

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The woman has long blonde hair and is looking up at the man. The man is shirtless and has his hand near the woman's face. The lighting is soft and intimate.

**CINDY
SPENCER
PAPE**

Nailed

C a r n a l R e u n i o n s

Nailed

A Carnal Reunions Tale

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Chapter One

To: Becky Belker, Bliss Harper, Chloe Wells, Fran Jameson, Miranda Ellson, Vicky Sutherland
From: SikorskiK@WIndianaU.edu

Hello to all of Gracie's Girls, class of 1999. Once again, thanks to all of you for the flowers and phone calls after my aunt Gracie's passing last winter. You all meant so much to her, and to me.

As I'm sure you all know, our tenth college reunion is coming up this fall. Since I now have Gracie's big rambling house all to myself, I'd like to extend an invitation. If any of you are coming back for the reunion, you're more than welcome to stay here, in your old rooms. Gracie quit taking in college students several years back, so there's no one here but me, and I'd love to have some company while I'm getting the house ready to put on the market. So what do you say? One last time as roommates? It would be great to see all of you again.

Hugs,
Karen

* * * *

Ten years later and almost nothing had changed.

Karen Sikorski looked around the hotel ballroom and sipped her soda water. Most of her friends were out on the dance floor. So why wasn't she? When she'd had the idea to invite all her old housemates to stay with her for their ten-year college reunion, she'd been so happy at the thought of seeing them again. Now it looked like most of them had something—or someone—more interesting than Karen on their minds.

She tugged at the hem of her requisite little black dress. It was a simple sleeveless sheath, with wide straps, a modest neckline and a hem that just grazed the tops of her knees. She wore it

for everything—faculty dinners, fundraising cocktail parties, even her great aunt’s funeral. Tonight her friends had convinced her to leave off the matching jacket and to wear Aunt Gracie’s 1950s opera-length faux pearls. When she’d arrived, she’d felt pretty and daring. Now she mostly felt frumpy and awkward—as usual.

“Would you care to dance?” The deep male voice was warm as molten chocolate in her ear. And familiar. Surely it couldn’t... She spun to the side and found herself staring straight into his groin.

Slim hips clad in impeccable black trousers greeted her view. They were cut too loosely to show much, but as her gaze traveled up past the narrow waist, broad chest and even broader shoulders revealed by his open suit jacket and crisp white shirt, she was practically salivating. His tie was a playful graphic design of multicolored frogs, perfectly knotted. Finally, she took in the tanned, handsome face that smiled down at her, and Karen felt her own cheeks flush.

Blond, blue-eyed Warner Beckett was every bit as gorgeous as he had been in college. Why in the hell was the king of the frat boys asking *her* to dance?

“Dance?” he repeated with that sexy grin that had haunted her dreams all through school—many of them erotic. “I’m Warner Beckett, by the way.”

“I...I know,” she managed. “We’ve met.” Not that he’d remember her, of course. Hell, he hadn’t even done that the day after he’d rescued her from two of his drunken frat brothers. Still, she couldn’t seem to help placing her hand in his outstretched one and letting him help her to her feet. She’d had a crush on Warner all through college, since right after she’d moved into her great-aunt Gracie, or Gracie’s, boardinghouse just blocks away from Western Indiana University. Most of “Gracie’s Girls” had crushed on the guys in the houseful of jocks next door, but not Karen. She’d only had eyes for the rich, blond playboy three doors down. Warner had always been nice to her, fueling her fantasies. He walked her home from campus on a few occasions, and always smiled and talked to her when their paths crossed.

Oh yeah, she had it bad.

“I remember you, Karen.” They made their way out to the crowded dance floor and Warner swung her into his arms. “You were the shy little scientist down the street, who took the trouble to tutor idiots like Donny Gillespie and Pete Miller.” He named the two frat boys she had tutored—until she’d shown up one night when they’d been drinking. The big brutes had decided they would do her the favor of taking her virginity, until Warner heard her scream and came to

the rescue. “They didn’t bother you again, did they?”

His arm was warm and strong around her waist, while his other hand held hers in a careful clasp. Karen fought the urge to lay her head on his lapel and shook her head. “No. I left for grad school just a few weeks later. I never really got to thank you for saving me that night.”

“No thanks necessary, sugar. I’m just glad I was there.”

Karen almost opened her mouth to remind him that she *had* come over the next afternoon to thank him. She’d made a big batch of chocolate chip cookies then walked three doors down to the frat house to give them to her knight in shining armor. When she got there, Warner had been sitting on the porch swing, a barely-clothed blonde in his lap, drinking a beer. When she’d handed him the cookies, he’d looked at her with glazed eyes and asked, “Do I know you?”

She never stepped foot on the frat house property again.

“So what are you up to these days?” He asked in a low murmur that sent a shiver of desire down Karen’s spine.

At first, she couldn’t remember how to speak. Just having her face this close to him, she was nearly overwhelmed by his rich masculine scent. Her brain had shut down and her one pair of black satin panties was damp.

“Karen?” he asked again. “You still with me?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She inhaled deeply then forced herself to look up into his face. His wide smile made her stumble on the unfamiliar heels Bliss and Chloe had talked her into wearing.

“Easy there.” He caught her easily and held her steady.

“And I haven’t even been drinking,” she managed with a laugh. “Sorry for being so clumsy.”

“It’s crowded in here,” Warner offered. “Probably stepped on a napkin or something on the dance floor. No worries.”

“Thanks.” She still felt like the clumsy, awkward girl who’d never quite known how to handle social situations.

“So how long are you in town?” he asked.

“Oh—” She’d been so busy trying not to stumble again that she’d forgotten to answer his original question. “I live here now. I teach at—”

Before she could finish, a tall, willowy redhead came onto the dance floor and tugged Warner’s sleeve.

“Come on, War. We need you outside for pictures.”

“In a minute, Lindsey,” he said. “I’ll be right there.”

“No, *now*,” she insisted. “The guys want to blow this boring party and go have some real fun.” She kept hold of him, standing so close there was no way they could continue the dance.

Warner looked down at Karen regretfully. “Can I catch up with you after I take care of this?”

She nodded, fighting to keep the sick sense of despair from showing on her face. Same old Warner, damn it.

“Karen...” He touched her cheek briefly, before the redhead pulled him away.

Karen stood on the dance floor staring after them as the woman dragged him out of the ballroom. She’d been right. Not a damn thing had changed since college.

Unable to face another minute of the party, she quietly gathered her purse and her sweater then headed for home.

* * * *

Warner swiveled his office chair to the window, looking out over the rich autumn colors of Heartwood, Indiana, his hometown. He left here ten years ago, vowing he would never again live in this little Podunk village. Five years ago, he came back, taking over his grandfather’s construction firm and building himself a real, solid life.

One dance—half a dance—with pretty little Karen Sikorski, and he’d figured out that the life he’d so carefully constructed was still missing a few important bricks.

“Boss, do you want me to send Frank or Dave over to do the estimate for the renovations on Parker Street?” His assistant’s voice broke into Warner’s thoughts.

Parker Street. The old Victorian residential neighborhood where he’d lived in the frat house during his college years. He hadn’t been by there in months. He knew the city had clamped down on rentals, and that many of the old houses were being re-converted to single-family residences instead, which made good business for him. “Who’s the client?”

“Somebody named Sick-ow-ski or something,” Betty replied. “Wants to make sure the structure is still sound and do some basic repairs, maybe a new roof. Apparently this one was never chopped into apartments.”

Warner’s heart rate sped up. It couldn’t be, could it? He’d looked Karen up on the internet, knew she was teaching in the biology department at the university. Was she living on

Parker Street? Maybe even in her old house? He'd been debating stopping by her campus office just to say hello, maybe ask her out. But this—this was the perfect way to connect with her again, and even let her see for herself that he wasn't the vapid party boy he'd been back then.

“Let me see the work order, Betty.”

The fifty-something woman who ran his business like a well-oiled machine lifted one eyebrow at him, but she ducked back through the door to her own desk without saying a word. Moments later, she reappeared with a single-sheet printout. Warner scanned the sheet, and sure enough, there it was: Karen Sikorski. 1424 Parker Street. Estimate for repairs to structure, roof and plumbing, along with refinishing wood floors and replacing tile grout.

