

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



SEXPLORATIONS

Finding Her Rhythm

CIANA STONE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Finding Her Rhythm

ISBN 9781419919879

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Finding Her Rhythm Copyright © 2009 Ciana Stone

Edited by Sue-Ellen Gower

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book Publication April 2009

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

FINDING HER RHYTHM

Ciana Stone

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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

Duckhorn: St. Helena Wine Company, Inc.

Jeep: DaimlerChrysler Corporation

Mercedes: Daimler Chrysler AG Corporation

NASCAR: National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, Inc.

Wrangler: DaimlerChrysler Corporation

Chapter One

"So what you're saying is that instead of kissing a frog to get a prince I'm supposed to kiss a pooch?" Stella spoke into the phone cradled between face and shoulder as she organized the stack of file folders on her kitchen table in the order she needed to go through them.

The remark hit a bit too close to home for comfort. It was the kind of thing her parents might have said, and Stella had studiously avoided following any kind of advice or even suggestion that followed the line her parents would have taken. She'd spent a decade trying not to be like them.

"That's a bit fanciful for my taste," she said into the phone. "I do find it extremely odd that every time I turn around he's there. This morning he was waiting on the front porch for me with a newspaper in his mouth. Not mine, mind you — *it* was lying on the porch. I'm going to have to call animal control. I can't have people thinking I'm a thief."

As Stella listened to her friend Fenny on the phone, another sound intruded from the front room. The sound of her name being yelled.

"Stella? Stella!"

Stella closed her briefcase and set it on the floor then rose. "Dee's here. Bellowing like a bull in heat...yes, I guess he is rubbing off on her. Talk to you later."

Just as Stella was putting the phone down, Delilah entered the room, her hands full of mail. "Did you know your porch is littered with..." she paused to look at the name on one of the envelopes, "Randall Dexter's mail?"

Stella pointed across the kitchen. "It's him."

Delilah's eyes widened as she spotted the dog lying on the floor in front of the back door. "Holy shit! Where'd he come from?"

"I wish to hell I knew so I could send him back." That wasn't entirely the truth. The first time the dog had shown up she had been a little scared. He was the biggest Rottweiler she'd ever seen in her life—the dog's head was as high as her ribs and he had to weigh in at over one hundred and fifty pounds.

He was enormous and intimidating with his fixed unwavering gaze. But as it turned out, he was as sweet and gentle as a lap dog. And having him around did provide a feeling of safety. Not that she was afraid to be alone. But in today's world, it never hurt to have extra security.

"He just showed up a couple of weeks ago and comes and goes as he pleases."

"Does he have a name?"

Stella shook her head and turned to pour coffee. "I don't know. He has no tags."

Delilah put the mail on the table and stooped down, extending her hand to the door. "Hey there, big fella. I'm Dee."

The dog regarded her for a few moments before getting to his feet and approaching, sniffing her fingers and hand then working up her arm to her face.

When he licked her across the face she smiled and stroked his broad head. "Well aren't you the flirt?"

She looked up at Stella who was putting coasters on the table for the coffee cups. "Stell, this guy has to belong to someone. He's too well mannered, friendly and healthy to be a stray. And the owner might not know he's running loose. Maybe you should put up some flyers in the neighborhood."

"That seems like a lot of trouble. Besides, if he was happy at home he wouldn't be here," Stella murmured. Truth be told, she was content with the way things were—aside from the newspapers and mail that didn't belong to her.

"And you definitely have to get this Dexter guy's mail returned."

Stella grimaced. She'd not really gone out of her way to meet everyone in the neighborhood. Once people found out you were a lawyer, they started coming to you

with every little nit-picking problem that came up in their lives. She had no desire to become the *pro bono* counsel for the entire neighborhood.

"Stell." Delilah's voice held that note Stella had come to recognize. The one that said she wasn't going to give in. Oh joy. Sometimes Dee really got under her skin. If she sunk her teeth into something, she was as stubborn as a bulldog. Just wouldn't let go.

Arguing with Dee could be a great sport. When Stella was in the mood. No one could belabor a point like Delilah Jackson. She'd argue with a signpost then throw rocks at it.

Stella grimaced at the old saying. God, hadn't she left Georgia behind?

It was a little odd that she and Dee were such close friends. Neither one of them would back down, or admit defeat in an argument, and they were both stubborn as the day was long. Cut from the same cloth, as Stella's mother would say.

For crying out loud! Stella's grimace turned into a scowl. What was with these old sayings suddenly crowding her mind?

"Come on," Delilah said and stood, rubbing the dog down the back of his neck. "Maybe this guy's trying to tell you something."

Okay, this was getting downright annoying. Stella's parents, even her sister, would have seen the dog's appearance and habit of delivering mail as a sign. There was a time Stella would have thought so as well. Maybe she still did. But she didn't intend on acting on it. Those days and that Stella were gone.

"Such as?" she asked just to humor Dee.

"How the hell would I know? I'm not a psychic. But we're writers so we can speculate, right? Maybe there's a reason he only brings you this guy's mail. Maybe Dexter's an invalid who's fallen and can't get up and is just lying on his floor, fading away, and waiting for help to come. Maybe he's blind, got lost, fell in a hole, and broke his leg. Maybe he needs a good attorney and his case will make you a shitload of money, maybe—well, who knows? Take the mail over to the guy's house and find out."

Stella shook her head. If she did and it turned out to be some cosmic act then she'd have to admit that she still believed in such things. And despite the fact that the new Stella she'd so carefully created was eroding back into old Stella with each passing day, she just couldn't leap off that bridge and admit that she believed the dog was there for a reason.

"Come on, Stell. You don't have to say the dog brought it. Just that you got it by mistake."

"I really don't want to do that, Dee."

Delilah watched her for a few moments then threw up her hands in defeat. "Fine." She gathered up the mail, dropping a couple of envelopes. "I'll do it."

The dog snatched up an envelope and bounded out of the room. "Hey!" Delilah chased after him, leaving Stella standing with her mouth open in protest to an empty room.

A few moments later she heard Dee's voice. "Holy sheep shit!" Hurried footsteps sounded and Dee ran into the kitchen. "Damn, Stell, is that portrait in your room of *you*? The nude?"

Stella felt the color drain from her face. She hadn't had the girls over since she'd hung the portrait. And wasn't ready to talk about it. But now that Dee had seen it the secret wasn't going to stay buried long.

"Yes."

"Wow! It's gorgeous. And I want to know all about it when I get back."

"There isn't really..." Stella trailed off since Dee had already bounded out of the room. A few seconds later the front door slammed. Stella looked down at the dog who was watching her with what appeared to be an expectant expression on his broad face.

"What? I'm just not ready to meet the neighbors. Is that a crime?"

For the first time the dog barked. She frowned at him and picked up her coffee cup. "Yeah right, side with her."

Delilah checked the numbers on the houses as she made her way up the street. Seeing a match for what was on the mail, she marched up to the front door of the tidy blue house with white trim and knocked on the door.

A minute passed before the door opened. When it did, her eyes widened appreciatively. *Hey now.*

"Can I help you?" the tall handsome man with eyes the color of spring leaves asked.

Delilah handed him the stack of mail. "I believe this belongs to you."

He accepted the mail, looked at it then at her. "Well, yeah. But the last time I looked I was able to walk to the mailbox and get my own mail."

"Oh, it wasn't in your box. This big Rottweiler brought it over and put it on my friend Stella's porch."

The man's eyes narrowed a bit. "A Rottweiler?"

"Yeah, big sucker. 'Bout this high." She raised her hand up, palm down in front of her breasts. "Head as big as a bear."

"Willie Brown."

"Excuse me?"

"The dog. Willie Brown. He's mine."

"Willie Brown as in 'my friend-boy, Willie Brown' from Robert Johnson's *Cross Road Blues*?"

"You know about Robert Johnson?"

"Who doesn't?" Delilah grinned. "One of the most famous Delta Blues musicians ever. Not to mention that cool legend that he was told to take his guitar to a crossroad, and when he did he was met by the Devil who tuned the guitar so that Johnson would have mastery over it, but would only return it to Johnson in return for his soul."

"Yeah. That's cool. 'Course it's been used to death ever since it started."

"Still, a great story," she said. "But an odd choice of a name for your dog. Unless you're a musician. Guitarist, I'd guess."

"What gave me away?"

"The calluses on the fingers of your left hand."

"You noticed that?"

Delilah grinned up at him. "Part of my job."

"Which is?"

"Photography."

"Cool."

"Yeah, it can be. But hey, I'm wasting your time. Just wanted to let you know that Willie Brown seems to have taken a shine to Stella. Been showing up regularly with newspapers and your mail. So if anything goes missing, stop by Stella's—that's Stella Walker. She's the fourth house down on the right."

"The yellow house with the new Mercedes?"

"That's the one."

"Okay, thanks, Miss...?"

"Just call me Dee. Have a nice day Mr. Dexter." She turned with a grin on her face and hurried back to Stella's, eager to report she'd discovered a prime hunk just four doors down.

Chapter Two

Stella was just getting to the big emotional scene in the book she was writing when the dog, lying on the floor, raised his year and gave a soft “woof”. No more than a second later the doorbell rang.

She hoped it wasn’t someone soliciting. She wasn’t expecting company so that was the only thing it could be. She hated that. It made her feel like she had to donate to whatever charity they were promoting, or buy another stack of magazines she’d never read.

Moving her laptop from her lap to the coffee table, she rose and went to answer the door. *Oh my!* One look at the man standing on the porch and a spark of energy whizzed down her spine.

She didn’t have to ask who he was. He fit the description Dee had given of the “hunk just four doors down” to a tee.

“Excuse me, are you Stella Walker?” the man asked.

“Yes. Can I help you?”

“Hey. I’m Dex—uh, Randall Dexter. I hate to bother you but the other day this lady—Dee—showed up at my house and said that Willie Brown was hanging around your house.”

“Willie Brown?”

“My dog.”

“Oh!” Stella stepped back and gestured. “Yes. Please, come in Mr. Dexter.”

“Thanks. And it’s Dex.”

“Stella,” she said with a smile. When he returned the smile she got another jolt. As sexy smiling as he was serious. And standing beside him, she felt positively petite. Not

an easy feat for someone topping five-foot-eight. But Dex towered a good head over her.

"Willie Brown," Dex said in a mock scold as the dog got up and wandered over, bumping up against Dex's leg. "You been bothering this pretty lady?"

"He really hasn't," Stella said, noticing the way his fingers gently stroked the dog's broad head. She wondered what those long fingers would feel like on her skin.

Jerking her mind away from lascivious thoughts, she continued, "Actually, he's good company. Doesn't talk too much, is happy with whatever you feed him, and aside from bringing the wrong mail and newspapers, isn't any bother."

"Yeah, that. Sorry," Dex said. "I still can't figure how he gets the mail out of the box."

"Seems he's smarter than you realized."

"I guess so. Well, I just wanted to introduce myself and let you know that if he's making a pest of himself I'll keep him inside or chain him or something."

"Oh no!" The idea of that was distressing. "Really, I enjoy his visits."

"Okay, if you're sure."

"Absolutely."

"Well, I guess I've taken up enough of your time so —"

"Actually I was just getting ready to take a break and have a glass of iced tea. Would you like to join me?"

"Sure, that'd be great."

Stella turned to head for the kitchen, letting out a breath she felt she'd been holding since she opened the door. Dee was right. Dex was sexy as hell. She cut a look over her shoulder and caught him checking out her ass. He looked up at her and grinned, clearly not embarrassed.

That brought a rush of unexpected excitement. She quickly turned to cover the smile that demanded space on her face. Once in the kitchen she busied herself with getting glasses and filling them with ice.

Dex took a seat at the table, lounging back in his chair in an altogether too appealing slouch. Stella pulled a pitcher of tea from the refrigerator. "So, Dex. Willie Brown is an odd choice of name for a dog. There's got to be a story there somewhere."

Dex chuckled. "Willie Brown played with Johnson and was mentioned in a song that became famous."

"I'm guessing you're talking about musicians?"

"Yep. Delta Blues."

"You're a fan of the blues?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

She cut a look over her shoulder. His right forearm was on the table, fingers tapping out a rhythm. Long, strong, elegant fingers. "I suspect there's more to it than that."

"I'm a musician."

"Oh? What instrument?"

"Guitar."

Stella nearly dropped the pitcher at the sudden flash that went through her head. Candlelight, damp sheets, and those long fingers sliding over the top of her breasts and working their way down while bluesy guitar music floated in the air.

Go away! It'd been a long time since she'd had a flash like that. And she didn't want to have one now. That part of her life was done and over. What was wrong with her? Could Dee be right? Had she gone so long without having a man that it was affecting her in some detrimental way? She'd have to give it some thought.

It had been a long time. Her husband had been dead nearly twelve years and in all that time she'd had two lovers. Actually, *lovers* was an incorrect label. She'd had sex with two men. Neither had been very satisfying. She could take care of those needs

herself. Even if it did require the assistance of toys she purchased through a discreet service.

No, she didn't need a man. Didn't want one. Wasn't interested.

Until now. There *was* something intriguing about Dex. Not to mention that he definitely started a fire in her libido.

"What do you do?" Dex's voice cut into her introspection.

"Consumer liability law."

"An attorney?"

"Yes." She walked to the table with two glasses of tea.

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Of course." She handed him a glass and took a seat, watching as he turned it up and drank down half of it. He lowered the glass, ran his tongue over his top lip and smiled. Stella started slightly, caught up in watching his tongue and feeling a slight flush of heat in her southern regions. Okay, this wasn't supposed to happen.

"That's really good."

Oh damn. Dee was right. He does have something. "What?" Oh god, it was a croak. She cleared her throat. "What?"

"The tea. Really good."

"Thank you."

"So consumer liability. Can't say I know anything about that."

"Why would you if you're not in the field?"

"I guess you must be good at it, considering the looks of your place, that new Mercedes and all."

"I have no complaints."

"Not the song most musicians sing."

"Oh?"

“Yeah. We pretty much live for what we do. Money pays the bills. But it’s the music—the art. That’s what matters. That’s where the passion is. And in the end it’s passion that matters.”

Stella, in the process of taking a drink of tea, choked on a chunk of ice. Literally. Choked and spewed. *By the elements! Get a grip, Stella.*

Dex jumped up and ran around the table to thump her on the back. It nearly drove her into the table. “Oh shit! Sorry.”

