

LYRICAL PRESS

Complications



By the author of *The Arrangement*, *Strictly Business* and *By Chance*

Cat Grant

Back Cover Copy

In a marriage of convenience, falling in love can be a major complication.

Eric Courtland, ambitious CEO, just lost his long-time lover Nick. Finding himself at a crossroads, he throws himself into a passionate affair with an old college friend, Ally Taylor.

Ally is shocked by Eric's marriage-of-convenience proposal. Sure, they're a great match in bed, and Eric's plan would help both their careers, but there'd been no mention of love... Does she really dare risk her heart and livelihood on such a volatile lover?

Content Warning: Features explicit sexual content of the m/f and m/m varieties.

Highlight

The neighborhood looked safe, but Eric insisted on escorting her to the building's front door. They stood staring at each other for a few awkward seconds before they both burst out laughing.

"Listen," he said before he could stop himself, "I'm having a small *soirée* at the penthouse this Saturday. It's just a few of my business acquaintances, but it might prove a good opportunity for you to make some valuable contacts, maybe even land an interview or two. I'd be honored if you could attend as my date."

"I can't. I don't have anything to wear."

"Why don't you leave that to me?"

"Eric, you don't have to—"

"Maybe I *want* to."

"Why? You've never paid me this much attention before."

"In that case, it's high time I made up for my past neglect."

Her hand flew up to cover her mouth. It was an artless, girlish gesture, and one that Eric found utterly charming. "I'm sure I'll end up regretting this," she said, "but...okay."

"I'll send the limo for you at seven-thirty."

"Don't be silly. I can take the subway."

"No, you can't." He flashed his widest, most evil grin. "Not in what you'll be wearing."

Complications

by

Cat Grant

The Courtland Chronicles: Book Four

Complications

978-0-9824170-6-5

0-9824170-6-3

Copyright © 2009, Cat Grant

Edited by Emma Wayne Porter

Book design by Emma Wayne Porter

Cover Art by Renee Rocco

First Lyrical Press, Inc. electronic publication: May, 2009

Lyrical Press, Incorporated

17 Ludlow Street

Staten Island, New York 10312

<http://www.lyricalpress.com>

eBooks are not transferable. All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. 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.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party Web sites or their content.

Published in the United States of America by Lyrical Press, Incorporated

Dedication

Now and always, this one's for Don.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Emily Moore, who beta'ed this story and pronounced it good.

Also, much gratitude and appreciation to my editor, Emma Wayne Porter and my publisher, Renee Rocco, for bearing with me at a difficult time.

There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.

—Oscar Wilde

Chapter 1

September, 2004

Eric Courtland should have known something was up when his lover of the past ten years insisted on meeting him for a late lunch, then sat there studying his place setting for the better part of an hour. At last, after the waiter came to clear away his uneaten salad, Nick Thompson sat up straight, ran a shaky hand through his dark curls and blurted, “Laura and I are engaged.”

Eric laughed so hard he nearly sprayed cabernet through his nose. But when the nervous twitches at the corners of Nick’s mouth morphed into a tight frown, Eric realized he was serious. “Wh-when did this happen?”

“Over the weekend. We’ve set the date for a week before Christmas.”

“You don’t waste any time. Or maybe I should say, Laura doesn’t.” His appetite now spoiled, Eric pushed his plate away, glancing regretfully at his last few bites of braised lamb shank. “When were you planning on telling me?”

“I just did.”

“I meant about you seeing Laura again. I thought you broke it off with her months ago.”

“I got tired of spending my evenings alone,” Nick retorted. “Besides, we haven’t been exclusive for a couple of years now. That’s the way *you* wanted it, remember?”

The heat of incipient rage flooded through Eric; he could feel his skin flush from throat to forehead, and cursed himself for even this small loss of control. No fucking way was he giving Nick the satisfaction of seeing him lose his temper in public. He poured himself another glass of wine and took a slow, measured sip before continuing in what he knew Nick would recognize as his calmest, most dangerous tone. “This is not the time or the place to be having this discussion.”

“If we don’t do it now, you’ll just keep putting it off, like you usually do.” Nick leaned across the table, his voice now pitched at a discreet yet urgent whisper. “When you married Barbara, you told me she knew the score, and that nothing between us would change, but it did. Everything changed. We only saw each other whenever *you* wanted to. You wouldn’t drop by my place more than once a week, and obviously I couldn’t come visit you at the penthouse anymore—which, if you remember, used to be *my* home too. Now you’ve been divorced for months, and you still haven’t asked me to move back in. How much longer do you expect me to wait?”

“Nick, you know I can’t risk something like this with the election coming up in a couple of years. We’ve discussed this before—ad nauseum, in fact—and you said you were okay with it. You know what this campaign means to me.”

“Obviously more than I do.”

That brought Eric up short. He wracked his brain trying to think of a suitably pacifying denial. “Nick, please, you have to listen—”

“That’s what I’ve been doing for the past ten years, and where’s it gotten me? Alone, in a crappy one bedroom apartment, waiting by the phone.” Nick shook his head. “I’m not doing it anymore. I’ve taken a back seat to you and your damn career long enough. This is the gauntlet, coming down.”

Eric stared at him. “What, so you expect me to make a *choice*?”

“If you really loved me, it shouldn’t be that hard.”

“Really? Suppose I demanded that you quit your job? Would you do it?”

