snowy coat hanging there looked so right, so natural. As if it belonged. The thought of him staying, making his own mark in this house, made her heart do a double take. Was it possible for her to hope for a future with Devlin? Not settle for one of loneliness and solitude where her only companions were of the equine and bovine variety and her only excitement the stories she created on her computer?

Stop it. Leave the emotions out of this. Tonight was her chance to live out the fantasies she wrote about. She wasn't going to screw it up by getting all wishy-washy.

He moved to the sink and brushed the snow off his hat. Taylor caught her breath as she watched the smooth way his body moved with even the simplest tasks. He was so devastatingly handsome, so strong and confident.

Yes. So out of her league.

Turning, he hooked his hat on the top of one of the ladder-back chairs. The gold on the new championship buckle she'd unhooked earlier winked under the kitchen light, reminding her exactly who the man was to whom she'd lost her heart all those years ago.

He was a professional bull rider.

The reality of his profession made her stomach clench. Bull riding wasn't just his job and means of making a living. Bull riding was his passion. Professional cowboys like him, who rode bulls for a high-paid, celebrity-style life, were a unique breed. In spite of the dangers, they craved the adrenaline rush of man pitted against beast, the thrill of the eight-second ride and the satisfaction of wowing an audience.

They sported so much brawn and guts that they put their lives on the line for the glory of a gold buckle as many times a week as their bodies could stand. They lived out

of beat-up riggin' bags and their homes were an endless series of hotel rooms across the country.

And relationships? Permanent, committed relationships were rare commodities for men like Devlin. For years she'd purposefully distanced herself from his career, afraid of seeing him hurt or worse yet, killed by a bull loaded with rage. Alone at night in her bed, she'd wonder where he was at that moment. Was he lying broken and battered in a hospital somewhere? Or was he with another nameless female who'd sought him out for more than just an autograph?

How could she shove aside all those worries and pay attention now that her heart was even more invested in the man she'd dreamed about forever?

How could she not?

She turned back to the stove and double-checked the fire, looking for an excuse to hide the tears gathering in her eyes. What a sap she was. She didn't tolerate this kind of behavior from the heroines she created and she sure as hell wouldn't put up with it from herself.

Besides, one night with Devlin didn't mean a thing. He'd agreed to have sex, that was all. Not to a lifetime of marriage and emotional commitment. And she'd best not forget it because when morning came and he walked out the door and back to his life, she was going to be all alone.

Again.

Strong arms wrapped around her from behind, pulling her close. Her heart tripped in her chest.

"Now, where were we?" he asked, nuzzling her ear.

She melted back into his arms, laying her head on his shoulder. He felt so good, so right. Blinking away the moisture in her eyes, she forced her fears for the future out of her mind. Devlin was here now, and by damn, she was going to make the most of it. There would be plenty of winter nights ahead for drowning in her sorrows.

He cupped her breast and circled his thumb over her nipple, making it peak and harden beneath the fabric of her shirt. Shock waves of electricity sizzled to every key point on her body. If this was her only chance to have Devlin all to herself, she wasn't going to ruin it. It was time to be more like her heroines, at least for one night, and seize the opportunity. She wanted no looking back and seeing nothing but regrets.

He lifted the hem of her shirt and brushed his hand over her skin. "Hmm. Feels kind of bare under that there shirt," he teased as he continued to play.

"Want to see for sure?"

"You betcha."

Breaking away from his embrace, she took a couple steps back, giving herself room to strip. Yanking the balance of her shirt out of her jeans, she undid the remaining top two buttons he hadn't ripped off in the barn. She lifted the shirt up off her shoulders and let it fall slowly to the floor. The intense heat of the woodstove warmed her back,

adding to her wantonness. Boldly, she placed her hands on her tummy and slid them slowly up over her ribs, not stopping until she cupped her breasts. Letting her head fall back, she let out a soft moan as she ran her tongue over her bottom lip. She caressed the full roundness of her breasts and teased her nipples until they peaked, giving him a show and herself extreme pleasure.

"Ah Tomboy," he drawled. "You sure have surprised the hell out of me."

Yeah and she'd surprised the hell out of herself too. Never in a million years would she have thought she'd have the grit to pleasure herself in front of a man—especially Devlin. Sure, she didn't have a problem creating characters who were forward and sure of themselves. But Taylor? No way. Their spontaneous sex in the barn and her long pent-up desires had obviously squashed her inhibitions—at least for now.

He sat on the edge of the table and crossed his arms over his broad chest, intent on watching her every move.

"Surprised you? Hmm." She gave him a saucy smile, deciding not to hold anything back. Swaying her hips back and forth, inch by inch she worked the jeans down until a hint of red curls peeked out above the zipper. She stopped, hoping to drive him crazy.

By the way his eyes smoldered with dangerous intensity, her little plan was working. She just hoped his sexual appetite was a long way from being satiated, because hers sure as hell was.

Giving her jeans one last nudge, they fell down around her ankles. She kicked them aside.

A muscle ticced in his jaw. He unfolded his arms and gripped the edge of the table so hard his knuckles turned white. He didn't move.

Wearing nothing now but a smile and the glow of the kitchen lights, Taylor was as exposed as she could ever be. Her heart thundered in her ears. Had she done the right thing by being so brazen? Would he like this side of her that he'd never seen before?

A deep moan escaped his throat, confirming his approval. At last he stood. A cantankerous lock of hair fell over his forehead, making him look every inch the bad boy his reputation claimed him to be.

"I always thought you were so sweet, so innocent," he said at last. He took a step forward, shortening the distance between them. "And here I come back home to find you write erotic novels and are propositioning me for sex. What's the world comin' to?"

"Its...senses?"

He stepped closer, until only mere inches of sizzling air separated them. Cupping her cheek in the palm of his hand, his touch was commanding, yet gentle and full of promise.

Her eyes fluttered closed as he traced the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip. Tingling desire pulsed through her blood, giving her the courage to take the lead. She grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled herself up on tiptoe. Stopping within a hairsbreadth, she studied his lips, wanting to look and savor before hiding their perfect

shape beneath her own. How many times had she thought about kissing those lips? Every time she wrote a love scene. Every time she saw him. Every time she dreamed about him.

"Do you like what you see?" he asked, his breath warm against her face. She lifted her gaze to meet his.

"Very much so."

"I want you to taste me, Taylor. Taste all of me." He caught her wrist and placed a light kiss there before guiding her hand to the front of his jeans. His growing erection pushed against the denim.

Taylor struggled to remember to breathe but her hand had no problem moving on its own, gently rubbing over his hard length. Yes. She would taste him. Every delectable inch.

They had all night.

Soft, shallow pants escaped his lips. He pressed his nose against her hair and inhaled. "Taylor..."

Taylor smiled at the sound of anxiousness in his voice. Knowing this man desired her so strongly was the headiest feeling she'd ever experienced. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him hard, fueled by the knowledge of her effect on him. He hauled her up tighter against his body and kissed her back as if he too, couldn't get enough. As if he'd never be sated.

Their tongues sought and found each other, dancing and mating in a wild frenzy while their hands reached, fumbled and searched, anxious to find the pleasures they sought so desperately.

Cupping her buttocks in his large hands, he lifted her off the floor and set her on the edge of the table. Laying her down, he shoved aside a set of keys and the day's mail, sending them flying to the braided rug below.

His hands encircled her waist and slowly he slid them up over her belly to just below her breasts, his fingers leaving a scorching trail in their wake.

"So beautiful," he drawled. Bending low, he captured a nipple and sucked, pulling it deep into his mouth. His hands worked their own magic, kneading, caressing and driving her insane with renewed want and yearning. Taylor shuddered and clutched the front of his shirt as if her life depended upon it, her clit wet and throbbing with need for the second time that night.

In a wild rush, they stripped off his clothes. When the garments were gone and no longer hindered her view, she gasped in awe and pleasure at the sight of the man standing buck naked in her kitchen. He'd been in this room many times but never like this. That hard, muscled body, devilish smile and sizzling charm, not to mention his large, aroused cock, made him one hundred percent hunk.

There was no doubt. Devlin McCord rivaled any Greek god ever depicted in marble. No wonder the majority of the fan mail to the Professional Bull Riders association was addressed to him.

But for tonight, he belonged to Taylor. There were no bulls to demand his attention, or fans clamoring for an autograph or a kiss. Devlin McCord was all hers.

And he took her, there in the middle of the table. The wood was hard and unforgiving against her back as he pounded his body into hers, his sheathed cock reaching so deep and filling her so completely that it sent lightning bolts of ecstasy zipping to her every nerve.

She cried out in pleasure. He stroked harder and faster in response, intensifying the sweet, torturous sensations spiraling out of control. She clutched at his damp shoulders in desperation and need and through a haze of mind-numbing climax she saw beads of sweat dot his forehead as he thrust one more time, pushing them both over the edge.

Devlin struggled to catch his breath as his body went limp against Taylor's. He couldn't believe he was naked and having sex with her in the kitchen, on the table of all places. The barn was one thing but the room where he'd shared meals with her whole family was another. Leave it to Taylor, the one woman he thought he could never have, to be the one to throw him for a loop.

He liked it.

In spite of knowing her for so long, he was discovering there was a lot about Taylor he didn't know—a lot that he liked and could come to appreciate. Now was his chance.

He propped himself up on his elbows and cupped her face between his hands. "I always knew there was a fire under all that red hair and shy demeanor of yours," he said, brushing a thumb over her thoroughly kissed lips. They were slightly swollen and sported a rosy glow. Knowing he'd put that glow there made him smile with satisfaction.

"Did you, now?" Her green eyes twinkled. "Well...let me show you how much hotter that fire can get." She gave him a mischievous wink and Devlin knew she had no intention of letting him catch much of a breath.

She pushed at his chest, urging him to move. He did so and she hopped off the table. Taking his hand, she pulled him closer to the warmth of the antique stove. He got rid of the condom as she grabbed a multicolored throw rug she kept in front of the steps and placed it at his feet. Again she took his hand, encouraging him to step from the cool hardwood floor and onto the softness of the rug. She knelt before him. Before he could utter a word, she'd wrapped her hand around his shaft.

He sucked in a large gulp of air as jolts of electricity zipped through him, reawakening every tired muscle and nerve in his body. Burying his fingers in her thick, soft hair, he offered silent encouragement that he knew she didn't need.

Her tongue flicked over the tip of his cock—once, twice—adding to the moisture already beading there. Tremors coursed through him as she licked and nipped in a

teasing game of foreplay, causing his muscles to tighten over every square inch of his body. Blood rushed to his dick, making it pulse and ache with a new round of need.

Closing his eyes, he struggled to keep his urges in check and, instead, focus on the feel, the scent and the unending beauty of the woman who knelt before him. But when she took him fully into her mouth, all hope of controlling those urges vanished and unrelenting lust, mixed with years of denied passion, took over.

Instinctively, he thrust his hips back and forth. The motion spurred her on and she worked her tongue up and down, massaging, stroking and casting an almost magical hold over him. Suddenly it wasn't enough. And he knew, with Taylor, he'd never get enough. He wrapped a long curl around his hand, pulling her closer, demanding she take him deeper yet.

She did.

"Taylor..." He was on the brink of exploding but he wouldn't come this way. Not this time, not here. He pulled back and brought her to her feet. Confusion clouded her eyes. Quickly he captured her lips in a heat-searing kiss, banishing any bewilderment she might have.

"The bedroom," he said, between kisses. He backed toward the staircase, pulling her with him.

"No." She stroked his cock again, stopping him at the base of the landing. "Here. We do it here."

"On the steps?"

She gave him a naughty smile and flicked her tongue over and around his nipple. "Research, remember?"

"Ah, sweetheart." He took her hand and sat on the edge of the landing, bringing her with him.

"I want to ride you, cowboy."

"Fast and hard? Or slow and easy?"

"Both. We've got all night. I just hope you have plenty of Trojans." She cupped his balls and squeezed gently, massaging and teasing. A new wave of heat ignited in his loins.

"Got it covered." He slid her off his lap and reached for his jeans, piled in a heap on the floor. Grabbing his wallet, he pulled the last condom from between the flaps.

"There's no more," she said, disappointment covering her face.

"Don't worry, darlin'. There's more in the truck."

"Good." Her smile returned as she snatched the foil package from his fingers. She wasted no time in sheathing him, then slid her body down over his throbbing erection.

He lay back on the carpet, trusting her to take the lead. Her body was so tight, gripping and pulsing around him as she began to move. Her moist, slick juices flowed down over him, increasing the hot, electrifying sensations of her wild pleasures ten

fold. No other woman had ever captured his attention and turned him inside out as Taylor did.

He ran his hands over her smooth skin, indulging in every dip and every curve as she rode him hard, demanding more. She leaned forward, bracing her hands on either side of his head. Her breasts bobbed as she pumped back and forth, stroking them both to the edge of climax.

Devlin moaned and gripped her hips in a tight hold. Bucking against her, he increased the speed of their ride. A surge of intense pleasure pounded through his veins.

His mind went blank. And with one last thrust, he exploded inside her. Taylor cried out as their bodies trembled and they climaxed in unison.

She lay limply atop him, the rise and fall of her chest matching the pace of his own racing heart. Brushing his hand over her back in a soothing caress, he felt the dampness on her skin. He smiled, knowing he'd worked her into a sweat, but this wasn't just sex between them. This was way more. He just wondered if she realized it.

For moments they just lay there, her head on his chest, relaxing and coming down from their sexual high.

"So...how was my ride?" she asked at last, still a little breathless. "Did I make the eight seconds and score high enough to make the finals?"

"Well, I'm not sure, sweetheart. You made me forget all about watchin' the clock." He scooted her off his lap and he stood. She looked up at him, her heart and her hopes clear in her eyes. He held out his hand to her and she took it. "Come on. I think you're due a re-ride. But this time we're doing it on the bed. I've got carpet burns on my ass."

Chapter Five

Taylor awoke to gray light filtering through her bedroom curtains. She rolled over, ready to snuggle some more with the handsome cowboy who'd kept her up most of the night. She moaned and let her arm flop down on the opposite side of the bed, finding nothing but cold, rumpled sheets.

She sat bolt upright and looked around the room. Devlin was nowhere to be seen. And neither were his clothes.

He was gone? Just like that? No "see you around"? No goodbye?

"He wouldn't leave like this," she whispered to herself, refusing to believe that, after all they'd shared, he'd be so cold. Raking her fingers through her messy hair, she glanced at the clock. It was five after nine in the morning. A sick feeling dropped into the pit of her stomach. She never slept this late and by doing so today she might have let the one man who'd ever meant anything to her walk out the door.

If Devlin cared even one ounce for her, he wouldn't just leave.

Would he?

He came from a good family, was a trusted friend to her brother and was an all-around nice guy. But her mind argued that at the root of all that he was still a cowboy who preferred the freedom of the open road and the roar of the crowd.

A heavy sigh escaped her and she scrubbed her hands over her face. She needed to be satisfied with the one night they'd shared together. It was far more than what she'd ever hoped to have with Devlin. She knew that most cowboys liked to "love 'em and leave 'em". She had to accept that.

But she couldn't.

Taylor flung back the covers and raced to the dresser, not ready to believe Devlin was like all the rest. He'd been so passionate and considerate of her every desire. What they'd shared wasn't just sex. It was more than that. In her book, they'd made love. And making love meant something – at least to her.

Pulling on a pair of jeans and tattered t-shirt, she hurried toward the stairs, not bothering to worry about her hair or anything else. Maybe, if she got lucky, he'd overslept too, or the snow had detained him.

The fragrant aroma of fresh-brewed coffee, along with an unexpected cozy warmth, drifted up the stairs from the kitchen. By now the fire should have died down, leaving the house on the chilly side and she hadn't set the automatic timer on the coffeepot.

Someone was in her house. Hope flared in her chest. Devlin hadn't left.

She stopped halfway down the steps and took a deep breath, trying to relax and pull it together. Letting her anxieties and fears take control was out of the question. She

needed to play it cool and not embarrass herself. If she wanted any chance of enticing him to stay, at least for a while, she needed to rope in her emotions and keep them under control.

Taking a deep breath, she continued down the steps. She reached the landing and looked out over the kitchen. There stood Devlin, a spatula in his right hand as he watched over a pan of scrambled eggs. Relief washed through her, calming her racing heart.

"Mornin', sleepyhead. Decide to get up?" His voice was low and rich, heating her from head to toe, inside to outside. Her breath hitched. He was even more handsome this morning, standing there in his stocking feet, his rumpled shirt untucked, playing the part of the domestic. A recessed kitchen light shone above his head, highlighting his soft brown hair and the shadow of a day's growth of beard covering his chin. Oh, what she wouldn't give to feel that beard against her skin, especially the supersensitive skin of her inner thighs.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

Oh, yeah. "You cook?" she said, hoping to cover her bout of lust. A girl needed to play at least a little hard to get.

"I know enough to satisfy this ol' gut when I'm in a pinch." He shrugged. "I hope you don't mind that I invaded your kitchen."

"I think you did a pretty good job of doing *that* last night," she giggled. Her cheeks warmed. They'd indulged in a nice helping of sexual delights right here where she was standing and she wouldn't mind adding to their menu.

He laughed and the husky sound filled the room with warmth that had been lacking for more months than she cared to count.

"Sit down. Breakfast is ready," he said as he placed two plates, full of eggs and bacon, on the table.

"It looks great. Thank you. But I'd better do chores first. The stock aren't used to being fed this late." She pulled out a chair but didn't sit down.

"They're okay. I did chores while *you* were still snoring." He grabbed two large cups and poured the steaming coffee.

"You did? How long have you been up?"

"A while."

"Oh. Well...I don't snore," Taylor said in self-defense, embarrassed that, on their first and maybe only night together, he'd discovered her annoying habit.

"Yes, you do. Now sit. We need to talk."

Talk? Oh God. Was he going to tell her it'd been fun but that he couldn't stick around and help her any more in the "research department" and that she shouldn't expect anything more between them? She let her gaze fall to the floor. Hell, he probably even wondered how she could write about sex convincingly when she sucked at it. Crap. If Devlin thought she was that bad, no doubt her readers did too.

"Stop worrying," he scolded.

"Worrying?" She looked up at him. "What makes you think I'm worried about anything?"

"Your nose. You wrinkle it every time that amazing mind of yours gets to fretting. You've done it since I've known you. Now sit. Your eggs are getting cold."

Taylor did as ordered, glad to put a chair under her butt to keep herself from falling off her feet. How could it be that he'd noticed such a minor thing about her when she had never realized it herself? Could it be that Devlin had been interested in her a little more than he'd ever let on?

A faint smile tugged at her lips as she scooped up a forkful of eggs.

Devlin cleaned his plate and shoved it aside before Taylor even had a chance to eat half of hers. He took a swallow of coffee.

"I've been thinking," he said, his voice low and steady. He leaned forward, holding the cup between his hands.

Taylor's nerves tensed. *Uh-oh, here comes the talk.* Of course, with a lead-in like "I've been thinking", it couldn't be too bad. Maybe he wasn't going to say, "It's been fun, see ya."

"I make a pretty good research assistant, wouldn't you agree?"

Taylor fought the urge to smile. He seemed so serious. Here was her chance.

"Hmm." She tapped her forefinger against her chin. "I reckon. But *I think* more research is still needed to make sure I've got all the information I need."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. You know what they say about writers."

"Uh...no. What do they say about writers?"

"Well, that we should write what we know. And in order to know something, we need to experience it fully. Wouldn't you agree?" Summoning up all her seductive powers, she brushed a bare foot along the inside of his leg.

"You bet." His eyes darkened, proving she'd been successful. She let out a pent-up breath.

"Okay. Since I still need some help with research, I was hoping that maybe you could stick around for a while, like a...day...or two, to help me out."

Devlin's shoulders stiffened as he sat back against the chair. A muscle ticced at his jaw. Silence grew between them.

"A day or two?" he said at last.

"Of course, if you're too busy, I understand," she said, a nervous laugh creeping into her voice. "I know you're just home for the holidays. You probably have a lot of stuff you want to do before you get ready to go back on the road and —"

"Taylor." Pushing back his chair, he stood and placed his hands on his hips. He bowed his head and pinched the bridge of his nose before scrubbing a hand over his

face. For the first time since she'd known him he seemed apprehensive, even unsure of himself.

Deafening silence hung between them again, stretching into what felt like excruciating minutes. At last he looked at her and splayed his hand back on his hip.

"I should have told you last night why I came here. I intended to. But things got...out of hand between us."

Why he came? Out of hand? Butterflies assaulted her stomach like angry hornets. She should have known he'd had a specific reason for coming—and that reason hadn't included sex.

Now, in the morning light, did he think last night was a mistake and regret it?

Taylor shook her head. To her, their time together was no mistake. In fact, it had been the best night of her life. And she'd always hold the memories, the emotions, tight to her heart. She'd harbor no regrets and refused to make apologies.

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her chin and braced herself for whatever was to come. "Told me what?"

"I'm not going back on the road after Christmas."

"Wh-what?" She forced herself to stand and face him, praying her knees wouldn't fail. Whatever she thought he might say, that hadn't been it.

"I'm not going back on the pro circuit. I've decided to retire."

"Retire? You're serious?"

"Very."

"But why? You're still young enough and at the top of your game, making big bucks. Why quit now?" Taylor's mind raced. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. And she couldn't believe it was Devlin who was saying it.

"Because, *I am* at the top of my game." He sat on the edge of the table and crossed his arms over that magnificent, broad chest. Her face warmed as a sense of déjà vu hit. Not that many hours ago they'd made love here, now...he was already saying goodbye.

"I'd rather go out on top," he continued, "than keep riding until my body is so beat up I can barely walk, let alone climb onto the back of an eighteen-hundred-plus-pound bull. I want to be remembered as a winner, not pitied as a broken-down has-been."

"Okay. I can respect that." He was giving up bull riding. A wave of relief washed over her. No more nights lying awake wondering, worrying. Even if she couldn't have him forever, at least she wouldn't have to fear for his safety every waking moment. "What...are you going to do? Find some Caribbean island to lounge around on all day?" she quipped as her heart lodged in her throat, afraid to hear his answer.

He smiled and shook his head. "Sounds nice. Wish I had thought of that. Actually though, I've already made other plans."

"Oh," she said, the word sounding flat and lifeless to her ears. Was there any chance his plans might include her?

She gripped the back of the chair for support and prayed he wouldn't notice. "So, if you don't mind my asking..." She forged ahead, needing to know more. "How long have you been planning this?"

"Actually, I've been thinkin' about it for a quite awhile. But I didn't make my final decision until last spring."

The eggs she'd eaten suddenly felt leaden in her stomach. She knew she shouldn't feel this way but hearing him say he had his future all mapped out, a future that, as yet, didn't include her, squeezed and twisted her heart until she could barely breathe.

"For as long as I can remember, all you've ever wanted to do is ride bulls."

"Yeah. But people change. Priorities change. Every day we grow older and we begin to see our lives in a new perspective. I'm ready to settle down."

"Sure." She understood and admired him for knowing what he wanted and not being afraid to go after it. She'd had many of the same thoughts recently. Difference was, she *was* settled down, always had been. She'd just never had anyone to *settle* with. And every day she saw herself growing older, alone. All because she *had* been afraid. Afraid of telling Devlin how she really felt.

Afraid of him breaking her heart.

"Bull ridin' is dangerous," he said, interrupting her thoughts. "And when this pretty cowgirl I know stole my heart, I knew it wouldn't be fair to make her worry over me forever."

Another woman? Taylor's shoulders stiffened, his words as sharp as a knife, stabbing her. But how could she think in such a way when they had never been anything but friends? She had no right to be jealous or expect him to be chaste on her account.

She turned and busied herself at the stove by placing another log on the fire, giving her time to blink away the tears biting at the back of her eyes. Devlin had left to pursue his gold buckle dreams years ago. Her folks, always wanting to retire to a warmer climate, had left the operation of the ranch to her and Jake. Then Jake had left too, after *his* perspective and priorities had changed.