She was still coughing, trying to catch her breath, and not having an easy time of it. The thought flashed through her head that she’d hate to die this way. *Attorney dies from choking precipitated by acute onset of horniness.*

Dex grabbed her by the upper arms, lifted her out of her seat, turned her back to him, and wrapped his arms around her. Oh god, he was going to do the Heimlich on her! She would have protested if she’d had the wind but it was taking everything she had to suck in air.

One swift hug and a chunk of ice shot out of her mouth. She sucked in oxygen in a big greedy gasp.

“You okay?” Dex didn’t release her but leaned down over one shoulder to look at her, his breath warm and sweet against her face.

She turned her head, tilting her face up, and their eyes met. *Oh!* Something went “click” inside her. Something strong and hot. Something that had been asleep for so long that its awakening was like a sudden storm, full of energy and power.

Dex’s eyes darkened and for a moment they were frozen. His hand drifted up and one finger stroked softly down the side of her face. A sizzle of fire sped from the point of contact, clear down to her toes. Then he cleared his throat. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He hesitated a moment then stepped away and reclaimed his seat at the table. For a few moments there was a rather awkward silence. “Look, Stella, I know we don’t really

know each other, having just met, but...well you seem like an interesting person and...and my dog really likes you, so I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner with me?"

Stella was still reeling from the power of the chemistry that'd clicked between them. Still high on the sensation and off balance enough to have her not thinking straight. "When?"

"How about tomorrow night? I have a gig tonight."

"Okay. But how about we do it here?"

Do it here? Oh shoot me, shoot me now. Dex was smiling at her in an all-too enticing and sensual way.

"What I mean is I'll run out and pick up something from one of the restaurants."

"Well, if that's what you want."

Stella couldn't tell him that having dinner at her house made her feel that she had more control of the situation. Nor could she say that she needed every advantage possible with him. He had way too much of an effect on her and she wasn't ready to give in to that. So instead she came up with a convenient lie. "I know a great Chinese restaurant and I've kind of been craving Chinese."

"Okay, great. I'll bring wine and dessert."

"All right."

Dex stood and looked down at Willie Brown who was asleep on the floor. "I would take him off your hands but he seems to have made himself at home. And apparently knows the way back."

She stood and walked around the table. "He lets me know when he's ready to leave."

"Okay, well, thanks for the tea, Stella."

"And for the life-saving."

"The least a man can do for a beautiful lady."

She smiled and walked him to the door. "I'm looking forward to tomorrow night," he said softly before leaning down to graze her cheek with his lips.

Good lord! Her knees nearly turned to jelly. Not to mention the effect it had on other parts of her anatomy.

"Umm, yes."

He smiled and walked out, pausing at the edge of the yard to look back and wave. She closed the door and leaned back against it to find Willie Brown standing there, watching. She grinned and knelt down, putting her arms around his neck as he licked her face. She blew out her breath and closed her eyes. *God, please don't let Dee be right.* There was a feeling in the pit of her stomach and a whisper of a voice in her head saying that Dee was right. Willie Brown had brought Dex's mail for a reason.

That thought sent her running for the phone. She'd nail Dee on not telling her the dog belonged to Dex then tell her the news and get some advice. Oh god, she had a date!

Chapter Three

Stella cast a quick look around as she crossed through the living room to answer the door. Soft pools of light from the lamp on the table behind the sofa and accent lighting from the lamps on either side of the front window cast a warm but not overtly romantic light to the room. She'd been loath to set a romantic stage for her first date with Dex. She didn't want to give the impression that she was a woman who'd easily jump into bed with anyone, even though thoughts of Dex and bed had been figuring prominently in her thoughts.

When she opened the door, he smiled down at her, a smile that was sexy enough to have her pulse race a little. He lifted the bottle of wine in his right hand. Stella glanced at the label. A bottle of Duckhorn Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon went for about sixty dollars. Meaning he was either not a starving musician or had splurged to impress her. Either option was palatable. As was the wine.

"One of my favorites." She smiled and stepped back for him to enter.

"I suspected it might be."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"I imagine it's a lot like you. Complex, yet seductive and a bit hedonistic beneath the surface."

Stella felt her skin grow warm at the analogy. God, how long had it been since someone gave her that kind of compliment?

"I never really thought of it in those terms," she admitted. "For me it's more like drinking a chocolate-covered cherry. Pure indulgence."

"Nothing more hedonistic than pure indulgence, is there?"

Before she could react to the provocative question he jiggled the baker's box in his left hand. "Where do you want me to put the dessert?"

"More decadence?" She gestured toward the kitchen.

"Absolutely."

Stella followed him into the kitchen. As he placed the dessert box on the center island, she pulled crystal wineglasses from the wine rack in the corner.

"Corkscrew?" Dex asked.

Stella grabbed the tool from a drawer and handed it to him. Dex uncorked the wine and poured into the glasses she held. She lifted one to sniff as he set the bottle down and accepted a glass from her.

"To new friends," Dex toasted.

Suddenly her vision dimmed. *Oh damn, no.* Sensory information from her other senses overwhelmed her. The smell of jasmine-scented candles. A whisper of air on her bare skin and the feel of something cool and wet dripping onto the top of one breast. At the distinct sensation of a wet tongue laving across her nipple, she stared back to reality.

"Or not," he said with a slight frown on his face.

"Excuse me?"

"To new friends?"

"Oh yes. Absolutely." She shook herself mentally, hoping that she didn't look as discombobulated as she felt.

Dex clinked his glass against hers then sampled the wine. "Hmmm, nice. So, what do you want me to do?"

Stella started. *Help!* What did she want him to do? Lock those luscious lips to hers? Run those long fingers over her skin? Press that glorious length of maleness against her? *Get a grip!*

She was like a teenager with a case of raging hormones or something. Being around Dex pushed the *on* button of her libido switch and she didn't seem to be able to find the *off* button.

"Do?"

"To help with dinner."

"Oh! Well nothing really. I have everything ready if you're hungry."

"Starved," he said with a suggestive smile.

Whack! The sound of a bat hitting a home run. She was definitely in trouble.

"But first, do you mind if I use your bathroom?" he asked.

"Down the hall, first door on the left," she replied. "I'll start getting things ready."

"Be right back." He set down his wineglass and left the room.

Stella blew out her breath and leaned back against the counter. She needed to get a grip or she was liable to make a fool of herself, or a big mistake. Something about Dex really got to her and it'd been so long since she'd been with a man that her hormones, now fully activated, just might prompt her to move faster than she was comfortable with.

Dex smiled as he walked down the hall. Stella was interesting. One moment those blue eyes were sending messages that could tempt a priest and the next they were the eyes of someone who felt completely out of their element. He found that curiously charming.

She was one hot woman. That silky sweep of red hair kissed with gold and the kind of body that hit all the right buttons with him. Full breasts, lush ass, but firm and toned. Obviously a woman who worked at staying fit. And one that seemed familiar. It'd been bugging him since they met. Where had he seen her before?

He stepped into the bathroom and as he turned to close the door, his eyes took in the view of the room through the opened door across the hall. *Holy shit!* Forgetting the call of nature, he hurried across the hall.

This was obviously her bedroom. Sensual and decidedly feminine. But what drew his attention was the portrait on the wall above the writing desk. A portrait he knew all too well.

Memories transported him back in time more than a decade. He'd just come in from a week on the road with his band, tired, hungry and as usual near broke. The only thing in the refrigerator was a half-eaten pizza and three beers. Snagging a piece of pizza and a beer, he headed for his room...

The light to his roommate Robert's studio was on. "Hey, what're you doing up so – fuck me!" Dex stopped and gaped at the portrait on the easel.

Lying on a lounge, the woman was on her stomach, propped up to look at the artist. Her red hair tumbled in loose shining curls over her shoulders and down her back. Black lace panties with a matching garter-belt and stockings were all she wore, but her position hid all but the side of one full breast.

It was sensual, erotic and powerful. Dex would have whistled but his mouth had suddenly gone dry. He slugged down a swallow of beer, staring at the painting. Robert had outdone himself. He'd captured the smoldering look in the woman's eyes and the suggestion of a smile that played around her lips. And if she was half as gorgeous in person as she was in this painting, she was a walking goddess. Dex made a mental note to ask Robert about the model, see if she was single.

Dex snapped back to the present. The shock of seeing it hanging on her wall had him a little off-balance. Now the mystery of why she'd seemed familiar was solved, but it also opened the door to questions. How had the portrait come to be here when a year ago it was in Robert's gallery in New York, and what had happened to the husband she'd supposedly had the portrait commissioned for in the first place.

He looked down at the desk and noticed a book lying on top of several printed pages. S.E. Howard. Hey, they had the same taste in books. He loved Howard's legal thrillers.

Then his eyes picked up a name on the top page beneath the book. *Well, I'll be damned.* Curiosity overrode the guilt of trespassing on her privacy. He lifted the book and scanned the top page beneath it.

She was S.E. Howard? Damn if Stella Walker wasn't just full of surprises.

Suddenly aware of the passage of time, he hurried to the bathroom. Once finished he returned to the kitchen. "Did you have the bathroom redone?" he asked to cover for the excess of time he was gone. "It looks far more modern than it should for the age of the house."

"The owner did that about a year before he sold. Pretty, isn't it?"

"Yeah, very nice. Hey, let me help you with that."

She relinquished the tray she held to him and scooped up the stack of placemats, plates and silverware from the counter. "I thought we'd eat in the dining room. I hardly ever get a chance to use it."

"Lead the way."

Stella distributed the place settings on the table. Dex put the tray down and watched. "So, what do you do besides law, Stella? Any hobbies?"

She paused in the process of placing silverware on a linen napkin then resumed. "Nothing notable. I like to garden when I have the time. I belong to a gym. And I spend time with friends."

"Like to read?"

"Yes, very much."

"So do I."

"Really?" She circled the table to him. "Who's your favorite author?"

"You."

She nearly swallowed her tongue. "Me?"

"Yeah, you *are* S.E. Howard, aren't you?"

"Umm, yes. But how did you know?"

"The photo on your books."

Stella didn't know what to say. The photo on the inside back jacket of her books was one she thought made her look quite stern and cool. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun low on her head and she'd even worn non-prescription glasses to change her appearance. She'd never met a fan who recognized her from that photo and had definitely never met a fan that she wanted to throw on the table and ravish. "Oh...well, well, thank you."

"Funny," he said, reaching out to put his hands on top of her shoulders. "I've always wondered what you'd be like in person. I have to say you're not like I imagined."

"No?" God, her skin was on fire. The heat was radiating out from the point of contact where his hands touched her skin and making her feel flushed all over.

"Nope. Kinda thought you'd be cool...and a little uptight."

"Uptight?"

"Yeah. Not the kind of woman I'd have spent the last twenty-four hours imagining what it would be like to do this."

Before she had a chance to do more than blink he lowered his head and kissed her. It was a gentle kiss. At least until her traitorous body pressed into his and her arms crept up to circle his neck.

Then all vestiges of gentle vanished. His arms moved around her, tightening at the same moment his tongue delivered an assault that had her reeling. *Mother of God!* What an assault. His taste and smell, the feel of his gloriously hard, lean body pressed against her. It was intoxicating. Arousing. She couldn't get enough.

When the kiss finally ended they were both breathing a little faster. Stella stepped back, a bit unsteady, and reached for the edge of the table. Mistake. Her hand landed on the tray. It wasn't fully seated on the table so the pressure she put on it in an attempt to steady herself sent it tipping up and her stumbling.

The tureen of hot and sour soup and the serving dishes containing the rest of the meal flew up, sending the contents splashing over them. Dex grimaced and squinted his eyes. Stella squeaked and the dishes clattered to the floor, scattering what was to be their dinner everywhere.

Dex swiped a glob of egg from his eye, looked around, and then wiped his hand on the front of his shirt, adding another stain to the already saturated material.

"Oh shit!" Stella peeled back food encrusted hair from her face and looked at him in dismay.

Dex looked at her and burst out laughing. For a moment she just gaped at him. Then it hit her and laughter erupted. Soon they were howling like loons, picking bits of food from their hair and clothing.

"Oh god, I'm so sorry," she gasped between laughs. "Here." She grabbed a napkin and handed it to him.

"Thanks." He wiped his face and put the sticky napkin on the table. "I think maybe I should head home and get cleaned up. Right after I help you clean up this mess, I mean."

"No," she argued. "I mean no you don't have to help me clean up. And I'll be happy to wash your shirt. If you want to take it off I can throw it in the washer —"

He silenced her with a kiss that had her off into another meltdown. "Does that mean you want me to wash your shirt?" she asked when he released her.

"Hardly. It means that if I start taking off my clothes around you I'm not going to want to stop until I have you naked, and I get the feeling you're not quite ready for that."

"Not when I'm thinking clear," she admitted.

"Does that mean I muddle your thoughts?"

"That's one way of putting it. Dex, I'm sorry. Not only about your clothes but now dinner is ruined."

"That's okay. It was more than an equitable tradeoff."

"Excuse me?"

"The kiss, honey. That was worth a dousing in Chinese take-out any day of the week."

She smiled and shook her head. "Flatterer."

"Just telling the truth, babe. And the truth is, I'd like to do this again. Well, not being drowned in hot and sour soup. But dinner. And most definitely the kissing part. You game?"

"Yeah, most definitely."

"Then how about next weekend? Come see my set then afterwards we'll have dinner and make out on the dance floor."

"Now how could a girl refuse such an offer?"

"I'm hoping you can't."

"I most definitely can't," she said.

"Then I'll call you and let you know the time. Want to ride with me? I have to be there early to set up."

"Sure."

"Okay, great. Now I'm gonna hit the bricks. Chances are Willie Brown's gonna go nuts and try to eat my pants when he smells the Chinese."

"Okay."

"But before I go," he said and pulled her to him again. "How 'bout one for the road, Red?"

Stella laughed in delight. "You got it."

The kiss he delivered had her wishing she had the courage to throw caution to the wind and rip his clothes off right then and there. But she knew it wasn't time for that. Dex might light her up like a string of Christmas bulbs but she wasn't ready to take the big plunge.

"Damn, Red. You do make it hard on a man," he said when the kiss ended. "Okay, I'm outta here. Talk to you soon."

"I'll be here."

Stella watched him leave the room then looked around at the mess. What a disaster. In all the history of first dates, this one had to take the cake. She bet Dee would laugh her ass off over this.