“That’s not the same thing, and you know it. You don’t need to run for senator. You’re already richer than God, and you’ve got more power and influence than half the politicians in Washington. I know the real reason you’re so hell-bent on doing this.” He took a long sip from his glass of ice water, green eyes glaring at Eric over the rim. “Your father’s dead, Eric. Stop trying to prove yourself to him.”

Eric’s lip curled, half in bemusement, half in thinly-veiled disdain. “Thanks for the armchair psychoanalysis. Evidently your talents are wasted covering the *Herald*’s city desk.”

“Go ahead, sneer all you want.” Nick tossed his napkin on the table and pushed his chair back with a loud scrape. “I’ve given you every opportunity to commit, and you won’t. Okay, fine. But I want a normal life, Eric. I’m tired of waiting around for you to squeeze me into your busy schedule. I want to come home to someone who loves me every night. But you don’t want that, and you haven’t for a long time. So as far as I’m concerned, we’re over.” Reaching into his wallet, Nick pulled out some cash and tossed it on the table, then stood and walked out.

Eric sat, stunned and seething, and nursed what was left of his bottle of wine. He stayed until the windows darkened and the rest of the lunch patrons had long since filed out. Finally the maître d’ tip-toed over and, with excruciating politeness, asked him to leave.

So he went home and brooded, this time with the help of thirty-year-old scotch. And as time wore on and the sky outside his penthouse window grew velvety-black and dappled with stars, his anger deepened into regret and melancholy. The more his memory replayed the scene from that afternoon, the more depressed he became. How little it would’ve taken to change Nick’s mind—a hand across the table and a whispered “I love you” would’ve put everything right again. If he’d only dredged up the courage to say those three small words, he’d be in the bedroom with Nick right now, tangled skin-to-skin atop smooth Egyptian cotton sheets, instead of sitting here drowning his misery in single malt.

The doorbell rang. Eric considered ignoring it, before he remembered his office was supposed to be couriering over some papers. With a groan, he hauled himself out of his chair and went to answer it.

It was Ally Taylor, standing there with the courier packet in one hand, a bottle of Absolut Citron in the other. “I intercepted your guy in the lobby,” she said, handing him the papers as she stepped through the doorway. “And yes, I’ve heard the news. Figured you could use some company.”

She breezed past him without waiting for a reply, tossing her coat and bag on the couch, then headed straight for the bar. Cracking open the vodka, she poured herself a double and clinked glasses with Eric. “To us—two exploded bombs in the minefield of Nick Thompson’s love life. Which should teach us both to stop carrying torches.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t drink to that.”

“Oh, c’mon, Eric—it’s either get shit-faced, or drown yourself in the bathtub. And you’ve never struck me as the suicidal type.”

“When you put it that way, you do make a rather compelling point.” Eric smirked and slugged back the last of his scotch, then poured himself another and joined Ally on the couch. He couldn’t help noticing how tired and stressed she looked; even a fresh application of makeup couldn’t conceal the puffiness and fresh lines around her eyes. Her blond hair had grown out of its usual perky chin-length bob, though he thought the longer style suited her better—or it would, once she got the wispy ends trimmed. She’d obviously hit a rough patch in the six months or so since he’d last seen her. It alarmed him more than he cared to admit. “How did you find out about the impending nuptials so quickly?”

“I dropped by the *Herald* this afternoon to meet Holly for lunch, and Laura invited herself along, too. She couldn’t wait to fill us in on all the details.” Ally rolled her eyes. “She got a bit peeved that we both weren’t jumping up and down begging to be bridesmaids. Something tells me we’ve been scratched off the invite list.”

“You certainly sound crushed.” Sighing, Eric let his head fall back against the couch cushions. “I suppose I brought this all on myself. Back when Nick first started at the *Herald*, I suggested he take Laura out a few times, solely for appearances’ sake. I never dreamed they’d actually hit it off.”

“You can’t really blame him, I guess. It hurt him badly when you married Barbara. And then when you told him he should start seeing other people—”

“I just didn’t want him to be lonely. Looks like I got my wish.” He let out a bitter chortle. “It’s funny, but I always thought that if Nick or I ever ended up with a woman, it’d be you.”

Her eyes widened with surprise. “I never would’ve expected to hear you include yourself in that statement.”

“Why not?”

“For one thing, we’ve known each other since college, and I had no idea you liked women until Barbara entered the picture. And I didn’t even think you liked *me* till a couple of years ago.”

Eric laughed. "Of course I like you. I've liked you ever since our junior year at Columbia when you told me you'd tear my heart out of my chest if I ever broke Nick's. You don't sugarcoat things, Ally, and I respect that. I've got dozens of employees all dying to tell me whatever I want to hear. Getting the unvarnished truth from someone I trust has become something of a rarity."

"Wow." A slow, sheepish grin spread across her lips. "I had no idea I rated so high in your estimation."

"There are only two people in this entire world that I can be myself with, and I just lost the other one for good."

She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight, his face pressed into the hollow of her throat, inhaling her sweet, clean scent. The simple comfort of her embrace almost broke him; to his mortification, he started to tremble, deep, wracking sobs threatening to boil up from the depths of his lungs. He choked it all down through sheer force of will, holding onto her until he'd managed to regain his composure, then gently pushed her away.

"It's okay," she murmured. "Let it out if you want. I promise not to alert the media," she added with a wink.

"I'm fine." Getting up, he went to refill both their glasses, making sure to pour himself a single this time. He sat back down at the far end of the couch, putting an extra few inches of breathing space between them. "We might as well get the gory details out in the open. What all did Laura tell you this afternoon? Nick said something about a Christmas wedding."