Now Devlin was leaving a second time to pursue new dreams.

And what about her? She'd never had the guts to go after what she wanted.

Until last night.

She realized now that holding back was where she'd made her mistake. It was high time for her to follow her heart, to do what *she* wanted.

"She's a lucky girl," she said, placing the heavy steel cover back over the hole on the stovetop. Lifting her chin, she turned toward Devlin, determined to take a stand and give them one more shot. "But you're giving up a lot. Are you sure she's the one?"

"Yep," he said, his voice strong with conviction.

The knife jabbed a little deeper. She loved Devlin and more than anything wanted them to be together, but if his heart belonged to another, she wouldn't interfere. She shoved aside the pain that pierced her. "I guess I do owe you an apology then."

"An apology? For what?"

"If I had known there was someone, I wouldn't have asked you — Put you in this position." She raked her fingers through her hair in frustration and looked away. She knew she should feel bad, but didn't. She'd been waiting for last night for...well, forever it seemed. And no one was going to take away those hours of passion they'd shared.

"Listen. I didn't do anything last night that I didn't want to." He tipped her chin up, forcing her to look at him. "Besides, I'm the one who owes you an apology. I acted like an ass that night after the rodeo. I was wasted. It was wrong of me to come on to you like that."

"You knew it was me?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes. I knew." He cupped her face in his hand and traced the pad of his thumb over her cheek, sending vibes of awareness rushing through her veins. "Taylor, I admit I've done some things in my life that I'm not proud of. That's one of 'em. I'm sorry. I'd screwed up my ride that night, my pride was hurtin' and you were there. I figured *what the hell*, got drunk and the whiskey took over. I should have apologized then. I hope you can forgive me now."

"I did, a long time ago." She gave him a weak smile. "What about last night? Are you...sorry about that too?" She held her breath, anxious to know, yet afraid too.

"No." He shook his head, that cantankerous lock of hair falling over his forehead again.

"But you said there was someone else. I don't want to be the cause —"

He placed a finger on her lips, silencing her. "No. I said a pretty cowgirl had stolen my heart. You're the one who assumed I was talking about someone else."

Taylor swallowed hard. Words escaped her. "You weren't?" she asked at last.

"Nope. I was talking about you, Taylor."

He encircled her in his arms and pulled her close. Her heart swelled as she shook her head, totally blown away by what he was saying. In spite of the warmth of his arms and the feel of his solid form pressing against her, she wanted to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. She'd done enough of that to last a lifetime. Now she was ready to see her dreams come true.

He covered her lips with his own, kissing her so slowly and thoroughly that her insides melted.

"You know," he said, pushing back a stray curl from her cheek, "since I'm retiring, I'm going to need a job. Is the position of research assistant still open?"

"Hmm. Maybe." She gave him a saucy smile.

"Maybe? Didn't I prove this morning that I'm good at cooking and handling livestock?"

"Yes, you did. But a talented, versatile celebrity such as you is probably pretty expensive. I might not be able to afford to hire you."

He quirked a brow, a grin teasing the corner of his mouth. "So, let's negotiate. I'm sure, in time, we can come to an agreement."

"Okay. As long as we don't do it too quickly."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, since you're a famous champion bull rider, I'm going to need all the advantage I can get. I always do my best thinking and reasoning in the shower. Let's negotiate there." She splayed her hand over the front of his jeans and gave a little squeeze, promising to pick up where they'd left off only a few hours ago.

"You got it, Tomboy."

PITCH BLACK

Fiona Jayde

Dedication

To the fabulous Beth Kery and Lacey Savage. I wouldn't be here without you.
To Ryan—for the unwavering support regardless of what craziness I think up next.

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iPod: Apple Inc.

PayPal: PayPal, Inc.

Swiss Army: Swiss Army Brand Ltd.

Chapter One

Kiev, Ukraine. 11:12 p.m.

She forgot how stifling Kiev could get in mid-July. Odessa, Krim—those port towns would be nice and breezy but here, inland, the darkened skies still scorched the air. It didn't seem to affect business—she watched from her balcony as people crowded cafes and bars and restaurants, while music blasted in a mix of Russian rap and Britney Spears. The pink neon sign for *Bulochnaya* competed with the red and white of Coca-Cola. Women in shorts or short, short dresses teetered on heels, and spoke so loudly their voices drifted up to the twelfth floor.

It'd been what—eighteen years?—since she'd left Russia and her childhood. Ukraine was its own country now—its own sovereign republic. Although she understood her share of Ukrainian, most people in the capital spoke fast and fluid Russian, peppering it with Odessa's slang and Polish cussing. The same sounds that she used to hear walking home from Fifty-Third *Schola*, her backpack on her shoulders and her school uniform a mess.

She'd had a bit of time to walk around, to soak in the sounds of her childhood. Once she was startled when she heard her name shouted out in pure childish glee. Katika! No one had called her that in a long time.

And yet Kiev itself was nothing like what she remembered. The Inntourist had been rebuilt with spearing towers, glass elevators and luxury most working-class Ukrainians would never see.

Silky paper covered walls in a sickening gold and pink. Fake orange flowers had been stuffed in a heavy vase painted a tired bronze. A huge wide bed that easily fitted four sported a heavy winter blanket despite all that dry heat. A pink starched duvet hung over it.

Almost done here, Kate thought again, and flipped open her cell to see if headquarters had texted a response. She had the plans, though why Intelligence Services Commission wanted them, she didn't know. Now she simply needed to get out of Kiev.

It was exciting, though—her first op. Years of training—sniper school, hand-to-hand combat, some dirty tricks her stepbrother taught her that she wouldn't find in any training manuals—they all led to translating recorded conversations behind the desk at ISC.

She was the perfect operative—Ivan said so himself when he wasn't too busy throwing her around in his version of judo or teaching her to shoot while running, climbing or drowning. She simply needed field-time.

She wasn't Jane Bond, but, damn, this was exciting—the gadgets, the secrecy, the role of an American translator for the company oligarch Vladimir Gregorievitch Dubrov hired to build his power plant that would unchain Ukraine from Russia's hold.

She'd studied Farsi and an Arabic dialect, but Russian obviously was her forte. Combine that with a networking degree, familiarity with Kiev and understanding of Ukrainian, and Katherine was tailor-made to slide under the noses of Dubrov and his security to steal the power plant schematics.

Her hotel phone discreetly trilled. "*Gospoza, dlya vas zapiska.*" She frowned at the dial tone—the concierge, or whatever they called it here, hung up before she could request the note to be brought up to her. Most likely a response—maybe a contact she could unload the drive to.

Tucking a knife into a special pocket in her pants—a girl could never be too careful—Kate exited her room and nearly collided with one of Dubrov's bodyguards. The one she'd kissed the night before.

Her blush was hot just like the air. "Excuse me, Nicholai." She murmured it in Russian, feeling her body temperature following suit. He wasn't gorgeous—not Hollywood gorgeous, at least. A lean, long body, hard but not too thick under the dark German suit that was becoming standard wear for bodyguards and businessmen in this part of the world.

She couldn't quite tell the color of his eyes—gray, green or blue. His hair—dark blond—was cropped close to his skull and not spiked up like most men did these days. His cheekbones were Slavic high, his lips unsmiling and straight, and firm and tempting when he'd kissed her on the balcony last night. And like an idiot she'd lost her head and let him, knowing that anyone could see them through the sliding doors.

He wedged in after her into the glass deathtrap that was the elevator. Raised a blond eyebrow as if asking her where she'd like to go.

"Umm... Lobby please." She really should stop staring at him, Kate thought, and ran a hand through the loose blonde strands of hair that had escaped her braid. If he had known exactly who he had been playing tonsil hockey with, he'd probably have shot her on the spot. With any luck, she would be on a plane to Moscow by tomorrow.

She focused on the lights of downtown Kiev spread before her—and not on the man who crossed his arms across his chest while the elevator gently glided down.

Then time suddenly stopped and the lit city became a dark bottomless pit.

Another blackout. Kate pressed her hands to the surprisingly cool glass and concentrated on her breathing. Her senses went to high alert, as if somehow the outage affected her directly.

Except it did. There was a man with her—a man who smelled of soap and aftershave and somehow managed to be standing much closer than she'd expected. Silence settled around them like a warm blanket, the only sounds Kate heard were her own heartbeat and his soft, steady breaths.

"Power outage," he whispered in perfect English, his mouth a hairsbreadth from her ear. Too close for any semblance of sanity.

"Hopefully it'll turn back on soon." Her voice matched his in softness. Kate wondered if he heard the tremble in it.

"We have a little while."

She felt his breath over her cheek and then his mouth found hers. Sweet, firm, and gentle. The shock of it had her melting against him. She let him press her back against the glass, his body—God, it was so solid—fitted along hers. Fleeting she thought of the last time he'd kissed her, the hunger she'd felt in his hands and mouth. This was subtly different, tender and somehow calculated and as erotic as all hell.

His hands were light over her bare arms, stroking, just stroking, close to her breasts, nearly brushing at their sides. Cruising his lips over her mouth, her jaw, her throat, nibbling, sampling. The stubble on his skin rasped delicately at her flesh, and she gasped for breath as his teeth grazed the tendon on her neck. The heat around her was nothing to what pooled inside her belly.

Between her clenching thighs, she felt herself already creaming. She should do...something. Not stand there like some dumbstruck teenager. Except her body became pliant, languid. His.

Another ragged breath as he put both his hands around her throat, long fingers cupping her nape under her hair, thumbs stroking her neck while she swallowed.

And still she couldn't see him.

"Let me touch you." His growl was a soft promise in her ear.

She nodded—tried to—with his hands around her throat. Those thumbs stroking her neck would really do better on her nipples. She wasn't brave enough to lift up the white shirt she was wearing, but she arched her back, offering her breasts in silent invitation.

"Turn."

His hands were gone.

"What?" She groped for him, suddenly panicked. Something was tingling between her shoulder blades, something both chilly and arousing. His hand was warm and solid on her arm when she felt his touch again.

"Turn around."

Without hesitation Katherine followed his command, braced her arms against the coolness of the glass, looked blindly into darkness.

His hands were on her once again, her arms, her neck, and finally, gloriously, on her breasts. She bit her lip to keep a moan from tumbling out.

Her nipples were already hard as he stroked gently over them, teased them with circular movements of his fingers. His lips were on her neck, whispering something, Russian or English, she couldn't quite concentrate to make out the words.

She wanted to touch him but her palms were against the glass, his body hot and hard behind her, his hands whisper soft as they slid under her shirt and found bare skin.

His breath over her ear sent more shivers dancing up her spine. He caressed the smooth skin of her belly, lightly palmed both her breasts over her bra, brushed at her nipples, one after another. Then lower, under the string that held her pants, toward the wet heat between her thighs. He pressed his fingers into her. Stopped.

"Do you want this?" His voice was a soft growl.

The sound that came out was nothing but a strangled sob. "Yes."

He ground his palm into her, pressed right into the heat. Too much and not enough. Against the glass, Kate shifted so she could part her legs, allowing him better access. The bulge pressing against her made her moan.

His fingers moved now, a tiny downward motion, delicious friction that sent thoughts scattering into sharp jolts of pleasure. She arched against his hand, needed more, just there, harder...

His lips against her neck, his arm steady and strong holding her against him, Nicholai pushed her into a shivering and breathless climax.

His own breathing remained calm when sanity finally returned and she could do no more than bonelessly lean against his chest. Both of his arms were around her, and in the warm and silent darkness she felt something metallic at her belly.

"Your cover has been compromised." His whisper was the same. His English perfect.

The shock of it had her jerking in his arms, warm silence shattering to cool, sharp ice. Her heart pounded hard for precious seconds. She fought herself to keep control with his body still and strong and hot behind her. She thought her skin was wrapped in ice.

"If you intend to kill me, this would be a perfect place." The knife at her hip was a sharp comfort. She hoped she'd get to it in time.

"I haven't killed you yet."

She didn't want the shivers that danced over her as his breath caressed her ear.

She could be tracked through a GPS chip implanted in her neck, but that was a small comfort now. She fought for breath and found herself ridiculously steadied by the rhythm of his heart.

"I've jammed your transmitter." There was no accent in his voice. No sense of urgency. Zero emotion. "Dubrov will see rapid heartbeat followed by death. It'll give you a head start."

She twisted now, tried to see him in the darkness. "Why?" She couldn't stand the intimacy of a whisper. Instead the words came out in a croak.

"Let's say our houses are friendly."

"What house would that be?"

"You don't have time for questions."

His touch was gone. She felt too chilly in the heat. She didn't hear him move. Below her, the darkened pit that had been Kiev seemed miles away. She wouldn't panic now, Kate told herself, groping for the knife in her pants pocket even as nerves tightened her throat. A cold second later she heard his grunt and felt a stir of air breathe over her skin.

He must've opened the elevator doors. In its rebuild for modernization, the Inntourist sported the neon green exit signs—and that pale light bled into the pitch darkness. She saw him now—at least, the outline of his body. She couldn't see his face.

The lift had stopped between the floors—she saw a narrow hole about three feet tall. Above it, Kate could make out a hallway with those neon lights. She could step up and melt into the darkness. She'd have to get through him.

"Were you sent to kill me?" The words were calm, as if she spoke about someone else.

His heat was once again too close for comfort. "The tracker shows you going flatline. Dubrov is happy for the moment, and if you're smart, you will be gone before the lights come back."

Kate nodded, fought for calmness. If this was a trap, she doubted he'd take the time to talk to her and...well, the other. Which didn't seem to affect him in the least. The whole thing was ridiculous, and yet sounded right under the circumstances. A rapid pulse followed by a flat line would register as death. And if somehow Dubrov had clued in she was with ISC, there was no doubt the oligarch would send someone to kill her.

Training was over. This was it. Actual fieldwork. She was determined not to blow it. She moved past him, reached up to climb out and up. His hand on her arm was sudden, warm and terrifying. Maybe he'd kill her after all.

"Go down."

"What?"

"Go down."

She didn't know why, but she knelt, pushed her legs through the three-foot hole, wondering all the while if someone was on the other side to grab her.

Her feet tangled, and she had a terrifying vision of falling down into that bottomless black pit. His hand was on hers, strong and gripping. Without words, she let his strength take over, felt herself hanging for a long and breathless moment before her toes finally reached the floor.

"*Ne puha ne pera, Amerikanca,*" she heard him say. Good luck.

Chapter Two

The thought of her drove Nick insane. It drilled into his gut while he calmly informed Dubrov and company that the American had been disposed of. It teased his cock while Tolyan made lewd remarks amid the acrid smell of cigarettes.

It burned his throat while he wondered if the Russians had caught up with her already, and if they had, whose body they would drop down the shaft for Tolyan to find.

The bastard would go check, Nick knew for certain—considering that little show yesterday evening on the balcony. She had been sweet and soft, with those full lips pliant and warm under his own. His cock ached more as he remembered running his hands over the tight curves of her body. Americans—always obsessed with working out. She had been warm and soft and muscled, and if she'd known exactly who she was rubbing up against, she would've packed a solid punch.

He wondered what house she belonged to and how Dubrov found out she was a US plant. The Russians may have leaked it to hurry things along. And since Nick didn't rely on luck that he would be the one assigned to kill her, he'd kissed her yesterday after the cocktail party. He didn't expect to get caught up in it, but the result had been the same.

Tolyan—head of Dubrov's security—had quite a mean streak in that square bricklike body. The bait was taken as it was intended, and being a careful and tenacious man, Tolyan would check.

The body he would find would preserve Nick's credibility, give Dubrov back that false sense of security and add more blood to Nick's already bloodstained hands.

He hated this shit. Hated death. Hated himself for feeling much more than simple cool regret about Katherine.

She didn't look like any operative he'd known, with those china blue eyes and sparkling expression. She barely reached up to his shoulder, that softly muscled body wasn't designed to set a man to drooling within twenty paces. And yet he couldn't keep his hands off her.

He saw no calculation in those guileless blue eyes. Both nerves and bravery seemed real in the elevator. And yet she'd broken into Dubrov's laptop and got the plans from under their very noses. Not NSA—although her comp skills were top notch. Although why any US agency wanted the schemas to the alternative energy generator Dubrov was building, Nick didn't know.

She wasn't CIA—they wouldn't shit in their own backyard. Not any of the Russian agencies—she had that slight semblance of an accent, like someone who was born here

and had grown up somewhere else. And Russia's Secret Service didn't like them growing up and fed elsewhere. Him being the exception.

The power had turned on—much earlier than Dubrov had scheduled it. Most likely it would flicker off again and the teenage hacker—a Russian boy ironically living in the US—probably shit his pants thinking what Dubrov would do to get back the payment that had been PayPal'd into the teen's account.

A few more outages in the heat of summer, and Kiev—softened with technology and air conditioners—would happily agree to pay for an alternative source of power. The Kremlin would shit a brick.

Now that she'd stolen the plans, Dubrov wanted her dead and Russian Intelligence wanted that flash drive. A perfect plan—let the American do all the work, destroy her signal so she would be considered dead and the schematics for the power plant would fall into their hands without the extra effort of fighting Dubrov's men bent on retrieving them. Easy and brilliant. As would be any accident that would befall the station.

The air conditioner had kicked in and he could've turned on the lights of the fake crystal chandelier. But still, an hour later, Nick sat motionless in his dark suite, wanting to pace, wanting a cigarette. It was a matter of pride that he didn't give in. Cigarettes were a weakness. Pacing meant nerves. Nick hoped he didn't have much left of either.

Perhaps he should have made it easier for both of them and simply killed her. He knew plenty of ways to make it easy, instant, painless. If GRU did find her as she ran through the dark hotel, she'd wish for death not long after "debriefing".

He did give her a good head start. The Russians couldn't track her with the GPS down—and with a small bonus program on his jammer, the chip would need some time to reset. Perhaps she'd gotten lucky and managed to avoid the Russians. Nick hoped like hell she had and wondered once again whose side was better played.

He was sent here strictly for Dubrov—a figure of interest in a never-ending race for stockpiled arms that could come through the Black Sea ports. Odessa and Sebastopol and Krim—the cities that would be dependent on his fuel.

Nick's cover had been perfect—born in Odessa, orphaned. The papers that Aunt Ella used were bought in the legit way of the Soviet era and listed her last name as his. Kolya Rostov—as far as anyone knew—had never left Ukraine.

And now, two years later, Petr Vasilyavich Zubov, low-level sergeant of the GRU, had offered Nick a tidy sum of euros to be a Russian snitch. Nikolai Rostov had happily agreed.

It was a pivotal point in his career. Nick had cut all but the necessary contacts and immersed himself inside this game. A lower-level security man for Dubrov. A weasel for the Russians. A man caught in the crossfire, hell-bent on keeping his cover—even at the expense of yet another death.

A job—that's all this was. She had been trained for possibilities, for just these sorts of situations. And still he couldn't stop thinking about those soft moans while she shuddered into climax.

His cock ached – guilt and blue balls. To do something constructive, he ran through names and agencies who would be uninformed enough to place her. A trap for him perhaps? A possibility, although Nick doubted it.

He squished another vicious jolt for cigs and focused on the soft and yet persistent sound of drawers being opened in the adjoining room. Silent and swift, he made his way into the bedroom, watched the small play of light as a dark figure went through his things, politely and professionally searching his room while American rap pulsed through the window.

His thief had guts and nerves and foolishness to leap here from the neighboring balcony and silently break open the sliding door.

It took Nick less than a second to grab the figure from behind, to feel sweet curves under his hands, to smell the scent that had been teasing him all night. He dragged her to the bed and threw her on it, taking the flashlight from her teeth, covering her lips with his as both relief and lust erupted in his stomach.

She didn't fight while he feasted on her mouth, her hands trapped under his. Instead she kissed him back. Her taste fueled his senses. He wanted to be in her, desperately, insanely, urgently.

The throbbing music fell away—either it stopped or he stopped hearing it. He didn't care. Nick stuffed his gun under a pillow and captured her small hands in his, linking their fingers, clasping palms. Her hips were restless under him and as he eased off her a bit, those long, strong legs wound around him, trapped him to her as he continued to seduce her mouth.

No words, just thick, dark silence. No light, just soft, smooth skin. He struggled for it, keeping one of her hands in his while he pushed up her shirt and bra to find her breasts. Left that sweet mouth to run his lips and tongue over her nipples, already hard and hot.

He hadn't really tasted her before, couldn't bring himself to do it. Now he was starved for her.

Her free hand gripped at him, brushed at his back, dug into his wrist as he closed his lips over a hardened berry tip. Not soft this time, no coolly calculated moves designed to ease her into passion. The beast that clawed in him was hard and hungry.

He didn't know why she had come back, didn't care about the knife he felt along her hip while he stripped her pants off long, smooth thighs. He felt her heart pound a rough staccato under his palms, her breaths short and panting, matching his.

Silence roared in his ears.

He used his thighs to muscle hers apart, couldn't stop himself from touching all that skin. His zipper was a short frustrating jerk and then his cock was free, so hard it almost ached, the need to be inside her nearly painful.

Control, damn you, control. Control could fuck itself.

He stopped when just the tip of him pressed against all that heat. He couldn't see her eyes, and yet knew that they were wild. "Condom," he muttered, and reached for the packets in the nightstand.

"Hurry." She wrapped her thighs around his hips and drew him forward, arching her back to drive him more insane.

He used his hands to grip her buttocks, lift her, poise her. Tortured them both by waiting. One heartbeat. Two.

And plunged into that glorious wet heat, deep, hard, so tight it nearly killed him as pleasure slashed into sharp ribbons.

Her gasp was just a short, thin cry. She gripped him with her thighs, the clenching of her inner muscles driving him out of his mind.

He moved inside her, couldn't see her face, could only take her moans into his mouth. Her hands were trapped in his, her body strong and pulsing as she moved to meet him, thrust for thrust. She sheathed him like a tight and silken fist and he was afraid that he would come right now, just burst and burn and die.

She gasped for breath, silently begging him for more kisses. Skin slid on skin, inside and outside. He took her mouth as he buried himself deep. His orgasm boiled somewhere close. He fought it, forced himself to still, to hold it off and then she arched up under him once more, a silent scream, a shiver, a sudden rippling of heat and coiled muscles and he was lost, just lost. Mindless, he moved with her, inside her, over her, gripping, and plunging, finally surging into her, emptying into her, seed, sanity and soul.

He didn't have words to say a long and silent moment later. He could get up, shrug on his pants and demand to know what in high hell she had been doing there.

Her heart still thundered under him. "You shouldn't have come back." Lane start, but it was something.

Before she answered, a hard knock on the door startled them both.

"*Sho zasnul? Otkrivai!*" Tolyan's voice demanded entry. A crash followed as he broke through the door.

Furiously, Nick thought about a way out as lights seared his eyes and Tolyan and his aide trained German guns and killer smiles at them.

His breathing stopped for just a few seconds. A part of him thought with relief that it was finally over. A part of him furiously started to shove Katherine farther under him, so he could take on any bullets that would hit her.

Time froze. A second. Two.

Two muffled shots and the men dropped to the floor, the light cheerfully glinting off their guns as blood oozed out of two small neat holes in their foreheads. Instant death.

Nick wondered if a third shot was meant for him. Katherine was dry eyed and terrified when he turned back to look at her. His gun, gripped in small trembling hands, was now aimed at his heart.

She didn't struggle as he took it from her. "Nice shots."

His pulse would calm back down – maybe tomorrow.

"Good thing you didn't jostle me." Her tone matched his in dryness. Her body shook in small and telling shivers that had nothing to do with him pressed into her.

They were both naked from the waist down, still touching on the most intimate of levels. And she'd just killed two men with perfect sniper shots.

"You need to get the fuck out of here." He didn't care that he spoke in English, or that the small hint of Midwest snuck back into his voice. He didn't care that he was still on top of her, his gun forgotten in his hand, her body strong and slim and shaking under his.

"They'll kill you now." A breathless voice – arousal or nerves, he didn't know. Maybe she was like the other female agents he had known – hot to the touch, ice-hard inside, unmoved by death and blood. Or worse, excited by it.