And for the first time in many years, Stella didn't mind that. It almost startled her when she realized it. Meeting Fenella Whitfield had been the start of a period of change for her. Fenella, or Fenny as her friends called her, was involved with Michael, one of the attorneys at the firm where Stella worked. Michael had introduced her to Fenny. Fenny was a well-known author of romance and she and Stella had hit it off, talking about writing.

That led to Fenny introducing Stella to the whirlwind, Dee. Dee was a photographer and a writer whose western romances had become the staple in a lot of women's homes. Through Fenny and Dee she'd also met another writer, Nadine Summers, the creator of the comic sensation Steampunk Suzie.

Three women as different as night to day in almost every respect and yet the best of friends. It hadn't taken them long to find secure lodgings in her heart and that friendship was causing Stella to ease away from the cool corporate attorney façade she'd so carefully constructed and be more relaxed.

It'd accomplished what her sister Callie and her parents had been wishing for since Stella's husband died. It had eroded that wall of ice she'd erected around her emotions and allowed the woman she'd once been to begin a reemergence.

That scared Stella a little. She'd put so much energy into suppressing who she'd once been and trying to make herself into the public persona she'd created, that letting go of it was like being the only fish at a shark convention. In short, frightening.

But not as much as it once was. Now she had friends. And Dex. Well, she didn't really have him, but she sure was interested in him and excited about seeing him again.

And excited about telling her friends. Maybe their wish for her was starting to come true. Maybe she *was* going to get her groove back.

Chapter Four

Stella was surprised how good the band was. Until now she'd suffered from a mild case of prejudice, wondering why a man Dex's age was content playing clubs and small venues and not pursuing a recording contract. Dee had suggested that perhaps Dex was more like her than Stella. Stella obsessed over her career—legal and writing. She wanted to win the biggest, most media-worthy cases and fretted over every book and whether it would hit a bestseller list. Whereas Dee didn't worry about those things. In terms of sales, she was far below Stella's level of success but it didn't bother her. She wrote because she loved it, not because she was seeking to be the most successful, famous or popular. Maybe that's the way it was for Dex. Music was his passion. For someone people the passion was enough.

That might be true and on some level she understood it, but the days of following passions were gone for her. She'd succumbed to that once and it had cost her everything she loved. Now she shied away from people who did follow that path. Color her shallow, but that way of life was something she wasn't ready to deal with. And, she realized as she watched him, swept up in the passion of his music, she had used it as armor to prevent Dex from gaining a foothold in her heart. She didn't have to deny the purely physical hunger he inspired, though. A hunger that had enjoyed a tremendous spike ever since he stepped foot on stage.

It felt like a fantasy of sorts. The club was packed and it seemed that a majority of the people were women. Women literally screaming over Dex. Stella would never allow herself to do such a thing, but she understood their enthusiasm. He was good. No, better than good. He was mesmerizing.

His fingers danced on the guitar, his body moving in time to the beat. Eyes closed, with an expression of ecstasy of his face, he made the guitar sing. When he opened his

eyes and leaned toward the mike, she held her breath. His eyes locked on her, singling her out as if he was singing only for her. It was enough to have something hot taking shape in her belly, tendrils winding up to circle her heart.

My god, could the man sing. Why had he never hit the big time? Talent like his shouldn't be playing a small venue like this. Imagine the frenzy he'd inspire in a large setting with thousands of people. Women would be killing to get at him. That thought brought an unexpected stab of something resembling jealousy that she quickly dismissed.

Stella clapped and cheered with the rest of the crowd when the band finished their last set. When he left the stage and walked to her table, she admired the grace and fluidity of his stride and noticed that more than one woman in the audience called out to him, offering a drink. It gave her ego a little boost when he leaned down and kissed her softly.

"You were wonderful." She smiled at him as he sat beside her.

He smiled and took her hand then looked up at the waitress who stopped beside their table.

"Can I get you anything, Dex?"

"Bottle of water would be great, Donna. Thanks."

"You got it."

"You certainly seem to have a lot of female admirers," Stella commented. She was all too aware of the looks being directed at them from the single females in the club. But not half as aware as she was of the way he was playing with her hand, caressing it, lifting it to graze her knuckles with his lips. Delicious and seductive, his touch evoked a hunger that had her thinking of more than soft kisses in a crowded room.

"Do you count yourself in that group?"

She smiled at the tease in his voice. "Perhaps."

Music came on over the speakers and Dex rose, pulling her to her feet. "Dance with me, Stella."

"My pleasure."

That's exactly what it proved to be. Dex not only knew how to dance, he knew how to dance well. It reminded her of the old film that coined the phrase "dirty dancing". By the time the first song ended her libido was red-lining.

A slow tune started and Dex pulled her up against him, taking her hands to guide them to his shoulders then running his hands down her arms to her sides and sliding around behind her to the small of her back to press her a bit tighter to him.

When she tilted her head back to look up at him his lips descended to meet hers. She was lost. His taste, the feel of his lean body moving in time with hers and arms tightening around her had her nerve endings singing much louder than the music. She forgot about the other people in the club and the eyes that watched. Lost in a cocoon of sensual pleasure and growing hunger, she gave herself to the kiss.

"Get a room, man." A voice beside them ended the spell. Stella pulled back as the drummer of Dex's band clapped him on the shoulder. "Later, bro."

"Be safe," Dex replied then turned his attention back to her. "Want to see the dressing room?"

Boy, did she ever. Dex had her humming like a high voltage wire. She might not be interested in hearts and flowers but a bout of sex was something she could use in a big way. She was tired of second-guessing herself and trying to figure out if he wanted the same things she did. She didn't have those answers but did know that she wanted him. And why shouldn't she indulge in that passion? Live out the nice little fantasy she had going?

"Lead the way."

Dex led her behind the stage and down a short corridor. He opened a door and gestured for her to enter, following behind her. Stella grabbed him by the shirt and pushed him back against the door the moment he closed it.

Her hands tore at his clothes, trying to rip the shirt loose from his pants as her mouth fastened to his. Reason no longer held sway. She wanted him too much, needed him too much.

"Slow down, babe." He pulled away and for a moment she thought she saw anger etched on his face. He opened his mouth then closed it with a slight shake of his head and yanked her to him for a savage kiss.

Yes. That's what she wanted, what she needed. When he pushed her back and started to unbutton his shirt, she reached for his belt. She had it and his pants undone by the time the shirt was open.

Stella knelt down, sliding his pants over his hips to bare him and reached for his cock with greedy hands. She fisted him, flicking her tongue over the engorged head. Dex's quick inhale was followed by his hands tangling in her hair. She opened her mouth, snaking her hands behind him to dig her fingers into the firm flesh of his ass as she worked her mouth over his cock.

She laved him, tormenting the head of his cock, and then swallowing as much of him as she could manage. "You like this?" She pulled back to look up at him, letting her hands drift around stroke him.

Dex pulled on her hair, bringing her to her feet. His mouth crushed on hers in a kiss that culminated in a moan when he worked his hand between her legs, digging beneath her skirt to cup her sex.

The moan apparently pleased him since the kiss got rougher and he slid her thong aside to ram his fingers inside her, stroking fast and hard.

"Oh god, yes," she mumbled against his mouth.

"Like that?" He straightened to look down into her eyes.

"Don't stop," she panted. "Please." The buildup of an orgasm had her writhing against him.

He rewarded her plea by yanking the shoulder of her dress down her arm and dragging the cup of her bra down to expose one breast. With one hand still fisted tightly in her hair, he pulled her head back causing her to arch against him to relieve the pressure.

When she did, he claimed the bare nipple with his mouth, his teeth nipping lightly.

God, she was like a rocket at final countdown, ready for liftoff any moment now. "Oh god, yessss..." Stella moaned and rolled her hips as he continued to stroke his fingers inside her.

"Ahhhh!" Reality exploded into endless sensation. She shuddered, clinging to him until the wave passed.

Dex watched her, feeling the vibrations that shook her body and the warm wetness that spilled into his hand. He knew that if he wanted, he could sink into that silky heat, pound against her and ease the hunger that gnawed at him.

But that would be a mistake. This felt like a mistake. What had just happened was nothing more than physical gratification. He'd scratched an itch, been her human sex toy so that she could get off.

There was a time that would have been enough for him but he'd passed that stage. What he wanted was not a quick fuck, a convenient release. He could take care of that for himself if that's all that mattered.

He wanted to see something in those blue eyes of her. No, not just something. He wanted to see what Robert had captured in that portrait. Hunger iced with a liberal frosting of emotion.

Stella sagged against him for a moment then reached for his cock. He put his hands on top of hers, staying her motion.

"Don't you want...?" The shocked expression on her face spoke volumes. She was more than willing to help him get off, return the favor. But that's all that it was.

And that wasn't near enough.

"I'm good."

"You don't want..." She felt the heat of embarrassment wash over her. What was going on here? She knew he wanted her so why had he suddenly turned cool?

He kissed her lightly. "Come on. I'll have Donna call you a cab. I need to get my guitar and amps packed up and talk with the club owner so I'll be a while."

She didn't know what to say so she just arranged her clothes as he pulled up his pants, buttoned his shirt and opened the door. In silence they made their way back into the club. Dex had the waitress call a cab for her then gave her a quick kiss, promised to call her soon and disappeared into the back again.

Stella felt a sudden swell of tears threaten and she hurried to the ladies room. Snatching her cell phone from her purse she dialed the first number that came to mind.

"Yeah?" Dee's voice sounded sleepy.

"You awake?"

"What's wrong?"

Stella fought back the sob that rose at her friend's astute ability to read the tone of her voice. "Can I come over?"

"Sure."

"Thanks. See you soon."

After cleaning up a bit, she washed her hands, dried her face, and went back to the bar. "Your cab's here," the waitress announced.

Stella thanked her and hurried out, giving the driver Dee's address. Then she loosened the reins on her tears and had herself a good cry.

Chapter Five

"Stell, I don't think he thought you were cheap," Dee protested. "Come on now, you're smart. Set what happened last night aside and think about the times you've been with him."

Stella wasn't sure she could even think straight at this point. She and Dee had been up all night while she alternately cried, cursed and worried about what had happened. In an hour or so the sun would rise and she wasn't feeling any better than when she arrived. Nor did she have the answer on what had gone wrong. She blew out her breath and snuggled deeper under the thick, soft quilt on Dee's bed.

"I don't know."

Dee rolled over and propped her head in one hand. "Okay, how about this? Has he done or said anything that would lead you to believe that he wasn't into sex or only into a certain kind? Is he looking for someone who's fast and furious, submissive and gentle? Is he looking for a fuck partner, a friend, or a lover? "

Realization had Stella's eyes flying open wide. "That's it! That's it, Dee."

"What's it?"

"Love. I could be wrong but I don't think so. Dex is looking for love."

"Ahhhh," Dee rolled over on her back, putting her hands behind her head. "And when you went at him all rough and tumble and then offered to—" she looked at Stella, "do him, it made him think you were just into getting off."

"Oh god," Stella covered her face with her hands. "I feel like such an ass."

"Why?"

"Why?" Stella dropped her hands. "*Why?*"

"Yeah. I mean obviously you're just looking for a fuck partner and if that's what you want then why should you feel bad that—"

"That isn't what I want!"

"Damn, Stella, I'm as confused as Dex. What the hell *do* you want?" Dee sat up, turning to face Stella. Had she not been so upset, Stella might have laughed. Dee looked like a kid. Her hair was pulled up in a sloppy knot on top of her head. An oversized pair of flannel pajamas with big cartoon characters enveloped her making her look like a little girl wearing her mother's clothes.

"Well, I want..." Stella couldn't finish the sentence because she didn't know the answer. Tears flooded her eyes. "I don't know. I just want to be happy."

"Ahhhh, Stell," Dee threw herself down beside Stella, one arm thrown over Stella's body and her head on Stella's shoulder, crying with her.

Stella lay her arm on top of Dee's, clutching the sleeve of her pajamas. God she was such a mess. How had she gotten like this and how was she going to figure out what it was she did want?

With that her last thought she drifted off into a troubled sleep.

* * * * *

Dex cursed as coffee sloshed over the rim of his cup. He hadn't slept much last night. The incident with Stella in the club had him tied up in knots. She probably thought he was a weirdo. What man turns down a blow job?

Damn, he should have gone along with it. At the least it would have relieved the need that Stella inspired, that hunger to sink between her luscious legs and ride her until they were both too sore to move.

But that would have been reverting to a Dex he no longer wanted to be. Fame and fortune might not have smiled on him in a big way, but as a musician he had his fair share of women offering themselves for his pleasure. He'd taken what had been offered more times than he wanted to remember and finally had realized what an empty,

meaningless act it was. Sure there was physical gratification, but that was all. Now he wanted more.

He'd thought maybe Stella was the woman he could find that "something more" with. Had he read her entirely wrong? Or was he trying to make her into what he'd imagined her to be based on a portrait painted more than a decade ago?

That prompted him to pick up the phone and call his friend, the artist, Robert.

"Hey, man."

"Dex? What the hell are you doing up?"

Dex hadn't even thought to check the time. "Sorry, man. Just chewing over something and needed some input."

"What's up?"

"Remember that portrait? The redhead?"

"Passion's lady. Yeah."

"What's the scoop with the model?"

There was a long moment of silence before Robert responded. "Odd question for seven in the morning. You wanna clue me in on why you'd ask?"

"I met her. Stella Walker. Been...seeing her. Just wanted to get the low-down. She married? Divorced? Should I run like hell?"

"Small world. Look Dex, all I can tell you is that I hadn't heard from her in more than ten years and suddenly she shows up at my gallery last year wanting the portrait."

"She sure waited a long time. Did she say why?"

"Tell you what. Let me wake up, get some caffeine in my system, and call you back."

"Sure."

"Talk to you soon."

Dex hung up the phone and sipped coffee, his mind too occupied with the dilemma of Stella to notice Willie Brown easing out of the back door and disappearing around the corner.

* * * * *

“Willie!” Stella sat straight up in bed, dislodging Dee who was draped across her like a rug, arms and legs akimbo.

Dee yelled, rolled off the side of the bed and landed on her feet a bit unsteadily. “What the hell?”

“Willie Brown. Dex’s dog. I just saw him get hit by a car.” Stella’s heart was pounding hard in her chest and acid born of sudden anxiety burned in her stomach. She had to get to Willie.

“You were dreaming.”