"Yeah, they're planning to have it up at the farm. Nick's mom and dad are thrilled." No huge surprise there. While Nick's parents had been unfailingly cordial to Eric over the years and seemed to accept their son's lifestyle, Eric knew they were never completely happy about it. "She dropped a few hints about trying to get Nick to quit the *Herald* and move back upstate to take over the farm. Evidently his parents are ready to retire, and they'd rather not sell the place."

"It might be best for all of us if Nick left. Besides, I don't think he's ever really cared for city life that much."

"It's exactly what Laura wants too. She hates working in the *Herald*'s secretarial pool. If I had a nickel for every time I've heard her whine about wishing she'd stayed in grad school, I could buy the whole damn paper."

"Still, if Nick quits, there's a job you'd be perfect for."

"With my resume?" she snorted. "Dream on."

"They hired Nick right out of journalism school. What makes you think you're less qualified?"

"Getting laid off from two features editor positions on two different magazines two years in a row doesn't exactly inspire confidence."

"That's hardly your fault. New publications go out of business all the time."

"If it'd only happened once, I could get away with chalking it up to bad luck. Twice, and it looks more like bad judgment."

“Have you thought about switching from print to TV? There’s a CNN producer who sits on the Courtland Industries board. I’d be happy to put in a good word for you.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I don’t have any on-air experience, except for a couple of lame video blogs I did at my last gig. I doubt that’s what they’re looking for.” Knocking back the last sip of her vodka, she stood up a touch too quickly, swaying from one foot to the other until Eric caught her under the elbow. “W-Wow, guess I had more than I thought.”

“I’d better get you a cab,” he said, letting her go once he was sure she could stand without help.

“You don’t h-have to do that.”

“Yes, I do, unless you’d rather spend the night in the guest room. You’re in no condition to ride the subway by yourself tonight.”

She pondered that for a long moment, then nodded, blinking blearily. “O-Okay, I-I’ll take the cab.”

He called down to the lobby for the concierge to hail them a taxi before helping her on with her coat and escorting her downstairs. And a good thing he’d insisted on coming along, too—they’d just exited the building’s revolving door when Ally gave a startled yelp, and would’ve ended up skinning her nose on the sidewalk if Eric hadn’t been there to catch her. The heel of her left shoe had snapped clean off.

“Shit!” she hissed, yanking off the fractured black leather pump. “I just bought these a few months ago. Fine Italian craftsmanship, my ass!”

Eric almost burst out laughing, but something told him Ally wouldn’t appreciate it. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek instead. “Maybe I should ride along with you.”

“I think I can make it from the cab to my front door without breaking my neck. Just barely, anyway.” Shaking her head, she leaned down to remove her other shoe. “Perfect ending to a perfectly fucked-up day.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Eric replied with a dour grin.

“You’ve got my cell number, right? Give me a call if you need to.”

“You do the same.”

“I will.” She stood up on her tip-toes to give him a kiss on the cheek, but a sudden gust of wind knocked her off her feet and into his arms. Eric set her down hastily, both of them erupting in nervous laughter.

He helped her into the cab and, over Ally’s weak protests, handed the driver enough cash to cover her fare and a generous tip. She gave him a wave and a wan smile as the cab glided off, heading south for a block on Eleventh Avenue before taking a left turn.

He made a beeline for the bar when he got back to the penthouse, bringing the bottle and a fresh glass back to the couch with him. There was a slow, dull throb starting over his right eye. If he kept on drinking, it would only get worse.

But that was exactly what he wanted now—to invite the pain in, and embrace it. He had a long history of indulging in self-destructive behavior whenever a stressful situation presented itself. If Ally had stayed a bit longer, no doubt he would've tried to coax her into bed with him—and thus run a stake through the heart of the one good relationship he had left.

It probably wasn't a good idea to see her again until they'd gotten over the worst of their sadness over Nick. He'd give her a call in a few weeks.

He made his best stab at polishing off the bottle, but when black spots started waltzing across his eyeballs, he knew he'd never make it to the bedroom. Somehow he managed to kick off his shoes and stretch out before oblivion swallowed him.

He awoke to find the room flooded with bright, skull-splitting sunshine and something small and solid digging into his hip. Snaking his hand between the couch cushions, he yanked out the offending object. It was the size of a deck of cards, lined with rows of tiny, shiny keys. He had to blink hard to bring it into focus. Ally's Blackberry. It must've fallen out of her purse.

"Shit," he groaned, tossing it on the coffee table before heading to the bathroom for some aspirin.

So much for best intentions.

* * * *

Ally slept for about three hours after the cab dropped her at Holly's apartment, then spent the rest of the night wrestling with her pillow, her head pinging like a broken clock. When she heard Holly puttering around in the kitchen making coffee around seven, she decided to haul her butt off the couch and join her.

"Hey," she rasped groggily, pulling out a chair and dropping onto it. "Could you pour me a cup too? No sugar this time."

Her roommate swung around, one eyebrow arching up under her bangs. "Whoa. I'd say you look awful, but that's an insult to awfulness. Did you and my lumpy couch have a battle to the death last night?"

"What, you mean like every other night?" She forced a chuckle. "It was a little bit of that, and a lot of me dropping by to see how Eric was doing. We ended up getting falling-down drunk. Or at least I did."

"That's getting to be a habit with you lately, isn't it?"