“Call and schedule an appointment for four o'clock Friday,” Warner said. “And whatever you do, *don't* give her the name of the contractor coming out.” He thought about Karen, with her full lips and stunning, aquamarine eyes that remained hidden by glasses in college, and he was glad his desk hid the erection that sprang up. It didn't take much to imagine those eyes glazed with passion, her honey-brown bob in disarray, and those lush lips wrapped around his cock.

“Oooo-kay.” Betty's lips didn't so much as twitch. “But who should I put down on our calendar to handle the project?”

“I haven't done a residential remodel in a long time,” Warner said, suppressing a grin. “I think it's time I got back to the basics, don't you? I'll take care of this one myself.”

Chapter Two

Karen knelt beside her porch, pulling weeds from the flowerbed she'd spent a good bit of the summer coaxing back to life. Ever since her great aunt had passed away in February, it seemed like she had too much time on her hands, even though she'd taught a full load of courses, including summer semester. She knew it was time to get going on another research project, but she'd finished her last one right before her aunt's final illness, and hadn't really gotten back into the swing of things. Maybe she would ask her boss if she could pick up a few extra classes for the winter semester. Perhaps then, she wouldn't have quite so much time to think.

She glanced down at her wrist, remembering she'd left her watch inside. The contractor from Heartwood Construction was due to arrive at four, and she hadn't planned to meet him with a sweaty face and muddy knees. When a big white pickup with the builder's logo turned onto the street, however, she knew she'd left it until too late. She stood, pulling off her gardening gloves, just as the truck pulled into her driveway.

Warner Beckett climbed out of the driver's seat and gave her a broad, sexy smile.

Karen almost swallowed her tongue. What in the hell was he doing here?

"Hey, Karen. Looks like we meet again." His long legs ate up the short length of her front walk, and then he was in front of her, holding out his hand. This time he wore a pair of faded-out jeans and a white cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up, but there was no mistaking it was the same man she'd danced with just a week before—and dreamed about almost every night since.

"Warner?" She managed to unstick her tongue long enough to mutter his name. Without even realizing it, she took his hand, almost swooning at the strength and warmth of his grasp. Why hadn't she noticed at the dance that his hands were calloused? Much too rugged for the Wall Street type she'd expected him to be.

"Last time I checked," he said with a laugh. "So you're looking to fix the old place up, I hear."

"Umm—yes." She licked her lips and reluctantly pulled her hand back from his. "Come

in. I can get us something to drink.”

Warner followed her inside, looking around in approval as they passed through the big double-parlor living room and into the warm, homey kitchen.

“I’m surprised at how good this looks,” he said, taking note of the original woodwork, which was scratched here and there, but mostly in good shape. “A lot of the student rentals have been totally gutted.”

Karen gestured for him to sit at the maple kitchen table her aunt had had since before Karen could remember. “Aunt Gracie kept things under control,” she replied, crossing to the fridge to pull out a pitcher of iced tea. “And she always lived here with the students. It was her home as well as a rental.”

“That’s right,” he said with a nod. “I think I remember her now. Mrs....Anderson, wasn’t it? She liked to sit out on the porch and wave at all of us as we walked by.”

“That was Aunt Gracie,” Karen agreed. “She moved here when she got married in the 1950’s. They never had any children, so after her husband died, she started taking in college girls, more to keep her company than for the money.”

“I didn’t realize she was your aunt,” he said, accepting the glass of tea she poured. “I’m sorry to hear she’s gone now.”

“Well, she was almost ninety, so she had a good long life.” Karen slid into the chair across from Warner. “But thank you. I miss her a lot.”

“So tell me about the house,” he said. The warm expression of sympathy in his pale blue eyes didn’t waver. “Will you be living in it by yourself now, or still taking in students?”

“I’m really not sure,” she admitted. “It seems like so much space for just one person, but I don’t think I have the patience Gracie did. Maybe one graduate student or something like that, just for company. I know I should sell the place, but somehow, that doesn’t seem right. Gracie wanted me to keep it, and honestly, it’s the closest thing to a real home I’ve ever had.”

“Well, why don’t you start by showing me around? At first glance it looks pretty good, but I’m going to need to get into the basement, and up into the attic if you want me to check the roof.”

Warner followed her, trying to keep his eyes on the house instead of on Karen’s ass as she led him through the house. He made notes about water damage and loose hinges with half his

brain, while the other half wondered what it would take to get Karen out of her jeans. He'd heard enough to know she was still single, and now that he knew she was here in Heartwood to stay, there was no way he wasn't following up on his attraction to her.

"The third floor hasn't been used in a while," she murmured. "It was my room in college, since I wasn't a paying tenant. With no air conditioning up here, it was hot as hell during the summer. She kept it for me when I'd come home to visit afterward, then I used it again for the first year after I moved back here to take care of her."

Warner looked around the attic bedroom. The center ridge of the roofline was the only place tall enough for him to stand upright, and he was only six feet tall. But Karen was a tiny little thing, maybe 5'3", so she'd have done fine in the sprawling space. White painted furniture filled half of it. A pink and blue patchwork quilt covered the bed, while the half furthest from the stairs was a storage area, full of stacked furniture, trunks and cardboard boxes.

So this was where Karen had slept, back when he'd started having wet dreams about her.

He forced himself to note the condition of the ceiling and walls, to look under the eaves for moisture or animal damage, and tried not to think about her lying there in that virginal-looking bed. She'd obviously gotten contacts since college, and her honey-brown hair had some golden streaks in it—probably from her gardening this summer. The sunshine would also account for the dusting of freckles across her upturned nose. He wanted to kiss each and every one.

"If you do decide to sell, give me a call," he said after he'd finished the rudimentary inspection. "I've been looking for a place like this."

"You fix up houses and sell them?" she asked as they went back down the stairs.

"No, I'm looking for a place to live." He was heartily sick of his bachelor condo, and though he'd thought about building himself a home, these stately old Victorians were really close to his heart. This place—it just felt like a home.

"I'll keep that in mind." She walked him back to the kitchen table where he whipped out his notebook and calculator to start working up a preliminary estimate. "How'd you end up in construction? I always thought you would be off to be big city right after graduation."

"I was," he said as he calculated the square footage of the roof in his head. "Went off to grad school at Columbia, worked on Wall Street—even married the boss's daughter." He noted her flinch, and felt a small pleasure at knowing she didn't like the idea of his marriage.

“So how does your wife like Heartwood?” Her spine had gone stiff and her voice turned icily polite.

Warner laughed. “She didn’t. Filed for divorce the day after I quit her father’s firm. Last I heard, she and my former best friend were still married, and had the requisite two point five kids and the house in Connecticut. Of course, with the way Wall Street’s been in the past year or so, I wouldn’t be sure about the house.”

Celia had told Warner kids were out of the question, yet not five minutes after she’d married Barry, she’d been knocked up and bragging about it. Yet another reason Warner knew he’d made the right decision five years earlier.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That sucks.”

Warner shrugged. “Not really. I got rid of the ulcer, the job that caused it, and the wife who liked my money a lot more than she liked me. Came home and took over my grandfather’s construction business. It’s a good deal all the way around, as far as I’m concerned. Looks like you came home, too. Or don’t I remember that you went off to California for grad school?”

“I did,” she admitted. “Got my doctorate, did a post-doc in Boston. By then Aunt Gracie wasn’t doing so well, and I took the job at Western so I could be with her.”

UCLA and MIT, he thought, having read her faculty biography. But she didn’t toss around the names of her prestigious graduate schools. She’d always been like this—fiendishly brilliant, but sweet and unassuming about it. Warner had recognized it even during his alcohol-fogged undergraduate days, but he’d had just enough self-control to know she deserved better, and to leave her alone. Now though? Now he was a responsible adult, and he was just the man to break through the wall of loneliness she’d built around herself in this big empty house.

“Look, it’s late,” he said as he finished writing up the estimate and handed it to her. “Let’s go and grab something to eat. You can tell me more about your vision for the house.”

She went still, and Warner could tell she was thinking about it. Pearly white teeth nibbled at her full lower lip.

“Come on. After ditching you on the dance floor, the least I can do is buy you a meal to make up for it.” He’d gone back into the ballroom the minute the pictures were finished, only to find her gone, and he’d been brooding about it ever since.