“No, I wasn’t. I was awake. I was just lying there trying not to wake you.”

Dee sat down on the bed as Stella sprang up and started gathering up her clothes.

“So this was some kind of vision?”

“Yes. Why are you just sitting there? Get dressed!”

“For what?”

Stella stopped long enough to look at Dee. “You have to take me to Willie. We have to save him.”

“Well where did you see him? If he’s close to home then why not just call Dex and have him go look—”

“Dee, please!”

To her credit, Dee didn’t put up any more argument. She stripped off her silly, oversized pajamas, threw on jeans, a sweatshirt, and boots and was looking for her keys in less than five minutes.

Stella hopped, propelling herself out of the bedroom while working her high-heeled shoes on one at a time. She didn't think about looking in a mirror or brushing her hair. All she could think about was what she'd seen. The old model compact swerving on the road, into the oncoming lane then off the road, the front left corner clipping Willie as he tucked tail and ran.

Dex would be devastated if Willie died. Hell, she'd be devastated. Willie Brown had become a fixture in her home. The days she arrived home from work and he wasn't waiting for her at the door, she felt let down.

As they neared her neighborhood she closed her eyes, trying to remember anything that would give a location where the accident had taken place. She remembered a mailbox. There were flowers stenciled on it.

"Turn at the next left!"

Dee jerked the wheel, turning the Wrangler with only a minor reduction in speed. Stella hung on for dear life. "Would you be careful?"

"You're still alive, aren't you?"

She couldn't really argue with that. Dee might be possessed of a lead foot and treat the roads like a NASCAR track, but she could handle a car.

"There!"

A cluster of vehicles blocked the road ahead. There was an ambulance, a fire truck and two police cars. Dee skidded to a stop and leapt out at the same moment Stella threw open the door.

Stella ignored the people, the heavy-set man with a compress on his forehead who was being questioned by a police officer. She raced to the other side of the road.

"Oh god! Willie!"

The dog's side rose and fell rapidly. At the sound of her voice he lifted his head and tried to stand. A yelp and a stumble had him back on the ground. Stella threw herself down beside him, looking up at the firefighters who watched.

"Well, don't just stand there, help me get him to a vet!"

"Is this your dog, ma'am?"

"What difference does it make? Move!"

"Where exactly do you want us to move him to?"

"My Jeep," Dee spoke up from behind them. Get the law to let me through and I'll pull around.

"Now!" Stella added when neither of the men moved.

One of them hurried off to talk to the police officer directing traffic. The other stayed, watching but not getting too close.

"It's okay," Stella, cooed, rubbing Willie, "You're going to be fine. We're going to get you all patched up."

It was only a couple of minutes but seemed like an eternity before Dee's Jeep pulled up. It took Stella, Dee and two men to get Willie loaded onto the small backseat of the Jeep. Stella was just opening the passenger door to get into the Jeep when a police officer hurried over.

"Ma'am? I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to stay."

"Why?"

"The driver claims the dog ran him off the road and wants to press charges against the owner."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Maybe, but you were in violation of the leash law."

Stella looked at Dee who sat behind the steering wheel. "It's okay," Dee said. "I'll take care of him. You deal with this."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Just tell me where the nearest emergency vet clinic is and I'm outta here."

"Oh god, I don't know." Stella looked at the police officer. He provided Dee with directions.

Stella watched Dee drive off then sucked in her breath, mentally clapped on her attorney hat and prepared for battle.

* * * * *

Dex was just finishing his conversation with Robert when he heard the beep of an incoming call. He checked the caller ID. It was his mother.

"I need to go. Mom's calling."

"No problem. Hey to Mom."

"Will do. Talk soon."

Dex clicked over to the incoming call. "Hey, Mom. What's up?"

"That's what I was calling to ask you. I was starting to think you'd gone MIA."

"Nope, just busy."

There was a long silence before his mother spoke again. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing my ass. I can tell from the tone of your voice."

Dex smiled. He'd never been able to fool his mother. She could read him like an open book, even from a thousand miles away. He poured himself the last cup of coffee in the pot and launched into the dilemma he had over Stella Walker. Dex didn't bother to leave anything out. Talking about sex with his mother wasn't uncomfortable. Maybe that was because she'd been so young when she had him.

She'd gotten pregnant at fourteen and refused to abort the baby even though it meant her rather highbrow family shipping her off to live with her great aunt on her mother's side. The one who was considered a bit odd and had lived an unorthodox life.

She'd raised Dex on her own for the first ten years then met and fallen in love with the man he'd come to love and consider his father.

His mother listened patiently. When he finally finished, he mentally held his breath and waited for her comments.

“Well, son, the way I see it you just need to give this woman some time. Maybe what happened was her wanting one thing and acting on another.”

“Okay, that’s as clear as mud.”

She laughed, a sound that had always had the ability to lift his spirits. “Don’t be dense, child. We all have needs—physical and emotional. And it’s far easier to give in to the demands of the physical and try to deny the emotional.”

That made sense. Particularly considering what he’d learned from Robert about Stella’s past. “Yeah, I know. I guess I just needed to hear someone say it.”

“Well then, I guess my work here is done. Now stop brooding and go do something productive. Write a song. Walk the dog.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, Mom. Talk to you soon.”

He hung up the phone, dumped the remains of the coffee, and washed out the cup. A walk sounded like a good idea. It was a crisp morning with no threatening clouds. A walk would do him good. And Willie was always up for getting out.

“Willie!”

Dex waited, expecting to hear the click of nails against the hardwood floor. When Willie didn’t appear, he called again. Still nothing. That’s when he noticed the back door. Damn, how had Willie managed to get it open?

Dex grabbed a jacket and walked outside. Willie wasn’t in the yard. Which meant he was probably at Stella’s. Dex wasn’t sure he was ready to face Stella just yet, but then maybe she wouldn’t be up yet and he’d find Willie on the porch.

He was in front of her neighbor’s house when a police car pulled up in Stella’s driveway. Stella got out, leaned down and said something to the officer then closed the door. As the car backed out of the driveway she spotted him.

The last thing he expected was for her to break into a run toward him but that's exactly what she did. She threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in the crook of his neck.

Dex felt the sobs shake her body a moment before he heard the sound. Alarm had him tensing and pulling back. "What's wrong? Stella?"

Stella shook her head, trying to choke back the crying and regain command over her voice. "Willie." It was all she could manage before another fit overtook her. She hadn't heard from Dee and was terrified that Willie was hurt worse than she'd thought.

"What about Willie?" His hands tightened almost painfully on her arms. She looked up at him and suddenly her own grief and fear were slammed into second place. The look on his face had her heart focused on only one thing. Him.

"Can we go inside?" The sidewalk wasn't the proper place to tell him. Besides, it gave her a chance to ease her cell phone out of her pocket and press the shortcut for Dee's cell.

"Who're you calling?"

"Dee." She waited, counting the rings.

"He's okay." Dee answered on the fourth ring. "A fractured hip, couple of stitches and bruised. I'm gonna stay here with him until the anesthesia wears off and the doc thinks it's okay to take him home."

"Bring him to my house."

"You gonna call Dex?"

"Dex is with me now."

"Okay, see you in a bit."

Dex was watching her with an expression that seemed equal measures of dread and hope. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

"Willie was hit by a car."

"Hit? When? Where is he?"

Stella fished out her house key and unlocked the door. Dex followed her inside.

"Did you see it happen? Where is he and how —"

"Slow down. Please." She shrugged out of her coat and saw his eyes widen.

"You had that on last night."

"Yes."

"You didn't come home last night after you left?"

"No, I went to Dee's."

"So how'd you know about Willie? And where exactly is he?"

"I need coffee. Let's go to the kitchen and I'll explain."

Dex followed her into the kitchen, taking a seat at the table. She busied herself preparing coffee.

"I didn't come home last night because—well, let's just leave it at I didn't come home. I went to Dee's and spent the night. This morning..." Stella stopped in the act of cleaning the filter and stared out of the kitchen window. What she was about to say could be ringing the death knell on any hopes of a relationship with Dex.

Should she lie? It was tempting but something deep inside balked at the idea. If Dex wasn't able to handle it or didn't believe her then they weren't meant to move forward. She had to be honest. Nothing could be built on a foundation of lies.

"I was lying in bed and I had a vision. I saw Willie getting hit by a car."

She turned to look at Dex. He was watching, his eyes intense and his face set in an expression of anxiety and stress.

"And?"

Stella actually felt her knees weaken. My god, he believed her and didn't even blink at the idea of someone having a vision.

"And I woke Dee up and we raced over to find him."

Dex got up and walked to her, taking the filter from her and placing it on a towel on the counter. His hands cupped her face, tilting it so their eyes met. "You saved him."

"No. Not really. I was too late to prevent what happened. Dee and I just got him to a vet."

"You saved him, Stella. At least that's what was in your heart. You wanted to save him."

"I love him," her voice broke with emotion.

Dex would not allow her to lower her head. His thumbs smoothed away the tears that tracked down her face. "And me."

The words shocked him as they emerged. Where had that come from? An hour ago he was wondering if he could ever be anything more than a fuck buddy with Stella and now he was announcing that she loved him?

Yet even as he questioned it, he knew it to be true. He could see it in her blue eyes, knew that it scared her and she didn't want it to be true. But it was. Maybe it wasn't the happily-ever-after, two-point-two children and a house with a white picket fence, but it was still love.

She blinked, opened her mouth and closed it then blinked again. "Dex, I..."

"I know. You're scared. So am I. But running from something doesn't make it go away, Stella. Running only gets you chased by what you're running from."

"It makes no real sense that we'd have strong emotions about one another this early in the game—unless it's fate. I do believe in fate, honey, and if this is mine then I at least want to give it a chance to play itself out. I hope you do, too. We don't have to make promises but we can at least acknowledge that there's something here between us."

She nodded and closed her eyes. It was a gesture of surrender made even sweeter by the soft exhale of breath and the way her body relaxed and leaned in against his. Her

arms circled his waist and he moved his hands to wrap his arms around her body and hold her close.

For a long time neither of them moved nor spoke. They simply held one another. When she finally pulled back, her eyes were still possessed of a look of wariness. "Dex, there's some things I need to tell you."

"Okay."

"Can we sit?"

"Sure."

Stella took his hand and led him into the living room. They both sat on the couch, her with her legs tucked up beneath her, her body angled to face him.

"First," she said. "I was married once. We met in college. He was my first real love. We both graduated from Georgia State with law degrees and we were involved in environmental law. Well, to be more honest we were more like activists."

"We moved around quite a bit, following the various causes and getting work where we could. It was kind of a meager lifestyle, but we were happy. When we couldn't find legal work I did..."

She paused and cleared her throat, obviously nervous. Dex took her hand and smiled. "It's okay, Stella. Whatever it is, it's okay."

She nodded and gave him a weak smile. "We'd find town festivals and carnivals and I'd do card readings."

When she fell silent and watched him expectantly he realized she was waiting for him to make fun of what she'd said, to show disdain for the idea or dismiss it. "I kind of figured you had some kind of gift, honey, when you told me about the vision you had of Willie."

"You mean you...you believe in that kind of thing?"

Dex couldn't suppress a chuckle or a flash of his mother's face in his mind. "Baby, my mom is probably one of the original New Agers. There's not much I dismiss or discount."

The relief was clear on her face. "Really?"

"Really."

Stella's body literally slouched—a position completely out of character with what he'd seen so far. "God, what a relief. I was sure you'd think I was a kook."

Dex pulled her over so that she was leaning back against him, his arms snugly around her and clasped in her lap. "Nope. Now you were saying?"

The words spilled out of her. She told him about her parents, her sister, her marriage, and her husband's death. And she told him about the portrait. She'd had it commissioned as a gift for her husband for their anniversary. He died before she could give it to him and she hadn't been able to look at it or think about it for years.

By the time she finished her voice was raspy. Dex held her, pressing his face into her hair and closing his eyes. It couldn't have been easy for her to tell him what she had, to let it all out into the open. He was grateful she had because now he understood why she'd been holding him at arm's length—why she'd been so afraid to let her emotions come into play.

"I really didn't mean to make you feel like I see you just as a sex toy," she said softly.

Dex smiled and released her when she turned to face him. "That's okay, honey. Hell, I'd be happy to be your sex toy. Long as it's a toy you care about."

"I do. I really do, Dex."

"So do I, Stella."

She smiled and kissed him softly. "Want me to fix you some breakfast?"

"Maybe later."

"Okay." Stella straightened with a grimace. "I really need a shower."

“That sounds good to me.”

She gave him a smile sexy enough to have his cock go into immediate stand-and-salute mode. “Well, come with me,” she cooed, and rose to pull him to his feet.

He claimed her with a kiss when he stood and she met it with passion that had him wanting to forego the shower and take her there in the middle of the living room. They managed to stumble their way down the hall and into the bathroom, lips meeting and parting, hands fumbling to remove clothing.

When she stepped into the hot spray in the shower and pulled him in with her, he pressed her back against the shower wall, devouring her with a kiss. Stella moaned into his mouth, lifting one leg to make room as she worked a hand between their bodies to fist his cock then rub it against her wet pussy.

Dex groaned. Dear god, she was potent. One push and he’d be inside her, enveloped in that hot, wet flesh. He almost made that push, but something had him looking down into her eyes instead.

And his world turned upside down. Free of makeup, her hair wet and plastered to her head, the Stella that looked up at him wasn’t the woman he’d known so far. Something was very different. He searched her eyes looking for it. What was it?

Then it hit him. All pretense was gone. The mask she’d worn—the cool and collected, super sexual but non-emotional façade was gone. There was no wariness, no mistrust or barrier. Emotion, real emotion shone bright in her eyes.

And it annihilated him. Completely.

“Baby, slow down,” he whispered as she started to guide his cock inside her. “No need to rush. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

Stella went still in surprise. His tone wasn’t that of a sex partner but a real lover, someone with an emotional investment, someone who was making a promise without coming right out and saying it.

It embarrassed her that tears filled her eyes and a small lump lodged in her throat making her breath hitch. Then it thrilled her when he cupped her face in both hands and his eyes searched hers, looking inside her to places she'd grown accustomed to keeping private.

"It's okay, baby," he whispered. "You're safe. I promise."