"Don't worry, I won't be overindulging again anytime soon. I spent the last twenty bucks from my unemployment check on a bottle of vodka. I didn't even have enough left for cab fare home—Eric had to spring for it. Talk about awkward." Holly handed her a steaming mug, and Ally took a long, grateful sip. "Oh well. Back to work on that article today, even if I do feel like hammered dog poop."

"Got any nibbles for this one?"

"I pitched it to *The New Yorker*, but they weren't all that hot about it. Guess I'll query the *Atlantic* or *Harper's* next."

“Good luck. You’re braver than I am, trying to free-lance in this economy.”

“It’s not like I’ve got much of a choice.” Ally sighed. “Besides, it could be a lot worse. If you hadn’t offered me your couch, I would’ve had to move back in with my dad.”

“You’d do the same for me, if things were reversed.” They fell silent for a few minutes while Holly nibbled at her toast, then got up to put her breakfast dishes in the sink. “I’ll probably be late getting home tonight. I need to stop to pick up some groceries and my dry-cleaning.”

“I could do that for you, if you want.”

“You sure it’s no trouble?”

Ally shot her a mock-exasperated look. “You’re letting me crash here rent-free. Running a few errands is the least I can do.”

“Okay, I’ll leave you my debit card. But don’t buy any more booze with it.”

“Scout’s honor, I promise.”

Holly left for work half an hour later, so Ally brought her laptop into the kitchen, poured herself another cuppa joe, washed down a couple of extra-strength Tylenol and launched back into research for her article on rising oil prices and their impact on the global economy. Around noon she caught a whiff of her eye-wateringly aromatic armpits and decided to take a shower, then go out to run Holly’s errands.

It was a pleasant early-autumn day, with blue skies and plenty of sun. Ally ambled along lazily, feeling the tiniest bit guilty for wasting valuable time she could’ve been spending on her article, but being out in the fresh air was too delightful a treat to rush through. She was used to being cooped up in stuffy office buildings all day; even now, without a nine-to-five job, she still clung fast to that old nose-to-the-grindstone work ethic. Nevertheless, she took her time browsing in the fresh fruit section of the little mom and pop bodega down on the corner, picking up a small basket of strawberries. They were a bit on the pricey side, but, knowing Holly’s mad love for strawberry shortcake, Ally didn’t think she’d mind. She added a can of low-cal whipped topping and some angel’s food cake to the cart before moving on to the Weight Watchers’ frozen dinners and other, even less appetizing items on Holly’s grocery list.

The dry cleaner was a couple of blocks further down on the opposite side of the street, right next door to the shoe repair shop. Now she could’ve kicked herself for forgetting her broken Manolos. It had taken her six months to save up for that pair back when she’d still had a steady job. Well, it wouldn’t have mattered even if she had brought them along. She couldn’t afford to get them fixed until she sold this new article anyway.

She strolled back to the apartment, a bag of groceries under each arm, Holly’s cleaning slung over her shoulder, humming an off-key yet still amazingly jaunty tune that petered out abruptly when she spied a black stretch limo parked at the curb. When Eric poured out of the back seat to greet her, she sent up a thousand silent curses. What the hell was he doing here? And why did he have to show up when she was wearing baggy jeans, her oldest, grubbiest t-shirt and no makeup whatsoever?

“Hey,” she managed to croak, forcing a weak smile. “To what do I owe this honor?”

“You left something behind last night.” He held up her Blackberry, slipping it in the side pocket of her shoulder bag once he saw that she had her hands full.

“Thanks. I appreciate you bringing it by in person, but you could’ve just Fedexed it.”

“I figured you’d want to get it back as quickly as possible. I wouldn’t last five minutes without my phone.”

She laughed. “Mine’s not exactly ringing off the hook these days. To be honest, I hadn’t even noticed it was missing.” The groceries were getting a bit heavy; she was about to set the bags down on the sidewalk when Eric’s driver stepped forward and took them from her. “U-Um, how did you know I was living here now?” she asked, her gaze darting anxiously from the driver back to Eric.

“The cab driving off in the wrong direction last night was my first clue,” Eric replied with a smile. “Then when I showed up at your old apartment a little while ago and saw that you weren’t listed on the directory, I looked up Holly’s number on your phone and gave her a call.”

“I see.” So now he knew she was not only out of a job, but reduced to sacking out on her best friend’s couch. Oh, for a crack in the pavement to crawl through! “Well...thanks for coming so far out of your way. Like I said, I appreciate it.”

She was about to turn tail and bolt up the building’s front steps, groceries be damned, when Eric’s hand closed gently but firmly over her arm. “Let James help you carry everything inside.”

“That’s not necessary,” she snapped. “I can manage fine by myself.”

“I know you can. But there’s no shame in asking for help when you need it.”

Ally hadn’t felt so horrible about her situation until now. Accepting Holly’s aid was one thing—they’d been friends since college, and she knew Holly would never think less of her for it. But Eric’s offer struck her like a fist to the gut, making her realize how sad and pathetic she must look to him. Her eyes stung, but she blinked hard, channeling the tears into brittle laughter. “Th—that’s funny, coming from Mr. Self-Sufficient himself.”

“You think I haven’t been at the end of my rope? Believe me, I have. I’m sure Nick must have told you what happened the year my mother died.”

Jesus, why the hell didn’t he just *go*? “What’s that got to do with me?”