“Okay, I guess.” She rubbed at the dirt stain on the knee of her jeans then sighed. “I’d better go clean up first, though.”

Warner smiled. She looked perfectly fine to him. "I wasn't thinking of anyplace fancy. Santucci's pizza is still the best in town."

"Trust me, I have their delivery service on speed dial," she returned with a laugh. "Though my hips would be happier if I didn't."

"Your hips look just fine to me," he argued. "But if you want to get cleaned up, I'll wait." Of course, if she wanted to get naked instead, he'd be happy to help.

"Fine, then." She squared her shoulders as if gathering her courage and stood. "I'll be back downstairs in ten minutes. The TV remote is on the coffee table, and I think the girls may have left some wine in the fridge, along with a soda or two."

"Iced tea is good," he assured her. He didn't drink much these days. "Don't worry; I'll be all right while I wait." It would give him more time to plan for what he wanted to do to her after he brought her home.

* * * *

Last weekend, she'd watched as one by one, each of her former housemates had hooked up with the man of her dreams. They'd all had hot, steamy sex, some of them were already *engaged* for goodness sake, and they were all ridiculously *happy*. When they'd left on Sunday and Monday, she'd felt more alone than she ever had in her life. She'd chewed herself out for hiding behind her aunt, her career and everything else. She deserved a little fun in her life too, damn it. Now here she was with none other than Warner Beckett. She'd practically soaked her panties just looking at him in the restaurant, and it seemed to her like he'd been interested in her as well. The only question was whether she had the guts to reach for the brass ring.

All through dinner, she could sense his eyes on her, watching her. She still hadn't gotten over her shock at finding him here, working in construction of all things. Sure, his truck was top of the line and his VISA card was platinum, but it was still such a stretch from the pampered golden boy he'd been years ago.

"Would you like to come in," she asked as he pulled into her driveway after their meal. Her stomach did somersaults as she waited for his response.

He didn't make her wait long. "I'd like that very much." He switched off the truck, and climbed out of the cab, hustling around in time to help her down from the hiked-up cab. She felt his hands at her waist, right through the fabric of her cotton sweater.

"I could make coffee," she said, as he took her hand and led her up the walk.

“If you want to,” he murmured. “I don’t mind one way or the other.”

Now what was that supposed to mean? She hoped it meant he was only interested in sex, but she couldn’t quite be sure. Still, her nipples had tightened into aching points at the mere sound of his voice.

He waited patiently while her fumbling fingers unlocked the door, then he followed her inside, carefully setting the latch behind them. That was good, right? It meant he was thinking about staying a while. She stood in the hallway, half turned toward the kitchen. “Do you want—?”

“You.” His low tone was practically a growl. “In case you weren’t absolutely clear on it, Dr. Sikorski, the only thing I want right now is you.” He cupped her cheek with one hand and rested the other on the newel post of the curved oaken stair rail. Then, so slowly she could have fled if she’d wanted to, been able to, he lowered his face to hers and kissed her.

Oh. Wow.

His kiss was like nothing she’d ever experienced before. She wasn’t a virgin—she’d had a couple of ill-fated relationships in grad school—but clearly she’d been looking for a man in all the wrong places. Her knees went weak and she clutched at his broad shoulders for support—which pushed her sensitized nipples even closer to the solid expanse of his chest. He let go of the newel post and clasped her butt with that hand, pulling her hips flush against his rock-hard thighs. Leaning forward, she went up on her toes, opening her mouth as he traced his tongue along the seam of her lips. She tasted pizza, and the single bottle of wine they’d shared, and over it all, the heady flavor of man that she’d been missing so long.

“Jesus, Karen,” he said when his lips finally left hers to trail up to her ear. “Your bedroom is upstairs, right?” His hand slid from her butt up to her waist, and under her sweater to the small of her back.

“Uh huh.” She tipped her head to give him better access to her neck, where he nibbled on her skin, sending ripples of pleasure all the way down to her wet, clenching pussy.

“Good.” He moved so fast she didn’t figure it out until he’d slid his arm under her knee and scooped her up to his chest. “I always wanted to do this, but never had an appropriate staircase.”

“Put me down, you nut! You’ll hurt yourself.” While she knew she wasn’t exactly fat, she was no model either. She had her grandmother Dzurak’s full boobs, and Granny Sikorski’s wide

hips and sturdy thighs. No matter how much she dieted, those never went away. Still, she wrapped her arms around his neck and held on as he easily loped up the steps.

“Honey, you weigh less than a bundle of two-by-fours,” he said with a laugh. “Relax.”

Relax? He had to be kidding. Every part of her was quivering, either from anxiety or anticipation. She’d wanted him her entire adult life, but would he still find her appealing after he got her naked and her sturdy thighs were out on display?

When they reached the top of the stairs, Warner turned to the right without even having to ask for directions to her room. Of course, he remembered the house. He wouldn’t be the perfect fantasy otherwise, now would he? He hit the light switch with his shoulder, casting a muted golden glow over the wrought iron four-poster bed with its snowy white comforter and pillows.

“Tell me this wasn’t your great aunt’s room,” he teased. “That might be a little bit creepy.”

“It was at one time, I think, but not for many, many years. When she decided to take in students, she moved downstairs, into what’s now my home office. After I moved back, she insisted I have this room redone for myself. I think she wanted me to put down roots here, so it would be even harder for me to sell the house.”

“Smart lady. I hope she doesn’t mind that I’m about to ravish her niece.” He laid her down gently on the bed.

“I think she’d be cheering you on,” Karen admitted, smiling up at him. “She was always encouraging me to get a social life, right up to the end.”

“I’m glad you finally took her advice.” He sat down on the trunk at the foot of her bed and unlaced his work boots, then peeled off his socks and stuffed them inside, before setting them neatly beside the trunk. Karen watched while he pulled his wallet and cell phone out of his pockets and set them on the dresser, along with his keys. Then he removed one more item from his jeans pocket and set it down on the nightstand.

Karen blinked. It was a strip of three foil-wrapped condoms. “You carry those with you everywhere you go?” Not that she was complaining. It just felt a little...odd.

“Hardly. I’m not twenty-two anymore, you know. I really don’t go through life day to day expecting to get lucky. But I’ll admit I was hopeful. I picked those up in the men’s room at the restaurant.”

Sitting up, she removed her own tennis shoes and socks. Warner reached out, took her shoes and lined them up next to his own.

“I haven’t done this in a long time, Warner.” It had been over three years—since before Aunt Gracie got really sick. “I hope I’m not a huge disappointment.”

Warner sat down on the bed beside her, took her face between his hands and kissed her gently. Then he looked directly into her eyes and said, “Believe it or not, it’s been a while for me too. And there’s no way you could disappoint me, unless you don’t want to do this. As long as we’re both here because we want to be, and we’re both having a good time, then there’s nothing to worry about.”

That’s all she needed to hear. Taking the initiative, she went up on her knees and kissed him this time, her mouth gently shaping his, one hand tunneling into his short blond locks while the other gripped his shoulder for balance.

He relaxed, letting her maintain control of the kiss. He cupped her ass with his hands, kneading gently without any real force or pressure. When she pushed her tongue inside his mouth, he stroked it with his own, but he didn’t push back—just let her have her way with him.

“Mmm.” Finally she pulled back for a breath, feeling her bones start to melt into goo. She let her hands drop to the buttons of his shirt, easing them open one after another until she had access to his sculpted chest. After pushing the shirt off his shoulders, she sat back on her heels, content for a moment to admire perfection. Crisp golden hairs curled in a soft mat over chiseled muscle that tapered down to his slim waist. His chest was almost as tan as his face, but not quite. There was a faint line on his arms and neck that told her he’d gotten the color by working outside, not from lying by a pool.

“My turn now.” He reached over and took the hem of her navy blue sweater in his hands, carefully drawing it up over her head and setting it down on the bed beside them. His finger trailed down along the shoulder strap of her powder blue cotton bra, and along the line of it to the vee between her breasts. “I was guessing white,” he teased. “But the blue is pretty against your creamy skin.”

She felt herself flush all the way down to where his finger still rested.