Disdain stirred as he looked at her again. Maybe this callousness was finally too much. Maybe he should just get up and leave, go home, visit the aunt who reared him in Kansas. Scrub off the blood and lies that stained his hands.

The lights chose just that time to flicker out again. The intimacy of dark silence was too much. He moved off her, suddenly uncomfortable.

Didn't this bother her – on some level at least? She'd saved both of them and yet she showed no remorse except for those initial shivers that could've been just nerves.

He shoved his gun into his belt as soon as he'd shrugged on his jeans.

"I need your jammer." She was already fully dressed, those strands of sunny hair smoothed back into her braid. Cool and ice calm.

Fuck. He didn't need hysteria at this point, and yet a part of him wanted to shake her until a glimmer of something human showed on her face.

He really was losing it. "So do I." He felt behind the dresser, found the small scar in the unpolished wood. Pressed at it until it fell inside, then groped for the emergency cash and extra bullets and a few sharp toys.

"We need to get the hell out of here."

He wondered how many deaths she'd seen to be this calm. "There is no we." She was much closer than he gave her credit for. Her scent still twisted him inside.

"You said our houses are friendly. And I just saved your ass."

Literally, he thought, but remained silent.

"I say we are together – for now anyway."

The net that wrapped around him choked him with cold and steely fingers. If she was here, the Russians didn't get the flash drive with the plans. And Tolyan's death wouldn't go unnoticed for too long.

He chose the greater of two evils. "Can you keep up?"

"You'll be surprised."

He was surprised already. The big, blue eyes and sunny smile hid stone-cold nerves. Nick wondered how long his own would last before he would be forced to hand her to the Russians.

* * * * *

She had to concentrate on the escape plan. No shock just yet – she kept it away with forced and focused breathing. She simply didn't think of anything but the most current task at hand. When they were safe, when she could stop for just a minute, she would allow herself to shred her soul to pieces.

She'd never killed before.

Stop, damn it. Not fucking now.

All right, all right. She breathed. Clean air in. Hysterics out.

Sex, death, escape. It really boiled down to survival.

She couldn't go to her room – most likely Dubrov had already searched it, and any cash and electronics were already taken. If she was right and it was GRU she'd managed to avoid earlier, her room was more than likely watched.

She smelled the blood she'd spilled. The stench of it burned at her throat and churned the insides of her stomach as they hoofed down the service stairs, risked running into more of Russia's patriots and snuck outside through the garage.

In theory, Kate knew the chip inside her neck was being jammed. At least for now – whatever side Nicholai was actually on, right now, he wouldn't want Dubrov to catch them.

And still she felt a bright and cheerful red X right on her neck.

Transportation. It would be minutes before someone went looking for – what was that man's name? Tolik? Tolyan? Did he have kids? A family?

She stuffed a hand over her mouth to keep the sob inside. *Just breathe, damn you. Just breathe.*

Beside her, Nicholai walked casually on the darkened street. The heat wasn't so bad now that it was long past midnight. She concentrated on the warmth of air in the moonless night. On anything but the lean form of the man who was beside her, his gun tucked casually in his pants. The gun she'd used... *Fuck. Stop.*

Maybe she shouldn't have come back to get the jammer. Kate thought this as they briskly walked through the alleys of downtown.

He was too comfortable in the dark. Too dangerous.

She didn't say a word when he pulled out something thin and sharp and walked up to a Soviet-era Jiguli – square and ugly – parked along the curb.

Silent, she watched him break into it, a little amazed how easily he got the driver's door to open. Before his invitation – or before he changed his mind – Kate reached into the car and pulled up the backseat lock to get the door open. She climbed onto the hot, scarred leather, opened the window to let some air through and simply...breathed.

"*Vokzal*," she murmured and wondered how long he'd take to start this thing. Odessa was a few hours away – if she could hold out that long.

"They probably have someone watching the train station already." He snapped the words, jerking the Jiguli out of park and into some semblance of motion.

"If we can put the GPS on one of the trains, it might give us some time."

And give her the opportunity to ditch him if the need arose. She had to figure out what his stake was in this. He claimed to be from a friendly agency, but didn't worry about anyone tracking him. His accent – when he spoke in English – was as good as hers. Meaning he could have grown up in the States. Which could mean a perfect tool for GRU – if that's indeed who she avoided by the sheer luck of bumping into the cart of laundry in the dark. She'd pushed at it as they walked by, muttering into their handhelds. And since she did a good and thick Ukrainian, they didn't bother her too much.

And if it had been Nicholai who'd sent her toward them, she might end up having to kill him after all.

The thought sent a spear of ice through her. This wasn't self-defense, this wasn't pure adrenaline. She didn't have the balls to coolly pull a trigger. Which had to change really fast if she wanted to stay alive.

"How the fuck do you plan on getting that thing from your neck?"

His voice snapped her to the present. She climbed into the front so she could see if he was texting or calling anyone. His hands were on the wheel, and in the stingy dashboard light they were both beautiful and lethal.

"Just drive." She clenched her jaw and took out her knife.

"You'll bleed all over." His voice held zero sympathy as he threw her a glance.

"Good thing it's not your car."

"I'll do it. I've got a Swiss Army knife." Keeping one hand over the wheel he dug into his pocket.

"So you're a Boy Scout. Just drive." No way would she admit fear of him touching a knife to her. Or simply touching her.

"Just let me do it." He braked, then wrapped long, blunt fingers around her forearm. She couldn't quite see his eyes, but his skin sliding against hers pushed her pulse again to overdrive.

She couldn't trust him much. And yet, she figured it would be in his best interest to lose the chip. For now.

Her arm still trapped in his, she raised her knife a bit. "One movement wrong and I'll cut off your balls."

"You aren't too original." He lifted his own knife, flipped up the blade and tweezers. "Ready?"

"Always prepared," Kate said in Russian, her free hand making a diagonal gesture across her forehead. Just like a Soviet pioneer.

She hadn't known a man could chuckle sexily. And yet he did, pulling her down, until her head was on his lap, her face over his crotch—God, was he hard again?

She forced herself to breathe as his warm fingertips brushed over her nape, exposing bare skin. "I don't suppose you have a first-aid kit." She needed to keep her mind on something other than his cock. You'd think the thought of having him cut into her would do it.

"You're in Ukraine," he said, as if that answered everything.

His fingers probed her neck. Kate couldn't help but shiver. The hard knock on the glass window nearly had her screaming. The light that shone inside burned at her eyes.

"Nu? Gospodin?"

Police.

"Zastukal," Nicholai said, his voice both arrogant and chagrined. "You caught us, brother." He said it in perfect local dialect—not quite Ukrainian, and not full Russian. "You know how the American broads are..." He shrugged, kept his fingers over her neck as she looked up.

Taking her cue, Kate licked her lips and forced herself to smile. "Ooh, a real Russian policeman!" She couldn't quite pull off a Southern accent. "I love me men in uniform."

The cop didn't look like he understood but his whole body straightened up as she climbed over Nick to look out the window. "I'm sorry, Officer, are we in trouble? *Ya ploxox*?" She butchered the Russian accent and let him take a good long look down her cleavage.

"Touristka?"

She nodded happily. "Da, da!"

"This isn't really allowed," the cop said, clearly addressing Nick while still helping himself to a good look at her breasts. "We're talking three hundred *hrunyas*."

With her still on his lap, Nick searched his pockets. "Twenty euros *soidet*?"

"*Soidet*."

The cop would probably pocket it himself, Kate thought as she got off Nick's lap, desperately trying not to put her hand over his crotch again.

"Don't you think he'll find it weird that you have twenty euros and drive this piece of shit?" She said it quietly as Nick stuck bills out of the window.

"By the time he does, we'll be long gone." He put his mouth on her—probably for show. And yet his lips were warm and firm, and God, she wanted nothing more than to sit there in this hot car and just kiss him.

She was a perfect idiot.

"*Nu davaite.*" The cop waved at them before turning away, happily pocketing the euros as he walked back to his own car.

"We don't have time." Nicholai kept his voice soft and all business. Completely unaffected by that kiss. "Power will be back on in a few minutes. With it, their computers and the network."

"How do you know?" She concentrated on the conversation as he pushed her face back on his lap. He wasn't hard—it was most likely just his zipper.

Once more his fingers brushed against her neck. Thank God she'd told the doctors to keep it close to the surface.

"How do you know that power will be back?"

"Dubrov controls the outages," Nick muttered. "Demand will drive supply as heat makes people stupid. His power plant will be the next big rage."

The pain wasn't too bad as he sliced into her, delicately and steady. Seconds were hours as he probed, his steady breathing the only thing Kate heard in the silence. She felt the chip moving inside her skin, felt tweezers pulling at it. She bit the inside of her cheek hard to keep herself from uttering a sound.

"I'm sorry," she heard him whisper, and then he popped it free.

She thought to keep the grunt of pain inside her. His fingers pressed, right on the cut, numbing it, stemming the blood with something. Later she realized he'd cut a swatch of cloth from his own shirt.

She breathed through gritted teeth and tasted bitter metal. Her own blood.

"You're fine."

"I know." Maybe she wished for just a bit of sympathy. "Let's go."

He held her on his lap for a few seconds more, pressing at the cut with firm and gentle pressure. "You're fine," he said again, this time a little softer. When she lifted her head, she could've sworn she caught a strange expression on his face. A second later it was gone. His palm gripped hers, as if to offer comfort. When he broke contact, Kate felt the chip inside her hand.

"Early train is usually at six." Kate contemplated throwing the chip out right here. Better to stick it on a moving target. Feeling like it was a bright and shiny beacon, she stuffed it in the pocket of her pants.

"I know what time the train is." His voice was soft and brusque.

Still holding the piece of his shirt over her neck, she almost felt his heat lingering against her. *Get over it.* When they ditched the car, it wouldn't do either of them any good to have bloodstains in it. He was simply being practical, his shirt the only thing to the stem the flow. *Don't read too much into it.*

And yet somehow it felt damn good to hold something against her skin that once touched his.

They had a few hours before it would make sense to head over to the train station. She needed to figure out a way to hide her hair, change her clothes and remain sane. The wall of ice she used to keep tears away was melting thinner with each second.

"I've got a place we can get supplies from." His voice was flat and calm. As if he hadn't just cut her skin. As if he hadn't nearly died. As if he hadn't just had mind-shattering sex with her. "Enough cash and they don't ask too many questions."

Too much... Too much for her to deal with. The tears started, soft and silent. She made damn sure that they were silent.

"We'll ditch the car, change clothes and get some food."

The thought of food twisted her stomach into knots. Fuck food, she needed to be in Odessa. Rest, safety. A way for her to contact ISC, then her stepbrother, because he probably already knew shit had hit the fan.

That thought finally broke the thin film of control. Tears choked her throat in hot, slippery fingers, just as she caught his glance toward her. He was expecting her to answer...something. She couldn't quite remember. Oh yes, food. She nodded, turned her face as if pretending to look outside into the dark.

"Okay?"

"Yes, fine." The words came out in a croak.

"Sure?" The question implied some level of concern. His voice implied anything but.

"Yeah. Neck hurts a little." She stuffed a hand over her mouth, couldn't quite hold back a sob. Mortified, she glanced at him to see if he'd heard.

He didn't appear to.

Relief brought on more tears. For herself, and the two idiot men she'd killed. Anger, frustration, some confusion. She hoped he didn't hear anything over the jagged rattle of the engine. The warm wind slapped at her, dried up her tears. And still she cried.

* * * * *

Her shoulders shook. Nick figured she was crying, just as he figured she'd gut him if he tried to offer any semblance of comfort. Maybe there was a human in there after all. He didn't have time now to find out.

His dacha amid other vacation homes in the woods just outside Kiev would be a perfect place to regroup and hold the Russians off for a few hours longer. He'd take her there and find a way to get the flash drive out of her—or at least its location. She'd probably mailed it somewhere which would explain her need to get onto a train.

After that little bout of sex, Nick had been almost positive she didn't have it on her. Not that he'd mind searching for it again.

At this point, the only thing he knew was that he wasn't handing her to GRU. Maybe he'd finally got sentimental. Maybe he'd grown soft.

He simply knew he couldn't.

Maybe he should just fling the chip out on the road. Or stage some sort of accident, so they would lose her trail right here. He'd get the flash drive out of her and send her safely back to the US before she knew what hit her.

The Russians would be happy, she'd be gone and maybe he could even weasel a promotion in the ranks.

The headlights that pierced the dark behind them were not good news.

He waited before he let his pulse speed up. Could be another car taking some guy to early morning shift. It could be anything. Or nothing.

The car seemed to be getting closer and the Jiguli wasn't exactly the epitome of speed. "Company," Nick muttered, and hoped the emotional moment was finished for now. Neither of them could afford it.

That's when the back window showered them both in glass.

"Shit. Shit!"

She scrambled down—rather, he forced her down. He didn't know how his hand ended up on top of her head but he pushed her until she was once again huddled on his lap. This time it wasn't even remotely interesting.

"Give me your gun!"

He swung wildly from lane to lane, hoping this piece of shit car would stay together. "Shooting at them won't help!"

"I'll shoot the tires!"

Another fling sent her closer against him. She had balls and brains and guts—and she didn't have a seat belt on. He shoved her down again before using both hands on the wheel. Pedal to the metal. The wind whistled through the open windows, her hand was somewhere on his crotch. "Not a good time!"

"The gun!"

Damn stubborn woman. His eyes scanning for turns and exits, Nick leaned forward, felt her palm over his back as she grabbed the gun that he had stuck into his belt. "Keep your damn head down!"

Another shot nearly spun them to the left. Nick tasted blood and kept his foot over the gas as rubber screeched over the asphalt. The smell of it was acrid in his nostrils.

He knew this place, his house was a few miles away. Under the trees, into the woods. These weren't Russians shooting—not with an American agent sitting beside him. Probably Dubrov, and pissed at that.

Another shot. It clipped a fender—not the tire, thank God. And his American was sitting backward on the seat, half crouched, aiming the gun. Another wild spin sent her at him. "You'll shoot my ass at this rate!"

She scrambled up. "Then keep us straight!"

He kept a grip over her hand—he probably hurt her but now he didn't care. The turn was coming up—a few more moments. "Hang on."

She struggled at his grasp, shouted to keep her voice over the engine. "I can take out their tires if..."

He didn't let go, twisted the car again, one-handed on the wheel this time, careened into the woods, barely missing a tree that popped out of nowhere.

"Go!" He pushed at her, felt the car shudder as tires crunched twigs. "Get out!"

"What? No!"

He braked, nearly wrapping around an oak as thick as him. The cliff, almost right to the cliff. "Get out, damn you!"

He didn't hear what she shouted as headlights from behind them lit up the twisted branches of the trees. With one hand on the door, the other in a death grip on her wrist, Nick pulled them both out of the car, into the air, onto the hard, unmercifully hard and painful, ground. He rolled, couldn't quite tell where she was, and caught a short glimpse of the Jiguli lumbering farther into the woods, going over rocks and branches until the ground became air. The crunching sound echoed low and faint.

Nick didn't know if he could move. There was no pain—not yet, not for a while probably. The car that followed them braked hard a couple of yards away, the headlights coming to a dead stop in the thick, dark bodies of the trees. They didn't get out to look down, just sat inside the car for a few agonizing minutes. He couldn't tell how long it was before they left him the dark.

The sudden silence was both eerie and clean. He waited for a few more minutes, wondered where Katherine was, if she was hurt. He willed his damn body to get up, to go looking for her.

Nothing but silence. Until there was a rustle—just a twig snapping. Again. A leaf crushed under someone's feet. He felt at his back for his gun and came up empty.

"Nicholai." She fell on top of him, covered his mouth with hers, gripped him with shaking hands. "Nicholai."

"Nick," he said, cupping her face and feeling dirt, and Jesus, maybe blood. "Just Nick. Are you all right? Are you bleeding?"

She sniffed a bit, buried her face in his neck for a few precious seconds. "I'm fine. I'm fine. Did you break anything?" With shaking fingers she pressed into his ribs, his hips, his thighs.

"We need to get the fuck out of here." He heaved himself up, barely had the strength to help her up as well.

"You keep saying that." Her voice was hoarse and somehow held a hint of sarcasm. She'd killed two men and cried. She had been shot at and thrown out of a car and now she found time for sarcasm. His perfect woman.

"This time I mean it. I've got a place—a few miles from here."

“And like a good Soviet pioneer you’re prepared with a compass?” She said it in Russian, her voice still hoarse, sarcasm already thicker.

He caught her around the waist and kissed her mouth. “*Vsegda gotov*,” he said, and pulled out a tiny LED. Always ready.

Grabbing her hand he led her through the trees, the beam of light dancing over leaves and ugly tire marks. She didn’t pull her palm away as they followed that barely there road and when he stopped to peer over the edge where the car had gone, she remained silent as she threw the bloody chip into the air.

His perfect fucking woman. Just his luck.

Chapter Three

They walked for hours. Those hours seemed like days. The sky started to lighten and still they walked in companionable silence. Whatever aches and bruises had gathered beneath her skin, they didn't bother Kate for now. Adrenaline, relief, a healthy dose of fear. Whatever worked, she thought, and kept on walking.

His hand was still on hers, his grip gentle, his skin rough. As the light around them increased, she could catch glimpses of his face, his lips pressed firmly closed, his eyes looking ahead.

He didn't look at her at all—if it weren't for his hand on hers, she would wonder if he knew she was there. She wanted to just pull him toward her and kiss him. Probably some idiotic reflex after adrenaline and near death.

The morning breeze was heaven on her skin, the birdsongs cheerfully peaceful as more light filtered through the branches. She could see cottages between the tree trunks. Little dachas from the looks of them—vacation and weekend cottages, a way for people to get out of the city and into the peace and silence of the woods.

Nicholai—Nick, she corrected herself mentally—didn't say a word as he led her to one of the cookie-cutter porches with silver spider webs trimming the wooden posts that held up the veranda. The steps squeaked happily under their feet as Nick knelt down to produce a key from somewhere beneath them.

The inside smelled of dust and heated wood. Nothing like the luxury of Inntourist—two beds with simple blankets over them, a dresser in the middle, another door off to the side. She wanted nothing more than to drop face first onto the bed—either one would do—and sleep for the next forty-eight hours.

"First-aid kit's in the bathroom."

Daydreaming about sleeping, she didn't quite hear what he said. "What's that?"

"You're bleeding." Now that he mentioned it, the damn cut on her neck stung like all hell, as did the scratches on her arms and legs and God knows where else.

When she glanced at herself in the bathroom mirror, tired and dirty with blood running down her neck, she didn't know whether to laugh or weep. The tiny window by the ceiling let in the morning light and her eyes in her reflection were pools of sunken black. Instead of dwelling on it, she pushed the mirrored door aside to get the first-aid kit.

She sucked in a ragged breath as alcohol made the cut on her neck burn, then stuck something that resembled a Band-Aid on it, hoping the Russian version would hold up in water.

Tired, adrenaline giving away to terror and something else inside her belly, Katherine stripped and, shivering, stepped into the tub to let cool water wash over her skin. Too tired to cry, too wired to just stand there.

"You could have waited 'til the water got warm."

His voice should've startled her. Instead, somehow, she had expected him. "It feels good."

She didn't turn when the shower curtain was pushed aside, when his arms came around her, his skin both hot and cool against her as water poured over them both. She felt his lips against the top of her head.

"I'm filthy." Her voice was hushed.

"I'll wash you."

He reached around her to grab for soap, slicking his palms over her skin, gently sliding over the welts and cuts on her arms, her shoulders. Over her breasts—once more after her nipples swelled. After the third time, she sighed and leaned her head against his shoulder.

His hands were dark against her, his body hard, his skin cool from the water.

"My turn," she murmured as she turned, aching to touch him. Soap-slicked hands moved over washboard abs, up to his chest, lower, much lower now, over his cock which stood up proud and erect.

She slid her hands over the satin skin of him before his hand grasped her wrist. "You keep that up and I won't be responsible."

She closed slippery fingers over him, moved up and down. "Responsible for what?"

"This." His mouth closed over hers, hot, hungry.

"Oh. Well." Another stroke. "Don't let me stop you."

She thought she heard him growl, deep in his throat. Those soap-slicked hands moved over her once more, rougher this time, faster. His mouth was desperate on hers, as if he couldn't get enough. Steam billowed now, his skin scorched hers. She looped her arms around his neck, and when he lifted her against the wall, she wrapped her thighs around his hips. He fitted himself against her, then tortured them both with the wait as he grabbed a condom from the cabinet and put it on.

His hands clenched on her buttocks when finally the fullness of him pierced her, speared her, plunged into her so hard, so deep, she sobbed with the pleasure of it into another kiss.

He pulsed. She clenched around him. Lips fused, wet skin slid over scorching skin, the pleasure coiling, building, so intense she shuddered from it and gripped him with all the strength she had left. His strokes were rough and short, each one pushing her against the hard cool wall, the feel of it behind her deliciously erotic.

She tore her mouth from his to shudder for a breath. His lips found her jaw, trailed nipping kisses on her throat, licked at her skin with each harsh stroke.

"Look at me,"

Kate didn't realize she'd closed her eyes.

"Look at me."

She met his eyes – dark, wild, desperate. He was so deep inside she almost hurt, the pleasure-pain of it so exquisite, so true, she burst from it, shuddered into a climax – would've screamed if his lips hadn't caught hers and taken the sound from her. She was still trembling when he stopped moving, buried his face in her neck and came in silent ragged grunts.

There were no words as he washed her again, dried her with one of the blue towels, led her to a bed, slid in beside her. Held her.

Her head over his arm, her palm over his chest, she let her eyes close and the past night slide through her. His heartbeat steady in her ear, she finally let herself sleep.

* * * * *

There were no faces of the dead in her dreams and that at least had been a blessing. Something held her down in the dark, its heavy arms pressing onto her eyelids, the blood that she had spilled burning her skin. She fought against the hold, screamed through unmoving lips, felt herself falling, falling, into a lit-up city, inside a casket made of glass.

The air felt as if it had been boiled. Beside her was a man – she knew him, yet she didn't – and it was he who held her down, who wouldn't let her move as they both fell at an increasing speed. He kissed her, suffocated her. And as she struggled to see him, those sad and watchful eyes were those of Nick.

She clawed out of the dream, breathless and cold, shivering with sweat. Alone. Kate didn't feel his warmth where he had been but there was still a slight dip in the pillow. He probably went out for a bit. Nothing to be concerned about.

She pushed the dream away, rubbed her hands over her eyes as if to scrub the terror out. She didn't know how long she'd slept, but it had been anything but restful. Her head ached just a bit, and when she sat up her muscles protested with aches and stiffness.

The drapes blocked out the sun, but the gold line under them told her the sun was high. The air inside was warm and still Kate shivered.

She didn't have her cell, didn't have a way to contact ISC for orders. She needed to figure out what Nick was, who he was working for. Maybe she shouldn't have slept with him before she knew, but it was done.

She didn't want to put on clothes from yesterday. Instead she wrapped a sheet around herself and opened the door to blinding sunlight – when his voice reached her, low and somber.

"No. If that's the case I will dispose of her myself." Sunlight caressed his skin. His back was to her, his shoulder crisscrossed with scars. Funny how she didn't notice that

last night. Then his words hit her. He'd spoken in English, his accent holding just a hint of the Midwest. And yet, the words were chilling in their meaning.

As if sensing her watching him, Nick turned. His eyes—cool, gray—met hers. Steady, direct. Unflinching. As if he hadn't just said he'd kill her once she became useless.

"I'll call back." He flipped the phone shut, took a step closer to her.

She didn't close the door between them, just stepped back to let him inside. Her belly twisted, churned. She would've thrown up if she'd had anything in her stomach.

Her eyes burned even as he blocked out the sun with his lean frame. His mouth was firm as he closed the door behind him, not fully, so the sun and air broke through that small inch he'd left open.

"You heard me." It wasn't stated as a question.