“Nothing. Everything. I don’t know.” Eric shrugged, looking away for a moment, and suddenly Ally saw the weariness—and the loneliness—beneath his veneer of casual indifference. “But I’d hate to see you tumble down the same rabbit-hole I ended up in. I wouldn’t wish that misery even on my own father, and I wasn’t exactly his greatest fan.”

She didn’t know what to say to that, but she knew she had to say something. “It’s really not that bad. I’ve got a roof over my head and all the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches I can eat. It’s sweet of you to want to help, but I haven’t reached the point of utter desperation yet.”

“All right.” He nodded, fixing her with an intense blue gaze that turned everything from her knees down to water. “But I’d count it as a favor if you’d have dinner with me this evening.”

“Why?”

“Because I’d rather not go home tonight and drink myself into a stupor again. Think you can help *me* with that?”

A thousand lame excuses swirled around in her addled brain, but when he flashed her that roguish smirk that had made her want to slap him so many times in the past, her last molecule of resistance dissolved. “Okay, you win. But it can’t be one of your fancy five-star eateries. I don’t have anything appropriate to wear.”

“I know just the place. Pick you up at seven?”

“Seven it is.”

Eric still insisted on his driver helping her in with her packages. This time she didn’t kick up a fuss, although her stomach plummeted when Eric stepped inside for a moment and saw the rumpled bedding piled on the couch. Afterward, she snuck a glance out the front window as the limo pulled away from the curb, a tiny, anxious flutter springing to life inside her.

She had the distinct feeling she was doomed.

Chapter 2

Eric decided to leave the limo behind tonight, and drove his sapphire-blue Jag XKE to pick up Ally for their dinner date. Apparently she must have been keeping a lookout for him, because she emerged from the building a few seconds after he pulled up, bouncing down the front steps, flashing him her trademark toothy grin. He climbed out of the car and opened the passenger's side door for her, grinning right back.

"Do I look okay?" She twirled to give him a prime view of her stylish black wool pencil skirt and matching cardigan, with a deep red v-neck blouse underneath. She wore her hair up tonight in a neat, classic French twist. Pearls at her throat and earlobes completed the ensemble. "It's my job interview outfit," she added with an apologetic shrug. "Nothing else was clean."

"You look enchanting," he replied with utmost sincerity, leaning down to give her a kiss on the cheek. "I hope you're hungry."

"Starving. I worked straight through the afternoon without stopping for lunch." She gave the car a wide-eyed once-over, letting out a whistle. "Wow. What's with the extra-fancy wheels?"

"I just felt like doing the driving myself tonight," Eric said, circling around to the driver's side. "C'mon, let's go eat before one of us passes out."

He cut across town on 40th Street, then headed straight up Amsterdam, pulling up in front of an old haunt from their college days with a familiar red, white and green flashing neon sign. The "L" in "Alfredo's" was burnt out, but aside from that, it looked virtually the same as it had a decade earlier.

Ally crowed with delight the second she saw the place. "Oh my God, I haven't been here in ages! I didn't even know they were still open."

"Neither did I, until I cracked open the phone book this afternoon. Shall we go see if that double-pepperoni pizza's still as good as we remember?"

"*Hell*, yes!"

Inside, the restaurant hadn't changed much either, except for the rickety old TV over the bar, now replaced by a thirty-two inch plasma screen. Cocktail tables in front, booths covered in red and white checkered tablecloths in back. The drippy red candles stuck in old Mateus bottles struck a hokey yet heart-warming chord.

"Talk about stepping into the wayback machine," Ally observed as the hostess ushered them to a booth, then left them to peruse their menus. "In fact, I think I recognize that crack in the wall over there."

"It's comforting to know that some things in this world remain constant."

She gave him a look he couldn't quite puzzle out, coupled with a tiny smile. "I suppose so."

They ordered all their old college standbys: Caesar salad, a large double-pepperoni and a carafe of house red. The wine tasted tart and vinegary, but it still packed one hell of a kick; Eric called a halt after a glass and a half, switching to Perrier. The last thing he needed was to get too intoxicated to drive home, and have to leave the Jag parked on the street overnight.

Ally, on the other hand, appeared quite happy to polish off the carafe by herself. When she'd finished her third glass and started to pour herself a fourth, Eric reached over and laid his hand across the rim of her glass. "Don't you think you've had enough?"

She did a double-take, the carafe freezing in midair. "Who died and made you the booze police?"

Shrugging, he pulled his hand back. While he was genuinely concerned for her, he knew from hard experience that pressing the issue would only prove futile. But perhaps a more subtle strategy would yield the desired result. "Go ahead and finish the bottle, if you insist. Good thing you're wearing flats tonight."

For a second, she looked as if she was going to pour herself another anyway. Instead, her gaze flicked from him to the carafe and back again, before she finally set it down. "Fine. Have it your way."

Eric signaled for the waitress to take the wine away and bring Ally a glass of water. "This is the second time in as many days that I've seen you drink to excess."

"Haven't I got a pretty good reason?"

"That's exactly why you shouldn't be doing it. First it's an excuse, then it becomes a habit, and by that point, it's too hard to stop. And after what I went through trying to get my mother to quit, I should know."

Her expression softened, turning contrite, almost abashed. "You really miss her, don't you?"

"More than I can say," he murmured, the mere thought of her sending a familiar sharp, shiny pain to prick and sting him. "She had her faults, no doubt about it, and there were more instances than I can count where I wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled, but... Aside from Nick, she's the only person in my entire life I've ever truly loved."

"Not Barbara?"

"No. Most definitely not Barbara."