When his lips met hers it was a kiss of promise and caring. Passion was there, strong enough to have her eager to feel him strong and hard inside her but the passion was colored with emotion. He took his time, exploring and tasting, the kiss tender and slow. It enflamed her, excited and thrilled her. And it frightened her. Not so much what she felt and sensed from him but what it inspired in herself.

Dex was right. She was falling in love with him. The fear housed within that realization flared bright and hot then faded like a shooting star. In its place was wonder and excitement. It'd been so long since she'd felt love filling her heart, making her weak in one breath and filled with energy in the next.

She gave herself to the kiss, letting him steer her under the warm spray of water, their bodies pressed together, the heat from their flesh matching the warmth of the liquid that cascaded over them.

Stella let go of everything else but that moment. It wasn't until the water started to cool that she realized just how long they'd stood there, kissing and touching.

Dex reached around her to turn off the water. "Want to invite me into your bed?"

"Most definitely."

Dex opened the shower doors to grab a towel and hand it to her. As she wrung out her hair and dried off, he did the same. She wasn't entirely dry when he took her hand and led her across the hall and into the bedroom.

He grabbed a handful of spread and blanket and yanked, sending pillows tumbling to the floor. Then he turned back to her and unfastened the towel she'd wound around her body.

"Before we go any further, I have to say this. I don't want to have sex with you."

Nothing could have shocked her more. Or dismayed her. "You don't?"

"No. I want to make love to you."

She nearly cried it choked her up so much. "Oh yes."

Dex smiled and laid her back on the bed. He sat beside her, letting his fingers trace down her body from face to thigh and then back up. "You are the most incredibly sexy woman I've ever seen in my life, Stella Walker. I've dreamed about this moment ever since I first laid eyes on the portrait."

She smiled up at him. "My friends just call me Stella. Or Stell."

"What do your lovers call you?"

Her smile faded. "I've only had one."

"Are you ready for another?"

"I don't know."

The moment the words were out of her mouth she knew they were not the right ones. It was clear in the expression on his face.

"Then what do you want, Stella?"

She couldn't articulate the feelings churning inside her and didn't try. Instead she sat up, slid her arms around his neck, and pulled his head down into a kiss. For her the kiss was one of offering and surrender. She loosed the restraints on everything inside her, opening herself so that she was emotionally bare for him.

Would Dex understand what the kiss implied? She didn't know but hoped that on an emotional level he would recognize what she offered. Maybe he did. His arms wrapped around her to pull her close as he deepened the kiss.

And she knew her entire world changed in that moment, in that kiss. The past receded to its proper place and the *now* blossomed. She knew beyond all doubt that she'd beaten the odds. She'd found her man.

With that realization an urgent need flared. Stella tore away from the kiss in a rash of impatience born of desperate need. Her lips moved down his neck and chest, tasting and biting until she stopped at his cock. It was like warm silk stretched tight over steel, a curious balance of soft and hard that had her mouth opening, eager to taste.

She ran her tongue over the head then down its length and back up to take him inside her mouth. There was no mistaking the hunger it inspired in him. His hands found their way into her hair, fisting as his body tensed.

Stella pulled away and lay back on the bed, holding out her hand to him. "If you really want to make love—"

"Stella!" Dee's voice bellowed from the hall. "Stell!"

"Oh shit!" It was all she had time to say before Dee bounded into the room.

"Hey now!" Dee's face registered surprise and she threw her hands up over her eyes and turned her back to them. "Damn ya'll. Put up a sign or something."

Stella and Dex were both scrambling for cover. "Damn, Dee, ever hear of knocking?"

"I did. A bunch. No one answered. And the door was open. I called out and you didn't answer. Thought maybe you were in the bathroom. I have Willie in the Jeep. I stopped at Dex's but no one was home so I brought him here. But I can't lift him by myself so I—"

"If you'll let me get to my clothes, I'll take care of it," Dex said.

"Hey dude, I don't have your feet nailed to the floor. By all means get to your clothes."

"They're in the bathroom across the hall."

"Oh!" Dee kept her hands over her eyes and sidestepped. "Okay, you're clear."

Stella couldn't resist a giggle as Dex slid out of bed and cautiously made his way past Dee. As soon as the bathroom door closed, Dee dropped her hands and whirled to face Stella.

"Bad timing, huh? I swear I didn't mean to screw anything up."

Stella laughed and got out of the bed and started pulling clothes from the chest of drawers. "It's okay. The important thing is that Willie's okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, positive."

"Whew. Okay, well I guess I'll head outside and keep Willie company 'til you guys are decent."

"Thanks, Dee."

"You betcha." Dee started out of the door then stopped. "And Stell? You and Dex? You're smokin' hot. I mean it. Maybe one day I can shoot the two of you. You know, some sexy stuff?"

Stella opened her mouth to protest but to her surprise what emerged was a giggle. There was one thing she could say about Dee. Nothing broke her stride for long.

Chapter Six

Stella cradled the phone between her face and shoulder, holding a black silk sheath dress in front of her as she looked in the dressing mirror. "I had a great time, too. And everyone loved you, Callie. You can bet that if Dee said she'd call you, she will."

Going to the closet as she listened to her sister Calliope talk about how thrilled she was to meet Fenny, Dee and Dini, Stella hung up the sheath and flipped through her clothes.

"I'm so glad Fenny meet Eden. She's really interesting, isn't she? And who would've thought that someone who writes such edgy medical thrillers would own a New Age shop?"

"Oh, and I hope you listened to her Cal—about your writing. You really should get serious about that book you've been researching. There's more to life than reading and entering contests, you know."

It was something of a standing joke, Calliope's habit of entering every contest she heard about. To date she'd never won anything, but it didn't dampen her enthusiasm for whatever was next to come along.

Stella did wish her sister would get out a little more. She hadn't had a date in two years and spent most of her evenings reading or writing romance reviews for an online review site. She'd talked a lot about trying to write, but thus far nothing had materialized.

Making a mental note to encourage Calliope more in that direction, Stella pursed her lips and considered her reflection. Maybe something with some color. She was just returning to the closet for another search when another call beeped in. She checked the caller ID. It was Dex.

"That's Dex. I gotta scoot. Talk to you soon. Love you!"

Before Calliope had a chance to respond, Stella clicked over to the incoming call. "Hello?"

"Hey, gorgeous."

"Hey yourself. I was just getting dressed."

"What a shame."

"Well, we could always eat at home," she teased.

"Be there in five, babe."

The line went dead, leaving Stella stunned. She hadn't expected him to take her up on the offer. In less than a minute she'd put away the black dress she obviously wasn't going to wear, peeled off the white bra and panties and replaced them with black lace edged in red.

It took two minutes to decide what to wear with the black bra, thong and garter belt. Black stockings? Nude? Fishnet? In the end she settled on nude topped with black lace. An oversized white man's dress shirt and flaming red stilettos completed her outfit.

By the time the doorbell rang her lips glistened, her hair was brushed and an aura of perfume wafted around her. She hurried to the door, took a deep breath and opened it.

Dex's eyes moved from her face, slowly down to her feet clad in fuck-me-heels then equally as slowly back up. "Oh baby," he murmured and stepped inside, closing the door behind him and placing the large basket he held on the floor.

Stella's skin warmed at just the expression on his face. He reached out to run his hand along the side of her face and back into her hair. "Red, you could tempt a saint."

"Are you a saint?"

"Hardly."

"Good."

Dex smiled and leaned down, his fingers tightening in her hair as his lips moved up to brush softly over hers again. The touch was as soft as a whisper yet possessed of enough energy to have electric need sliding through her like hot silk.

She was almost too much of a temptation. There was part of Dex's mind yelling for him to rip off that shirt and throw her onto the floor. That was the part of him that'd been waiting too long to sample what she had to offer. Another gentler part, the aspect of himself he tried hard to cultivate, encouraged him to take it slow. Stella was a woman who deserved to be seduced.

Fighting back his own need, Dex moved his lips over the point of her chin and down the soft column of her neck, lingering at the hollow of her throat where her heartbeat pulsed. The feel of that increasing beat against his lips quickened his excitement and made every slow kiss an exercise in self-control.

When his lips moved back to hers, he couldn't quell the sudden bout of hunger. He wanted to taste her, devour her, and feel her quake against him. His lips were more demanding than he intended but the shock was her response. It was heated and hungry and the kiss quickly turned into one of need, each of them trying to feed their own hunger.

Stella's body pressed against his, fueling the fire and tearing at his tenuous control. It took more effort than he'd want to admit to reestablish control, and it was only after his mind had started to clear that he realized he had her in a grip like a vise. Easing up on the hold he had on her, he slowed the kiss then pulled away.

It almost took his breath when he looked at her. Her eyes were dark with passion and her skin flushed. He wasn't going to last five minutes. Just looking at her made him want to come.

This had to be about her, he reminded himself. It was time to put his plan into action and stop letting his dick lead him around. He picked up the basket and held it out to her. "Take this."

"Okay." She took the handle of the basket and when he released it, it sagged. "Damn, what've you got in here?"

"That you will soon see," he replied and swept her up into his arms. "Now, let's see, where shall we begin? Ah yes."

He carried her into the dining room. "Put the basket on the table."

The moment she did, he moved his arm from beneath her legs, holding her with his free arm so that she slid slowly to the floor, her body pressed up against his on the way. Dex pulled out a chair and gestured toward it. "My lady."

Stella laughed and took a seat. "What're you doing?"

"Tonight," he said as he opened the basket, "you are my prisoner. Did I mention that Blackbeard was in my family tree? Well, anyway, tonight I'm a rogue of the sea, in port for only the night. And this night my pleasure will be the capture of a beautiful, very sexy princess, whom I will subject to all manners of delicious torture."

"Do tell? Torture? Shall I quake in fear, Sir Pirate?"

"Oh but yes." He grinned at her. "Now let me prepare. First...." He pulled out two candles, already firmly held in silver candlesticks. Once he'd placed them on the table and lit them, he proceeded to empty the basket.

When he'd finished, the table held a bottle of champagne, glasses and many small platters of sweets and confections.

"Yum," Stella said with a smile. "Bring on the torture."

"First, the preparations," Dex said and pulled a set of padded restraints from the basket.

He started to fasten her right arm to the chair but paused, looking at her for permission. She smiled at him. "Well, a girl can hardly be a prisoner if she's not properly restrained."

"That's my girl. I mean, wise choice, princess." He removed a black silk scarf from the basket and fastened it around her head, covering her eyes.

When he stepped back and looked at her, his cock nearly split his pants. Even when he'd fantasized about this he hadn't imagined she'd look so sexy, cuffed to the chair in that white shirt that displayed all of those gorgeous long legs and parted just enough at the bottom to give him a glimpse of her lace-covered mound.

Stella heard him move then there was silence. What was he doing? The unmistakable sound of a champagne cork being popped. The faint clink of glass on glass preceded the sound of liquid and a slight fizz.

"Surely you must be parched, Princess," Dex said.

A moment later she felt the rim of the glass against her lips. She allowed him to feed her a sip, licked her lips, and smiled. "Ummm, good."

A few moments passed before she felt the touch of something on her lips. "Open, Princess."

It was creamy and soft at first, then rough. What was it? It was kind of round, but with a point.

"Bite."

She did and the taste exploded in her mouth. Strawberry dipped in chocolate. One of her all-time favorite things. "Oh god, that's—" The rest of her words were cut off when his lips closed on hers.

The combination of champagne, chocolate, strawberry and Dex was sublime. She leaned her head back, losing herself in the taste and feel. Being unable to move and blindfolded seemed to amplify the sensations coming to her from his touch and taste. She was surprised to discover just how erotic and exciting it was.

And how disappointed she felt when his lips left hers. But the disappointment was shortlived. Dex fed her bites of decadently rich and delicious desserts and confections, washing the bites down with more champagne and kisses.

She couldn't begin to guess how much time had passed, but knew for sure that her libido was starting to redline and he hadn't done more than kiss her. Not once did he put his hands on her. And she wanted him to. Badly.

Something rubbed her bottom lip. His finger. It moved away, but left something creamy behind. As she opened her mouth to lick her lip he took her lip into his mouth, sucking and licking the creamy mixture then sucking her tongue into his mouth.

"Ummm," he murmured. "Delicious."

The next sip of champagne found its way down Stella's chin, only to be sucked off. For each bite or sip he fed her, he took his share off parts of her skin. The game was getting far more interesting as the food and drink found its way to her neck and the area of her chest exposed by the partially unbuttoned shirt.

"I do believe you enjoy this kind of torture," he whispered in her ear. "Fortunately, this is just an...appetizer. For our main course, I'm going to have to move you."

Stella was all for it. Her body was taut with anticipation and her panties wet with need. She heard him releasing the restraints from the chair. They remained fastened to her wrists. She started to ask why but he pulled her to her feet and into his arms and all thought fled her mind.

God he felt good. And smelled good. Inhaling deeply, she felt her pulse quicken. His body was hard against hers, particularly a prominent appendage that pressed against her. She started to put her arms around his waist but he swept her up into his arms again.

She tried to determine where they were headed. When he fumbled a moment then stepped back, she felt cool air on her skin and realized he had to be taking her outside.

"I hope this is the back door," she remarked. "I'd hate to be putting on a show for the neighbors."

Dex chuckled. "I noticed a nice chaise on your deck."

"And?"

“And I think that makes a perfect place for the main course.”

Stella wasn't sure what he had in mind and before she had a chance to decide, her feet were on solid ground and Dex was holding her close.

“Uh, I thought you said something about main course?”

“Right you are. Tonight you're the main course. And I'm going to devour every delicious inch of you.” Dex cupped one hand on the back of her head and pulled her to him in a fevered kiss that silenced any thoughts of protest.

His mouth was hot, his tongue demanding as he explored her mouth with enough skill to have her knees feeling decidedly weak. If that was not fuel enough for the fire burning inside her, when his mouth moved to her neck, she felt like icing melting on a cake just fresh out of the oven. She leaned her head back into the palm of his hand, reveling in the feel of his mouth on her skin.

Stella's breath caught in her throat as Dex took hold of her shirt and pulled it open, sending button flying. His mouth moved into her cleavage, his tongue dipping between her breasts then up to lick and suck at the mounds above her bra.

She couldn't stop the small moan that came from her mouth. Her hands were tightened into fists and her body tense with the electrifying sensations rioting through her.

Dex licked, sucked and bit his way around and up the side of her neck. When he captured her earlobe between his teeth, her legs trembled. “Dex,” she breathed shakily.