"Yes." She hated that her voice shook, that she was trapped inside a sheet, stark naked under it. Her knife was still inside her pants somewhere in bathroom. His gun was lost in the summer woods.

"I need the plans, Katika." He used her Russian name and it enraged her. Too close, just too familiar. You didn't call someone by their childhood name and then just kill them.

"I don't have them." She didn't bother injecting much acting into it.

"I know. You mailed them—that's why you wanted to get to the train station. I need them."

"Why?" He didn't make a move toward her. Somehow she wished he would and it would end. Betrayal was a cold pit in her belly.

"It's complicated."

Of course it was.

"Tomorrow you'll be on the first plane out of the country. You'll be safe." Now he took a step close to her. Somber, controlled. Not the same man who'd held her a few hours earlier.

She let him put his arms over her shoulders. Hating herself, Kate trembled at his touch, wanted to lean, to burrow, to cry. Instead, she slid her palms over his arms, letting the sheet fall onto the ground. When his gaze followed it, she did the only thing she could.

She used the edge of her palm to knife-hand him in the sleeper artery. Below the ear, just under the jawbone. Just like her brother had taught her.

Her throat burned as he folded at her feet, unconscious. Dead maybe? She didn't know but she was fairly sure this wouldn't kill him. She didn't allow herself to feel his pulse.

Survival. That's all it boiled down to. There was never complete trust. The only allies were the ones who profited from similar ambitions.

With sunlight streaming through the door, the air both tranquil and alive, the man she might have fallen in love with slumped on the wooden floorboards, Kate shrugged on whatever clothes she found in the closet, breathing again, doing the focused meditation. She concentrated on the present. She didn't think about the past.

She wanted nothing that had touched his skin and yet her clothes were dirty and stained with blood – noticeable – while ill-fitting clothes would be the norm among the Ukraine's working class.

Kate slipped on her shoes, rolled up the cuffs of jeans that were too long, and transferred the contents of her old pockets to the new – contents that included a knife, a wad of cash and a Chapstick – and she walked out into heat and trees and cheerful sun.

She didn't run – forced herself not to even if the itching between her shoulder blades told her someone was watching. Maybe he was already up and trained a weapon on her. She didn't know how long the knockout would last. She hadn't known it would be this effective.

When she finally got to Odessa she'd have to contact Ivan and tell him the move worked.

Just keep on walking, Katika.

Chapter Four

Odessa was a blur, but she was clean, dry and dressed in clothes that fitted her. And if that cold ache was still inside her belly, she tried not to think about it. The contact had been made, the courier would pick up the envelope with the flash drive at the *pochtamt*—the post office on Main Street. Out of her hands, out of her hair.

Now she just needed to hop onto a plane to Moscow, and from there, home.

She didn't even know what his real name was. *And you probably won't, so just get over it.*

As far as first missions went, this one could be seen as a success. She'd got the plans, she'd stayed alive, and hell, she'd even had amazing sex with a hot man who almost killed her. Jane Bond type stuff. But she wouldn't think about it.

She felt good in her new black power pantsuit—just another businesswoman, blending with the upper mid-class passengers. She wasn't startled when somebody bumped her from behind, or when they took her arm as if to steady her.

And then she turned and froze. That steady smile, that bull-like stature belonged to Vladimir Gregorievitch Dubrov.

"Katerina!" There was evil pleasure in that booming politician's voice. The men surrounding him had their hands casually in their pockets. Probably aiming German-made steel at her.

"Vladimir Gregorievitch." She kept her voice calm, even as her pulse started to beat triple time. Had they found Nick? Had they already killed him? "A pleasure to see you again."

"I owe you an apology." He spoke in Russian as more people turned to see the source of that rich voice. Already some started to make their way toward him. A hero for the people, and a money-hungry opportunist in his heart.

"The man working for me—Rostov—was a pig for GRU. But maybe we should continue this in private?"

The guns pointed at her ensured that she responded favorably to the idea. She walked outside amid the waves and smiles. She didn't know if he ever planned on going into politics but he was setting himself up to be a shoo-in.

His armored limo had been parked in front of the airport, shiny and black against the summer sky. She was ushered inside and, as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, her body was groped by meaty, sweaty hands that lingered on her breasts.

"Can't be too careful." Dubrov's voice didn't change, but in the intimate shadows of the air-conditioned limo, the public persona faded. She really didn't like the smile behind the mask.

"*Ny dorogya*," he'd called her dear—the same thing he'd called a girl he'd been subtly groping at the cocktail party a few days ago, "you're very expensive. I hope you're worth the money that I paid for you."

She smoothed her face of all emotion. "My death isn't worth that much."

The oligarch took out a cigar from the silk lining of his jacket. A snap of fingers had one of the bodyguards lighting it for him. The stench ate at her eyes and churned her stomach. Kate figured if she threw up on his shoes, at least it would make for a nice diversion.

"Did that pig fuck the plans out of you?"

"What plans?" She couldn't breathe with all that smoke burning her throat.

He slapped her—casually and not too hard. An insult. It stung rather than hurt and still tears gathered in her eyes. The grins from the five bodyguards told her the show was only starting.

"That *blyat* Rostov was paid by GRU. They want the station plans and I was told you had them. Who's your buyer?"

She watched him steadily as she considered possibilities. He thought her just a hired hand, didn't connect her to a US agency. Something was off and she couldn't afford to second-guess herself. A second later his cigar was on her skin. She hissed and pulled away, fighting for breath as pain burned a red circle on her wrist.

"The plans, *dorogya*. I don't have time for games."

"I didn't know he was with GRU."

Another slap, a light one. As if punishing her for her stupidity. "Neither did Tolyan. Doesn't matter now."

"What did you do with the other Americans?"

He laughed, a rich seductive laugh of confidence and power. "I could tell you that I killed them. Tortured them. Would it eat at your conscience? But like I said, I don't have time for games. They are restructuring the schemas and they won't leave Ukraine until they're done. Their lives are in your hands."

For emphasis he tapped a finger on her raw burned skin. And then the world went crazy.

"*Szadi!*" A bullet split the rear window into a web of cracks. A bodyguard was on Dubrov, pulling him down. Another shoved his automatic through the window randomly firing as the limo careened sharply to the left. The spray of his blood hit Kate square in the chest as they moved forward at a crazy speed, the bodyguards wildly shooting and Dubrov cussing on the floor.

She could get out through the sunroof and, if not hit by bullets, risk getting rolled over by a car.

Dubrov cussed once again.

She'd take the car.

With the bodyguards busy, she muscled open the sunroof only to be thrown forward into the leather seat as the limo screeched to a stop and silence mixed with a burning smell of rubber.

"Ny! Ruki V Verh!"

Hands up!

She felt as if she was in a movie. Their hands on their heads, the bodyguards piled out, followed by Dubrov. She was pulled out by a man with dark blond hair and a stranger's eyes.

Nick. Nicholai. In jeans and a white shirt, cool and blank-eyed.

"Excellent." The men who surrounding them stood military straight, their Kalashnikov automatics ready. Their leader—bald, unsmiling, and slender—appraised her up and down. *"Oklichno."*

The roar inside her head made it difficult to think. Things were a blur as she was shoved into another car, Nick sitting in the front, ignoring her.

Nick couldn't quite breathe and that started to be a problem. That stain of blood over Katherine's chest caused momentary panic—he pushed it down deep into his gut where it could churn in silence. The blood wasn't hers and for now he could at least maintain control.

The burn over her wrist had him clenching his teeth in fury. But since he couldn't do anything about it, he locked his jaw and buried it.

The safe house was ironically another dacha—this time out just outside Odessa—by the sea. The breeze ruffled her hair as he followed her and the Russians into it. She walked with a slow and steady pace, as if she was an honored guest.

He knew her heart was pounding. Outside, her face was as smooth as glass. Her eyes changed just a bit when she was pushed into a room to wait for Vasilyavich to begin "debriefing". As Nick casually passed by to make sure she was all right, she turned around and their gazes met.

He held her gaze for one brief moment. Those blue eyes remained cool and steady—no sparkling expression now. Somehow that seemed the worst thing of all.

Nick didn't see that he had much choice. Using a confiscated cell from one of Dubrov's guards, he dialed a number and hung up. And waited.

The day was too damn pretty to get killed. The surf was up, the sun glittered and played over the sea foam as waves crashed to the sand. The breeze ruffled across his face. A lone cry of a seagull was poignant and symbolic.

Vasilyavich wasn't impressed that the missing hours he had spent with the *Amerikanka* still hadn't led them to the data. The fact that she had knocked him out was verified and found irrelevant.

The timing at least worked. The mole in Dubrov's pocket had been caught, although Nick still didn't know how in all hell the Russians had figured out Katherine's location.

A pretty breeze kicked up, and through the roar of the sea he thought he heard her scream. His blood boiled even as his mind forced it to cool. With casual steps he walked around the house, around the veranda, to the open window of her room.

Two men had their hands on her, holding her upright. Her back was toward him, he couldn't see her face.

"Nicholai. Would you like to join us?"

She jerked at the sound of his name. A part of him was grateful that he couldn't see her eyes. "I prefer a different approach to women."

He couldn't tell if she was hurt. Forced himself not to reach for the small gun strapped to his ankle. He breathed salt air through his nose.

Vasilyavich just smiled. "A different approach?" He raised the blade that he was holding. "Fucking?" His hand made a slow slicing movement. Nick couldn't see her. But somehow he smelled blood. "This is less painful in the beginning, but more powerful. The mind doesn't shut down as fast. Does it, dear?"

Nick thought he heard her breathing, sucking in air through her teeth. She must have answered something vile because with his free hand, Vasilyavich slapped her, so hard she sagged against the men holding her up.

"How brave you are." Her voice was low, her Russian heavy with sarcasm and accent now that she didn't work at clearing it. "Striking me with two men holding me down."

Pride swelled at that idiotic show of bravery even as his muscles burned to shoot them all. He had to keep his cover. He couldn't get her out of this, not yet, not without losing all he'd worked for.

Vasilyavich took out his gun. "You're right. I'll shoot out your kneecaps then we can be alone." He aimed and smiled.

Nick's gun was hot inside his hand when hell exploded.

Gunfire—muffled by the roaring sea—shouts, curses, bodies running. Nick was already through the window as Vasilyavich ran out the door, gun waving. The men holding Katherine down looked surprised as Nick grabbed hold of her. "I've got her! Go!"

They didn't question him and maybe saved themselves a bullet. Her face was pale but steady. Blood seeped where her blouse was torn.

"Don't touch me." She mumbled the words even as she leaned on him. The gunfire was deafening, the shouts urgently insane.

"Just shut up." He told himself most of the blood staining her suit wasn't hers. She hissed as he got a hold over her upper arm, as something hot and dark seeped through

his fingers. He had a sudden vicious image of pressing his gun into Vasilyavich's lap. "Let's go."

She hesitated, distrust and pain clear in those eyes the color of a wild sea. That second may have saved their lives.

Dubrov came through the door, an automatic in his hand, blood spattered on his face, rage twisting it. Behind him, Vasilyavich lay dead in the sunny and cheerful corridor.

"Suka," hissed Ukraine's visionary of the future. "I'll kill you, bitch."

Nick pushed her out of the way just as ice pierced his arm, his shoulder. The metallic smell of blood wasn't a surprise and wasn't pleasant. He couldn't lift his arm to shoot. Couldn't find his gun. Time swam like slow molasses.

He heard a gunshot in the distance, someone heavily falling. Katika. He had to get to her, cover her with his body.

When he finally found her, his gun was somehow in her hand. Tears mixed with blood over her face. She was alive. Dubrov was down.

Then darkness pulled at him.

* * * * *

Kate was beginning to hate airports. The Sheremetievo in Moscow, Kennedy in New York. The small, hot one in Washington. She didn't want crowds of vacationers, excited kids, gum-snapping tourists. And all that heat that drove her fucking batshit.

She'd started swearing lately. She liked swearing. Ivan did that and now she understood. The words—the grit of them—were coarse, raw and simple. Stripped to the basic facts, devoid of emotion.

She wanted winter. Ice, sleet, cold. Bad tempers, stranded flights. She wanted everyone to be as pissed as she was.

Alliances. That's all that was. Her life was risked because ISC wanted to build alliances with Russia. They didn't care about Dubrov or generators or the strategic future of Ukraine. They'd set her up to get the data, then gave the GRU her coordinates for a friendly exchange of information.

Nearly got her killed—and fucked up a major CIA op.

But she wouldn't think about Nicholai. Or Nick. She still didn't know what his real name had been.

The GRU was only too happy to let the Americans take the heat for fucking up international relations and killing the man who could lead Kiev into the bright green future. The head of ISC shifted the blame straight on her head. If Nick hadn't come forward, her ass would be fried on a sling.

Not that Nick had spoken to her directly. Not that he'd come to see how she was doing now that she'd quit. Not that he'd let her know he was all right after playing hero and taking a bullet meant for her. Asshole.

Well, she'd got plenty of fieldwork experience to land a job. But first, a vacation. Somewhere cold. Somewhere not Russia. Maybe Antarctica where it snowed this time of year.

She had to make a short pit stop in San Diego. Get her own clothes, her shoes, her freaking iPod so she could drown herself in movies and not think about him.

As she entered the plane, the flight attendant had a toothy grin that bothered her. She didn't have her weapons – can't fly with firearms without a special badge. Not that it mattered now. With the mood that she was in, she could put someone down with a pen.

She found her seat and buckled up.

First San Diego's scorching sun, then winter in Antarctica snow, snowmen and fake fur. Maybe she'd find somebody there to warm her up and wipe away the taste of him.

She saw a man out of a corner of her eye, a man who sat down next to her, gaunt and gawky, his limbs appearing too long, his back hunched over. Thick sunglasses concealed his eyes.

Her shoulder blades itched once again. She turned, but... No. It couldn't be this man who blew his nose into a tissue, loud and juicy while the flight attendant with the horse's grin held up the safety cards and gestured. *In case of a water landing...*

She wouldn't think of that either.

The plane taxied, gained speed. She loved that part. In heat or snow, she loved the feeling of going fast, so fast you flew. Gravity slapped her down in her seat, her stomach dropped, her mood improved just slightly.

Then she felt eyes on her and, when she turned, the man beside her became Nick.

Of all the words she had, none found a way past her dry throat.

"What, no hello?"

Her pulse pounded so hard, she barely heard him. "Fuck you."

"Exactly what I'm thinking. Bathroom?"

She turned away from him, stared at the toy cars on the tiny alleys through the window.

"I'm sorry, Katika."

"Don't fucking call me that."

"You swear a lot more on US soil. I'll have to remember that."

"Why the hell would you?"

His voice was solemn now. "I'm burned out. And not finished. I need another agent, a cool head and a sniper's hand. I heard you're looking." He took her wrist at that, brushed a gentle finger over the pink burn circle that wouldn't go away. She didn't

tug her hand from his when he lifted it to his lips and kissed her right over the scar. The jolt of it sent sparks down to her belly.

"You heard right." And hell if she'd ask him to be her sponsor.

"You've got the skills, you've got the language. Your stepbrother nearly shot my other shoulder, by the way."

She buried the question about his bullet wounds. "Maybe you fucking deserved it. You know Ivan?"

"Us Russkis stick together." He tidily sidestepped the question about Ivan. With his dark glasses off, she still couldn't tell the color of his eyes. Gray, green or blue. "I'm sorry. I couldn't break cover. I couldn't get you out fast enough. I should've have stuffed you into a suitcase in that elevator and sent you to Sheremetievo right there."

"I would have killed you."

"Probably. I could use you at CIA."

"All right." He simply raised his eyebrows. "ISC wasn't exactly good to me."

He smiled now. "We could be partners. Posing like a married couple half the time. Think you can handle it?"

"Can you?"

"A challenge? At the Mile-high Club?"

She was still pissed. Exhilarated just a little bit, but pissed. She needed to work out her aggression. "Meet me in the first-class bathroom in two minutes."

His eyes darkened as she got up. He stood up after her.

"I said two minutes."

He grabbed her hand, pulled her toward him and kissed her, hard and long. "Life is too short to wait."

SHIFTING SIDES

Cheryl Dragon

Chapter One

Breman had returned to Old Earth three times since the evacuation, each time hoping she'd be there. This time his intelligence proved true and his timing was perfect. Kiren's ship rested not far from his. Finally they were both visiting Old Earth at the same time. They'd be safe here for a time.

The lovely brunette cat shifter haunted him. That she'd chosen to stay with the bulk of the population and move to New Earth tore at him. The government had treated the shifters like lab rats. They'd been rounded up, drugged and experimented on for years.

Yet without that horrid twist, a dragon shifter like him, used to a cave-dwelling life, would never have met the solitary Kiren. He couldn't protect her when they were both in cages but now he could try to free her. The rebel colony life was hard but she had strength equal to his. Plus, if his information about the New Earth government was true, Kiren had no idea of the danger she was in.

Breman sniffed the air. He could smell her sweet scent. She was near. With no other dangers in the area, he shifted to a majestic golden dragon and winged for the building. Since the evacuation, Old Earth had been overrun with plants and wild animals. The native creatures no longer feared humans—no human dared to return as they were far outnumbered. The spoils of New Earth and a lower population left little reason to show concern for the ravaged former home.

No doubt the government kept Kiren alive for the purpose of retrieving valuable items from Old Earth. After a year, Breman wondered what they still needed. They'd taken it all—gems, precious metals, plant and animal DNA, and enough supplies to survive quite some time as they integrated their crops with the new world's environment. Old Earth had unified under one government and extensive testing had begun in a variety of directions. With no one to check the scientists, dangerous tests went out of control. Water supplies were contaminated and more.

Yet Kiren stood there, in the vault of an underground bank. Money? They couldn't want more money. It had to be gems or coins. Breman's stomach turned. His source said this would be Kiren's last trip to Old Earth. She'd been marked for death. But Breman wanted her to return with him because she wanted to, not just because of the danger.

Shifting to human form, he walked toward her. Clothes were useless and annoying. On Old Earth there was no point in wearing them. Shifting destroyed them and there was no one around to see. Kiren stood naked as well. They'd more than seen each other in that state. On the rebel colony, Breman and other shifters wore clothing to prove their equality, but here he wanted Kiren nude.

He grew hard just looking at her graceful bare back but tried to control those old instincts. The experiments the government scientists had performed on them now echoed in his mind. His need for her was more than a habit, more than a directive from their captors.

Kiren turned suddenly and her green eyes flashed with recognition and relief Breman wanted to see. No anger or fear reflected in her body language and he knew her well enough to read every muscle twitch.

"Long time no see." He leaned on the wall next to her and felt something move under his shoulder.

Out of nowhere the vault doors slid shut with no chance to make an escape. He stared at it, stunned. Nothing with power still worked on this planet as far as he knew. The backup to this deep vault had somehow remained untouched. A pressure trigger? A booby trap?

"What did you do?" She ran to the door and tried to move it.

He threw all his strength into helping her but it was no use. "I don't know what happened. Everything electronic here is dead."

"Obviously not or it's a different sort of lock. What are you doing here anyway?" She turned to him, her angled features furrowed in frustration.

"I needed to see you. You're okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I can take care of myself. How's your rebel colony?" She tried the switch for the door and examined the wall for a switch or trigger. Finally she slammed it with her fist.

Breman was in no hurry to escape. A captive audience would help but her heat and scent distracted him from logic. "Good. Safe. Free. You'd be happy there. No experiments or captivity." He slid a hand on her tense shoulder. Kiren didn't want to be locked anywhere. Neither did he but being locked up with her made it better.

She relaxed a bit under his touch. "The experiments don't happen anymore. Nothing like that with the new government. I work recovering items and I'm not a captive. You and your shifters can live like wild animals—I won't."

"It's not that bad. Shifters are free. Some have human mates. Some live in packs while some live as humans and only shift when they feel the need. We're not the only ones the government oppressed. You're sure you don't want to try freedom. Do you like a leash?" He moved behind her and pressed his chest to her back. Kiren's skin was always so soft.

All the things he'd longed to do with her rushed to mind. All the things the scientists made them do left him wary of her reaction. One shift and a swipe of her claws and he'd be dead.

Judging the risk worth it, he nuzzled the back of her neck, brushing her long brown hair aside. "I've missed you."

Kiren leaned into him. "You know there is a death order out on you from New Earth. You're considered dangerous."

He pulled her closer and her rear brushed his erection. "Don't you ever wonder about it? The freedom. All the things they'd never let us do?"

"They were experimenting with our reproductive capabilities. If it didn't result in potential pregnancy..." She shuddered.

"The shock collars are gone." He held her, letting his hands glide over the curve of her hip and onto her flat stomach. "I wanted you before the experiments. I don't care about reproduction. I want you still."

"All the things we couldn't do." Her voice cracked as her fingers pulled his hands up. "I've thought about it."

Her high round breasts felt warm and her hard nipples pressed to his palms. Relief and arousal mixed in him. She wanted him now – not just in captivity.

Breman turned her and pressed her back to the wall. They could be locked here forever for all he cared. He kissed her mouth slowly and then deepened it as her arms pulled him closer. No rush of people watching, no pressure to perform – only here and now could he sample and seduce her.

Her hands worked down his back and cupped his ass. Kiren's eagerness aroused him more. He looked around, waiting for the shock correction. Finally he laughed at himself. They were truly alone. He didn't have to share her with others or hide anything from the prying eyes of the scientists. They weren't going to be watched and that fact only made it harder to control his need for her.

"No one is watching. We're free. I want your tongue on my body. Your mouth." She kissed his throat.

He wanted that so badly his own mouth went dry. "What about the death order? You don't want to kill me?"

Kiren smiled up at him. "Right now I want you alive. We deserve this much." Her arms wrapped around his neck as she kissed him and pressed down on his shoulders.

He'd never been more willing to kneel before someone in his life. But he went slowly, sucking his fill of her firm breasts and then tonguing down her stomach.

Pausing at her hips, he kissed them gently. He'd gripped them countless times in the rut of the experiments but now he could do anything to her.

The smell of her arousal sent shots of adrenaline through him. Possessive and carnal instincts pounded in him. He'd never tasted her – not once had they been allowed this simple intimate act. She'd ached for it as well.

Slowly he licked at her outer pussy lips and her hips snapped, pushing him in farther. The tangy flavor of her drugged him. He needed to pleasure her in every way forbidden before, for both their sakes. They'd never be free, either of them, without this experience. This was their true rebellion. Her soft moan encouraged him to feast and Breman let his lust run free.

Her fingers dug into his scalp, kneading the flesh but resisting the urge to claw. Kiren had dreamed of seeing Breman again but never imagined she could. His tongue worked her inner folds as though hunting for buried treasure. Her dream was really happening and better than she'd imagined.

Spreading her legs wider, Kiren angled to give him more. She needed more of him. The thought of sucking his cock pushed her to the edge. There would never be enough time for them to do all they wanted. Once would never be enough. Her dreams of him never ended.

His tongue caressed over every sensitive spot before dipping inside her. Kiren's insides clenched in a small release and Breman moved in deep for his reward. Her pussy ached to ride him again even if they'd done it hundreds of times in the lab. There was no way she'd let him go back without one last time.

Then his tongue shifted up, toying with her clit before methodically sucking and squeezing it with his lips. The build of need made her limbs feel heavy. The graze of his teeth on her nub sent sparks through her until she trembled. Kiren gasped for air and tightened her grip in his hair as Breman caught her clit and held it firmly between his teeth.

The release jolted through her as Kiren tried to muffle her cries of ecstasy. His arms held her waist as her body swayed with passion. She never knew it could be like this. No cages around them and no shock collars. The scientists never allowed them to enjoy more than necessary for their experiments. Their sick priorities went on and on but never matched the physical needs of their test subjects. Some of the male shifters she'd never enjoyed at all.

Breman always made her come at least twice even under the harsh glare of lab lights in a transparent cage. Neither of them could break out even if they shifted—so every detail of their encounters could be viewed by all.