"Then...if you don't mind me asking, why did you marry her?"

He let out a weak laugh. "Maybe I should order some more wine before I answer that."

"Look, if you don't want to tell me—"

"I might as well. Although you'll probably think it's a fairly cold-blooded reason." He took a sip of his mineral water before continuing. "Three years ago, I hired a team of strategists to help me do long-range planning for my senatorial run. They told me if it came out that I was living with another man, there's no way I would ever get elected. But they also said the public's more inclined to forgive a man for a few youthful indiscretions if it appears that he's put them behind him and settled down into domestic life."

“Enter Barbara.”

He nodded. “She and I were old friends from high school. I hadn’t seen her in years until we ran into each other at some charity event. I took her to dinner a few times, and we seemed to hit it off again. She wasn’t married, or even seeing anyone, so I...proposed a bargain.”

He knew Ally would be shocked, and her slack-jawed expression didn’t disappoint. “You mean, you *bought* yourself a wife?”

“I told you it would sound cold-blooded.”

“Jesus, Eric! Are you telling me you kicked Nick out to marry some woman you hadn’t seen in over a decade, all for the sake of a senatorial race that wouldn’t happen for *years* yet?”

“In essence. But before you get on your high horse, both Nick and Barbara agreed to the deal. I didn’t coerce them. In fact, Barbara was perfectly happy to let me go on seeing Nick, as long as she got to enjoy all the other perks of being Mrs. Eric Courtland. She never had any call to complain about the way I treated her.”

“Really? Then why did she divorce you?”

“You’d have to ask her. All I know is, I came home one evening and she was gone. The divorce papers were delivered to my office the next day.” Strange, how the memory smarted now, when at the time he’d felt nothing at all. “We never spoke to each other again, except across a courtroom.”

“I’m sorry,” Ally murmured. “Doesn’t sound like a great way for a marriage to end, even a sham one.”

“Not a day goes by when I don’t ask myself what I did wrong.”

“It might’ve helped if you’d actually cared about her.” Grabbing her purse, she slid out of the booth. “I should be getting back. I’ve still got some work to do tonight.”

Their waitress was busy scurrying from table to table, so Eric took the check up to the bar to pay it before following Ally out to the Jag. The air between them buzzed with tension the entire ride back. Finally he couldn’t stand it anymore. “So, what are you working on?”

“Just some free-lance stuff. I’m trying to make the transition from features to hard news, but it’s a bit tricky when you don’t have a steady gig.”

“But Holly told me you’d sold a few articles.”

She gave him a look. “Holly needs to learn to keep her mouth shut.” Then, with a sigh, she added, “It’s enough to keep me in peanut butter and shampoo, but it’s not a career. Not yet, anyway.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get there.”

“Hopefully before I’m too old to type.”

The neighborhood looked perfectly safe, but Eric still insisted on escorting her to the building’s front door. They stood there staring at each other for a few awkward seconds before they both burst out laughing. Despite the serious turn the evening had taken, Eric realized he didn’t want it to end.

“Listen,” he said before he could stop himself, “I’m having a small soiree at the penthouse this Saturday. It’s just a few of my business acquaintances, but it might prove a good opportunity for you to make some valuable contacts, maybe even land an interview or two. I’d be honored if you could attend as my date.”

“I can’t. I already told you, I don’t have anything to wear.”

“Why don’t you leave that to me?”

“No,” she replied slowly, shaking her head. “Eric, you don’t have to—”

“I know I don’t have to. Maybe I *want* to.”

“But why? You’ve never paid me this much attention before.”

“In that case, it’s high time I made up for my past neglect.”

Her hand flew up to cover her mouth, in an obvious attempt to stifle a giggle. It was an artless, girlish gesture, and one that Eric found utterly charming. “I’m sure I’ll end up regretting this,” she said, “but...okay.”

“I’ll send the limo for you at seven-thirty.”

“Don’t be silly. I can take the subway.”

“No, you can’t.” He flashed his widest, most evil grin. “Not in what you’ll be wearing.”

* * * *

Ally found out exactly what Eric meant when a uniformed courier arrived at her door on Saturday morning, bearing a huge, red-beribboned box from one of the most exclusive women’s boutiques on Madison Avenue. Inside, nestled within a cotton-candy cloud of pink tissue paper, lay a knee-length Vera Wang cocktail gown, dripping with strands of hand-sewn beads, in a sort of faux-1920s flapper style. At first glance, it appeared to be plain, classic black, but when Ally held it up to the light, she could see it was really a deep, dark midnight blue. There was another, smaller box swimming beneath the paper, which held a brand-new pair of matching Manolos, all shiny, elegant patent leather with three-inch stiletto heels.

Holly stood in the kitchen doorway, watching Ally unpack her unexpected treasure trove. “Wow. Looks like Cinderella scored some extra-fancy duds for the ball.”

Ally glanced at her roommate, then back at the dress and shoes still piled in their box on the coffee table. She wasn’t sure whether to be flattered or mortified. “God, Holly, I can’t accept this! The dress alone must’ve cost Eric a couple of thousand.”

“He can afford it. His wife never left the house wearing anything cheaper than Chanel.”

“Except I’m not his wife.”

“Play your cards right, and you probably could be.”

“Oh, c’mon, Hol, be serious. You know I don’t think of Eric that way.”

“Maybe you should start.” Holly nodded toward the box. “Besides, it’d be a shame if you sent it all back without trying it on first, wouldn’t it?”