Warner pulled her into his lap and kissed her again, his hand shaping the lines of her back and waist, before sliding up between them to cover both of her breasts. His big hands cupped her softly, his palms rasping her aching nipples through the cotton covering them.

Karen ran her fingertips over the muscled contours of his back and shoulders, loving the solid strength beneath the warm skin. His erection prodded at her thigh, straining the fabric of his jeans, and she knew her own jeans had to be just about soaked. It was time, she decided, to remove those barriers.

Pulling her face away from his, she wiggled off his lap to stand beside the bed.

“Jeans,” she whispered, amazed at her own daring.

Warner grinned, the lines that crinkled at the corners of his sky-blue eyes only adding to his appeal. “Great idea.” He slid to his feet beside her and immediately unbuckled his belt while she managed her own zipper with shaky fingers.

With a deep breath, she hooked her thumbs in the waistband of her blue cotton panties and shoved them to her feet along with her pants. Oh, hell, had she remembered to shave her legs? When? She hadn’t had a wax in—years. Maybe she could convince him to turn off the lights.

Then Warner dropped his Levi’s to the floor and she forgot everything.

Oh, lord, the man was *built*. Not that he was freakishly huge. Based on her admittedly small sample size, she’d guess he was simply equipped in proportion to his height, but that made him big by her standards. More than that, he was just...beautiful. There was no other word for it. Thick, magnificently erect and as perfectly curved as any statue, he was every notion of masculine perfection she’d ever had, personified.

“You keep staring at that, it’s liable to get impatient,” he said with a low, husky chuckle. He reached both hands behind her back and unsnapped her bra before easing the straps off her shoulders. “Oh, sugar, you look pretty enough to eat.” He followed that up by pulling down the comforter then sitting back on the edge of the bed and pulling her to stand between his legs. His arms wrapped around her, while he buried his face in the valley between her breasts and inhaled deeply. “And you smell even better.”

Karen trembled from head to toe as his tongue traced circles around the soft mound of her breast. She clutched his shoulders for balance, her stance as wide as his thighs would allow. He paid extra attention to the tender area under the curve, drawing just a little closer to the center with each pass, but taking his time, until her nipple was diamond-hard, and Karen was practically begging him to touch it at last.

Finally, he circled the dark pink areole, so close she could feel the warmth of his breath

on the pebbled tip. She waited for him to move closer, do more, but he didn't. Instead, he began slowly circling away.

His hot, rigid cock pressed against her belly, so she knew he was aroused. Why didn't he do more?

"Tell me what you want, Karen," he whispered. "I want to be with you, a living, breathing woman, not just a statue. I want you to tell me what you like, what feels good, how I can please you." His wicked tongue moved over to circle her other breast.

"Suck it," she finally moaned, shocking herself. "I need your mouth on it, Warner."

"On what, honey?" He kissed her sternum. "Here?" Her collarbone. "Here?"

He was going to make her say it. Karen's face heated again. She'd never had a partner who wanted to talk during sex.

"How about here?" He dropped his head to tickle her bellybutton with the tip of his tongue.

That made her laugh, and the giggle broke the spell of shyness. "My nipples, damn it. I want you to suck on my nipples."

"See, now was that so hard?" He immediately cupped one breast in his hand and placed a kiss on the nipple. "Now *these* are hard." Then he took one into the hot cavern of his mouth and Karen had to hold on tight to keep her knees from giving out.

His cheeks hollowed as he drew hard on the tender nub. His clever fingers found the other and rolled it, sending twin bolts of sensation straight to her womb. She rubbed her belly against his groin, her soft skin massaging his cock. The heat of it warmed her and she swore the tip left traces of moisture on her skin. She still found it hard to believe that such a magnificent man could be so turned on by her. The knowledge sent her own arousal skyrocketing.

"Oh baby, these are so sweet," he crooned, switching his mouth to the other breast and taking her still-damp one into his hand. "I could suck on them for days."

"Feel...free," she managed between short, gasping breaths. Wetness coated the tops of her thighs and she didn't think she'd survive much longer without having him inside her.

"One day," he murmured thickly, a few moments later when he dragged his mouth along her sternum to her throat. "I'm going to make you come just by playing with your nipples."

She would have laughed, but with Warner, she almost believed it was possible. "Later," she said. Her hips twisted restlessly. He'd wanted her to tell him what she wanted, and right now,

she wanted him to quit playing around. “Don’t make me wait, Warner. I need you to fuck me now.”

“Sweetheart, I can’t wait.” He pulled her mouth down to his and kissed her deeply, plunging his tongue inside in a raw imitation of what his cock would do to her in moments. While they kissed, he leaned back on the bed, pulling her down on top of him. One hand roved down her spine to the crack of her ass, running down between her legs to slide along her drenched slit.

If she shifted just a little bit, she could impale herself on that luscious dick. She wriggled until the blunt tip was poised right at the entrance of her weeping pussy.

“Not so fast, sugar.” With one powerful move, he flipped her onto her back, holding himself above her on his elbows. “One little detail to take care of first.” He shifted onto his knees, reached over to the nightstand and grabbed the strip of condoms. Karen watched as he deftly tore off one and tossed the others aside. Then he opened it and carefully rolled the latex sheath onto his erection.

Poised above her, Warner stopped moving, and simply looked at her. How had she ever assumed that blue eyes were cold? Warner’s sparkled with heat.

Karen smiled. “Then what are you waiting for?” She reached down and clasped his cock in her hand, drawing him down between her legs.

Warner took it from there. With one powerful thrust, his thick crown parted her labia and stretched her wide. She bent her knees so she could push upward, taking him deeper as he slowly surged into her depths.

“So tight, sweetheart. So warm and silky and wet.” His lips came down on hers as he seated himself to the hilt. He laced his fingers through hers, holding her hands pinned by the sides of her head as he slowly began to move.

“Warner,” she sighed against his mouth, her eyelids fluttering shut.

“I’m right here, Karen. Open those pretty eyes, baby. I want you to see who’s fucking you. I want you to know I’m the one making you scream.”

“I can’t believe you’re really here at last,” she admitted, her eyes locked on his. “I imagined you so many times.”

“I wasn’t ready for someone like you,” he rumbled. “Someone sweet, and strong, and *real*. I had a hell of a lot of growing up to do when you knew me before, but I’m a man now,

baby. The man who wants to make every one of your fantasies come true.”

He picked up speed, driving into her with short, sharp thrusts, filling her completely with each one. But she wanted more. She wanted to feel as dark and wild as she had in her dreams. “Harder,” she whispered. “I need more.”

“More?” He slammed into her even faster. “Oh, baby I can give you more.” He pulled out, making her almost want to cry at the loss.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he growled. Kneeling between her legs, he slid his hands under her ass and lifted her up to his mouth. “I just hadn’t had a chance to taste you yet.”

Lowering his face to her pussy, he speared his tongue into her slit then dragged it out and around her distended clit. With lips and tongue, he worked her clit while two thick fingers slid up into her slippery channel.

“Warner!” She’d wanted to come with him inside her, damn it.

“Come for me, sweetheart. I want to drink down all that cream.” As soon as the words were out, he sucked her clit between his lips, drawing on it hard.

She couldn’t tell him she’d never had multiple orgasms in her life. She couldn’t speak at all. His fingers curled inside her channel and found a spot she’d only read about, and Karen’s whole world exploded. Lights flashed in front of her eyes and she did scream Warner’s name as her pussy walls clamped down on his hand and her juices filled his mouth. She gripped the sheet in both hands as she rode the rollercoaster, her body spasming over and over while Warner continued to lap at her pussy, occasionally treating her throbbing clit to soft, careful licks.

Just as she started to breathe again, his tongue picked up speed, tormenting her tender flesh. The roughness of his tongue soon had her passion building again, though, and she couldn’t do much more than lie back on the bed, tossing her head from side to side. “Now, we’ll see how much *more* you can take,” he muttered thickly. He pulled two pillows from behind her and stacked them in the middle of the bed. “On your knees, with your face on the pillows. Hands beside your head.”

Karen gulped as anticipation grew. This sounded serious, but it also sounded fun. Obediently, she rolled to her stomach then knelt with her face on the pillows and her butt high in the air.