Kiren opened her eyes. It hadn't been a dream. They were here, alone. Breman knelt between her legs, smiling up at her. Her body hummed with satisfaction yet pined for more in the wake of true freedom. If only she could freeze her life on this moment.

The world didn't remain still for long. He kissed his way up her body and she craved more. First she needed to know how this happened. "Why are you here?"

He pressed his forehead to hers. "To see you. It's not safe for you on New Earth. I want you to return with me."

"You risked your life for me?" She couldn't believe it. The journey was short but dangerous with New Earth patrols around. "I'm sure you have plenty of females eager to mate with you in your colony. Why come after me?"

Breman grinned that boyish grin she'd so rarely seen. His dark hair and golden eyes were intimidating but he was kind as well as strong. She'd felt it the first time he'd touched her. Breman was so nice she had to adore him. "I've got a taste for you, always have. Let's enjoy it before you come to your senses and kill me for the reward." He kissed her quickly.

There had to be more behind it. He held something back. But as he pulled her tight to him, Kiren knew his arousal was genuine. For now, their physical need won out.

Pushing him to the ground, she straddled his hips and eased down to kneel over his body. She'd missed him, especially his touch.

As he leaned up to suck her breasts, she arched her back to give him more. Shuddering as he dragged his teeth along each nipple, she lined her body up with his and pushed him inside. He lifted for more and Kiren moaned as her body stretched for his thick cock.

Breman's arms held her and pulled her down until she was filled. Her hands clung to his shoulders to keep control. When they were in the lab, they'd been prodded to act quickly, not to *play*. Postures and mates were chosen for them and any deviation was punished immediately. Kiren wanted to enjoy this feeling now and let it last.

She ground her hips and squeezed his erection inside her while her mouth claimed his. Breman's hands worked from her breasts around and down to cup her ass. He encouraged her thrusting as they rocked together. As he deepened the kiss, Kiren held him closer, letting her body press to his as though they were one.

The tightness built inside her as they rocked in unison. He hit the right spots deep within and her pussy convulsed in release. Kiren gasped for air and held tight to Breman as her body worked to maximize the orgasm. She knew they were safe but her body still feared they'd be pulled apart and left hungry for more as she shuddered around him.

But Breman's cock pulsed inside her. He hadn't come yet. She tested him with a gentle squeeze and he groaned. "Play all you want. We're free."

Breman rolled until Kiren was on her back. She made no effort to stop him and instead stretched and arched in wicked triumph. Now they could indulge as never before. Breman tested her with a gentle thrust. Kiren responded by lifting her hips. "More," she begged.

He braced his palms on either side of her and began slowly fucking her. The rhythm sent a chill through Kiren as her hands slid over his well-muscled chest and back. She'd give him anything. They belonged together like this. If only they could be together forever she would welcome it.

The tension in Breman's muscles built as he thrust harder and faster. Kiren wanted to watch him come. Forcing her eyes open, she held on to him tightly. He moved one hand lower and Kiren bucked as his fingers worked her clit with rough flicks and pinches.

He knew how to pleasure as well as shock her. Kiren screamed as the second climax took over and that one pulsing spot consumed her. Faintly she heard him groan and felt his release. She curled her legs around his muscular ass.

"Tired of me yet?" he asked.

Kiren laughed. "Never. I'll never have enough." She kissed his forehead.

"Tell me what you want and I'll do it. Anything. We were tortured for so long, we need to be free."

How could she choose? There were so many things she wanted with him. But her orders were clear. She had to recover the item and get back. If she played too long, they'd assume she was taken prisoner or died. At that point, they would remotely detonate her ship. Everyone was expendable and their technology was not allowed to fall into the wrong hands.

Looking him in the eye, Kiren wanted to stay. "I have to go." She rolled them and got up.

"So you use me and then you kill me?" he teased.

He looked so good lying there naked. No collar, no cage—hers for the taking. "I won't kill you but we need to find a way out of this vault. I can't go with you and I have to get back on time."

"Fraidy cat," he mocked.

"You wish." If Breman only knew how much she wanted to go with him. But sacrifices had to be made. Not all shifters could be free. Kiren was the only one of her kind on New Earth. The only one fit for retrieval and the harsh conditions.

They'd kept her for a reason and Breman didn't need to know the details. As linked as they were sexually, Kiren knew Breman fought for the greater good. He'd sacrifice himself to save others and get away safely from New Earth's clutches. His vision gave people hope.

Some sacrifices had to be suffered in silence. She'd make the hard choice and go back to New Earth. No testing or experiments, just survival among the non-shifters.

She collected the vial of gems the government wanted, stowed it in a small pouch that wrapped around her wrist and looked around for another exit. Delaying the inevitable would only make it harder to leave.

Chapter Two

Kiren's distance was a dash of cold water on him. The cat shifter had been captured young, her mother killed in the process. She never had a real taste of freedom. Breman could give it to her if only she'd trust him. She responded to him readily with sex but following him across space was too much? Shifters he'd never met had risked it all to be free yet she wanted to be leashed and thought it made her safe.

He watched her arrange the pouch securely and then walk the perimeter of the room, looking for an escape. He couldn't let her go – not when her life was at stake.

Breman paced in front of her. "You're so eager to leave?"

"You'd prefer to stay trapped in here? I'll feel better when we're free of cages." Kiren tried the door again without luck.

He slid in behind her. "Seems to me you like being caged. Old Earth or New, you play their game and do as they say. No fun there."

"Life is about survival, not fun."

She didn't run and he eased a hand over her lush hip. "We can have both. Come back with me and you'll see."

"You barely trust me not to kill you and you're willing to have me join your rebel colony?" She leaned back into him, a perfect fit.

"I trust you." He meant it at least partly. He trusted her not to kill him or harm the others in the colony, but she had to commit to the new life first. Fear and survival instincts made people do crazy things. "You trust me and we've barely scratched the surface of what we were denied in captivity."

Breman slid his hand down to her pussy and dipped two fingers in, massaging her slick folds.

"Don't play," she gasped. He'd heard it from her so many times when he'd broken the rules during their experiments. Each time the punishment was worse and she didn't want him hurt. Those words meant she cared. The punishment had been worth it. She was the only woman he broke the rules for. He'd do anything just to be closer to her.

He turned her to lean against the wall and so he could watch her reaction. Kiren's legs opened as his fingers teased and tugged on her outer lips.

Her hands pressed to his shoulders for support as he rubbed an index finger to her core and penetrated her just enough to make her want it more. "I'll play all I want."

"Breman," she moaned.

"Good," he said. "Remember who can make you come like no other. Who wanted you even when the scientists forced our mating. No one wanted you more no matter how many mates we were forced to take."

Kiren's eyes closed and her head tipped back. Immediately, Breman changed tactics. He tugged and flicked her inner lips. "Look at me."

Her eyes popped open and stared at him. "Please," she said.

"Did you dream of this? Did you want me more than the rest of the rutting male shifters?" His thumb grazed her clit and a sob escaped her throat.

"Yes," she cried. "I always wanted you. Only you."

Breman believed her and rewarded her with one long finger inching slowly deep inside. Pressing her clit until he'd aroused her every inch, Breman curled and uncurled the finger inside her.

Her body tightened around his finger and her hips flexed. "More please."

"No." He pulled the finger back. "You'll get your turn if you play nicely but now I get to fuck you and do the things I always wanted to do to your body. The things I know you wanted every bit as much."

Kiren stilled her hips and bit her lip to muffle her frustrated moan.

"You'll come, I promise." He pressed two fingers deep inside her and felt the internal clench but her hips remained still. "Good."

His other hand cupped her breast and teased the delicate nipple. They'd never let him touch her there and the tender flesh clearly needed attention. Her nipple hardened for him instantly and Breman couldn't resist. He tongued over the tight round breast and then sucked on her nipple, never intending to stop.

She moaned but held still. He flicked her with his tongue as his thumb teased her clit. Kiren shuddered against him. "Breman, I need you."

Not this time. No one was going to rush him. He was hard but all he wanted in this round was to see her indulge in the pleasure so denied them. For once she'd let go of expectations and trying to please others. Breman wanted to watch her break the rules and enjoy it.

Three fingers slid in and out of her easily as he increased the pressure on her clit. He watched as her beautiful face went from shock to pleasure. Her eyes fogged over with a haze of lust. Kiren's hips snapped and he made no move to correct her. She was wild and should be free. Working her faster with his hand, Breman felt her release as her body froze—her head thrown back and mouth open in silent scream. Her juices drenched his hands as her hips jerked a final time.

Breman sucked his soaked fingers, tasting her. "Better?" he asked.

Her eyes fluttered open. "Different. So good. Still not enough." Her fingers stroked his heavy balls and he groaned.

"I wanted to watch you come. You're so beautiful. Those sick scientists got their thrills watching you. Did they ever...?" He couldn't finish the question. Breman wasn't

sure he could stand the answer. Other shifters had been forced to enjoy her body. Who wouldn't? But they were under the same restriction as he. The scientists on the other hand had no such limitations.

She shook her head. "No, shifters were dirty lower beings they'd never touch. I'm sure they got a jolt from watching us though." Her hand wrapped around his erection from base to tip, her thumb grazed the head with slow exploration.

Breman had to clamp down and get control fast. "Your turn to explore. I don't expect equal time."

"I always wanted to see." She brushed kisses over his chest as her hand jerked and serviced his cock. The smell of her arousal, the feel of her soft hand and the heat of her body pressed to him pushed Breman faster than he wanted.

"Easy." He tried to slow her.

"Now." She rubbed the head with her thumb.

Out of control, he thrust into her palm and came with a groan. The sight of his cum on her hand was a new type of erotic fuel. They'd never been allowed any contact that wouldn't possibly result in reproduction for the scientist to experiment on. Kiren tested the consistency of his cum with her fingers and then smeared it all over his cock playfully.

"So fast?" she asked.

"You started me off. It wasn't fair." He fought for control as she continued to tease him.

"Sorry. Next time I'll go slower." She stopped and turned abruptly. Looking away, she stared at the ceiling. "That'll do."

"What?" Breman followed her gaze and saw a small vent about two-thirds of the way up the wall. "You'll never fit through there."

"Any bets?" She grinned.

He'd seen her shift to all manner of tigers and pumas, the large jungle cats that were dangerous. No, not even a mountain lion could fit through that vent. The jump she could make easily but neither of them could fit in human or shifted form.

With a wave, she shifted into a large mountain lion-sized feline. With a running start, she leaped and in midair changed to a housecat.

That would fit!

His mission not yet fulfilled, Breman needed to keep her here. He shifted to a dragon and swatted her out of the air with his wing. He roared at the domestic feline, no match for a massive dragon.

The cat hissed in return, shifting to a larger panther that began to growl. They'd never fought but he knew she'd be hard to beat without breathing fire and roasting her. Both of them had lethal claws but she had speed and flexibility. He couldn't even fly, contained in this vault. If she got near his throat, one bite could kill him.

Breman roared. In a flash, the growling cat leaped and swiped at his arm. The pain shot in his shoulder. He shifted to human and watched as she did the same.

Assessing the wound, he applied pressure to test it. Nothing major had been cut. "You won't kill me but you'll slow me down?"

"Why did you stop me from leaving?" She pushed him. "I can get through there and free you."

He grabbed and pulled her close, the adrenaline raging in him mixed with lust. "You won't listen to me. Stop fighting us. I don't want to lose you."

The fire in her eyes matched his. Kiren's fingers closed around his cock. "I won. It's my turn again." She slid down his body and onto her knees, sucking his cock into her mouth.

The pain vanished as Kiren's sweet lips and demanding tongue took over. She explored him like a novice, licking up one side and down the other and sucking his balls before tugging on them. He tried to steer her but she refused to be led. Gently her tongue teased the tip of his erection. Breman fought for control. "Deeper or I'll come too fast."

Kiren took the warning seriously, sucking lower and lower until she had all of him in her mouth. The vibrations of her throat nearly sent him over as she purred for him.

Slowly he began to thrust in and out. He'd know quickly if she liked it or not. The groan in her throat encouraged him. She met his thrusts while her fingers tormented his sac. Her soft tongue curled around him with every thrust. Breman sank a hand into her long hair as he let her win.

His body jerked with a deep release. Her hungry mouth devoured every drop and sucked more from him. "You see how good it can be to get someone else off?" he asked.

Kiren kissed his balls and thigh. "I'm sorry I clawed you."

Deep down, Breman wasn't sorry. He pulled her to her feet and kissed her. The next move in his plan was critical but he was hardly thinking clearly. Kiren was his passion and his weakness. Without her he'd never be complete.

Her body purred with sexual thrill but she was truly shocked at her own behavior. She stared at the claw marks. She'd hurt him. A reflex but she regretted it. They'd been through enough pain not to inflict more on each other.

"Why did you try to stop me?" she asked.

"We're not done. We'll never be done with each other. You're running away from what you really need." He held her close.

"We can't always have what we want. There are trade-offs and consequences. I won't kill you for the bounty on your head but I have to get back or they will detonate my ship and put a bounty on me in case I'm alive." The bracelet counted down the time she had left to reenter New Earth's space.

He glanced at it. "You're got enough time to indulge once more. They're using you."

"If not me, someone else." She bit her lip before she said any more. Breman towered over her, strong and so male she wanted to be his mate forever. But she'd make it much worse for both of them if she gave in.

Leaning against the wall, Breman pulled her body up against his, hiking one of her legs over his hip so her pussy opened to him. The angle was perfect. He rubbed his cock between her lips and Kiren gasped.

He had such an imagination! She'd never grow tired of him. Kiren wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him as she ground her pussy against his growing erection.

All those times they'd been forced into positions and she'd fantasized about breaking free. Riding Breman and trying every naughty thing forbidden to them. To be free to follow the instincts of her body was a fantasy back then. She'd dreamed up new ones every night alone in her cold cage. At least she had a view of Breman to comfort her then. Now she had him inside her on their terms. Her pussy clenched.

Clearly he'd had those same thoughts and he was not ashamed to pursue them now. Not that Kiren held any shame, but she'd always wondered if he craved her as much as she did him.

They were a danger to each other, even here. Letting their guards down opened them up to attack. Secretly she feared someone had followed him because the bounty was so high. Her being seen with him and not killing him immediately would mean her death as well.

Yet her body refused to feel the fear or hesitation her brain registered. She grew wetter as the friction increased. He was so hard and ready for her, she wanted to ride him again. But he seemed determined to get his release just like this, rubbing in defiance of all the scientists had put them through.

Kiren ground her hips forward for more contact and dug her fingernails in his hair. Her body shook and there was no point in fighting it. She came as his incessant hands pulled her hips up and down along his cock even as her cunt squeezed juices onto him.

Panting, she tried to rest but his hands urged her hips to continue. She wanted to feel him come again and snapped her hips to push him faster. Kiren bucked against him and rubbed against him with her whole body to keep him off balance.

Breman grabbed her ass and held her still as he grunted in release. Kiren stayed pressed to him as the warm wetness shot up onto her stomach and breasts.

He recovered fast and rubbed his cum into her skin. Kiren knew a marking when she felt it. The thrill filled her and she gloried in it. In a way she had marked Breman when she'd clawed him. His scent on her was infinitely better. They were marking each other like animals and yet no animal shared this intimacy. She knew she shouldn't and tried to resist, but she knelt and sucked his cock clean, tasting their mixed juices.

The cruelty of their encounter began to sink in. If she didn't know what she was missing, it'd be easier to live without it. Now that she'd had Breman free and wild,

she'd suffered from more vivid dreams and fantasies about him. Her body constantly would yearn for this moment. Yet she couldn't regret it.

Kissing his hip, she licked her way up his hard chest. She paused to bite his flat nipples before kissing his throat and finally his strong mouth. Another thing they were denied so many times. Kissing wasn't in the plan and how she'd wanted it. She deepened the kiss and slowed it so it sank into her memory.

"You have to come back with me. We are fated. How did we never succeed in their experiment?" He kissed her slowly.

Her resistance dropped a bit. He wanted to reproduce with her? A crazy notion. A dragon and a cat shifter. The scientists had dabbled with genetic manipulation and shot them up with various serums to assist. It'd never worked. "Our shifter animal forms aren't compatible. There's no way to know what would happen if they'd ever succeeded. I have to go back now."

"Why?" he demanded.

"New Earth still seethes from the insult of the rebel colony not wanting to be a part of ours. If they think you kidnapped me or I defected, they'll attack. They have plenty of weapons and they'd love any excuse to destroy you."

"You think we lack defenses?" he asked.

She shrugged. "You escaped with very little. You'd be outgunned and certainly outnumbered. It's safer if I go back. I won't have innocent blood on my hands." She pulled away slowly.

"Neither will I." Breman shook his head. "Your blood is innocent as well."

"Then I'll go back. If I bring what they want, they won't harm me." She sized up the vent again. It'd work, it would have to. "I'll escape and free you. Then we'll both go back to our lives and never meet again. It's too dangerous for you to come here."

"No human will set foot on Old Earth," he countered.

"No, but they will orbit and wait you out. The price on your head is very high. Some men are willing to take insane risks to earn that fortune and the good graces of the government."

"Why me?" he asked.

"You are the rebels' leader. If you die, they believe the colony will fail and the people will come crawling back to New Earth."

"Others would take my place. They imprisoned too many shifters to think they'll surrender rather than die."

Kiren nodded. "I know. However, it's best for all to avoid a war. You stay safe and with your colony. Please. I don't want you to die!" She had to let go and walk away now.

Chapter Three

Breman knew it was now or never. He had to stop Kiren from leaving. "I'm not the only one with a death order on their head."

She froze and turned slowly. "What do you mean?"

"We've built up more than our defenses, Kiren. I've got a good intelligence network now. How do you think I knew you were here? New Earth trades for goods with the same planets we do. I've made some connections. You've been marked for death as well."

"That's crazy. They sent me on this mission. Why would the government kill me?"

"Why would they send you for a vial of gems? A little more money? Barely worth the trip. They wanted to get you off the planet."

She leaned against the wall. "It is the smallest retrieval I've done. But if they wanted me dead, why bother with a mission at all? Why not just have me killed like any other undesirable?"

"That's what I thought at first. I had two sources verify the price on your head. It's not public, like mine, of course. Only government officials and outsiders know about yours. Instead you're a reminder of the colony and the old times, a wound to their pride."

Her face contorted in confusion. "Why? I don't understand."

"As near as I can find out, you're no longer useful to them. Old Earth's value has been harvested so they don't need you around. You never managed to produce a shifter offspring, and with no male shifters on New Earth there's no hope for one. So no more experiments or anything of that nature. Short of sticking you in a zoo, there's no job for you."

"I'd escape from a zoo," she said.

"Of course. I don't know how you stood it this long but you have to protect yourself and get away while you can." He moved closer to her. "You'll be safe with me at the colony. I promise."

"Is that why you came here? You risked your life for me?"

"I found out when your last mission would be. It's the only chance to free you."

She stood slowly. "How could you be so stupid? What if it's a trap to lure you here?"

"It's no trick." She had no reason to trust him but she had to.

"Why not? They knew of our connection. Maybe your sources work for both sides?" Kiren folded her arms.

Breman sighed. She didn't want to believe it. He couldn't blame her. For whatever reason, she'd chosen to stay on the side of New Earth. "If they were working both sides, why not have those sources kill me and not bother with any of this? One of their problems would be gone and you'd be taken care of shortly."

She mulled his logic. "I guess you have a point, but surely an oddity like a shifter wouldn't be killed. It makes no sense. I've done everything they've asked, short of hunting down and killing you. They have no reason to believe I'd betray them ever."

"You're a shifter, Kiren. You're beneath them. You're one of my kind and I'll bet anything they fear you'll try to escape. Your knowledge of their world would be very useful to their enemies. Letting you live is too dangerous now."

"I do know everything I've stolen from Old Earth and what was done with it. I know generally what their defenses are. I never thought about it like that." She opened her mouth but then abruptly closed it again.

"You're a good person, not an underhanded thief. They think like criminals. You can't go back. If you make it out of orbit alive, I'll be amazed."

"You believe they're waiting for me?"

"Your price is higher than mine, believe it or not. Save yourself, Kiren. Save your people. Come home with me and help us strengthen our defenses. I swear you'll be safe."

"How? If assassins are waiting for me in orbit, they'll pick us both off. We're doomed." Kiren ran her fingers through her hair, the anguish of betrayal written on her face.

"Not if we trick them. I have a plan but you have to trust me." His hand gently touched her flushed cheek.

"I trust you. What's the plan?" She took a deep breath.

"We send up your ship and you radio that you've killed me and are returning with my body to claim your prize. The interference on the planet is too strong. They'll never read our life signs. Your ship makes it out to orbit and they seize it. Meanwhile, we take off in my ship and slip away while they're fighting each other to claim yours."

"You think we can outrun them in your ship?" She sounded unconvinced.

"I've got some very skilled and creative engineers. We'll make it if we time it right and plant the right distraction. It's our best shot. You have to trust me or we'll both end up dead." He'd find a way to dodge any menace if only she'd return with him.

"And your colony will accept me? I stayed behind. They may feel I betrayed them."

He moved to her and held her shoulders. "You were caught young. They killed your mother and brainwashed you. You're smart enough to know I'm telling you the truth. I have no reason to lie. There is no benefit to me personally. That's not why I'm doing this. If you don't want me, that's fine. I want you to live whether you're my mate or not. I need you to be safe. You may have some knowledge to help the colony but I don't give a damn about it. You chose the wrong side before but you can fix it now."

Suddenly Kiren began to laugh hysterically at him. "Chose?" She pulled from his grasp. "You really think I *chose*?"

He realized he wasn't the only one with a secret here. "What is it, Kiren? What don't I know?"

"There was no choice." Her eyes held his gaze and he could see tears forming.

He took a step forward. "Tell me."

Kiren stepped back. "I fled to join you but I got caught. I should've left earlier but they were watching me. I wanted to give you the best chance to get away."

"They captured you?"

"Almost. I could've slipped through in cat form with injuries. There was only one problem. They said if I ran and joined you, they'd fire on your ship and destroy you."

She stayed to save them. The reality hit Breman hard. "So you stayed?"

She nodded. "I half expected them to fire anyway, but they didn't. They said if I stayed and got them what they needed off Old Earth, there would be no unprovoked attacks on the colony." Kiren rubbed her eyes. "Why didn't I see this coming? They only needed a shifter in the short term. We couldn't take *everything* of use to New Earth and it was too dangerous to risk a human. I was the perfect pawn."

"They put you in an impossible position. It's not your fault. You had no way out, it's true." If possible he loved her more for her sacrifice. It should've been him to pay a price. It was his plan. She'd suffered in silence and more alone than before. Then the good news hit him. "You wanted to come to the colony?"

"Of course. They tortured us. I wasn't brainwashed. It was about survival and doing what I needed to live. I wanted to be free but I couldn't let them destroy you. Letting thousands die? I'm not an animal so cruel and selfish to do that."

"You're amazing." He moved to her but she backed away fast.

"I'm a fool. I should've seen the signs. Their need for me was limited. They do want me dead."

His hands stroked her head. Kiren felt stupid for her blindness but Breman's touch soothed her. In a matter of moments all that she knew and counted on had flipped upside down.

"What is it?" He pulled her to him.

"The cries from the public for war and unity are growing. The rebel colony trading with others, being treated equal to New Earth, is upsetting the citizens. I'm a reminder of what is in the colony. If I die no one will be upset. If they blame my death on your rebel colony then it'll be an excuse to go to war." She buried her face in his shoulder. There was no way out, except maybe Breman's plan.

"They're orchestrating this. I bet most people don't care. They're not suffering and the shifters are gone except for you. The government is manufacturing this to wipe out the colony. You'll be safe with us." His large hands felt so good on her back.

"We'll never be safe." She relaxed her body into his. In all her life she'd never felt safer despite all the danger swirling around them at that moment. He made her feel so different.

"The colony isn't without protection. We've got allies and treaties in place. New Earth is no more popular than Old Earth was with many of its neighbors. They caused their own problems and have learned nothing. You'll be safer with me than alone."