So much for willpower. It took a grand total of five seconds for Ally to snatch up the dress and shoes and march into the bathroom to see how the outfit looked in front of the full-length mirror. The silk sheath whispered over her skin like a feather's kiss, an absolute perfect fit—in fact, almost *too* perfect. It clung to her every curve, leaving no bra strap or panty line to the imagination.

Before she lost her nerve, she took everything off, then slipped the dress back on again. This time it fit like a coat of wet paint, the beads gently swaying with her every move, making a sound that reminded her of leaves rustled by a spring breeze. The shoes were her size too, their height casting the illusion of lengthening her petite legs, and lifting her ass so that it resembled a round, delectable apple. She marveled at Eric's uncanny talent for guessing her sizes, until she recalled that she was roughly the same height and weight as Barbara, and he must've seen the "7" emblazoned on the inside of her ruined Manolos when she'd taken them off the other night. Still, she had to hand it to him, both for his daring and his exquisite taste. She'd never worn an outfit that made her look—or feel—so blatantly sexy.

Holly's eyes bulged appreciatively when Ally came out to show her the ensemble. "Looks like you'll be leaving the pantyhose at home tonight."

"I can't go out like this, Hol. I feel like I'm walking around naked!"

"That's the idea." Her roommate grinned. "You'll have every man in the room groveling at your feet within thirty seconds—and probably a few of the women, too."

"Looking like a high-priced hooker's not going to help me snag any interviews."

"You don't look like a hooker, Al. You look fucking *gorgeous*. Why do you think Eric sent you the dress in the first place? Trust me—you show up wearing that, and you won't have any problem getting people to talk to you."

Ally smoothed down the front of the dress, shivering as the silk tickled her skin, raising gooseflesh all over. "You really think so?"

"If I'm wrong, I'll take the couch for the next month."

As promised, Eric's limo arrived at the stroke of seven-thirty. Ally slid into the spacious, leather-upholstered back seat, unsure whether she should feel more like a fairy princess about to be whisked off to some magical land, or the proverbial lamb waiting for a hammer between the eyes.

Her mouth went as dry as the Sahara when Eric opened the penthouse door and ushered her inside—and not only because he looked devastatingly handsome in his tailored Armani tux. When he'd mentioned a soiree the other night, she'd envisioned a small, intimate gathering, but there had to be at least fifty people here, filling the living room and spilling out on the balcony. Giving the room a quick scan, she recognized two or three CEOs, a couple of prominent hedge fund managers, and several other major players in the financial world.

Crowds didn't usually put her so ill at ease, but it had been a long time since she'd faced a throng of this caliber. She'd obviously gotten rusty sitting behind an editor's desk for the past couple of years. Eric must have noticed her anxiety, because he was at her side within a moment, tucking her hand inside his arm. "You okay?" he murmured.

"I-I wasn't expecting anything like this."

"Why don't we get you something to drink before we start mingling?"

"Good idea." She followed him gratefully to the bar, before realizing that it might be best to keep a clear head tonight. "On second thought, maybe I'd better not."

Eric handed her a tall glass of something fizzy, garnished with a thin slice of lime. "Don't worry, it's club soda."

"Thanks." A couple of sips helped ease her dry-mouth problem, but unfortunately, Eric's hand gently rubbing her shoulder wasn't having the desired calming effect on her nerves.

"You ready?" he prompted gently.

"G-guess I'll have to be."

"You'll do fine." He held out his arm to her again. "C'mon, let's go work the room."

They wandered about for the better part of an hour, dropping in on conversations already in progress. Ally couldn't help admiring Eric's ability to pick up on any subject and speak about it knowledgably, though it really shouldn't have come as such a surprise. Nobody achieved what Eric had achieved by the age of twenty-nine without being incredibly sharp and focused.

Eric's enthusiasm proved infectious, and Ally soon felt like her old, considerably more animated self again, laughing and riposting with the best of them. Holly was dead-on about the dress; it did all the work of attracting an audience, leaving Ally free to bowl them over, one by one. By the end of the evening, she'd collected half a dozen business cards, along with several leads for new articles.

She was getting ready to call it a night when Eric sidled up to her and whispered, "There's someone I want you to meet before you go." They picked their way through the dispersing crowd over to the balcony, where a tall, slender man with a well-trimmed beard stood peering out at the breathtaking view of the Hudson. "Ally Taylor, may I introduce Martin Atkinson. He's that CNN producer I told you about."

"Oh, *really*?" Ally drawled, shooting Eric a pointed glance as he moved off to usher out some of his departing guests. No wonder he'd been so insistent about her coming tonight. Then, pasting on her tried-and-true networking smile, she shook Atkinson's proffered hand. "It's a real pleasure to meet you," she said sincerely. "I've been following your work for awhile now."

"Likewise," Atkinson replied, with a disarmingly lopsided smile.

Ally blinked. "I-I haven't had that much work to follow. Not lately, anyway."

"Didn't you write that article on the latest developments in green technology in *Mother Jones* a few months ago?"

"Yes," she admitted, "but I didn't think anyone had actually *read* it."

"Oh, I read everything. You never know when something good will pop right out at you. It was an exceptionally well-written piece." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his card. "I'm heading out of town for a couple of days, but if you want to give my office a call next week, maybe we can schedule some time to talk."

“A-About what?”

Atkinson laughed, then leaned in closer, lowering his voice. “Eric mentioned that you’re between jobs right now.”