“Ah, Red. You're so hot,” he whispered in her ear. “So delicious.”

His lips descended on hers and she strained to press as tightly as possible against him, returning the kiss with as much passion as he delivered. They were both breathing hard when he pulled back.

His hands closed on her upper arms and guided her. She felt the edge of the chaise against the back of her legs and he steered her down into it. Once she was reclined, he fastened each of her wrists to the armrests on the lounge.

"Do we need the restraints?" she asked. "Or the blindfold? I want to see and touch you."

"And you will. In time. But tonight I want you to experience the sensations with no distractions. I want you to *feel*. That's it. Just feel."

"Okay."

Cool air whispered over her skin as he pulled aside the shirt and popped the front clasp of her bra. Her nipples puckered as much from excitement as the cool air.

She felt his hands on her hip. A swift tug and the elastic of her thong snapped. "Sorry about this," he said and proceeded to snap the other side. She felt the slide of lace against her sex as he pulled the thong free then the shift of the chaise as he propped his hands beside her wrists and leaned over to capture her earlobe in a playful nip.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered.

She felt his weight as he sat on one side of the lounge. A few seconds later she gasped when his mouth touched her neck. The feel of his lips traveling down her neck and his hands cupping her breasts sent fire sizzling through her. His thumbs tracked over her nipples, each pass making them harder, making her want more.

Stella couldn't remember feeling so alive, so filled with desire. Her skin felt electrified, each touch, each breath or waft of air like a current that drove her desire higher.

Dex's mouth closed on one nipple. She nearly came up off the lounge, her body arched so suddenly. There was no fighting this kind of sensation, no way to deny its effect. She surrendered to it, moaning as his tongue flicked at the hard nub.

"That's it, baby," he crooned. "Let go."

She couldn't respond verbally except to take a deep breath as he claimed the other nipple. Her fingers clawed at the arms of the lounge, the fast scrape of nails on wood an accompaniment to her irregular heavy breaths and her skin sliding over the material of the lounge as she wiggled and writhed.

Dex's hand was warm against her skin as it traveled down her stomach and over the top of her pelvis to cup her sex. As he suckled and teased her nipples with his mouth, she tilted her pelvis up, grinding against his hand. He curved his middle finger just enough to slide inside her pussy. Stella rocked harder against his hand and two of his fingers slid deep inside her.

Her shoes had long ago been kicked off, and her stocking peeled away and left lying on the deck. Her bare toes curled against the cool planks of the deck. God, this was good. If she just had more leverage, she could push against those delicious strokes a bit harder.

Feeling around, the big toe of her right foot moved over a section of board that had a knothole in it. It was just big enough to wiggle her toe into. Oh yeah, now she could push. And push she did, meeting the movement of his hand as he stroked deeper and faster.

"Ahhh," Stella quaked, her pussy clenching on his fingers. God she had a short fuse. She rocked her pelvis in time with the rhythm of his hand, forgetting everything but the exquisite sensations running rampant through her body.

The rhythm of Stella's body and the smell of her sex drove Dex dangerously close to the edge. The slow, seductive dance her body performed against his hand was pushing him ever closer. While fighting for control, he worked his mouth down her body, tracing his tongue over the small, neatly trimmed patch of hair on her mound then lower.

She spread her legs, allowing him easy access, and he ran his tongue along the outer edge of her lips. As he'd expected, she was as sweet as honey. He laved her like a child with an ice-cream cone—all around the outside, working over and between the labia then up to circle the hard bud of her clit. With each pass of his tongue it hardened and she quivered.

The quiver intensified when he captured her clit in his mouth and began to flick his tongue rapidly over it. He picked up the tempo of his fingers, working them in and out of her wet pussy faster and harder.

She moved her hips in rhythm with his hand, her fingers scraping over the wooden lounge arms in quick strokes.

"Oh. Oh god," she moaned a split second before her body quaked and wetness filled his hand. Dex did not pull away from her clit until her body relaxed, and then he straightened and slid his fingers from inside her.

"Ummm," she murmured with a sexy smile.

"Ummm is just the beginning," he replied. Unfastening the restraints, he pulled off the blindfold. Stella blinked, stretched like a long, lazy cat, and smiled up at him with a look that had to have been what inspired the myth of sirens that lured sailors to their watery deaths.

The smile soon faded, to be replaced with a look of desire that had his balls aching. He saw no need for words. Taking her hands, he stood and pulled her to her feet. She stumbled against him.

"Oh shit!" Her right leg started jerking.

That was the absolute last reaction he'd expected or hoped for. "What?"

"My toe." She looked up at him. "It's stuck."

Dex looked down. Sure enough, her big toe was wedged into a knothole all the way past the knuckle. He knelt down and wrapped one hand around her ankle and the other under her foot. And tugged. Nothing.

"I think we have a problem," he said as he stood.

Stella wanted that knothole to suddenly expand and swallow her. How horribly embarrassing. "What am I going to do?"

“You just sit down. I’ll grab a blanket for you and then run over to my house. I have tools. I can get you out of this. I promise. Just don’t worry.”

He hurried inside and she sank down on the lounge, staring at the deck and her stuck toe. Dex returned with the throw from the sofa and wrapped it around her. After a quick kiss he raced down the steps of the deck and disappeared into the darkness.

Stella shook her head. What were the odds? She finally found a man to generate some genuine heat with and look what happened. Dee would roll on the floor over this one.

Chapter Seven

"Oh god!" Dee howled and flopped over sideways on the couch. "Did he actually have to saw you free?"

"Yes. God, what a nightmare. I felt like the biggest idiot."

"Hey, it wasn't your fault. Besides, you were just—uh, looking for a way to dig in and hang on."

"Funny," Stella said to the sound of Dee going into another laughing fit. After a few moments, Dee straightened.

"I'm sorry. Seriously, Stell. But damn, girl. Seems like every time you guys start heating up some calamity strikes. You two better take it straight to the bedroom next time."

"Tell me about it."

"But hey, it was good, right?"

Stella smiled. "Oh god yes. It was...I don't even know how to describe it."

"I think you just did. Way to go, Stell. Sounds like you're really getting that groove back."

"I hope. If..." Stella couldn't make herself say the words. She'd had three more visions about Dex. Two of them making love and another of them at a big party where people were talking about the happy couple. Was it her and Dex in the vision who were getting married? She couldn't even let herself consider such a thing. Marriage was not something she had in mind. Not again. And she barely even knew Dex.

"If what?"

"Nothing."

"No, it's not nothing. What?" Dee grew serious.

Stella got up and walked over to the window, hugging her arms close to her body. The idea of confiding in someone about the visions was so tempting. But what if Dee thought she was crazy? Stella had avoided talking about the vision she'd had about Willie Brown and so far Dee hadn't brought it up either.

"Stell?"

Stella turned and saw the look of concern on Dee's face. "I...shit; it's these visions."

"Yeah, we never did really talk about that vision thing.?"

"Have you ever known anyone who had...visions?"

Dee's eyebrows drew together in a slight frown. "Aside from my mom? No. Why?"

"Your mother had visions?"

"Yeah, she's kinda...unique that way. Why?"

"I have them."

"Visions?"

"Yeah."

"As in seeing your kid fall off the roof where they're perched with homemade Icarus wings getting ready to take the plunge, visions?" Dee asked.

"Please tell me that didn't happen."

Dee held up her right arm and pointed to a scar on the outside, just below the elbow. "Bone jabbed all the way out of the skin."

"And your mother saw it?"

"Yeah, she was at work. She owned the local beauty salon. Soon as it happened she high-tailed it home and found me in the backyard. My brothers scattered like rats on a sinking ship. Rat bastards. They're the ones who helped me build the wings. But that's beside the point. You have those kinds of visions?"

"Not exactly. But I do get glimpses now and then."

"And?"

Stella stared at Dee in shock. She'd expected Dee to be put off, to disbelieve, to call her crazy – anything but accept it. "And you don't think that's odd?"

"Not really. We all have different skill sets. Some people just tap into stuff the rest of us don't."

"Have you ever had anything like that? I mean with your mother and all?"

Dee shook her head. "I get gut feelings but nothing visual. May not even be the same thing. But I do trust those gut reactions. So having visions freaks you out?"

"No – yes. It didn't used to but then..."

"Then what?"

Stella's throat tightened and long-suppressed emotion welled to the surface. "I...I had a glimpse before my husband died. Nothing clear, just this sudden darkness and a feeling of fear. I told him not to go meet the client who called. To wait until the next day. But he went anyway."

"He didn't believe you?"

"No. I mean he did believe that I sometimes had flashes of insight, but he didn't believe that anyone could see the future – or alter it. And he didn't really believe in things like psychics. Mostly it was a joke to him. Not that he made fun of me, but he did sort of affectionately dismiss it."

"And you think Dex will do the same thing?"

"Why wouldn't he? Dee, I can't walk that road again. I didn't ask for this...ability, but it's there and I don't want to have to try to hide it or pretend it doesn't exist. I did that once – for love – and look what happened."

"Stell, you just have to stop beating yourself up over the past. It's not healthy."

"But what if I'd tried harder? Convinced him that he shouldn't go? Maybe he wouldn't have been in that car, wouldn't have been in the path of that truck."

"Or maybe it would have happened the same way," Dee argued. "Stella, you've got to let go of that."

"I don't know if I can."

"Wouldn't he want you to?"

Stella thought about the question for a long time then nodded. "Yes, I think he would."

"Then let it go."

"But what if Dex is the same way? Where does that leave me? Do I hide it and try to build something with Dex knowing there's a part of me that I'll always be trying to keep hidden from him? Or do I tell him the truth and take the risk that he freaks out—or worse, treats it like a joke?"

"Ah." Dee nodded and leaned back, appearing suddenly relaxed again. "I get it."

"You do?"

"Sure. There're lots of things I'm not keen on revealing to Cam. Like the bit about my mom. Or that the idea of marriage scares the holy bejesus out of me."

"It does? Why?"

"Hey now, this isn't about me."

Stella smiled and wandered over to sit next to Dee on the couch, curling her legs up beneath her and angling to face Dee. "It's hard, isn't it? Letting people in."

"Damn hard."

"What if he doesn't like the real me, Dee?"

Dee reached out and took her hand. "What's not to like, Stell? You're beautiful, talented, smart and one tough cookie when you need to be. But you're a good person. Kind and caring. You have a lot to offer. Besides, if he doesn't like the whole package then he isn't the man for you and you don't want him anyway."

"Is that what keeps you from letting Cam in on all the dark secrets?"

Dee grimaced. "Just the opposite. He accepts all of it. Might not like some of it, but he accepts it. And that's even scarier."

"How so?"

"Because it means he really *is* the one for me and I don't know that I'm ready for that. I'm used to being a me and a him. Not an us or we."

"Being an 'us' can be pretty nice, Dee."

Dee nodded. "Yeah, it can. But—damn, Stell, I could lose myself. Cam gives me feelings that make me want to chuck the photography thing and settle down. And what if settling down makes me lose what I am?"

"Big questions."

"Yep." Dee smiled. "We all got 'em, sister. Oh, speaking of sisters, I ran into your sister at a bookstore the other day. I really like her."

"Yeah, Callie's great."

"I'm looking forward to getting to know her."

"I think it'll be really good for her."

"Great. Well look, babe, I gotta hit the road. Cam's flying in tonight so I need to get all spiffed up and ready. You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Good. And just remember. It's not about whether you're good enough for him, Stell. It's whether he's good enough—or right—for you."

"Spoken like a true friend."

"Bet your sweet ass." Dee grinned and rose. "Give me a call tomorrow and let me know how it goes. But not too early. I plan on keeping Cam up *real* late tonight."

"Okay. Have fun."

"You know I will. See ya!"

Stella watched Dee bounce out of the room, thinking about what Dee had said. Until now she'd not considered it, but Dee was right. The most important question to be answered was whether Dex really was right for her.

* * * * *

Stella sat on the front porch in one of the wooden rockers, watching Dex as he walked down the sidewalk toward her house. Tonight she'd dressed in a manner that she'd once considered "her style". A long soft cotton shift with a low scoop neck that buttoned down the front and a soft shawl. The dress was the rusty rose of a sunset, soft and clinging to hips and breasts. The shawl was a swirl of the same rose, with deep muted blues and golds. She wore it draped over her shoulders. Tonight she'd not bothered to blow dry or straighten her hair but let it tumble in soft curls over her shoulders.

Dex looked toward the house and spotted her. A smile came on his face. Stella returned the smile and rose, walking to the railing to wait for him. She loved the way he moved. Long, graceful strides. There was almost a musical rhythm to his walk, as if his steps were timed to some inner beat.

He stopped one step below the landing, putting him at eye level with her. "Hey, gorgeous."

"Hey, yourself."

"You look incredible."

Stella smiled. "I was just thinking the same about you."

Dex grinned. "So, you gonna invite me in, or do we give the neighbors a show?"

She laughed and extended her hand. Dex took the lead, pulling her toward the door. Willingly she followed him inside. He led her into the living room and stopped in front of the couch.

She pressed eagerly into him when he wrapped his arms around her, her arms moving to loop around his neck as his lips sought hers. The kiss held enough passion to make his cock throb. Damn, she could turn him into a walking hard-on with just one kiss. This woman was dangerous. Totally lethal.

Stella raised one leg and hooked it around his body to draw him closer. Dex cupped her ass in both hands and lifted her up. Her legs encircled his body, her wet sex pressing hotly against his abdomen, causing a groan to rise in his throat.

Turning, he sat on the couch. Stella held on, straddling his body, grinding her pussy against him and devouring him with her lips and tongue in a way that had his control headed toward total meltdown. How the hell had she done it? He hadn't been in the house for five minutes and already he felt like if he didn't have her soon his dick was liable to explode.

Stella pulled herself tighter to him, rotating those lush hips. He couldn't take it. Rolling her over onto her back, he pulled her dress up and knelt between her spread legs, cupping both breasts.

A breathy moan came from her when he unbuttoned her dress and leaned down, taking a nipple in his mouth. She yanked his shirt free from his pants and ran her hands under it, feeling the first muscles of his abdomen.

"Take it off," she whispered. "Please. I need to touch you."

Dex reluctantly released her breast long enough to strip off his shirt. Stella's eyes moved over his bare skin. "I love looking at you," she whispered. "Touching you." She explored every inch with her fingertips as he knelt between her legs, her touch sending tendrils of fire spreading throughout his body.