She couldn't argue that point. "I'll put you in more danger."

"We're in the same danger. Better we face it together and watch out for each other. Trust me, Kiren." He kissed her mouth softly.

Kiren's resistance melted. Being the martyr alone on New Earth would no longer save anyone. She'd sacrificed herself before because it was the right thing. Now she had to dare to take on a new life with Breman—if they lived.

She kissed him back more firmly and let her tongue find his. The groan from the back of his throat encouraged her.

"We need to leave," he said against her mouth.

She glanced at her bracelet and then pushed Breman onto his back on the floor. "We've got time." Kiren wanted one more pleasurable memory to hold on to before they faced death.

She knelt over him in what the scientists would've called a most unnatural way. She pressed her mouth to his balls as her pussy hovered over his mouth. "We'd get in such trouble for this. It makes it feel even better!"

Breman groaned. "I've dreamed of this." His strong hands held her ass and pulled her lower. Teasing her, his tongue slid over her cunt until her hips twisted.

"Please, Breman," she moaned into his thigh.

Finally his tongue spread her pussy lips and dug deep into her folds. The exquisite sensation of his rough tongue fucking her pussy and then pushing her needy clit around teasingly made Kiren vibrate with pleasure.

It felt as if he were consuming her one bite at a time. Kiren rocked for more. As she grew more aroused from Breman playing with her pussy, she turned her attention to his erection.

Not rushing, she traced the rod with her fingers, teasing every ridge. She pressed soft kisses from base to tip and found a bead of pre-cum waiting for her. Licking it eagerly, she sucked the thick head into her mouth and rolled it around her tongue over and over.

His hips lifted, looking for more. Kiren teased him further, sucking his balls instead. If he wanted a battle of wills, he'd get one. As much as she wanted him, she wanted the freedom to play with him and not be forced into anything like in their past time. Of course fulfilling his every fantasy aroused her further. Someday he would do everything he wanted.

Kiren rubbed his cock in her hands as Breman ate her pussy faster. She moaned and licked the head slowly. It was hard to be strong when he nuzzled and sucked her clit so well. Kiren swallowed his hard cock and groaned. She wanted all of him, to be safe with him in bed on the rebel colony forever.

He lifted and Kiren found herself lost in the feel of fucking him with her mouth as he ate her pussy. She ground down on his face for more as she gave in to her love and lust for him. Her hands squeezed his balls and the base of his cock as she sucked as much of him as she could.

When his mouth pulled away from her pussy, Kiren felt the loss but didn't let up. He stiffened beneath her and she was rewarded with his cum.

"Damn, Kiren, you'll be the death of me," he muttered before burying his face once again between her legs.

She sat up, changing the angle and squirming for more. His hands stilled her hips as his teeth tugged at her clit. Kiren rocked and braced her hands on his chest until he ate her to orgasm. Her body tensed and suddenly she was free. She came hard on his face and screamed in wild abandon.

As Kiren recovered, he kept eating her, licking her cunt clean until she eased off him. Slowly she turned to face Breman. The time to take on reality together had arrived. "You really trust me?" she asked.

"With my life and the life of everyone in the colony. Get us out of here so we can go home." He pulled her down for a kiss.

She kissed him deeply for a few moments, taking in the scent and taste of her true mate. Then she eyed the vent. "That's a high jump. I'll make it safer if you give me a boost."

He groaned and slowly made it to his feet. "Be careful." He brushed a hand over her cheek.

"Always." She shifted into a small housecat and waited. He shifted into a dragon and picked her up and set her in the vent with ease. They'd always made a good team.

She worked her way through the maze of vent ducts and finally found sunlight. There was no way to know if it was safe but she jumped out of the building and changed into a cougar on the way down. She landed on all four paws, snarling to ward off danger.

With no sign of danger on the surface, she shifted to human and began playing with the door lock. She was no engineer but she had to free the man she loved or they'd both end up dead.

Chapter Four

Breman paced the vault like a caged animal. Without Kiren there to play with, all he wanted was his freedom. The flashbacks of being caged for years hit him hard. He couldn't hear a thing and time ticked by far too slowly. When he heard beeping in the control panel, relief set in. She'd found a way to open the door. That was the least of their problems, but at least she'd made it out alive.

Hearing a clanging sound, he saw a flat panel wiggled on his side of the wall. Kiren had made progress if nothing else.

Pulling the panel from his end, he reached in and felt fresh air. It was Kiren's touch, however, that soothed him.

"One of these mechanisms must trip the door." Kiren peered at him through the small opening.

Breman reached in and began trying switches and disconnecting power sources. Kiren tried the same tactics on what she could reach.

Finally the door hissed open and Breman slipped through before anything could cause it to close. He grabbed Kiren and hugged her. Freedom was precious to both of them and he hated the reminder that he'd lost it for so many years. However, if he hadn't been caught, he'd never have met her. Their fate was connected. He'd see to it they were never apart again.

"You doubted me?" She nuzzled his neck.

He framed her face with his hands and kissed her firmly. "I love you and you're never leaving my side again."

The shock registered in her eyes. Then a smile slowly spread to her lips. "It's good to know I wasn't just imagining things those years we were caged." Her hands grasped his arms, rubbing them as though trying to remove years of pain and separation.

"So you'll stay with me?" He chuckled softly.

"Only you. Because I love you. Whatever happens we're in this together." She kissed his palm.

Breman wanted her right there. But they were too exposed and needed to act quickly. "Get to your ship and record a message for New Earth's government. Tell them you've killed me and are returning to get your bounty. Tell them you've succeeded in your mission as well. Set the message to broadcast as soon as your ship breaks free of the atmosphere."

"Those mercenaries will hear it and come after the ship." She nodded.

"Odds are they'll blow up each other to get to it. Make sure to say that you'll set my ship to auto-launch toward the colony after yours."

"Think they'll buy that?" she asked.

"I hope so. Odds are they'll be too busy fighting each other to go after a ship they think is empty. There's no value in it."

Kiren went to record the message while Breman prepared his ship. It'd be a tight squeeze but they'd make it. He wrapped a bandage around his arm. It would scar but it'd be a scar worth wearing. His mate, Kiren, would take her place in his life. In time she'd relax and be a leader among the cat shifters of the colony.

He headed over to the Kiren's ship. "Done?" he asked.

"All done and set to launch. Now what do we do about life signs on the off chance are they equipped to run a scan?"

Breman removed her bracelet and attached a small device before setting it on the seat. "One of our engineers rigged this. It'll emit a life sign that'll fool them long enough. Your bracelet is proof if they capture your ship. They'll think you were kidnapped."

"And the vial of gems?" she asked.

"The rebel colony could use all the resources it can get. It's coming home with us. Ready to launch the decoy?"

She nodded unconvincingly.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "You've got to be sure, Kiren. We have to time it so one ship gets through. We launch and make our escape. We can't hesitate."

With a smile, she nodded. "No hesitation. I just like this ship. There is so little in the world that has ever belonged to me." She leaned in and entered the launch code. The door closed and Kiren and Breman headed over to his ship, far enough away for the thrusters to fire.

"You'll have plenty of personal possessions on the rebel colony. I promise, starting with me."

They watched the ship overcome gravity and head into the atmosphere. As it vanished from sight, Breman climbed into the pilot's seat of his ship. There was no second chair so he pulled Kiren into his lap.

She sighed but relaxed against him. After three minutes, they launched. "I'm cloaking our life signs." Breman punched several buttons on the control pad.

As they ascended into the atmosphere, they saw debris falling toward them. The ships were exchanging fire and Kiren's vessel was already severely damaged.

"It worked," she whispered.

"Now as long as we don't get hit," he muttered.

"We can fly around it." She grabbed the steering lever.

"No, we've got to look like we're on autopilot. Let it go."

She released it and let the ship steer itself. They held their breath that the sensors would react quickly enough to avoid damage. He kept one eye on the ships nearby still

fighting for the prize. One seemed to dominate and it towed Kiren's battered vessel behind it.

"Yes!" Breman exhaled finally.

"What?" Kiren leaned over to follow his gaze.

"It doesn't look like they're going to board your ship now. They'll tow what's left of it back to New Earth. If they don't blast it to bits between them fighting over it, that's the next best thing. We'll have time to get back safely now."

Kiren nodded. "I wish they'd blow it up. No evidence means maybe they'll leave us alone."

"There's still one ship left. It's busted up but it isn't retreating yet." He held her tight.

The second ship turned and fired on the one towing Kiren's ship. In a split second, it shot laser blasts into Kiren's vessel and it exploded in a fiery display.

"Yes!" Kiren grinned.

"Now they'll both run home telling the tale and try to get their reward. As far as anyone knows, we're dead."

"And all the evidence New Earth will have is my message." Kiren leaned back and Breman felt her body fully relax for the first time since they'd boarded his ship.

Breman kept a wary eye that neither ship came after them for additional proof but the two were in a race to put in their claim first. Both ships were gone in a shot in the opposite direction. Breman smiled into Kiren's soft hair. "Good riddance."

"You really came all the way, endangered your life and your colony for me?" Kiren turned as best she could to face him.

He curled an arm around her waist and held her. "You're worth it and I had a good plan. The hardest part was timing it to be with you."

"Good instincts too apparently." She kissed his cheek.

His hands warmed her body and teased her breasts. "We've got some time before we hit the new colony airspace."

Kiren rubbed her ass cheeks against his growing cock. "Really? Well, there is one thing I'm certain they never let us do in the lab because you tried it once and got punished rather severely for it." Her tight asshole rubbed against the length of his cock.

"You're sure?" he asked. It was a fantasy of his and yet he didn't want to push her too far. They had all the time in the world now.

"I'm sure. I wanted to try it but they never let us have any fun. Those sick men enjoyed denying us whatever we wanted. I'll never go without my wildest desires again." She moved up and back, sliding his cock into her wet pussy and fucking him until he was good and slick.

"You were definitely meant for me." He held her steady.

His finger rubbed her rear and Kiren clenched out of instinct.

"Relax," he whispered.

Nodding, she took control of her body and eased those muscles. Being caged for so long, she'd learned self-control at exceptional levels and now it paid off. But that was only one little finger, not his huge cock.

Breman advanced his finger as she relaxed and triggered nerve endings she'd never felt before, not like this.

She tightened her muscles around him to test the sensation and her hips flexed.

"Good?" he asked.

Kiren reached for any part of him she could reach. "More," she replied.

Nipping at her ear, Breman removed the one finger and Kiren groaned softly. Then he advanced two fingers.

She caught herself and admitted him without clenching this time. Focused on the tender flesh and friction, she trembled until he was all the way in.

"Better?"

She laughed shakily. "Yes."

Then he parted those two fingers so deep in her, Kiren rocked forward with a moan. His strong arm held her stable as he brought the digits together and spread them a few more times.

"You're playing with me," she accused.

"I'm preparing you." He quickly removed the two and added a third.

Gasping, she pushed back for more even as the fuller feeling caught her off guard. Those three fingers never rested, pumping in and out of her and then curling and spreading while inside. She squeezed to hold on to them and he suddenly stopped.

"Please, Breman."

"Now you can handle the real thing."

He kissed the back of her neck and shifted her so she was in line with his cock. The slick head rubbed and teased her a few times.

She squirmed in frustration. Now ready, Kiren let him guide her hips down slowly. She'd never tried it before but she wanted Breman in her body in every way possible. Especially ways their cruel former captives had forbidden. A rebel to her core, Kiren no longer had to hide.

His cock stretched her back entrance while his hands supported her. The larger invasion rang completely new to her body and she tensed. The tight space and new sexual exploration made her doubt she could pull it off to Breman's pleasure. His fingers were nothing compared to this.

"Relax, I know it's different. There's no rush," he whispered.

She nodded and took control over her body, relaxing each muscle that resisted just as she had on his fingers. Inch by perfect inch, he filled her ass and then held her. When

she squirmed for more, he eased her down farther and then fucked up slightly so she got the full sensation.

"It's so good." She arched back against him.

"You're only halfway. Keep relaxing or you'll only get a piece of me." Breman lifted her and eased her back down.

"I want it all." She pressed down for more and groaned as he thrust up. The feeling of tightness was intense but not painful. Kiren wiggled her hips wantonly for more. "Yes."

"You're sure you want it all?" he asked.

Kiren adjusted her position until her legs were against the seat on either side of Breman. She had the advantageous leverage. She eased herself down the shaft and up. "All of it. Can *you* handle it?" She grinned at him over her shoulder.

His hand moved up to stroke her breasts as she took control of the fucking. Her hands braced on the armrests on either side of him and held on for balance as she lifted and lowered onto his thick cock. Kiren tried to take a little more each time. Finally she felt his flesh pressed to her rear.

"You're extraordinary." He lifted his hips and Kiren moaned.

She rocked back onto him. The new sensation and stretching kept her on the edge of coming. Breman's hand slid down to her pussy and fingered her clit. That was the final push. Kiren's hips took over. She fucked him and rubbed against Breman's fingers. The orgasm spiraled through her entire body and she felt like she was floating in zero gravity. Her body went limp against Breman's as he came deep inside her.

"Feel better?" he asked.

She nodded. "We're free." Kiren leaned forward to look out the window.

"They're not following us. The scanners would alert us." He rubbed her shoulders.

"How much longer?"

"Other side." He pointed out the window.

Kiren looked at the small planet. "It's safe?"

"Very safe. We're about to land." Breman hit a few buttons. "I've got clothes for us in the hangar. You'll never be naked again, except in our private home."

Kiren eased off Breman and watched their descent. "How many people?"

"About fifteen thousand now. Many escaped from New Earth to come here after the initial move."

The ship landed in a large hangar that closed over them. Out of sight, Kiren breathed easier. When Breman opened the hatch, she hesitated. New planet, new life and no idea what would happen. Except that she'd be with Breman. It was more than she'd ever dreamed.

Slowly she exited the small craft and took the clothes he offered her. She'd need a new wardrobe and a place to live. What few possessions she had been permitted on New Earth were long gone.

"What do I do now?" She tugged the simple dress over her head.

"Whatever you want. You're free. I'll take you home with me for tonight. We can get cleaned up, have dinner and sleep. Tomorrow I'll show you the colony and whatever you want. Sound good?" Breman slipped into his clothes.

Kiren nodded. "It's weird seeing you in clothes."

"Same here but now it's your choice when, where and with whom you're naked." He led the way to a transport vehicle and helped her in.

She rode along, looking at the surrounding city full of people, human and shifter. All clothed. All equal.

"They'll hate me," she said.

"What? No they won't. Once they know the sacrifice you made for them, you'll be a hero." He reached over and squeezed her hand.

"Why should they believe me? They could think it was a lie and I helped the New Earth government to keep down the shifters and hurt the colony." Kiren found it hard to believe she was safe and free. But people walking by on the streets looked at her and took no notice at all.

"Why would you side with the government? After what they did to you, it makes no sense. The only logical conclusion is that you were forced to stay. I'm just glad they weren't torturing you all that time."

The transport halted and they exited in front of a small cozy house. Breman opened the front door and let her go in first. He closed the door behind them and Kiren walked around. Comfortable, if a bit sparse, furniture decorated the house. Definitely needed a woman's touch.

Peeking into the bedroom, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. The clothing shocked her. It was real.

"So I could have a home? A job?" It seemed too simple here.

"You have a pouch full of gems. I'd say you're entitled to set yourself up from that take. You've got piloting experience and covert operation skills. Our governing body can use your intelligence and brain. Of course, I'd love for you stay with me but if you want a place of your own... The first few nights I'd say stay here, those were hard when we first escaped. Being alone felt foreign to the shifters."

He wanted her here. "I like it here. I can't imagine not having you around." She turned and looked at Breman. She never wanted to leave. "Tomorrow I'm going to get a wardrobe while we're out. Every color possible!"

"You'll look gorgeous in anything."

Her fingers grazed his chin and up his cheek. "You're so handsome. I never realized how wonderful you look."

"Always looking at my naked body." He winked at her. "Seeing you in clothes is even sexier than without."

"I love you. Thank you for coming for me." She pressed their clothed bodies together. The feel of fabric rubbing between them was new and erotic. The material teased her nipples and clung to her rear.

His hands caressed her back. "I love you too. I couldn't give up. Now you're the only one who will see me naked."

"Sounds good to me. I don't want anyone else to see me like that." This was it. Home, life and safety. Freedom.

"Are you hungry? Want to shower? Take a nap?" He suddenly offered her everything and anything. They were simple things but after being a captive she'd never take them for granted.

She shook her head. "Right now I only want one more thing that we weren't allowed to do." Wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed him slowly and softly. Kiren let the warmth and exploration she'd longed for fill then. No rushing, they had all the time in the world.

THE JOHNSON OBSESSION

Lyla Sinclair

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Chapter One

The night it happened I'd been keeping vigil on the balcony of my second-floor apartment. It was Friday, August 26th. The date is burned into my brain because it appears just below the time on my alarm clock next to my bed, and I spent a lot of time facing it that night while he—

Well, I'm getting ahead of myself. Back to the vigils. As ridiculous as it felt sometimes, this had become my daily after-work ritual. I'd come home from my stupid, boring bookkeeping job, open a bottle of wine and sit in the lounge chair with my sketch pad—yes, this boring bookkeeper was a closet artist.

If anyone noticed me on the balcony, I'm sure they thought I was just relaxing after a day's work, sketching the lovely flowers that grew around the swimming pool.

But if so, they couldn't have been more wrong. For over six months, there'd been only one subject appearing in my drawings over and over again.

On *every* page. Of *every* pad.

His name was Duke Johnson, if you can believe that. I knew because, one time, our sorry excuse for a mail carrier had delivered Duke's mail to me by mistake. During the months I'd been sketching him, I'd given him all kinds of names—Brad, Derrick, Stud Muffin—but I must admit the Duke thing kind of surprised me. Who names their kid Duke? I guess considering we were in California, he was just lucky it wasn't spelled DuQue. Anything goes in Lala Land.

Anyway, the mail mix-ups had been happening constantly for about two months—since the new mail carrier took over—and it was pretty annoying most of the time. Until the one day I started to deliver some misdirected mail to another tenant and saw the back of that gorgeous tight ass—the one I'd recognize anywhere since I'd drawn it so many times—entering the door I was headed toward. I stopped, completely awed when I realized he looked even better at eye level than he did from up on my balcony. He didn't see me. He walked inside and shut the door.

I looked down at the mail again and realized I finally had an actual name to put to all those pages in my sketchbooks. Duke lying in a lounge chair by the pool in his mirrored sunglasses. Duke swimming, the muscles in his arms bulging with each stroke. Duke emerging from the pool, droplets of water clinging to his skin, running down his chest and over his abs—his drop-dead beautiful killer abs.

Gradually, during those six months' worth of sketches, my imagination had taken over and I'd started taking liberties with my drawings. Duke began doing all kinds of things I hadn't seen him do in real life. I drew him in the positions and locations where he'd appeared in my fantasies.

So there I was with his mail in my hot, sweaty little hand. This was my chance to finally meet him in person. I could examine all those virile muscles on his six-foot-tall body up close. Better yet, when he'd entered his apartment he was still in his swimming shorts and shirtless, the way he was so many afternoons by the pool.

But when I got to his door I started thinking how he was *way* out of my league. I was certain he'd been one of the cool kids back in school, while I was a wallflower—more *wall* than *flower*—with mousy brown hair, mud-brown eyes and a violin. I knew on some level that I'd outgrown that awkwardness and wasn't so bad now, yet I never could *feel* it. I was so used to going unnoticed that I couldn't bear to put on clothes that made anyone take notice of me. I looked down at the gray business suit I was wearing and thought about the black claw holding up my boring hair and...

I completely lost my nerve, like I always did with men. I dropped the mail on the floor in front of his door and hurried off to drown my cowardice in a tub of chocolate-chip cookie dough ice cream. Then, I mentally kicked myself until my brain was black and blue.

All I'd learned from the experience was that, first, I was even more of a wuss than I'd ever imagined, and second, Duke Johnson was living in the apartment directly below mine.

This only caused me to become more obsessed with him. I was self-conscious of every sound I made, embarrassed to blow my nose or flush my toilet. I wondered every night if I was sleeping directly over him. Once, when I thought I heard a woman's laughter, I even tried listening through the floor with a drinking glass to my ear. Does that ever actually work for anyone?

In the afternoons, my routine never altered. Every day, I waited for him to appear by the pool. On sunny days, he'd show up right on cue, at 6:05. I'm not sure if knowing the exact time makes me a good candidate for a job as a private investigator or a certifiable stalker, but I knew.

I also knew it wasn't nice to spy on someone, but how could my eyes resist that hard chest? Those iron thighs? And damn, when his suit got wet, it clung to his tight ass in a way that made me want to touch myself, right there on the balcony.

But I didn't, of course. I was always willing to wait for hours, until he finished swimming and lying by the pool, drinking his Corona or his giant bottle of water, depending on how hot it was that day. Then I'd go inside, take off my sweaty clothes and get into the shower, thinking of his mouth on my breasts and his wet shorts on my bedroom floor.

I'd done this same thing, day after day, for months. The days he didn't show were miserable. I watched the weather report avidly, cursing any chance of rain, because on those nights, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get off when I touched myself.

This was my life. I'd accepted it. And I'd decided to put the thought of actually meeting Duke Johnson out of my head. He was *too* everything for me anyway. Too

confident, too masculine, too California sun-blond, too hot. It was my destiny to fantasize about him from afar.

Friday, August 26th looked like it was shaping up to be one of those zero-orgasm nights. I'd waited for two hours to see him, but he never showed himself. Jealous, I was sure he had a date and she was probably as hot as he was.

I was in a terrible mood when I went inside and showered. I got out, put on a flimsy, old, sheer nightgown and dried my hair, then took my barely touched wineglass to my bed, feeling pitiful. Another sip confirmed that it still tasted sour to me, but I suspected it was all his fault for forsaking me.

I was lying in bed, watching some reality show at 9:08, when my doorbell rang. I automatically grabbed the only robe I had handy—it was thin and wispy but I didn't plan on opening the door anyway—and ran to the peephole.

And I thought I was hallucinating.

It was him—Duke Johnson—in the flesh, but instead of the usual swim trunks, he wore a snowy-white t-shirt that showed off his tan beautifully and a pair of distressed jeans. I turned and squeezed my back against the door. My thoughts were swirling crazily in my head.

What should I do? Had he finally come for me? To fulfill all my fantasies? No, that didn't make sense. He didn't even know I existed and, thank goodness, he couldn't possibly know my fantasies.

I took another peek to confirm what I thought I'd seen. His cobalt eyes bored right into mine through the peephole. He looked every bit as enticing fully dressed as he had half naked, and if I were a guy I would have had a major erection pop up at that moment—yes, I was sure men also got erections looking at Duke Johnson.

He knocked once more and that's when I noticed what was in his hand. I sighed, both relieved and disappointed. He was just there to give me some misdirected mail. Only *he* had the decency to knock instead of throwing it on the floor like a big fat coward.

I quickly opened the door and there he was, in the flesh. God, I'd never been so close to him before. I had to look up to meet his gaze. "Hi," I said. My voice shook. He was even hotter up close.

"Yeah...hi," he replied.

What was that look? Like he knew something I didn't know.

"I'm your neighbor, Duke Johnson—"

"I know...I mean from getting your mail by mistake."

"Well, it's happened again," he said. "But vice versa." His eyes lingered on my breasts and I remembered my robe was nearly see-through.

I grabbed the mail from him without looking at it and held it in front of my chest. Damn, I wished I'd gotten that boob job. We were in L.A., for God's sake! What B-cup in L.A. doesn't get herself bumped up a notch or two?

And he didn't have any business staring like he was. Never mind the fact that I'd been secretly ogling him for months. We were strangers everywhere but in my mind, and standing there a couple of feet away from him made me suddenly aware of that fact. Over the past few months, I'd turned him into the perfect man—the perfect lover for me—and for all I knew, I shouldn't have even opened the door for him. He could be an axe murderer.