Warner didn’t know if he’d ever seen a sexier sight than Karen Sikorski’s pretty, pale ass

pointed up at him. He did know he couldn't resist leaning over and nipping one of those gorgeous cheeks, just hard enough to leave a red mark that would be gone by morning. Fleeting, he wondered if she liked being spanked, but decided tonight wasn't the night to try it. Probably wasn't the right night to fuck that dark pink rosebud, either. Soon, he promised himself. Karen was going to be his, in every way possible. She was the woman he'd unconsciously been waiting for all his adult life. Now that the time was right, he was determined to have her. Looking into her eyes, he'd wondered how he could have overlooked the fact that she was the love of his life.

He moved up behind her and positioned his aching dick at between her puffy lower lips, then slid steadily home. The hot, tight clasp of her walls made his eyeballs almost roll back in his head. He pushed inside until his groin pressed against her ass, his crown nudged the entrance to her womb and his balls slapped against her mound.

Fucking heaven.

"Look up," he whispered hoarsely. "Look at the mirror." The dresser ran parallel to the bed, and the big mirror mounted atop it showed a perfect reflection of their bodies. Warner tunneled his hand through her hair, holding her head to the side so she could see as he slowly moved in and out of her welcoming sheath.

He felt her ripple around his cock as she saw their reflection. "Isn't that the fucking hottest thing you've ever seen?"

"Yes," she whimpered as he pulled out, paused then thrust back inside. "You." *Pant.* "Are." *Gasp.* "Amazing."

"No, baby, that's you," he said. He let go of her hair to reach beneath her and cup the heavy mounds of her breasts. He squeezed them gently in time to his movements in and out of her heat. "It's never been this hot for me, Karen. Not with anybody."

Her eyes shut and her mouth firmed into a line. Shit, he'd said too much, too soon. He turned away from the mirror to watch Karen herself. She was climbing again, but Warner didn't know if he could last much longer. He damned sure wasn't going to leave her hanging, so he brought his right hand down between her legs to fondle her clit. The little nub was so swollen he could feel it poking out of its hood, and Karen moaned as soon as he touched it.

"Come for me again, baby. I want to feel that sleek little pussy clamping down around my dick," he said in a ragged voice. "Come to me, Karen, you know you want to." He pressed

down firmly on her clit and slammed himself deep.

“Yes!” she shrieked as her walls shuddered and clenched around him. Her breathing was nothing but a series of sobs, and she buried her face in the pillow as spasm after spasm racked her body.

Warner may have yelled something as the seed boiled up out of his balls and shot out in a blast that seemed to take off the top of his head. Pulse after pulse of semen spurted into the condom, drawn by the rhythmic clenching of her snug channel. He leaned over Karen’s back and poured himself into her until he was sure he would be nothing but a dried out husk. Still he didn’t want to stop. His cock continued to twitch, long after he finished.

“Are we still alive?” she asked a few moments later, after he’d managed to roll them both to their sides. He was still tucked inside her, and amazingly still semi-erect.

He reached out and smoothed a silky strand of hair off her damp cheek. They were both sweating like racehorses. “I think so. Not sure I could prove it, though.”

“Kay.” He felt her body sag then heard a soft snuffle that could have almost been a snore.

Oh, hell, I put her to sleep. His cock finally softened so he reluctantly slipped out of her warm sheath and slid out of bed. Karen stirred, so he shifted her, laying her the right way on the bed and pulling the covers up over her. Then he ducked into the adjacent bathroom and tossed the condom, before returning to the bedroom to stare down at Karen’s sleeping form.

Should he leave? He had no doubt she expected him to.

Warner smiled. His southern grandfather, Kent Warner, had once told his grandson he was as “stubborn as a striped-assed mule.” Both of them had known that it wasn’t an insult. Warner may have been a flake in his youth, but once he decided on something, there was no standing in his way. Sweet little Karen could damn well learn to live with it.

He was her man. She was his woman. End of story.

With a shit-eating grin on his face, Warner climbed into the undersized bed, pulled Karen’s lush ass back against his groin, and settled down to sleep.

Chapter Three

Karen woke feeling warmer than she could ever remember. Since she was almost always cold, that was a real change of pace. Had she forgotten to turn the heat down last night? Wait, it was only October. She hadn't turned it on, yet. A lifetime of watching every penny had ingrained in her the importance of thrift over comfort.

So why was she warm?

"Mmm. Good morning." Warm lips grazed the back of her neck and Karen's eyes flew open wide.

Omigod! It hadn't been another wet dream. Warner Beckett was really here, naked, in her bed.

"You're thinking too much, there, babe." He nipped her ear playfully and his hand shifted up from her waist to cup her breast.

Karen could feel herself getting wet as his talented fingers teased her nipple, which was still puffy and tender from the night before. What was Warner doing here? *Duh!* That was obvious. He was doing *her*.

"I don't even get a good morning, sugar?" His teeth found the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder.

"G-good morning," she said. She couldn't help rubbing her butt back against his rampant erection.

"It sure is from my point of view." He suckled lightly on her neck, and she wondered abstractly if he might be leaving a hickey. She'd never had one of those before—good thing she wore turtlenecks a lot in the fall. She could just imagine the ribbing she'd get from her students.

"If you can think that much while I'm making love to you, I must be doing something wrong." There was a trace of something in his voice—it couldn't be disappointment, could it?

"You're doing everything right," she assured him, just in case. "I'm just not awake yet—I keep thinking this is just another dream."

“I’m real, sweetheart.” He leaned up over her to snag the last condom off the nightstand then pulled back from her for a minute to slip it on. They’d used the second one somewhere in the middle of the night. No wonder her muscles were aching—in the best possible way.

Then he was back. He lifted her leg and pulled it back over his, opening her to him. His long fingers tested her wetness, drawing a soft sound of approval from his throat before he slid slowly inside her from behind. He pulled her back against him and trailed his hand up to play with her breasts while he moved in and out of her channel at an unhurried, leisurely pace.

“You’re just as beautiful in the morning as you were last night,” he whispered in her ear, his breath tickling. “A man could get awfully used to waking up like this.”

She didn’t protest that she wasn’t beautiful—she didn’t call him on his flattery at all. She was going to enjoy this moment while it lasted, damn it. “I could get used to it too,” she admitted. She clutched at his forearm—the only part of him she could reach—and closed her eyes to focus on the gentle glide of his cock, shuttling in and out of her pussy as if they had all the time in the world.

Neither of them spoke, and, Warner’s pace gradually increased and he nipped down on her throat again, sending a shockwave of passion skittering down her spine, all the way to her core. His fingers abandoned her breasts, sliding downward to find the taut nub of her clit. He closed two fingers around it, squeezing gently while his cock filled her in strong, rhythmic strokes.

Her orgasm coiled in her belly as she rocked her hips against his harder and faster. Warner squeezed her clit, held himself deep, and Karen exploded. She let out a wordless cry as her body convulsed, waves of bliss coursing through her, all the way to her scalp, fingers, and toes. Warner followed her over. His guttural shout filled her ear, just as she felt his body clench and he pulsed inside her.

He snuggled her close dropping kisses on her neck and cheek. “Now it’s an even better morning.”

Karen didn’t have any complaints. Her body still hummed with satisfaction. “Uh-huh,” she murmured. Turning her head, she managed to reach his upper arm with her lips. “Thanks.”

“Oh, baby, we’re just getting started,” he said warmly.

“Warner…”

“I’ve got a job site to stop in at this morning,” he told her as he finally pulled out of her

pussy and rolled away. “But I’ll be back—say two o’clock? I saw a grill out back—I’ll bring over some steaks, if that’s okay.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” She’d had her one night. Better to end it now, before somebody—she—got hurt.

With no self-consciousness whatsoever, Warner crossed to the bathroom, disposed of the condom, then returned to stand in front of her, his hand gently stroking her hair. “This wasn’t a one-night stand, Karen. Not for me, and I don’t believe it was for you, either. I know we’ve got a ton of talking to do, and yeah, it’s going to take some time to get used to the idea of being in a relationship, but we *are* in a relationship. I’ll be back between two and three. Okay?”

“Okay.” What else could she say? Her head was reeling. Relationship? Her? Warner? Where the heck had that come from?

He pulled on his underwear, jeans, and shirt then sat on the bed by her feet to put on his boots and socks. “I’m going to run back to my apartment and shower, then head over to the site. Call me on my cell phone if you want me to pick up anything at the grocery store on my way back.”