When her fingers traced the hair that ran from his navel to disappear under the top of his pants, he shuddered. Slowly, she ran her hands back up his stomach and over his chest to the sides of his neck. "I love the way your skin feels against my hands."

"Not near as much as I love you touching me."

She smiled up at him. "I don't know about that. You have no idea what it does to me when I do this..." she trailed one finger down the center of his torso making him quiver, "and feel the reaction of your body to my touch."

"Tell me what it does?" He almost held his breath, waiting for her response. This was a side to Stella that hadn't been revealed, her sharing innermost feelings about their lovemaking.

"It makes satisfying my own needs less important than giving you pleasure. I want to give you pleasure like you've never had or ever will again from anyone but me."

"Stella." His voice was thick with emotion, words that longed to spill free trapped behind the lump in his throat.

Before he could try to form the words, she grabbed the back of his head and pulled him down to her, wrapping her legs around him. She explored his mouth with her tongue, slowly, taking her time, tasting his lips and nipping lightly with her teeth when he tried to control the kiss. Frustration mixed with pleasure, manifesting as a low growl that rumbled in his throat. She pulled back to look into his eyes.

"Your eyes are so beautiful," she whispered. "Flecks of gold shimmering in a sea of green. Why haven't I noticed that before?"

"Maybe the light wasn't right." He could only guess, and wonder why suddenly she was noticing.

"God, Dex. Have I been so consumed with myself that I haven't really seen you? Have I been so self-absorbed that I haven't really paid attention?"

"I don't know, honey."

Her eyes glistened with sudden tears. "Forgive me, Dex. I've been so lacking. So afraid."

"And now?"

"Now I can see more clearly and I want to make up for my mistakes."

"Honey, there's nothing to make up for."

"Oh, yes there is. And I'm going to. I want to see, taste and touch every part of you, show you without words. If you'll let me."

"With pleasure."

Stella pushed him away, gently forcing him to reposition so that he lay back on the couch and she was straddling his body. The hard length of his cock pressed against her pussy as she settled her weight on him.

She took her time, slowly running her fingers over his face, feeling the strong bones and the raspy roughness of his jaw from the slight stubble of beard. His lips parted beneath hers when she lowered her face to claim a kiss.

"Dex," she breathed against his mouth. "God, what you do to me. You're my living, breathing aphrodisiac. I can't seem to get enough of you. Can't taste, touch or breathe in enough to stop the wanting."

"Nor can I," he admitted. Her words stunned him. Stunned and excited him, triggering some primal switch inside that made him want to claim her, make her his.

Moving slowly down his body, she explored his chest and stomach with her mouth, taking her time. He thrilled at the vibration that ran through him at her touch. She reached the waistband of his pants and sat up, reaching for the button on his pants.

Dex reached up, sliding her dress off her shoulders. It slid into a puddle around her waist, leaving her breasts free. Just as she reached for the zipper of his pants, his hands wrapped around her wrists, stopping her. He couldn't be passive any longer. He needed to stake his claim on her, brand her with pleasure so intense that she'd never want another man. He sat up, pushing her arms behind her back, making her arch forward. He lowered his head to her chest, moving his tongue over the swell of one breast.

Stella murmured a small sound of pleasure when his tongue flicked over her nipple. The sound ripped through him like an electric current. He wanted, no needed to take her higher, drive her mad with longing then deliver release that surpassed anything she'd ever known. Using the tip of his tongue, he traced small circles around the hardening nub. When he captured it between his teeth, she moaned in pleasure.

Dex released her wrists and moved her off his lap to stand in front of him. He kissed her stomach and ran his tongue along the line where her dress caught on her

hips. His hands worked under the soft material from the bottom of the dress, caressing their way up the outside of her thighs to her hips.

Stella's hands moved to tangle in his thick hair as his fingers traced the outside of her lacy thong. Dex fisted the material of her dress and tugged, inching it down over her hips, tasting his way lower. When his mouth opened against the patch of lace that covered her sex, she shifted her stance to provide better access.

Dex moved his hands up the back of her legs, his hands covering her buttocks to squeeze and pull her against his mouth. Stella clung to his hair, pressing eagerly against his mouth as it worked at her through the thin lace. She smelled so good, sweet and clean, sexy and all woman.

His hands traveled up her back as he stood to capture her lips in a searing kiss. His body hummed with need, a primal wave washing over her at the moan that came from her when their lips met.

"Dex, I need..."

This time when she ran her hands between them to reach for the zipper of his pants, Dex didn't stop her. She pushed the slacks over his slender hips revealing cotton boxers that were strained to contain his erection. Stella fisted him and he groaned slightly against her lips. Damn, she could almost make him come with a touch. Hunger intensified as she gave him a tight squeeze then moved her hands under the waistband of his boxers and around to his back.

Dex's arms tightened around her when she grabbed his ass in both hands and pulled him tighter against her. His hands moved to cup her from behind as she started to rotate her hips, creating a delicious friction as his cock pressed into her belly.

Need flared even hotter and more demanding. She broke the kiss and stepped back, pushing his boxers down his hips. He was long and hard, pulsing in her hand. She slid her fingers along the length of his cock, into the hair at its base and down the crease of his leg to cup his balls.

Dex tensed slightly, issued a harsh breath then quivered as she moved her fingers up, trailing her nails over the bulging head. God, he couldn't take much more. He had to have his hands and mouth on her. Transferring his hands to her shoulders, he pressed her down on the sofa. His lips moved over her stomach and down her pelvis to the top of her thong. With teeth and fingers he pulled it down the length of her legs then ran his hands up the inside of her thighs, using his fingers to explore her pussy, knowingly touching her in ways that drove her passion higher.

"Oh god! Dex." Stella's breathy gasp came a moment after his mouth replaced his hands on her pussy. "I'm going to...no, don't stop." But he did stop, just as her body started to tense in climax. He knelt beside the couch, pulled her hips to the edge of the cushion and spread her legs. Stella groaned as he slowly sank inside her, and then undulated against him.

Dex began a slow rhythm, pulling out almost completely before plunging back in again. Stella quaked with each stroke, her hands tightened into fists in the fabric of the sofa.

"Ahhhh," she moaned, "more, please."

Her plea was like throwing gasoline on a fire, spurring him to give her more. His rhythm began to build in speed and intensity. When he grabbed her behind the knees and pushed her legs toward her chest, spreading her wide, she tumbled, crying his name as her body quaked. It nearly drove him over the edge. Jaw clenched and body straining, he fought for control.

Stella surrendered to the climax, freefalling into endless sensation that obliterated everything but the sublime sensation that held her in its grip. Dex rode her until the wave receded then lowered her legs and slowed his pace. He leaned forward, lowering his upper body against hers to capture her lips. The kiss was slow but passionate, matching the tempo of his hips as he moved inside her.

She fell into the rhythm, moving against him, her hands tightened on his shoulders and her hips rising and falling beneath him. She could feel his body tensing and knew he was close to coming. She wanted it to come, to overwhelm him. She deepened the intensity of the kiss and wrapped her legs around his waist, urging him to go faster.

He complied eagerly, driving inside her hard and fast. Stella pushed against each thrust, matching him stroke for stroke. But she couldn't last long enough. An orgasm exploded inside her that had her legs locking around him, her fingers digging into his flesh and a groan bursting from her lips.

A few moments later she felt his body go rigid and his cock pulse inside her. That prompted another wave that had her shuddering against him, her breath fast and hard as she was carried away by a climax that left her limp and breathless.

Dex pulled out and climbed onto the couch, pulling her on top of him. Stella laid her face on his chest, listening to the beat of his heart and feeling his sweat-slicked skin warm against her. There was nothing more she wanted than this moment. Nothing at all. With a contented sigh she closed her eyes.

And woke when she felt him pulling the warm throw from the couch over them. She rolled off him, placing her head on his shoulder. Suddenly she felt a little shy. Had she said too much, revealed too much of what she felt? Would it make him shy away? What if she'd read him wrong and he wasn't interested in more than what they had now?

Insecurity assailed her, making her restless. Finally she couldn't lie still any longer. "I need something to drink," she said with the first thing that came to mind.

"Water sounds good," he agreed with a smile.

"I'll get it."

He sat up then stood. "Mind if I use your bathroom to clean up?"

"Not at all."

"Thanks." He smiled and gave her a light kiss then padded naked from the room. Watching his naked ass disappear down the hall, she rose and went into the kitchen. Doubts assailed her. Fear that she'd made a mistake. Maybe he hadn't recognized it, didn't know how stripped bare she'd been in their lovemaking. Fear sucked. She hated feeling this way. Was there a way out of this? She didn't know. After getting a glass of ice water, she wandered down the hall.

Dex was standing at the sink washing his hands. "Want some?" She held out the glass.

"My goddess." He took the glass with a wet hand, turned it up and downed it. "Ah, nectar of the gods."

"Want more?"

"Oh yeah," he grinned. It was clear that he wasn't talking about water. Stella smiled and backed out of the bathroom with him advancing on her. Was this just sex play? Had she read things wrong? Dex caught her midway across the hall in a kiss that had her eager to back on up into the bedroom. Forget worrying about the "what if's". She hadn't lied. He was a living aphrodisiac to her, one she couldn't get enough of. Dex propelled her into the bedroom still locked in a kiss. When he pulled back, his eyes moved to the wall, paused, and then returned to her face. "That's some picture, Red."

"I was much younger."

"You look better now. Maybe you could have another one done. For me."

She chuckled. "You sound like Dee. She's been nagging me to pose for her. For *us* to pose for her."

"That might be fun. Hot. Sexy."

"Spoken like a true man. I'm a bit hesitant to bare it all for a camera at this stage of the game."

"Why? Stell, honey, you're a walking wet dream. And I bet Dee would do a great job."

"So you want to pose with me?"

"I could be persuaded. Or...I could photograph you and her."

Stella's brows shot up. "Me and Dee?"

Dex shrugged. "Call it a perverted male fantasy. Two hot women, naked, sweaty..."

"And I guess you'd want enlarged prints?"

"Hey, only if you wanted me to have them. You know, a gesture of love and affection. Kind of like the portrait."

"That was different."

"Why? Because he was the love of your life?"

That question sent something rocketing through her. A vision. *Oh please. Not now.* But it was too late to stop it. Music played in the background, the sound of glasses clicking in toasts and voices raised in cheerful chatter. She could see the tables, decorated in white linen with white and yellow calla lilies as centerpieces. A large tent covered the area, beyond which she could see trees and grass. A golf course? It was hard to tell. "Who would've thought?" She heard Dee's voice. "So just six months 'til the big day. Dun – dun – deedun," With Dee's voice mimicking the wedding march, the vision faded.

Leaving a very confused-looking Dex staring at her, and her with a burning question in her mind. Was she meant to have only one love in her life? Had she already buried that love, or was there another intended for her? And if so, was she staring into his eyes now?

"I don't know," she finally whispered. "I loved him. But was he the love of my life? I suppose only time will tell."

"Does that mean you're open to the idea of having another love of your life?"

Stella smiled at him. "Yes, I think I am."

Dex smiled but the smile was short-lived, replaced with a look of tenderness that brought tears to her eyes. "I was going to ask you to invite me into your bed, but what I really want, Red, is for you to invite me into your heart. Do you have room for me there?"

That question battered down the last bricks in the wall imprisoning her heart. What she saw in his eyes was something she'd never expected to see again, something she'd been afraid to see. Now that she had, she wanted to run toward it as fast as she could, embrace and hang on to it as long as possible.

Stella stood and peeled off the robe, letting it fall to the floor. "I think you're already in my heart, so you want to share my bed, Dex?"

"I thought you'd never ask, Red." With that, he took her in his arms.

Chapter Eight

"A recording contract?" Fenny asked. "As in make an album contract?"

"Yes!" Stella was so excited to be telling her friends about the contract Dex had landed. "He was stunned. Said he hadn't heard from his agent in two years and then out of the blue he's offered a contract."

"That's fantastic, honey." Fenny put down her glass of wine to give Stella a hug.

"It really is," Eden said and added her congratulations and her hug.

"Me too, me too," Dini chimed and joined in, making it a group hug.

Stella had been eager all day to tell her friends the news. Today they were meeting at her house since Fenny was having new carpet put in her condo and some rooms repainted, and staying with Michael until the work was finished.

She had a lot of news to share and couldn't wait to blab it all. If only Dee would hurry up. As if in answer to her need, Dee's voice came from the kitchen door.

"Well, hey now, give me some of that action."

She wedged her way into the group hug. "Okay, what are we hugging about?"

"Dex got a recording contract!" Dini squealed.

"I know. Exciting stuff, huh?"

As one, the women parted, all eyes on Dee. "What do you mean? You know?" Stella asked.

"I mean I know. Cam told me."

"How did Cam know?" The moment the words were out of her mouth, Stella knew the answer. "You put him up to it, didn't you?"

Dee's right eyebrow hitched up a bit. "Hey now. That tone doesn't sound too friendly. Before you throw your hackles up, sit down and I'll explain."

Once everyone was seated, Dee grabbed a handful of chips from the bowl on the table and started. "Since Cam bought this record company, I figured he needed new artists. So I told him about Dex. Cam had a scout go over and check Dex out and the scout recommended that the company offer him a contract."

"You're sure you didn't put Cam up to it?" Stella knew that Dex would never want something he hadn't earned. And a deal like that was a once in a lifetime thing. If you weren't ready and didn't have what it took, you'd flop. And the idea of him bombing on his first album was not something she liked to consider. It would hurt him too much.

"Scout's honor." Dee raised her hand. When Fenny gave her *the look*, she turned her hand in Fenny's direction. "Bonified scout's salute, my dear. Three brothers, all Eagle Scouts, thank you very much.

"And besides," she turned her attention back to Stella, "I wouldn't do that to Dex or Cam. I just figured that if he has what it takes, the scout would recognize it. And if he does, then he deserves his shot."

Stella felt relief wash through her. "Thanks, Dee."

"No problem. Oh, I brought that surprise I told you about."

"Surprise?" Dini asked. "For who?"

"Stella," Dee replied and got up to grab her laptop from the kitchen counter where she'd put it when she arrived. She placed it on the table and accessed the files. "Once Cam signed Dex, he hired me to do some promo shots and shots for the album cover. I thought you'd like to see them."