My eyes dropped to his hands. Thank goodness. No axe. They were big, strong, manly hands though. I let my mind flash to one of my fantasies where those hands were clutching my ass, pulling my hips into him...but then I realized that I didn't even know what this guy did for a living, much less anything else about him.

"Well, thanks for dropping this by," I said, as I started to close the door.

His palm made a loud thump as it hit the middle of my door, holding it open. "I was hoping for a little more than a 'thank you'," he said.

I stood, staring at him, unsure of how to proceed. I'd never let a man into my apartment—other than my one ex-boyfriend Ned, who didn't really count as a man—mainly because my mother had convinced me when I was growing up that there was a criminal assigned to me. Well, she didn't say it that way, exactly, but she always made me feel like the minute I was alone—especially *living* alone—said criminal would try to get into my apartment, murder me, chop me into little pieces and stuff me into the luggage she got me for Christmas. She actually said that part to me after a couple of eggnogs on Christmas night. So, I couldn't let him inside even if I wanted to, although he *had* been nice enough not to just trash my mail.

"Well, um...I..." I stammered, trying to come up with an excuse not to invite him in, but not really wanting one. "Do you want to come in for a glass of wine?" My voice sounded bizarrely high pitched. I needed to get control of myself.

"Sure," he said. He stood there for a moment. Finally he raised his eyebrows questioningly. I realized I hadn't stepped back to let him in. My feet felt like concrete.

I managed to pull the door open and move out of the way. He came in and closed it behind him. As he passed by me, I inhaled the scent of freshly washed hunk and realized it had been a long, long time.

I tossed the mail aside and went to the cabinet to get two wineglasses. When I grabbed them both with the fingers of one hand, the bottoms clinked together several times. I quickly moved one to the other hand, wondering how I was going to pour with all this nervous shaking. Did Duke really want to be here with me? And why the hell hadn't I thrown this crummy old nightgown and robe out years ago?

"Why don't I do that?" Duke asked as he took the glasses from me. His skin brushed over my fingers all too briefly when he did. I felt like I was blushing from fingertips to cheeks. The temperature in the room suddenly shot up about a jillion degrees. I got the wine from the refrigerator, and he poured it into a glass and pushed it toward me.

"What about you?" I asked.

"I don't drink wine," he replied.

"Oh." I glanced back at my refrigerator. "I don't have any Corona...um..."

"Corona?"

I realized I'd screwed up. "Beer. I don't have any beer...if that's what you drink."

"You said 'Corona'."

"Did I?" Attempting to look nonchalant, I breezed out of my kitchen and sat down on the couch. He followed me, but remained standing.

"Interesting that you chose Corona...like you knew it was my brand." He seemed to be trying to control a smirk or a smile or something.

I took two big gulps of my wine. "You just look like a Corona kind of guy," I said. Although I'd achieved the breezy tone I was going for, I could still see the wine shaking in my glass as I held it.

People dreamed about movie stars all the time, but they never actually came strolling into their apartments. For months, Duke had been the star of every thought, dream and porno fantasy I'd had. What the hell was I supposed to do now?

"How come I never see you out at the pool?" he asked.

I nearly choked on my third gulp. "The pool?" I glanced toward my balcony *faux-casually*, as if I'd forgotten we had a pool. "Oh, it's just really public, right in the middle of a three-story complex and...I'm not really comfortable..."

"Yeah, I guess any weirdo could be out on his balcony...*watching* you. You never know what kind of stalker perv could be *watching* you nowadays. Women have to be careful about that, I guess. I'm lucky I'm a guy. Don't really have to worry about the *watching*."

Was it my imagination that the word "watching" seemed to be jumping out of his sentences at me? I thought about all the times I'd *watched* him. And all the extremely perverted thoughts I'd had afterward as I ran my hands over my body, always pretending it was him. If he only knew what a freak I was in my own mind, he'd probably have run away screaming already.

My eyes met his again. He was way too hot for me. But I wanted him. Maybe I needed to leave the room for a few seconds and pull myself together.

I glanced down at my ratty old gown. When I looked up, I realized he was staring at my nipples. I knew they'd hardened because I could feel them straining at the fabric. "Um, I'm not really decent," I said. "Maybe I should go put something else on." I stood and started toward him, since he was between me and the bedroom.

Duke reached down and grabbed the bottom of his shirt, pulling it effortlessly over his head. "There. Now we're even," he said. "I can see your nipples. You can see mine."

I stopped dead in my tracks. I *could* see his nipples because they were right at eye level for me. I was also just a few inches away from his broad shoulders and I could count the muscles in his six-pack. It felt like my insides were breaking out in a sweat. My heart raced like I was running a marathon.

Duke Johnson just took off his shirt in my apartment. That's gotta mean he wants me...right?

I did a quick inventory.

Underarms and legs shaved? Check.

Recently showered? Check.

Bikini wax? Thank God for those nice ladies at the salon who always talk me into buying more services than I actually need! Check!

Duke wanted me. It wouldn't be the extreme freaky fantasy I'd always dreamed of, but it would still be Duke, all over me.

I realized I was just standing there, staring. "Is it hot in here to you?" was all I could think to say.

"Yeah, let's go out on the balcony," Duke said. "It's dark. No one can see you."

I followed him out. The cool breeze on my overheated skin was a relief after the inferno my living room had become in Duke's presence.

Even though there were lights around the complex, my balcony was well covered by the shadows from the third floor and the plants I had hanging along the sides. The darkness relaxed me a bit.

Duke stood at the rail. "Wow. Great view of the pool," he said. He had that tone in his voice again, like when he'd been talking about people "watching".

"Yes," I said calmly. "And the flowers all around...I really like the flowers."

"The flowers?" Duke chuckled and turned toward me. He grabbed the back of my head with one hand and his mouth closed in on mine. He began kissing me harder than I'd ever been kissed before. His fingers wound into the hair at my scalp as he pushed his tongue in as far as it would go. I felt a liquid release in my crotch. He smelled so good and tasted so good, I thrust my tongue into his mouth with equal enthusiasm. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I squeezed my body against his. I had the urge to throw my legs around his waist.

His lips left mine suddenly. He stepped behind me and put his arms around me as I gazed toward his unoccupied lounge out by the pool. His chest immediately warmed my back. "I want you, Vivian," he rasped into my ear. "I want your body to belong to me for the night. Anything I say."

I gasped. The thought of belonging to Duke, even for one night, was so unbelievably hot, I thought I would pass out. My body tightened in anticipation and I fought the urge to grind my ass into his crotch.

For a brief second, all my fears about my body, my bedroom shyness and my repressed upbringing flashed through my mind, but I forced them out because I was ready—right there, right then—to finally be fucked by Duke Johnson.

"Vivian?" he murmured. His hot breath on my ear sent a pleasure shiver through my body.

"Yes...okay," I whispered.

He ushered me back through the door, but left it open so the breeze could pass through.

I was surprised when, just as we got inside, he pulled both of my wrists behind me and held them with one hand. I glanced back to see him reach into his back pocket and pull out something shiny. Almost instantly, I felt cold metal encircle my wrists.

"What are you doing?" I asked, suddenly nervous again.

"Be patient. You'll find out."

I strained at the handcuffs. True, in my fantasies this was really hot, but now, in real life, I wasn't so sure. "What do you want from me?" I asked. I was torn between the fear of being completely at his mercy and the promise of a much wilder night than I'd expected.

"It's not what I want from you," he said. "It's what you want from me...I knew you were watching me all these months. I never understood why you wouldn't come around and say 'hi', but now I know just what you want from me."

My mind raced. He knew I'd been watching? And now? What was he talking about? We'd never even spoken before this. Was he crazy?

"Where's your bedroom?" he asked. My eyes darted in the right direction and he led me there. When we stepped through the doorway, he glanced around then grabbed a knitted scarf from the hook in my open closet. "This will do just fine," he said.

I looked over at my rumpled bed with its silly pink bedspread. It seemed so frivolous under the circumstances. "Listen, I..."

Before I could finish, he wrapped the scarf around my eyes and tied it tightly behind my head. I was suddenly aware of the chilly breeze raising goose bumps on my arms, as his hot breath heated the back of my neck. I was trembling, but unsure if it was from fear or arousal.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll take good care of you. I know what you want. I know why you haven't had any more boyfriends around here, and I know that little mealworm you used to date couldn't have delivered the goods to your satisfaction...but I can." He ran his hands over my goose-bumped arms then pulled the first of three strings that was holding my robe together. I felt it release and the thin fabric sag, nearly exposing my nipples. "This is what you always wanted. Isn't it, Vivian?"

I took in a shaky breath. Why wasn't I saying "no"? *Because he might stop?*

"I don't know what you're talking about," I tried to argue. But I wondered how it was that he seemed to know about me and my fantasies. The handcuffs, the blindfold...

"Did you drop the sketchbook down to me on purpose?" he asked.

That's where it had gone! I'd been looking for it for days. Since I had a dozen like it under my bed—all filled with pictures of him—I racked my brain trying to remember what I'd drawn him doing in that particular sketchbook. It was brand new. It couldn't have had that much in it, could it?

I felt movement at my shoulders. My robe fell back and I knew all that separated us was the sheer nightie.

"Your nipples are already hard for me."

Although I still couldn't see, I was sure his hand was hovering just above one breast. When I took in a shuddery breath, my barely covered nipple came into contact with his skin. Another rush of liquid flooded from my pussy. My panties felt damp. I "accidentally" breathed in deeply again so my breast could touch him once more. I guess I may have leaned forward a little too.

"Thank you, Vivian. All I needed was your permission." He pulled me up onto my tiptoes until I strained to retain contact with the floor. The thin straps on my nightgown popped and it dropped to my feet. I felt a hot, wet mouth on my breast and the most extreme tingle on my clit. He licked and sucked on one nipple and then the other.

I think I moaned. I didn't mean to. I shouldn't have.

He let go of my arms. "On your knees," he commanded. I complied without a word of objection. "Your turn."

I heard the clink of his belt buckle and a zipper going down, followed by the sound of rustling fabric, and I struggled to open my eyes, but my blindfold was tied too well. I was completely at his mercy. The thought sent a shiver down my spine, but I was sure now it was one of anticipation. I wondered how a girl with my upbringing could be so perverted.

"Suck my cock, Vivian." His voice was low but it was definitely a command.

I wanted him to unlock the handcuffs. I wanted him to take off the scarf. No, I wanted to suck his cock handcuffed and blindfolded. But I couldn't admit that.

"I can't...I can't use my hands." Kind of a lame excuse, but I didn't want any man to know that this kind of treatment was what I'd secretly dreamed of.

"You don't need your hands. Find it with your mouth."

I hadn't been comfortable enough with a man to request anything like this—in real life—ever. I'd always wished for someone who would just take control and make it happen since I was way too repressed to even hint at anything kinky. In fact, I'd barely gotten through the missionary sex with Ned without feeling guilty. Not to mention that I'd never sucked a cock in my life. What if I wasn't good at it?

"Look!" I said, suddenly overcome by the idea that I was way out of my sexual league. "You can't just come into my house and—" Before I could finish, Duke lifted me up by my arms, turned me around and pushed me, facedown, onto the bed. My feet were still on the floor, my ass jutting up behind me.

Chapter Two

I felt three swift smacks to my bottom. I gasped at the stinging sensations.

"I can do whatever I want, Vivian. You're completely mine for the night, remember? Now, are you ready to be a good girl?"

"I'm not sucking your cock. Not like this. You can't force me to —"

Three more smacks followed. They stung so badly, tears popped into my eyes...and my clit tingled. How did he know what to do? It was like he'd read my diary — except I didn't keep a diary.

"If you want to be a bad girl, I can punish you all night," he said.

It was humiliating, yet I could feel my own juices trickling into the crotch of my panties. I wished I could wipe them away somehow. I still didn't want him to know how much his perverted little scene had turned me on.

"Are you ready to be a good girl and suck my cock?"

"Yes," I whispered, telling myself it was only because I didn't want to get spanked again.

"Make that 'Yes, Sir', and tell me what you're going to do."

"Yes, Sir. I'll suck your cock."

He pulled me from the bed and repositioned me on my knees. "Go ahead," he said. He didn't even have the decency to hold it out for me. I had to root around for it with my face, first encountering a hairy set of balls that I had the ridiculous urge to lick. But I didn't because I couldn't let him know what I was really like. That I'd secretly yearned for —

My lips brushed his cock and I felt it jump. It gave me some satisfaction to know how badly he wanted this from me.

"Lick it, like a Popsicle," he said.

I ran my tongue from the base, straining my neck to get to the top. He stepped away for a moment and came back with what I soon realized were my couch cushions. He had me kneel on them so I was high enough to do the rest of the job he'd given me.

My mouth found his cock again and when I circled my tongue around the tip, he groaned. Just as I covered the top of his cock with my mouth, he tangled his fingers into my hair and pulled my head down, so I took the whole thing in at once. *What a turn-on.*

I wished my hands were cuffed in front, so I could touch myself while I sucked on him. But I was a rookie at this cock-sucking stuff and when I nearly gagged as it touched the back of my throat, I pulled away automatically. He gave me only a second to recover then thrust his hips forward, in complete control over the action, pushing

himself deep into my mouth again. But instead of struggling, I found myself swirling my tongue around him and sucking on him with all my might. As I did, my pussy ached and my nipples burned to be touched.

"You give good head, Vivian. You dress like some uptight little prude, but you suck cock like a whore."

I do? He said it like it was a compliment and it actually made me feel good. The prude thing didn't bother me since it was a known fact. Wait, how did he know how I usually dressed?

He pulled my head back until his cock popped out of my mouth. "You've been a very good girl, Vivian," he said. I wished I could see his face. He sounded genuinely proud of me. For a moment, I didn't feel so bad about my dirty little fantasies.

I felt him bend over me and unlock the handcuffs. It was good to relax my shoulders, but he immediately pulled my hands around front and locked my wrists together again.

"Stay down on the cushions but spread your knees apart."

I did as I was told.

He pulled my head forward until I could feel coarse hairs tickling at my chin. "Suck my balls, Vivian."

I tongued one fuzzy, soft testicle, then the other as he moaned. Then I sucked them into my mouth one by one. He grabbed me by the chin. "That's too good. I don't want to come yet. I have big plans for you," he said. "Put my cock in your mouth again."

I could taste the pre-come on his cock and it was so yummy, I couldn't help but try to please him by opening up as much as possible and deep throating him. "Mmmm...good girl...I want you to put your fingers between your legs and touch your pussy while you suck me."

Was he reading my mind? I reached down and touched my panties. They were wet like I'd gone swimming in them. "Pull your panties down to your knees and touch yourself," he said. "No, don't stop sucking me – multitask."

I struggled to keep my face high enough to suck his cock as I worked my underwear down my thighs, while still wearing handcuffs. The second my panties were down, my hand was at my crotch. He began thrusting again. My mouth bobbed harder and faster on his cock, while I swirled my finger around on my clit, whimpering with pleasure. When he tightened his fist in my hair and pulled, it was all I could take. My pussy exploded and I shuddered and ground myself into my hand.

When I stilled, he pulled his cock from my mouth. "Stay there," he said. I heard his footsteps leave the room then the squeak of one of my wooden dining chairs. "Sit here," he said as he returned and put me in the chair. "We'll talk."

Talk? Didn't we already do that?

"You're going to answer my questions. If you answer truthfully, you'll have some options offered to you."

"And if I lie?"

"Are you planning to lie before you even hear the questions? Liars get what's coming to them, Vivian."

I got nervous again. I didn't know what I was supposed to say to that.

"Tell me about how you watch me from your balcony."

"I don't watch you. I just like to sit out there after work," I answered defensively. "I need to unwind after being at the office all day...that's why I got an apartment with a balcony," I babbled on. "I like to have a glass of wine and the flowers are really nice and I sketch—" I remembered he'd seen what I'd been sketching and it wasn't flowers.

"Already lying? That was the easy question, Vivian."

"I just like to relax with a glass of wine. If you happen to be there—"

"Tell me about your sexual fantasies, Vivian. What kinds of things do men do to you in them?"

I felt panicky. I didn't want him to know the filthy things that went through my mind. I'd been a straight-A student in school, on the dean's list in college and a model employee. If anyone knew—

"Normal things," I lied. "Just the normal things. I'm completely normal."

He laughed. "Well, normal is relative when it comes to sex, Vivian. Were you raised very religiously?"

"Yes."

"Maybe that explains it then."

"Explains what?"

"Why you're such a freak."

"A freak?" I couldn't stand to hear him say it out loud, as much as I'd thought it in my own head. "You don't know me! You came in here and forced me to—"

He chuckled. "There's nothing wrong with being a freak in the bedroom. And what did I really force you to do, sweet Vivian? Did I force you to open the door to me in a see-through robe? I know you have a peephole."

"I...um...forgot what I was wearing." That was actually true, although it was the excitement of seeing him at the door that made me forget in the first place.

"Did I force you to tongue me so enthusiastically?"

"Yes...well...not exactly."

"Did you agree to give me your body for the night?"

"Well...I...um..."

"Did I force you to come?"

"I didn't want this!" That argument was getting harder and harder to make. I knew I hadn't actually said "no" or "stop" since he'd brought me in the bedroom—because he was giving me exactly what I'd always wanted.

But fantasies weren't the same as doing something in real life. I never would have asked someone to do this to me. Just telling a man my fantasies would have been too humiliating. I couldn't stand the thought of anyone believing I was a sexual deviant. Not even this Duke Johnson weirdo.

"You made me do this," I said. "It's disgusting! And degrading!"

He laughed loudly. "We've barely hit the tip of the iceberg, Vivian. I have way more disgusting and degrading stuff in mind for you and I know you want it."

"How would you know?" Again, I realized I could have just said, "No, I don't want it." But it would have been a lie and, besides, he had me at "disgusting".

"Oh, I know," he answered. "I'll be back in a minute with proof. Don't move."

I sat there in the chair he'd ordered me into, trying to decide what to do next. Now that he was gone and I was handcuffed in the front, I could remove my blindfold if I wanted. I could run to the door and lock it. I didn't have to do any more than I'd already done with this pervert—I knew he was a pervert because he was enjoying the same perverted scene I'd always dreamed of.

But I didn't want this to end. I'd had an immensely better orgasm with his cock in my mouth than I'd ever had on my own, but my fantasy still wasn't complete. I wanted the rest of it. What if he really did know what to do? What if he was somehow my perfect lover? What if he came back and "forced" me to do all the things I'd been too embarrassed and guilty to ask for all this time?

Besides, I was really curious about this "proof" he had about me. I certainly didn't want that out in circulation, whatever it was. I needed to get it back.

I was sure the only thing it could be was my sketchbook, but it's not like it was a video. Any drawings in there couldn't be enough to explain his nearly psychic knowledge of my sexual preferences. How did he know I wanted to be handcuffed? How did he know I wanted a man to make me get on my knees and suck his cock and his balls while I touched my clit? How did he know about the spanking thing? I knew I hadn't drawn that in any of my sketches.

I heard the front door open and tensed. With nerves on red alert, I waited for him to come into my bedroom. My ears were perked up like a German Shepherd Dog's, listening for the sound of his footsteps, but I didn't hear anything.

Suddenly, I felt his breath on my ear. "Miss me, Miss Vivian?" I shivered with the anticipation of pleasures yet to come.

Duke dropped something into my lap. I felt around to make sure it was my sketchpad, and it was, but I still wasn't sure what I'd drawn in this particular one. Then he tossed some other items on top of it.

I ran my hands over them, wishing I wasn't still blindfolded. *My mail*. Some bills and what felt like a thick manila envelope.

Oh, no... was this what I thought it was? Would he have peeked inside? Before I could get it open, it was snatched away from me. I didn't know what to say. The humiliation was so intense, I wanted to climb into my bed and hide.

"Guess you didn't want anyone to know," he said. "I see how you dress for work every day, all prim and proper. Even when you were staring at me from your balcony, I never would have guessed the kind of stuff that might be going through that innocent-looking little head of yours."

"I'm sure whatever you think you saw was probably some sort of mail mix-up." My face felt hot with embarrassment and I was sure it had turned bright pink. "Those things happen all the time around here lately."

"I know they do. I got your little envelope last week too."

Oh shit.

"Stand up, Vivian."

I stood. I could still feel my panties around my ankles. I wanted him to go away and leave me to my own mortification, yet the thought of him knowing about me and coming here to realize my fantasies had me literally dripping wet.

"Step out of your panties and lie on the bed," he said.

Once I was on my back, he lifted my cuffed hands up over my head and held them there by pressing down on the chain in the middle. I felt his free hand move slowly on my neck, trailing down my breastbone to my navel, where it rested a moment, hot and heavy. I tried to keep my hips from thrusting up to him. I was sure he felt my abs tighten with the strain of it.

His hand roamed back up to my breast. He fondled it, then squeezed just before I felt his mouth come down over the nipple. He sucked. Then he sucked harder. Then he sucked so hard my clit contracted and I almost came. Then he bit me.

Ouch! But when the sound came out of my mouth it was more like a groan of startled pleasure. Duke gave my other breast the same treatment and my clit responded in kind, like he was commanding it remotely.

His hand began moving downward again, grazing my ribs, my abdomen...

Until I felt one finger tickle just inside my pussy lips. I writhed around, thinking I could come with just one more touch, but he seemed to sense it and moved it away, making circles on my thighs with his wet finger.

"Please," I said. He ignored me, running his finger all the way down my calf, farther and farther away from the place that yearned for it the most. Then he ever-so-slowly trailed that finger back up the same path. I thought he'd never get there, but finally, mercifully, I felt it make the lightest contact with my pussy lips. I spread my legs wide and thrust my hips upward. He touched his finger just inside me and then began running the damp digit down my other thigh.

This was going to kill me.

"Please! I can't stand it anymore!" I pleaded. But he continued his leisurely teasing until his finger made it to my ankle then he gradually started up again.

I was bucking my hips like a wild horse and struggling to get my hands free from his hold above my head. If he wouldn't touch me like I needed, I had to touch myself. But he was so much stronger than I was.

I suddenly felt his finger sink into my pussy. I groaned loudly and tried again to break free of his hold, needing my hands to pleasure myself as I was used to doing, but he held tight, sliding his finger in and out of me slowly, torturously.

"Please," I begged. "I need more."

"More? What do you need more of, Vivian?" He slid his finger out and rested it lightly on my clit, waiting.

"I need you...inside me," I gritted out. Why did he make me say it? The man was just supposed to take me. Begging him wasn't part of my fantasy. I guess it was part of his though.

"Oh, you think I'm just going to fuck you and that will be it?" he asked. "You don't know me at all, Vivian." He laughed at his own joke. "And that's not really what you want anyway...but I think you do want *this*."

I screamed as he bit down hard again on my nipple. I arched my pelvis into his hand at the same time. I felt like I was dying a long, hot death, until he bit the other nipple and I knew I was. He put his finger back inside me and began sucking my neck as he plunged it into me over and over. I nearly came so many times, but I kept giving it away with my frantic sighs, so he'd break the rhythm just in the nick of time.

He was the awful, tormenting bastard of my dreams.

His mouth moved down my body until he was sucking the insides of my thighs and finger-fucking me at the same time.

"Please, please fuck me," I begged.

He laughed again, then reached up and pulled my blindfold off.

"Damn," he said. "I've never seen anything more beautiful than little 'dresses like a librarian' Vivian all naked and juicy, begging me to fuck her!"

I finally got a glimpse of his naked body, hovering over mine. It looked even better than in the swimsuit. And he was calling me beautiful? He was beautiful, from his piercing blue eyes to his just-right pecs to that washboard stomach to — *Whoa!*

His cock was really big and really ready. I didn't understand why it wasn't in me already.

"Beautiful!" he repeated, then flipped me over onto my stomach.

I tried to turn back toward him but he smacked my ass and told me to stay put.

He proceeded to nibble his way from the nape of my neck to the small of my back, an area I never knew was so deprived until he attended to it. I moaned and writhed around like a snake. I felt like I was losing all inhibitions. Maybe with Duke I could get rid of all those hang-ups I'd had forever.