“I don’t have your number.”

“Sure you do.” He grinned, leaned over and gave her a loud, smacking kiss. “I left it downstairs by your phone yesterday.”

After following up with a much more thorough kiss, he stuffed his wallet and phone in his pocket, picked up his keys, and left the room, whistling.

* * * *

The scent of violets filled the room, and Karen rolled over in bed. “Aunt Gracie? What are you doing up here?”

Then she remembered her aunt had been dead for eight months and her eyes flew open. Sure enough, there was Gracie, sitting on the foot of the bed in her favorite purple flowered caftan. The only weird part was being able to see through her aunt to the wall behind her.

“I’m so happy for you, honey,” Gracie said. “This one is a keeper, for sure.”

Her aunt knew about Warner? She hadn’t watched, had she?

Gracie shook her head. “Of course not. I stayed downstairs until he left. But oh, Karen, I couldn’t be prouder. Don’t let him go, sweetheart. You’ve been alone long enough.”

“It was just one night, Gracie.” *Unfortunately.*

“Not if you’re as smart as we both know you are.” Gracie’s insubstantial form leaned over and kissed Karen on the forehead. “Use that brain of yours, girl. Hold on to that man.”

And then she was gone.

* * * *

Karen didn’t make it downstairs until noon. She missed Warner more than she wanted to admit, and her weird dream about Aunt Gracie had her shaking her head. She’d never believed in ghosts, so it had to be a dream.

Didn’t it?

She made her way through her shower and breakfast while mentally rebuilding her defenses. It would be so easy to fall in love with that man. She’d already done it once, and even his rejection of her the next day hadn’t really destroyed that adoration. Subconsciously, she’d compared every man she’d met since to her knight in frat boy armor.

Now he was here, all grown up, and he wanted into her life. What the hell was she supposed to do?

“To start with, mow the damn lawn,” she told herself grumpily.

She dragged on her oldest jeans, a T-shirt left over from grad school, and a pair of ratty tennis shoes then pulled her hair up into a ponytail. If Warner wanted to show up at two o’clock, he could damn well cope. Maybe seeing her all grubby and sweaty for the second day in a row would get it through his head that she wasn’t in his league.

Her lawn wasn’t very big, so when Gracie’s gas mower had died, Karen hadn’t bothered to buy a new one. Instead, she wrestled around the old human-powered push mower. It was great exercise and environmentally friendly. Of course, by the time she finished the backyard and started on the front, she was huffing and puffing.

Just as she finished the last strip between the sidewalk and street, she saw a familiar car pull up to Joe Harris’s house across the street. To Karen’s delight, her friend Becky and two young kids tumbled out, along with Becky’s Aunt Mary. Karen leaned the lawn mower against a big old maple tree and hurried across the street.

“I can’t believe you’re here so soon,” she cried, hugging Becky tightly. During the reunion a week earlier, Becky had hooked up with Joe, a local mechanic, who’d had a crush on her long before her brief, unpleasant marriage. Now Becky had taken a job here in Heartwood, and she and her kids were moving in with Joe.

“We’re not here to stay, not this time,” Becky said, stepping back and tucking a strand of her long white-blonde hair behind her ear. “This was just an introductory weekend, to give the kids and Aunt Mary a chance to meet Joe and check out the house.”

“Looks like they’re getting along fine,” Karen observed a few minutes later after she’d greeted Joe and the kids. They barely remembered her, and happily followed Joe into the back yard when he’d offered to play Frisbee.

“They really are,” Becky said, blinking back what looked like a tear. “I’m so happy I could burst, but I keep looking over my shoulder, afraid it can’t possibly be real.”

“I know what you mean.” Karen shivered as she thought of Warner. “You’re sure about this? It *is* awfully sudden.”

Becky swallowed hard, but nodded. “I’m scared, but yeah, I’m sure. Joe is the one for me. I’ve never been more convinced of anything in my life.”

After everything Becky had been through with her asshole ex, she and her kids deserved whatever happiness they could find. Karen only wished she had half that certainty about herself and Warner.

Warner was whistling again as he turned his truck onto Parker Street. The big old painted ladies were a mix now, some still rentals, but most single-family residential, and he could easily see himself and Karen settling down here, touching up her great-aunt’s home, maybe filling a few of those extra bedrooms with kids. He pulled into Karen’s driveway with a wide grin on his face. Now all he had to do was convince her that he was in it for the long haul. He sure hoped it didn’t take too long.

Carrying a bag of groceries, he climbed out of his truck and started up the walk. Her push mower was leaning on a tree, but Karen was nowhere in sight. Then he heard her laugh and he looked across the street. What was she doing at Joe Harris’s place? A low coil of jealousy tightened in his gut. Then he saw that she was talking to another woman, a petite blonde. It was one of her old housemates, but for the life of him, he couldn’t recall the name. While Warner set the groceries on her front steps and started across the street, Joe came out of the back yard and wrapped his arms possessively around the blonde, a sappy look of contentment on his face.

So that’s how it was. Good.

Warner stepped up to Karen’s side, wrapped one arm around her waist and kissed her,

hard.

“W-Warner,” Karen stuttered when he released her mouth. She tried to pull away, but Warner held her firmly against his side while he reached out a hand to Joe.

“Hey, Joe. How’s that new roof holding up?”

“Like a dream,” Joe told him. “You bringing that truck in for new brakes anytime soon?”

“I guess you two know each other,” the blonde said dryly. “But would someone mind enlightening the new girl in town?” Her blue eyes sparkled as she looked at Karen.

“Becky, this is Warner Beckett,” Karen said. “He used to live at the frat house down the street. Warner, this is Becky Belker. She was one of my roommates when I lived at Gracie’s during college.”

Warner held out his hand and smiled. “I knew you looked familiar, but I’m horrible with names. Nice to meet you again, Becky.”

“Becky and her two kids will be moving here in a week or two,” Joe said proudly. “Hey do you guys want to stick around, have dinner with us?”

Karen’s eyes went wide as she started to speak, but Warner shook his head. “We’ll take a rain check soon, okay? Today we’ve got some stuff we need to talk over.”

“I figure I’ll have a big end of the season barbecue as soon as Becky and the kids get settled in,” Joe told them. “We can catch up some more then.”

“We’ll be there,” Warner assured him despite the dagger look Karen cast him. He turned, tugging Karen with him as he moved back toward the street. “Nice meeting you, Becky.”

They got halfway across the street before Karen lit into him.

“What the hell was that? How dare you speak for me in front of my friends?” She wrestled herself away from him and glared.

“Because we *do* need to talk, and I didn’t think you’d want to do it in front of your neighbors—or in the middle of the road for that matter.” He took her arm and pulled her to the curb.

“You could have asked, instead of just assuming,” she fumed, poking her finger into his chest. “Spending one night together does not give you the right to tell me what to do.”

“A little louder, baby. I don’t think the guys in that frat house heard you. Though the three on the porch look mighty interested.”

Karen blanched and she hurried up her walk, nearly tripping over the sack of groceries.

Warner followed, scooping up the steaks and potatoes as he loped up the stairs. He ducked into the living room behind her before she could slam the door on him.

He hadn't taken two steps into the room before she rounded on him, pointing at the bag. "What is that?"

"Dinner," he replied. "I told you I was picking up steaks."

"Exactly. You *told* me. You didn't ask me, you just told me. Just like you did across the street. I'm not an infant, Warner, nor am I a helpless idiot. Did it ever occur to you to let me make my own decisions?"

"No. Not today it didn't. While you're one of the most fucking intelligent people I've ever known, I didn't want you thinking too hard today. I could tell this morning that you were chickening out, and I didn't want to give you the chance to tell me to take a hike."

She paused, some of the fight draining out of her. "Most guys don't like women who are, as you say, 'fucking intelligent.' And that still doesn't give you the right to tell me what to do."

"Well I happen to find brilliance attractive as hell," he extended a hand and touched her cheek. "And you're right. I was a prick. My only excuse is, I was scared. I was afraid if I left it up to you, you'd throw me out and refuse to see me again."

"And would that have mattered?"