She turned the laptop so the others could see. "These are so good," Stella said. She knew Dee was talented, but hadn't realized how talented. She'd captured looks that Stella knew intimately. Looks that Dex had when he was thoughtful, or being silly, or dead serious or excited. One in particular caught her eye. Dex sitting on a wooden stool, half of his body in shadow and the other half lit from light streaming in through what appeared to be a broken window in an old factory. Dex was playing the guitar. A look of concentration and pure joy on his face. The look of a man enraptured with his art.

"Oh god, do you think I could get a copy of this?" She turned the computer to show Dee.

"Sure. What size?"

"Eight by ten?"

"You got it."

"These are amazing," Fenny said.

"Killer," Dini added. "Want to do some of me? My publicity shot sucks."

"Oh god, me too," Eden said. "Mine look like I've got something up my ass. I hate it."

"You name the time and it's done," Dee said and crammed more chips in her mouth.

"Thank you," Stella said, still looking at the photo.

"Welcome," Dee mumbled and washed down the chips with a slug of wine. "And hey, you know that old saying about nothing being free?"

"Do I hear the sound of the other shoe dropping?" Fenny asked.

Dee grinned. "It's no big deal. It's just that after I shot Dex, Cam and I were looking at the photos and there's one the lighting guy did of Dex and me. Cam said it made him kinda hot seeing me with some guy's arm around me."

"His arm was around you?" Stella started scrolling through the photos. "I can't find it."

"Don't panic, Red," Dee teased. "It was a very brother-sister kinda deal. Anyway, Cam and I got to talking and one thing led to another and — well, in the course of some excellent sex, he told me that some of his best fantasies about me were seeing me strip on stage and...are you ready for this? Seeing me get it on with another woman."

"Woman?" Dini gasped, looking suddenly a little green around the gills.

"Yeah, woman. So—" Dee reached for the laptop and started typing. "I spent two weeks studying with these gals I did a pictorial on for a guy's mag, and the other day, the club owner let us come in and film this."

She turned the laptop to face the others. Everyone went silent. Stella was a little surprised but also a little impressed. There on stage was Dee, twirling around a pole like she'd been doing it all her life, bumping and grinding as she stripped down from a sexy cowgirl outfit to a very brief g-string with fringe on the front.

"Damn," Dini breathed. "You're hot."

"Whoa," Eden exclaimed. "I didn't know you were this sexy."

"Is that really you?" Fenny moved closer. "You got naked in front of...how many people were there?"

"Me, the girls who coached me, the camera guy, couple of grips and gaffers, the audio guy, the guy who owns the club—"

"Dee!" Stella exclaimed. "You let all those people see you naked?"

"I wasn't naked. I had on that—that g-string thing. Besides, what's the big deal? It's only skin."

"A lot of skin," Fenny pointed out.

"I didn't know you were in such good shape," Stella admitted.

"Yeah, what the hell do you do to get those ab things?" Eden asked. "Damn."

"Thank Cam," Dee said with a laugh. "The man keeps me in motion."

"Well, more power to you, sister." Fenny raised her glass. "I assume you're going to treat Cam with this little video?"

"Yeah, but I need one more piece of footage. And I brought a video camera. We don't have to have a professional thing, just a minute or so of—what?"

Everyone was staring at her like she'd grown another head. At least that's what Fenny's and Dini's expressions looked like to Stella. She had no idea what her face must look like but would admit that she was a little apprehensive of where Dee was headed.

"You're not going to suggest that one of us..." Fenny waved her hands, unable to complete the question.

"Sure, why not?" Dee asked. "Come on, Fenny. You know if I swung that way I'd do you."

"Well you don't and I definitely don't and I won't. No. Sorry, babe, I love you but no. No, no, no. Hell no."

Dee grumped and looked at Dini and Stella. "Not me." Dini held up her hands palm out. "Sorry. You're hot and all that, but no. Can't do it."

"Don't even think about it," Eden said. "I love you but not *that* way."

Dee turned her full attention on Stella. "Stell?"

Stella considered it for a few moments. "Well, you know, ironically, Dex told me that one of his favorite fantasies is this one of me and you together."

"You and Dee?" Dini asked.

"Yeah, he thinks she's hot."

"Well hey now." Dee grinned. "This is what I call a twofer."

"Twofer?" Dini asked.

"Two for the price of one. We can give both the guys champion woodies. If you're woman enough, Stell."

Stell knew the sound of a challenge when she heard it. "Just stand warned. I won't be responsible for you getting all hung up on me."

"Think you're that good, Red?" Dee teased.

"Come and find out, Fancy," Stella drawled in a fair imitation of Cam.

"Yeah, baby!" Dee jumped up and got the video camera. "Here, Fenny. You're tall. Operate the camera."

"I don't even want to see this, much less film it."

"Fenny, please?"

"Fine, but if this sends me into therapy you're paying."

"Deal." Dee headed for the living room. "Let's do it in here. Dini, turn on that light over there. Eden, close the blinds. Stella, hit the overhead. That light is bad. Turn on those lamps by the couch and maybe light some candles. Dini, see what kind of music Stella has on that thing on the hutch."

Stella found herself rushing around, following Dee's orders as they set the stage. Once Dee was satisfied, she looked around with a smile. "Perfect. Now, here's how I think we should play this. You sit on the couch. Fenny will stand here." Dee guided Fenny into position.

"I'll enter this way and go to the couch and make a move on you."

"Why do you get to make the move?"

"Well, you wanna make the move?"

"Yeah." Stella figured Dex would be more turned on seeing her initiate things.

"Okay, works for me. Everyone ready? Dini, you ready?"

"Ready, chief."

"Okay, action."

Dini hit the play button on the stereo, Fenny hit the play button on the video camera, and Stella wiggled into position on the sofa. Dee crossed the room and took a seat beside Stella.

"Hey, Stell."

"Hey, yourself." Stella reached out and ran her hand down Dee's arm to take her hand.

"How you feeling, Red?" Dee took Stella's hand and moved it to her thigh.

"Let me show you."

Taking a deep breath, Stella pulled Dee over, lying back as she did so. Dee landed on her, their breasts smashing together and Dee's hair falling over Stella's face. Stella gathered it up in both hands, held it on the back of Dee's head, and pulled Dee to her.

Surprisingly the kiss was rather erotic. Dee was a good kisser, and either was playing her role to the hilt or enjoying it because she writhed on Stella, making the kiss more demanding and running her hand along Stella's side to her breast.

"Damn, you're good," Dee breathed as she pulled back from the kiss, clearly surprised, then caught herself and fell back into her role. "But way too covered."

She sat up, straddling Stella, and stripped her t-shirt off, revealing a lacy see-through black bra. Then she unbuttoned Stella's shirt.

"Jesus," Dee gasped in surprise as she parted the shirt. Stella smiled. Her breasts had always been one of her favorite features. Full and heavy, when encased in a push-up bra they were, as Dex liked to say, two of the natural wonders of the world.

"Want some?" Stella cupped her breasts in her hands.

Dee's eyes widened and she hesitated. But only for a moment. "You know it."

Stella reached up to pull Dee down. When Dee's hands replaced hers, cupping her breasts and her tongue snaked out to flick at the top of one breast there was a shriek from Dini followed by a loud "Cut!" from Fenny.

Dee sat up, throwing her hair over her shoulder. "Did you get it?"

"Yes, god help me. Here." Fenny held out the camera in a two-fingered grip like it contained a toxin and she was afraid of contamination.

Dee jumped up, pulled on her t-shirt, and grabbed the camera. Come on, let's take it to the kitchen and download it to the laptop. Come on, Stell. Get dressed!"

Stella buttoned her shirt. It suddenly dawned on her that maybe she'd made a big mistake. It was one thing to do something to turn on your man, but to make out with a friend? Would that affect her and Dee's friendship? What if it made them feel weird about being around each other? In silence, she followed the others. It wasn't long before the footage was playing on the laptop.

"Damn!" Dee cocked her head sideways, studying the screen. "We're not bad."

"Not bad?" Stella asked as she got a look. "We're hot as hell."

"Well, you are a good kisser," Dee said, her eyes still glued to the screen.

"You're no slouch yourself."

"Thanks!" Dee looked up at her with a grin, flooring Stella. Dee had absolutely no inhibitions at all. She wasn't embarrassed, didn't feel silly, dirty or foolish. It wouldn't hurt their friendship because neither one of them was attracted to the other. This was all just fun and games, something to turn on their men and something for them to laugh about doing.

"I can't believe you did this," Fenny said, and refilled her wine glass.

"What?" Dee turned her attention from the laptop to Fenny. "Like you've never kissed a girl before?"

"Actually no. I haven't."

Dee's eyes rounded. "You're kidding."

"Nooooooooo."

Stella chuckled as she watched the exchange.

"Well I bet you've thought about it."

"Not once."

"Fenella Whitfield, are you going to sit there and tell me you were never even *curious*?" Dee asked.

"Again, not once," Fenny said decisively.

Dee looked at Dini. "How about you?"

"Never and eweuueeeeeee."

"Eden?" Dee asked.

"Never done it, never want to do it."

Dee shrugged and turned to Stella. "So, am I your first, Stell?"

"Hate to bust your bubble but no. My first college roommate gave me a very good lesson in how to love a woman."

"Oh ewuuueeee," Dini groaned. "TMI, TMI."

"Too much information is right," Fenny agreed. "Now if you girls are through with your porn, can we get back to drinking and talking?"

"Sure," Dee agreed and started to turn off the laptop.

"I want a copy of that before you leave," Stella said.

"You got a blank DVD?"

"Be right back." Stella hurried to her office, got a blank disc, and returned to the kitchen. "Here ya go."

"Cool." Dee inserted the disc and set about copying the footage. "Someone pour me a drink. I got a mouthful of Stella."

Stella snorted and refilled Dee's glass. "Thanks." Dee smiled and took a drink. "Okay, so on the phone you said you had big news. Was that the record deal?"

"Actually a bit more than that."

"So give. Right after you tell me if you have any chips. And what about dip?"

"Chips in the pantry. Dip in the fridge."

"Cool. Okay, go ahead, I'm listening."

Stella smiled, shook her head and looked in Fenny and Dini's direction. "First, I think I'm going to try my hand at incorporating some romance into the book I'm working on."

"That's great," Fenny said. "Have you spoken with your editor about it?"

"She's all for it. She's been trying to get me to spice things up for about a year."

"Spice?" Dini asked and snatched up the container of dip as Dee put it on the table. "You mean hot-sex-and-heavy-breathing spice?"

"Yeah."

"Yum," Eden said with a smile.

"I hope it will be."

"Well, you do have research resources now," Dee pointed out. "Dex, I mean. Not me. Even though that might be pretty hot."

"I don't think I'm quite ready for that." Stella laughed. "And yeah, Dex is a very good research partner. I'm not so much worried about the mechanics of the sex but more about the emotion. I want the characters to feel real, you know?"

"Amen and do we ever," Fenny said. "There's nothing worse than a technically correct love scene that reads like a geography lesson. No emotional impact at all."

"Yeah, no pow no wow," Dini added. "You gotta have the emotions. That's what makes it work."

"I just hope I *can* make it work."

"You will," Dee said in an uncharacteristically quiet tone, and when Stella looked at her, she continued. "You haven't come out and admitted it, but it'd be my guess that you and Dex have some pretty strong emotions going on."

Stella nodded. That was the perfect segue into the next thing she wanted to tell her friends. "You're right. I didn't expect it. And didn't even want it, but it seems to have snuck up on me. I'm..." she paused and took a deep breath. "I'm in love with Dex."

"In love as in 'babies and white picket fences' love?" Dini asked.

"Or love as in 'I want to lick him like a lollipop' love?" Eden asked.

"Both, I'm afraid."

"Oh, no. No, no, no." Dee said in her usual tone. "We'll have none of that 'afraid' crap. Not after all the hell you've given me about being afraid of being in love with Cam. If you are, you are. Balls to the walls, stand proud and deliver, woman."

"Well, when you put it that way — I'm in love with Dex. Madly, insanely in love."

"Woo hooo!" Dee raised her glass in toast. "To love, baby!"

Everyone cheered and hooted, glasses clinked, and hugs were exchanged. "And," Stella added once the hubbub died down, "I quit my job."

"You what?" Fenny gasped.

"I quit. My heart's not in it and it doesn't make me happy so I quit. I'm opening my own practice. Dex is helping me renovate and I'm going to have an office in my home, do family law—wills and trusts, estates and things like that. It'll give me more time to devote to my writing."

"And more time for fooling around," Eden said with a wink.

Stella chuckled. "Yeah, and that."

"Well hell, Red," Dee said. "You really are a balls to the wall, take charge and get'r'dun kinda gal after all, aren't you? More power to ya, babe. Hope it's everything you wish for—and then some."

"Here here," Fenny added and raised her glass.

Stella looked around at her friends. In the past year her life had totally changed. She'd cast off an unwanted and uncomfortable mask that she'd hidden behind for more than a decade, made friends with women who had become family and fallen in love with a man who just might prove to be the real love of her life. It was all a surprise, but a very welcome one.

"To Stella getting her groove back in a major way," Eden added.

"And finding her rhythm," Fenny added, to which Dini hopped up and did an excellent air guitar performance

"Finding my rhythm?" Stella asked with a smile. "Well, as Dee likes to say, hell yeah." She could definitely toast to that.

About the Author

Ciana Stone has been reading since the age of three, and wrote her first story at age five. Since then she has enjoyed writing as a solitary form of entertainment, and has just recently come out of the closet to share her stories with others. She holds several post graduate degrees and has often been referred to as a professional student. Her latest fields of interest are quantum mechanics and Taoism. When she is not writing (or studying) she enjoys painting (canvas, not walls), sculpting, running, hiking and yoga. She lives with her long-time lover in several locations in the United States.

Ciana welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can e-mail us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Ciana Stone

An Unwanted Hunger

Another Saturday Night

Hot in the Saddle 1: Chase 'n' Ana

Hot in the Saddle 2: Molding Clay

Hot in the Saddle 3: Scout 'n' Cole

Hot in the Saddle 4: Conn 'n' Caleb

Riding Ranger

Saturday Night Fever

Sexplorations: The Thing about Cowboys

The Hussies: A Taste for Jazz

The Hussies: All in Time

The Hussies: Maxwell's Silver Hammer

The Hussies: Sin in Jeans

Wyatt's Chance

Also see Ciana's release at Cerridwen Press (www.cerridwenpress.com):

That Which Survives



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com