His hands squeezed my butt cheeks as his tongue traced little patterns on them. Then he started smacking them again. Each stinging slap on one side of my ass was matched with an equal one on the other. It happened over and over again and my pussy constricted and my clit moaned with every swat. He knew just how to do it. Not hard, bruising smacks, but hit-and-run stings that turned me on in a way that had to mean I was a real sickie.

After five or six on each side, he stopped and ran his hands over my ass again.

"Beautiful," he said. "You've been a very good girl. If you promise to be a model sex slave, I'll take the cuffs off."

I agreed, since the handcuffs were even more uncomfortable in this position. Duke removed them then stuffed the two pillows up under my hips while I was still facedown on the bed. "Touch yourself, Vivian," he said. As I did, he lapped at my ass like a dog, stopping to suck hard on the meatiest spots—the ones I was so self-conscious about in a bathing suit.

I concentrated on my clit. Next thing I knew, his lips were on my ear and I could feel his cock between my thighs. "I'm going to fuck you now, Vivian. Ask me for it, unless you want me to just keep spanking you all night."

I was beyond argument. I'd been dying to have him inside me since we stepped into the room. "Please?" I said in my most pleading voice.

"Please, what?"

"Please fuck me."

"Please fuck you where?"

"Please fuck my pussy, Sir," I added.

"Good girl," he said as he pushed his cock into me all at once. "Oh damn, you're tight. I can't go slow now. I have to pound you, Vivian. I have to pound you hard." He thrust into me repeatedly, so deep I could almost feel his big cock poking out my abdomen. "You're so tight...so wet..." He fucked me faster and I remembered my hand was still down by my pussy. I started working it as frantically as when I'd been all alone, fantasizing about him.

When my moans went louder and higher in pitch, Duke slowed and said, "Don't come yet, Vivian. You're not allowed to come now." But I was already so lust-crazed, I didn't listen. I kept swirling my finger around on my clit, just like I had all the other times I'd thought of him, but now it was so much better because he was here in the flesh. I heard myself begging him to fuck me more.

"Stop touching yourself, Vivian. Don't come yet or I'll have to punish you," he said without missing a stroke with his big cock. But I couldn't obey him anymore. The orgasm before had been so hard-core when all I was doing was sucking his cock. With him fucking me from behind, the thought of the orgasm to come was just too much. I didn't care what he said. I had to have it right then. Duke Johnson had made me completely lose control.

"Stop, Vivian," he said. "I'm warning you. There'll be a punishment for coming before I tell you this time."

I laughed a sex-crazed laugh and swirled myself over the top, whimpering like a puppy as I came, my body shaking and convulsing and writhing like I'd never experienced before.

Duke stopped fucking me. Since he was behind me, I had no control over the situation. I wished we'd been face-to-face so I could pull his hips into mine and thrust mine upward.

"Why are you stopping?" I asked. "Don't stop! Keep fucking me!"

But he didn't move. "You were a bad girl, Vivian. I warned you you'd be punished."

I was giddy from the endorphins. "What are you going to do? Spank me again?" I said sarcastically.

"No," he answered. He pulled his cock from my pussy. Was he angry? He hadn't come yet.

I watched as he reached down and took a travel-sized tube of something from his jeans, now crumpled on the floor.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Lube." He stroked it onto his cock.

"But my pussy is soaking wet," I said, completely confused.

I turned to see him reaching for something else, but I couldn't see what it was because his back was blocking my view. "You don't remember what happens to naughty girls in your books? The ones who don't do what they're told?" He threw something down next to my face. I stared at the latest arrival from my B&D erotica of the week club—the cover I hadn't laid eyes on yet, since Duke got it instead. It was much like the cover of many others I'd seen, though. A hot, naked man doggy-style on top of a mostly naked woman who he'd blindfolded and tied loosely to the bed by one wrist. Except, instead of having his cock in her pussy, it was just starting to enter her ass.

The usual thrill went through me when I saw it, then I realized —

Chapter Three

"What are you planning to do?" I asked. I felt so vulnerable. I suddenly couldn't swallow my own saliva.

"You know how bad girls get punished in your books, Vivian." He placed his hand firmly at the top of my back, just below my neck, like the man in the picture. I was stuck in that position, staring at the book cover. Yes, I got completely hot each week when I saw the covers and when I read about the man, dominating the woman, submitting her to bondage, cock-sucking, blindfolding...and it almost always culminated in a major ass-fucking.

It was clear now how Duke knew so much about me. He'd seen the pictures I'd drawn of him, looking hot and sexy. Even some nude ones where I'd used my imagination to fill in what his adorable ass looked like naked. He knew I was obsessed with him. Then he'd gotten my books by mistake, two weeks in a row. He must have read the stories and figured out that I was one sick puppy. But in real life?

I turned my head as far as I could and looked at his cock. It looked big before, but now that I thought about it invading my tiny little asshole, it seemed huge, humongous, gargantuan even. I stared at it in shock. The fresh shine on it didn't help matters any. It looked like the cock they'd put on an anatomically correct cyborg.

I thought again about him inserting that monstrosity into my tiny little butthole. "It won't work," I said, trying to sound calm. "You're too big."

"It *will* work, Vivian. It will slide right into your tight little ass. It's what you've always wanted, isn't it? A man to take control and 'make' you do all the nasty little things you've secretly wanted to do? How long have you wanted a man to fuck you in the ass, Vivian?"

He tossed my sketchbook down on the bed near the paperback. It was open to a drawing of a naked man, who looked very much like him, behind a naked woman, who happened to look very much like me.

"How long have you wanted *me* to fuck you in the ass?"

Yes, he knew everything. My deepest, darkest secrets. I caught another glimpse of his long shiny cock. "Please," I begged. "I'm scared. It was just a fantas— Ohhhh..." He'd poked the soft tip of his cock into my ass, moving it in and out so slightly it was almost a tickle. The nerves there must have been directly connected to my clit. It jumped and pulsed with each touch to my little butthole.

Before I could stop it, my hand moved back down and started working my pussy again. It really was like there was a nerve running straight between the little hole he was invading and my clit. "Ohhhh..." I couldn't help myself. The syllable just kept

escaping my lips over and over. He continued to tease me with the tip of his cock. I wiggled my finger faster on my clit. It felt like I could come at any moment.

Then he pushed himself in farther and I felt a frightening pain in the muscle that enveloped his cock. I couldn't do this. He was too big. I was too small. I tried to pull myself away. "No!" I yelled for the first time since the encounter started. "It hurts! It hurts!"

Duke pulled his cock out, but held me down with his hand until I quit writhing around under him. "Vivian, submit to me completely, and I promise you, you'll enjoy this every bit as much as she did."

I looked at the book cover again, this time focusing on the woman's face. Even though the man appeared to be holding her down, she had a look of pure ecstasy on her features—eyes closed under the half-cocked blindfold, mouth open, tongue raking across her upper lip. I wanted to feel like that.

"I can make it good for you, Vivian." He reached underneath and began caressing my clit slowly as he touched his cock to my buttock. "It's what you want, isn't it?"

"Ohhh..." I replied.

"The pain won't last. I know it hurts at first, but if you'll let me get past it, you'll love this. I can tell. You'll be begging me to fuck you harder."

"But..."

"Submit to me, Vivian. I can give you what you've always wanted. Be my good little slave. Let me butt-fuck you into submission. Let me fuck your beautiful little ass, Vivian."

He worked my clit a bit more. I realized this could be the only chance I'd ever get for this and I didn't want the night to end without finally having my fantasy come true. I didn't argue with him anymore.

He went back to teasing me with his cock for several minutes, poking in just a little at a time as he took me closer and closer to ecstasy with his finger. He swirled and wiggled until I knew without a doubt I needed his cock in me. I pushed my ass up to meet it. He thrust in farther this time and I felt the intense pain. When I cried out, he swirled his finger faster on my clit and held his body still until my muscle adjusted to the invasion.

"You're so tight. Damn, you're so tight!" he said. "I want to pound into your ass...but not yet. You're not ready."

He pushed into me again and again, a little farther each time. The sensations were bizarre. I wasn't sure if I wanted him to pull his cock out of me or pound me.

"Are you okay?" he asked as he retreated, then pushed in slowly.

"Yes, I'm okay."

He suddenly went deeper. He thrust harder and harder until he was pounding into me. He was groaning like a dying man, but never missed a beat on my clit. His finger

moved in rhythm with his pounding and the sensations were so fabulous, I felt like I was spiraling out of control.

Me, *Vivian*. Out of control.

"Fuck me harder! Please fuck me harder!" I yelled.

"Tell me what you like, Vivian." I felt his lips next to my ear.

"I like your cock in my ass," I said.

"And what do you want?"

"I want you to pound me. Pound me with your big, hard cock," I yelled again. I didn't even think about the thin walls or my elderly neighbors.

And Duke didn't either.

"Damn, you're so tight," he kept saying. "Fuck, I love your tight little ass!"

He pounded me until I groaned and whined, and he teased my clit until I came in the most body-racking orgasm I'd ever experienced, starting in my clit and ending with my ass throbbing and pulsing around his cock. Then he shuddered and said my name, shuddered a few more times and collapsed on top of me.

I'd never experienced anything like it. I'd never been so satisfied.

But once the glow of the climax wore off, I was mortified again. A man I hardly knew was on top of me in my bed with his cock in the last place a man's cock should be. And I'd asked for it. I wondered what he really thought of me. I wondered who would know about this the next day.

Would he tell the neighbors? The guys at work? He knew my full name from the mail he'd intercepted. He was bound to brag about this. Worse, he could write about me on the internet. And why wouldn't he? Tonight was just like what guys wrote about in those braggy sex letters in dirty magazines. I'd found one in Ned's apartment once when he wasn't home and couldn't stop reading the *filthy, filthy* letters—I also came about two times per letter.

Was there any way to keep this guy from telling everyone he knew about this? Maybe I needed to change my name and move.

"Mmmm...Vivian," he said into my ear. But this time his voice sounded different. Instead of the harsh tinge of my dominator, it had a soft, wistful quality. I was confused.

"Let's hit the showers." He took my hand and pulled me along with him.

After we'd taken turns under the shower head, giving ourselves a good washing, Duke started giving me a—completely unnecessary—second soaping. He picked up my shower gel and turned it upside down, letting it dribble onto my nipples. I actually giggled. He began to massage the suds over my breasts.

"I already washed there," I said teasingly.

"Yeah, but I think the rules are 'wash, rinse, repeat'."

"I believe those are the shampoo instructions."

He chuckled and ran his soapy hands over my abdomen and around to my butt cheeks. "Has anyone ever told you that you have a beautiful little ass?" he asked.

"Not a lot of people have seen my 'ass'," I said. He'd definitely brought out the naughty in me because I usually didn't say "ass" out loud.

I decided to reciprocate his attentions. I filled my palm with soap and wrapped it around his semi-erect penis, quickly transforming it into a full-blown hard-on.

Duke grunted and leaned his head back against the shower wall, allowing himself to enjoy the attention. I felt a sexual power I'd never experienced before, knowing I could pleasure a man like him. Surely he must have had much sexier women, yet he was still here with me when he could have been long gone.

He groaned once more and stilled my hands with his own. As we turned to the side and let the water rinse his cock to a long, hard shine, he lifted my chin gently. He gazed into my eyes then touched his lips to mine in the most soulful-sweet kiss I'd ever had. We wrapped our arms around each other and kissed more deeply, our bodies melding together in the liquid heat of the shower, and what felt like passion, or at least what I always thought passion would feel like.

We kissed for so long the water turned tepid and he finally shut it off. He grabbed a towel and dried me tenderly. I wrapped my towel around my head as he wrapped his around his waist. He leaned over and kissed the base of my neck. It felt so sweet. It was hard to believe he was the same guy who was delivering stinging swats to my backside just a little while before.

I didn't know what we were supposed to do next since I'd never had a one-night stand before. I took the towel off my head, wrapped it around my body and began blow-drying my hair, just to keep busy.

"Can I brush it?" Duke asked.

"Oh...yeah...sure," I said, completely surprised. Was he a hairstylist?

He took the brush and the blow dryer from me and worked meticulously, until it became obvious that he was definitely not a hairstylist. I had to break the news to him and finish the job before he managed to turn my normally smooth hair into an afro.

When I put the brush down, he wrapped his arms around me from behind.

"Vivian?" he said.

"Yes?"

"I want to make love to you."

"Didn't we just get out of bed a few minutes ago?" I asked. I couldn't imagine my butt being up for another pounding at the moment, but I could see from the way his towel was poking out that Duke was more than ready to go again.

"That was different," he said. "That was hard-core fantasy sex, and it was fun, but now I really want to *make love* to you."

Wow. Looking up into his soulful blue eyes, I felt myself melting away. Would all my sexual *and* romantic fantasies be fulfilled in one night? If I let that happen, what would I have to look forward to for the next sixty years?

Yes, it was definitely too good to be true. Maybe he was playing me for a sucker. Maybe he was a loser and was looking for someone to pay his bills.

Duh! A struggling actor. We were in L.A. He probably acted as if he liked women, made their fantasies come true, then mooched off them until they figured it out.

"We don't even know what each other does for a living," I said.

"There's time for all that later," he replied, as he leaned down and nibbled at my ear. I giggled again. Right then, I decided this was worth it, whatever the outcome. If I could have a man who made me moan and say filthy things and giggle all in one evening, it didn't matter if tonight was all I had. I was going to enjoy every last second of it.

Trying not to be body shy, I slowly reached up to where the front of my towel was tucked in and pulled it loose, allowing it to drop to the floor. Duke stood still and watched me. I could see he wanted me to take the lead this time to show him that I really wanted him.

My hands quivered just a bit as I unhitched his towel, unleashing the beast underneath. He watched my eyes for a few more seconds then pulled me tight against him.

Suddenly, he swept me off my feet in a move Rhett Butler would have been proud of and carried me to the bed, laying me down gently on my pillow. He lay next to me on his side and lazily traced a finger from my nose, down as far as he could reach on my thigh, his gaze following along as if he wanted to memorize every inch.

When his eyes met mine again, they seemed a darker shade of blue, a more serious shade. I swallowed hard, suddenly realizing that this night could mean more to me than I ever would have imagined.

His lips brushed my lips, my jaw, my neck. I pulled him into a deep kiss, thrusting my tongue into his mouth, exploring him with a freedom and bravado I'd never felt before. When I released him, he moved down and suckled on each breast, but tenderly this time. Tears came into my eyes at the feel of his lips and the smell of my shampoo in his hair. The object of my lust for six months had suddenly become the object of my affection.

I ran my fingers through his hair, down his shoulders to his stomach. I caressed the little trail of dark blond hair that led to the base of his cock. Then I squeezed his balls gently.

"Oh God, Vivian," he said.

"It's time," I replied.

He moved over me and I spread my legs and bent my knees to allow him complete access to me. I could feel that I was already soaking wet, even though he hadn't laid a finger on my clit this time.

"Vivian," he whispered as he entered me. It felt like the first time, even after all we'd done just a short while before.

I wrapped my legs around him and thrust my pelvis up to meet him. He groaned loudly and pushed his way into me until I felt completely filled. He covered my mouth with his and thrust his tongue inside just as deeply as his cock, as though he wanted us to be connected in every possible way. As his movements began causing a series of delicious shocks and electrical pulses inside my pussy, his kiss stirred something deep inside my chest.

I'd never felt anything like this before. I met each of his thrusts with one of my own and I was suddenly overcome, by emotion, by passion, by sensation. My pussy began pulsing and throbbing around his cock and it responded in kind. The intense moans caused us to finally break the kiss and I remember saying, "Oh, oh, oh," over and over again, apparently incapable of intelligible speech. Then he went still and I went quiet.

"I think I love you," he whispered into my hair.

I stopped breathing for a moment, completely shocked at his words. "You don't know anything about me other than my secret life as a pervert," I finally said. No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't allow myself to believe for a second that he was serious.

He propped himself up on his elbows, but didn't leave my body. "I watched you too," he said.

"No, you didn't. I never took my eyes off you at the pool. You didn't even look my way."

"You know how I look into my mirrored sunglasses to fix my hair after a swim?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"I never do that, except when I think you're there. I can see you in those glasses...but that wasn't what I was talking about. I watch you leave for work every morning."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I can see you out my kitchen window while I'm eating my cereal. You're the most punctual person I've ever met."

I laughed. "And that's a turn-on for you?"

"Not normally. But *you're* a turn-on for me. I kept trying to picture your cute little body under all those clothes, but you seemed way too uptight to ask out. I couldn't make myself do it because I'd get turned down and that would be it. Dream over."

"What could you possibly be dreaming about?"

"I wanted to touch your hair."

"Really?" I said. "Why would anyone want to touch the bun on the back of my work head?"

"I wanted to go up behind you and take out the pins and let it fall down around your shoulders. But then I figured it was best to leave it as it was because if it was down other guys would notice how pretty it was."

"It's brown," I said.

"It catches the light. It shines. I wanted to touch it...and, well, other stuff."

His finger followed a strand of my hair down my shoulder to my breast. He kissed me softly.

Wow. I never would have imagined this guy dreaming about boring ol' me.

"I got your mail last week but kept putting off bringing it to you for the same reason. I didn't want to lose the fantasy when you turned me down. But when I got it again today, I took it as a sign that I was supposed to ask you out. I decided to look over the envelopes to see if I could find out anything that might give me an edge, then I started wondering about the plain brown ones you seem to get every week and felt a paperback inside. I had to look. I thought maybe you were a sci-fi nut or something and I could bone up on my *Star Wars*."

I covered my face with my hand to block out the naughty naked couple, still lying shamelessly on the book cover next to me. "And you saw what was in there and still wanted me?"

"Well, the sketchbook already had me intrigued, but I thought there was always a chance you were using me as an artist's model or something. But after the paperbacks, I saw what you were into and didn't think you were getting it anywhere else. I thought maybe with that knowledge, I had a shot. Then you opened the door for me with your nipples poking through your robe and I went for it."

"You sure did," I replied, still trying to digest this information. "So I guess you got what you wanted." I guess I'd gotten what I wanted too, but it made me a little sad that our one-night stand was over.

"No, I was trying to give you what *you* wanted. What *I* wanted was for you to have dinner with me," he said mischievously. Before I finished laughing at the ludicrous comment, he placed a hand on my chin and turned my head toward his. Then he kissed me, deeply but sweetly and said, "How about I buy you supper...and maybe breakfast, if you can stand me around that long."

I was overcome by the odd feeling that I could stand him around for a lot longer than that. "Sure," I said. "Or should I be buying you dinner?" I no longer cared if he was an out-of-work actor.

"Is that your way of asking me what I do?"

"Well..."

"Okay, it's kind of cheesy..."

"Please don't say 'male escort'."

"Well, it depends on your definition of 'escort'. I own a couple of Hollywood tour companies. The ones where we show tourists the stars' homes...and the one where we give them a tour of where all the famous people died and the cemeteries they're buried in."

"Hollywood Down Under?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"I went on that tour when I first moved here. It was actually pretty interesting stuff."

He seemed flattered. "Researched and wrote it myself," he said. "So, does that qualify me to take you out?"

"Actually, after the second time in bed, I'd decided to support you as an out-of-work actor."

He laughed. "Well, that's good to know. Now go put on some of those uptight little clothes of yours so I can have hot thoughts about you over dinner."

"Pervert!" I said.

Duke didn't say a word. He just picked up my paperback, waved it at me and raised his eyebrows. That's when I realized being a deviant was going to be lots of fun now that I had someone to "deviate" with.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Angelia Sparrow & Naomi Brooks

Angelia Sparrow has been telling stories for about forty years, and writing for almost that long. She traded a library paraprofessional position for ten in the wind and the hum of the highway. She drives a semi and writes during her loading and unloading times.

Her home time is spent refereeing four kids, two cats and a husband. She crochets and knits to get past writer's block.

She has been publishing professionally since 2004, mostly paranormal romance, and has been nominated for several awards.

Naomi Brooks has been writing since the age of nine, when she won a short story contest at her elementary school. She has been active in the fan fiction community since 1999, before finally going pro in 2006.

She works as a shipping clerk when not writing and finds her young male coworkers her number one source of inspiration. She is mother to one brilliant, gifted and non-finicky cat.

Also by Angelia Sparrow & Naomi Brooks

For Love of Etarin

Glad Hands

Heart of a Forest

Also by Angelia Sparrow

Eight Days Ablaze

Raising the Dead

Courtney Bee

While not yet the Ernest Hemingway of erotic literature, Courtney Bee's mind swarms with carnal story ideas faster than she can write them down, so expect to see more moaning maidens and femme fatale fairies in the near future. Her stories have appeared in *Hustler*, *Playgirl* and numerous anthologies. While candles and rose petals can be lovely, Courtney has always craved erotic encounters with a little more bite. Bondage? Spankings? Sex on the rough side? This is what happens when Catholic girls gone astray get their hands on a computer.

Courtney currently lives in California and can often be found watching *Strangers With Candy* reruns and listening to the Rolling Stones.

Also by Courtney Bee

Athima

Sherry James

A native Nebraskan, Sherry James spent her youth riding and writing, and all of those hours spent in the saddle gave her plenty of time to think up a slew of stories. The first book she wrote (at the tender age of 9) was three chapters long, each chapter only one page long, and was written from the point of view of a horse.

A romantic at heart, Sherry was thrilled to discover the fictional world of historical romance novels during her high school years. One day she decided to get serious about her writing and pursue it as a career. And guess what! She grew up to not only become a rodeo queen, but a published author as well. All that riding and writing sure paid off!

With a deep love and appreciation of books, Sherry enjoyed many years as an assistant manager for a Waldenbooks store, giving her valuable insight into the book world. These days she's a wife to an amazing husband and the mother of two equally amazing kids. She rides when she gets the chance and can't imagine her life without horses. She is a founding member and past president of the Prairieland Romance Writers, www.prwne.com, and is a longtime member of Romance Writers of America. Currently she has published more than 80 magazine and newspaper articles and several romance novels.

Also by Sherry James

Cowboy Fling

Fiona Jayde

Fiona Jayde is a pilot, a ninth-degree black belt in three styles of martial arts, a computer hacker, a mountain climber, a jazz singer, a weight lifter, a superspy with a talent for languages and an evil genius.

All in her own head.

In life, she is an author, insists she is a good driver even though various loved one refuse to let her drive, possesses a brown belt in Tae Kwon Do and blue belt in Aikido, a web developer, scared to death of heights, loves jazz piano, can bench-press about 20 pounds—with effort, speaks English and Russian fluently, and when not plotting murder and mayhem, enjoys steamy romance novels, sexy spy thrillers, murky mysteries and violent movies where things frequently blow up.

Lyla Sinclair

Most days Lyla Sinclair can be found lying on a beach surrounded by nubile young bodies, all of whom are at her beck and call. Eyes closed, sun warming her scantily clad body, she dictates her most lurid fantasies to one of her young sex-slaves as she's massaged, manicured and lulled to sleep by a nude Spanish guitarist. These catnaps are important, since her nights are spent gorging herself on young men and chocolate (though she never, ever gains weight).

Also by Lyla Sinclair

Checking Out Audrey

Hard On Miss Hardin

Cheryl Dragon

A lover of unusual things, Cheryl Dragon enjoys writing unique stories of sinfully hot erotic romance, pure erotica or paranormals with a psychic twist. Never at a loss for ideas, she has plenty of stories yet to be written. Her two favorite settings are Las Vegas and New Orleans – where anything can happen.

Cheryl lives in the Chicagoland area with her deaf albino cat. By day she analyzes numbers as an assistant controller for a division of a large international company, which leaves her creative side free for writing.

Also by Cheryl Dragon

9 ½ Years

An Extreme Haunting

Black on Blonde

Curse of the Mexican Opal

Defying the Moon

In His Mind

One Hot Experiment

Out of Body Sex

Outsmarting the Moon

Quintupled

Vegas Style

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