"It would have mattered more than anything." It was time to lay it all on the line. "I know it was fast, but one night with you was all it took. I'm in love with you, Karen. And I'm pretty damn sure it's the happy-ever-after, to-death-do-us-part kind of love. I know that scientific brain of yours is going to want to quantify and analyze that, and it scares the shit out of me that you might decide it isn't worth taking a chance on our emotions."

"Wow." She reached out and laid a hand on his chest, her fingers crinkling the cotton of his oxford shirt. "Fast is right. How can we be sure? Earth-shattering sex doesn't necessarily equal the love of a lifetime."

"No. But maybe being with the love of your life *creates* the incredible sex. It's never been like that for me, Karen. And the difference wasn't just physical. The difference was—is—the way you make me feel. I love you. That's all there is to it."

"I don't know, Warner. I—I think I love you. I didn't want to—I've tried not to since the night you kept your two drunken frat brothers from raping me. But the next day you broke my heart. I'm not sure I could take that kind of devastation, magnified the way it would be after we

were in a grown up relationship. If I let myself love you, you'll have the power to destroy me."

"I knew, even then, that you deserved something better than a guy like me. But I'm not that kid anymore. I'm a man now, with good friends, a successful business and a life that seemed just fine until I saw you again. Now it will be empty without you. Please put me out of my misery, Karen. If you won't agree to marry me yet, at least let me try to convince you." He was dangerously close to begging. He'd never done that in his life, but he would now, without a qualm. Nothing had ever mattered more.

Karen just started at him, her aquamarine eyes going misty. "Okay."

Warner's heart leapt. "Okay, you'll marry me?"

"Maybe. But for right now you can go ahead and try to convince me." Her clever fingers began to unbutton his shirt.

Warner didn't hesitate. In thirty seconds flat, he had them both stripped naked, and was on the floor with Karen straddling his hips. He couldn't have come up with a single persuasive sentence if his life had depended on it, because he couldn't speak anything more than her name. When Karen slid that hot tight pussy down on his aching dick, everything else in the world disappeared.

When she leaned down to ride him, he lifted his mouth and caught the tip of one breast between his lips. She squealed his name as she rocked frantically back and forth, while Warner nibbled on her succulent nipple. He pinched the other with his fingers, and it didn't take long for Karen to come, milking his erection with viselike contractions. Warner shuddered and emptied into her, his body arching up off the floor as he poured what felt like rivers of fluid into her slick heat.

Finally, the aftershocks faded and Karen rested on his chest in a boneless heap.

"Okay," she said with a weak giggle. "I'm convinced. As long as this isn't just a ploy so you can get my house."

"You caught me," he whispered, his heart swelling with happiness. "It's the house that had me walking around all day with a two-by-four in my pants. I love you Karen. I'd like to live here, but if you don't want to, I'll build you whatever house you'd like."

"Here's good." She sighed, then sat up on his stomach and looked at him. She caught her lower lip between her teeth, a sure sign that she was thinking too hard again. "We didn't use protection."

Warner arched an eyebrow, trying to fight off the little thrill of satisfaction that she'd let him into her bare. It had felt like heaven. "Does it matter? I wouldn't mind a baby or two." Waiting for her to respond tied his stomach up in knots. He didn't want to play games about starting a family again—he needed to know her feelings right up front.

Karen just slowly smiled. "It's a good thing I got my tenure this year," she said. "I have time to plan a wedding—and more, if we need to. I wouldn't mind a couple kids either."

His throat filled up and he couldn't speak. All he could do was wrap her in his arms and kiss her until neither of them could breathe. Then they fell back onto the rug, limbs still entangled.

"I love you, Karen." His voice broke, and he hoped she didn't notice, or didn't mind the moisture that had filled his eyes. "I'll love you for the rest of my life."

"I love you too, Warner. Forever."

There was a hearty laugh somewhere in the room, and a strong scent of violets.

"See, girl?" said a woman's voice that Warner didn't recognize. "I told you this one is a keeper."

About the Author

Cindy Spencer Pape has been, among other things, a banker, a teacher, and an elected politician, though she swears she got better. She does volunteer work in environmental education, when she can fit it in around writing. She lives in Michigan with her husband, two teenage sons, a dog, a chinchilla, and a lizard, all of which are easier to clean up after than the three male humans.

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Are you in the mood for another Carnal Reunion?
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IOU by Paris Brandon

The morning after her final exams, Bliss Harper woke up in her own bed wearing only her underwear. She's never remembered how she got there or why she found an I.O.U. tucked into her panties for one night of "Bad Boy Sex," signed by her favorite pizza delivery guy, Nick Santucci. But she had a ten-year plan that didn't include any more bad decisions and handsome men. But all work and no play make for a dull life and she's headed to her ten-year college reunion with every intention of collecting on a debt that's long overdue.

Ten years ago, bad boy Nick hadn't usually looked twice at shy, thrift-store fashion reject Bliss Harper. He just hadn't been able to avoid it when she'd started doing a tabletop, drunken striptease at a frat party the police were raiding. These days Nick's not delivering pizza, he's delivering deals and he's headed to his ten-year college reunion determined to negotiate one night into many with the woman who holds the marker on his heart.

G-Spot by Taylor Tryst

Lily Sutherland. No, Detective Lily Sutherland, a title she worked her ass off to earn, has returned to Heartwood Indiana for her ten-year college reunion. An ex-Lady Hawk, and a star athlete on the volleyball team, Lily used her competitive edge to win on the court. She dove into the male dominated world of law enforcement where she once again rocked the foundation and shot up the ranks to homicide detective in record time. As far as Lily is concerned, she's just one of the boys until she reunites with Dakota Reese, the love of her life.

Special Agent Dakota Reese has always been too smart for his own damn good. Specializing in serial cases, Dakota attends his college reunion at Western Indiana University for what he believes will be a reprieve, only to discover that his life just became much harder...literally, when he sees Lily Sutherland at the grand old Victorian down the street. Dakota and Lily had split amicably ten years prior, each of them marrying for all of the right reasons. Unfortunately, they married someone else, and were now both divorced. There's a natural animosity between the cops and the feebs, but can Lily put their differences aside long enough for her 'G Man' to find her g spot and rock her world, forever?

Prisoner of the Heart by Anny Cook:

When Rebecca Iversen graduated from college, she headed home with nothing on her mind but

wedding plans. Less than a month later her plans were in ruins when she discovered she was pregnant the same week her fiancé was arrested for selling drugs. Anxious to provide legitimacy for her child, she married Tom while he was still in jail. Years later, Becky finally divorced him, resolved to make a peaceful life for her children and herself.

When the reunion invitation from Karen arrived in her e-mail, her Aunt Mary urged her to take the time to enjoy a little adult time at the reunion.

Young Joe Harris lived across the street from the old Victorian where Becky lived during college. He spent those years secretly yearning for the “older woman”. Now that Becky is back and single, Joe plans to do everything in his power to convince her that he’s exactly the man she needs.

First and Ten by Fran Lee

What Fran Jamison and Jack Gerrard have in common, you could balance on the head of a pin. And to make things worse, Jack blew his chances to hell back in High School with the BBW.

Neither goes to their 10th college reunion expecting sparks to fly, but when they collide in the airport, painful old memories quickly evaporate to make way for two people desperately needing to scratch 12-year-old itches.

Jack royally blew it when he let other people's opinions stop him from pursuing the 5'11" bombshell so many years back, and by the time he realized he was a jackass and tried to apologize, a traumatized and hurt Fran had shredded his ego in public, leaving him to lick his wounds and move on.

She thought she would hate him on sight. She didn't. She thought she could walk away. She couldn't. She certainly didn't expect to find herself making out like a madwoman on the hood of a borrowed car in the airport parking ramp. But she did expect one thing...she was not going to walk away again. Not when he was so damn good at scratching those itches...

Training Randi by Tessie Bradford

Miranda Ellson graduated from college with a degree in design in one hand and a ticket to London in the other. Ten years, five job changes and three boring, unfulfilling relationships later she’s back at WIU to re-connect with old friends, enjoy the campus activities and take a break from...oh who the hell is she kidding?

Jeff Briggs, former college neighbor and best bud, now successful gym owner, lives in town. He’s the only guy she has ever known who could set her panties on fire by simply walking into a room and Randi is sick and tired of only hooking up with him in her dreams. This may be her only chance to discover exactly what kind of personal training he has to offer.

Smokin' Ace by Regina Carlisle

A college reunion and seeing her best 'gal pals' is just the thing widow and single mom, Chloe Wells needs to put a little oomph back into her boring, routine life. For her, those carefree years and the friendships she made with six other women in the old Victorian were unforgettable and, hey, what's wrong with revisiting a past that was fun and full of laughter? But when she bumps into Michael "Ace" Banner other memories surface. Memories of hot nights and rumpled bed sheets. Memories of the loss of the one man who burned her to ash.

Former college tennis star, Ace Banner, now a renowned sports photographer, has just one chance to regain the love of pretty, sweet, very sexy Chloe. Yeah, he blew it years ago by walking away but he's a man now and not about to let her get away again. Ace is prepared to pull out all the stops in reclaiming what he lost all those years ago. It'll take a slow hand and an easy touch but he's up for the challenge.

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Handcuffs and Lace

Resplendence Publishing's Erotic Romance Line of Law Enforcement Themed Stories

***What the Cuff?* By Celia Kyle**

God really should have reconsidered making werewolves. That, or Lyssa needed to get better taste in men and stay away from those with wandering eyes—and other things. Drunk as a wolf, she stumbles to her best friend's house to sleep off her whiskey induced haze and wakes to...*cuffs*?

Caleb sees his chance and takes it. His buddies on the force ribbed him but good for buying silver plated cuffs. But with a werewolf in his bed, the woman he's yearned for since they were teens, he wasn't taking any chances. Lyssa was his. She just didn't know it yet.

***Ticket Me More* by Tia Fanning**

Hailed by the bridal flower world as an artistic genius, Meli works long nights making bouquets for women lucky enough to find love, while she herself lives a life of solitude. She yearns to share her heart and body with someone other than Bob, her *Battery Operated Boyfriend*, but acute shyness keeps her from engaging the "living" world.

However, Meli's quiet and predictable existence takes an unexpected turn when she is pulled over and ticketed by the most gorgeous cop she has ever encountered—Officer Michael Johnson. Though he doesn't seem to notice her as anything more than a traffic violation, Meli makes plans to overcome her timid nature and seize the police officer's attention...using any speed necessary.

***Handcuffs and Lies* by Bronwyn Green**

Sometimes promises to friends are the hardest to keep. Undercover police officer, Michael Tanner, promised his dying partner that he'd take care of the man's little sister. Trouble is, after her brother's death, Doctor Tori Spinelli wants nothing to do with Michael—or any other cop for that matter.

Tori has always fought against overprotective men and deception. Forced into protective custody

with Michael, she's now faced with both in the same package. Despite their differences, Tori falls in love with him, but how can she trust a man who lies for a living?

***Search Me Baby, One More Time* by Melinda Barron**

Wren Thornberry's life isn't going according to plan. She let her father talk her out of marrying Bryan Stockard, the man she loves, and moved halfway around the world. Now she's back home in Texas, babysitting her grandmother while grandma and her boy-toy work through their list of sexual exploits, making themselves the talk of the town.

But what Wren doesn't know is that things in her hometown are about to heat up even more, and it will have nothing to do with her grandmother. It seems that Bryan Stockard is still around, he wants to get back into Wren's life—by any means necessary, and now he has just the tools to do it: A police uniform, handcuffs, and the authority to make Wren *assume the position*.

***Cuff Me Lacy* by Demi Alex**

Three months is way too long to wait for some simple, low-down, straight forward sex. It's not like Officer Chrissie Hansen is asking for prince charming to offer her the love of a lifetime. All she wants is a good orgasm that she doesn't have to work for alone.

At least with "The Bull" she knows what to expect. But when Patrick MacKlick returns to her life and tempts her with new options, she discovers that lace can imprison a heart better than handcuffs can.

***Going Commando* by Catherine Chernow**

Bounty hunter Shyra Lawrence listens to her favorite radio station one morning where the DJ's are discussing "going commando" —*a.k.a* wearing no undies. Captivated by their conversation, she decides to shed her panties in favor of the freedom that wearing no underwear brings.

Enthusiastic, Shyra sends an email to her best friend, Donna, detailing the delights of panty-freedom, but unbeknownst to Shyra, she's hit the send key...to the wrong email addy!

When Derek Grayson opens his emails that morning, he discovers that his #1 employee and top bounty hunter has sent him an erotic, enticing message about going commando. Derek has always been polite, professional, and so damned attracted to Shyra that it's almost painful. Working day in and day out with voluptuous woman has sent Derek's hormones into overdrive on more than one occasion.

Now, Shyra's shed her panties and Derek's got all he can do to contain his lust when she announces that she's... GOING COMMANDO.

Also available from Resplendence Publishing

***Scorcher* by Celia Kyle**

Phoebe's a salamander with a problem. Fire is her element, her very best friend, and the core of her nature. But she can't control it worth a darn. One decent temper tantrum and *poof!* Fire galore. Good thing she lives in the desert with nary a tree in sight. Well, there are a few bushes and such. And her house. And a few cacti...sorta. At least until she'd gotten mad over getting stuck by one of the darned things...

Brant lives by fire and dies by fire. Literally. As Fire Chief, it's his job to stamp out fires in Winthrop, making sure residents of the small town in the back woods of Arizona don't have to worry about fire taking their businesses and homes. As a phoenix, he has the ability to sense fires the moment they start. It's a handy talent that keeps the residents safe. Except for his girlfriend, who seems to be able to blow up just about everything, including the stove.

***Red: A Seduction Tale* by Maddie James**

Garnet Boudreaux is going home. Not back to her nice little apartment in New York City, but to her childhood home in the bayou. She doesn't want to go, and isn't certain what will be waiting for her when she arrives. But standing there in the voodoo shop on Bourbon Street, in the middle of one helluva party, she's told by Madame Madeleine Dupuis that she has no choice. She presses two pouches into Garnet's hands, wraps a red cape around her, and tells her she must go—and go now—to see to her grandmother.

Max LeBlanc spies the lovely redhead across the street and knows in a heartbeat that she is the one. A rougarou always knows when he's met his mate. Some may call him a lycanthrope, a werewolf if you will, but in Cajun bayou lands, he's known simply as *The Rougarou*. He'd waited several hundred years for this moment, and for her. There is nothing left for him to do but mark her and claim her as his mate. Soon.

***Oriana and the Three Werebears* by Tia Fanning**

Oriana Ricci has taken over the family business—flying cargo and rich tourists around Alaska's barely inhabited Kodiak Archipelago. When her plane malfunctions and she's forced to make an emergency landing, she finds herself stranded in the middle of a National Wildlife Refuge. With no civilization for miles and no hope of rescue, she thinks all is lost...

Until she stumbles upon the entrance to an underground bunker.

Jack, Jordan, and Jonathan McMathan own and operate a secret intelligence firm contracted by the US Government. Hidden away in an old Cold War spy station located the middle of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, the brothers are not only able to do their top secret jobs safely without fear of discovery, but are better to protect their other, more personal secret: they have the ability to shift into Kodiak bears.

Like a fairy tale gone bad, the brothers return home to find their lunch tasted—or eaten, their computer chairs adjusted—or broken, and a beautiful blonde sleeping in one of their beds. This situation poses a big problem for the brothers...

Their location is now compromised. But more importantly, what are they to do with the lady?

***Extinction* by Carol Lynne**

Professor of Environmental Science/Wildlife studies at UNLV, Jack McBain has spent his adult life trying to track a legend overheard during his youth. Born and raised in the Canadian Province of Newfoundland, Jack remembers his grandparents telling stories of a race of people eradicated by European settlers in 1829. According to the legend, the Beothuk people didn't die out as first thought, but were transformed into wolf shifters.

When Newfoundland wolves began to appear in great numbers, the European settlers began killing them under the guise of population control. In 1910, the last of the Newfoundland wolves was shot, making them one of the few extinct species of wolves in the world.

Following spotty leads, Jack begins to track what he believes are Beothuk/Newfoundland shifter wolves. His search leads him to the Lake Mead National Recreational Area outside of Las Vegas. There, on Spirit Mountain, he finally comes face to face with not only the shifter he's been looking for, but the man of his dreams he didn't know he needed.

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