“Oh, did he?” Ally spied Eric halfway across the room, and, once his eyes locked on hers, proceeded to look daggers at him. Then, turning back to Atkinson, she added, “Look, if you’re offering to interview me, I’m flattered, but... I might as well tell you, I don’t have any on-camera reporting experience.”

“We’re not necessarily looking for that, although I can tell right now you’d be a natural. I think you’d do fairly well starting off as a staff writer, and we’ll see how it goes from there.”

“Sounds like you’ve already made up your mind.”

“Eric’s never steered me wrong where financial advice is concerned. I doubt he’s off-base in this instance either.” He drained his glass, then set it down on a nearby table. “I’ll look forward to hearing from you.”

She stayed out on the balcony for another half hour, waiting for the rest of Eric’s guests to leave. Finally she strolled back inside, poured herself another club soda and took a seat beside Eric on the couch. “Did you enjoy yourself tonight?” he asked, reaching up to loosen his tie.

“Eric, you’re a liar,” she said flatly. “This party wasn’t already planned, was it? You put it together for my benefit.” His sheepish shrug served as her confirmation. “How’d you get all those people to show up at such short notice?”

“I made some phone calls, called in a few favors. It was nothing, really.”

“*Nothing?*” She shook her head. “God, I’m such a fucking idiot. I should’ve suspected as much when I got this damn dress this morning.”

“A dress that looks *damn* good on you, I might add.”

“How many times do I have to tell you, I don’t need your help!” she snapped, banging her glass down on the table. “I’m perfectly capable of landing a job on my own.”

“Did I ever imply otherwise? Martin already knew who you were when I mentioned your name to him. All I did was facilitate the introduction.”

His calm, measured tone should’ve had a soothing effect, but it only managed to piss her off all the more. “You can’t buy me, you know.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This dress, the party, taking me to Alfredo’s the other night. I know why you’re doing all this.”

“Because I like you, and I enjoy spending time with you?” He sat up, forehead crinkled in what appeared to be genuine confusion. “Is there something wrong with that?”

“Is that really all it is, just friendship?”

“Why, do you want it to be more than that?” The touch of his hand on her arm sent her pulse spiraling, and when his eyes locked on hers, deep bottomless blue, she knew she was a goner. Damn, but Eric was a good-looking man. Why hadn’t she ever noticed before? “Say the words, Ally. I can’t read your mind.”

Oh, *hell*. She was going to say it, wasn’t she? “W-Will you shut the fuck up and *kiss* me already?”

She wasn’t sure what to expect, but as usual, Eric surprised her. He nipped slowly at her lips at first, teasing her open before darting his tongue inside. It was a welcome change from her last date’s all too typical battering-ram approach. Eric, by contrast, moved at a relaxed, deliberate pace, deepening his kisses until the room began spinning and Ally could barely catch her breath.

It was like water from the coolest, purest well on the face of the planet, and Ally drank it down greedily, winding her fingers in Eric’s hair to make sure the precious fount didn’t suddenly slip away. God, she’d forgotten how fucking good it felt, needing the touch of a man’s hands and mouth like this. It was all she could do to keep from dissolving in grateful sobs. Her entire body thrummed like a plucked violin string, every molecule vibrating.

Trailing his lips down to her throat, Eric found her fluttering pulse-point and sucked hard, easing one hand behind her, scrabbling in vain for something near the middle of her back. “What’re you doing?” she mumbled thickly, puzzled and irritated by the distraction.

“Trying to unzip your dress—or maybe I should say *my* dress, since I paid for it.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Indian giver.”

“Do that again, and I’ll send you home in the limousine naked.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Oh yes, I would.” Tangling his hand in her hair, he yanked her head back, kissing her so hard she knew her mouth would be bruised and swollen the next morning. But as long as he kept on doing it, she didn’t give a damn. “Maybe I’ll ride along, and fuck you in the back seat with the windows rolled down, so everyone we drive past can look in and see us. I’ll bet you’d like that.”

She choked out a tiny, desperate laugh, unsure whether she was more afraid he’d actually do what he’d threatened, or that he wouldn’t. She’d often fantasized about sex in public places—but Jesus, how the hell did Eric know that? “I-I had no idea you were so kinky.”

“Judging from the way your heart’s racing, it doesn’t look like you’re terribly averse to anything I’ve suggested.” Then, flashing his trademark smirk, he got up, holding his hand out to her. “C’mon, let’s move this to the bedroom. We both know you’re not going home tonight.”

It was a good thing she hadn’t had any alcohol, though lust-drunkenness apparently still counted; even with her high heels off, she nearly tripped over her feet twice before she’d made it down the hall. Eric just laughed and swung her up into his arms, carrying her the rest of the way to the bedroom. Ally had never envisioned him as the caveman type before. The mere notion had her erupting in giggles.

He set her down on her feet right next to the bed, then slipped off his jacket and started unbuttoning his cuffs. "Wait," she said, putting one hand on his wrist to stop him.

His eyebrows shot up. "Wait, you don't want me to get undressed, or wait, you'd rather do the undressing yourself?"

"A little of both," she purred, turning so that he could unzip her gown. Once done, she slid it slowly off her shoulders, letting it slither sinuously to the floor. "After all, since you're so eager to get this back, I thought I should oblige you," she added, swinging around to face him.

To his credit, Eric's eyes didn't immediately zoom in on her bust line. Instead, he gave her a measured, leisurely once-over, from her toes to the top of her tousled head. "You honor me," he whispered, leaning down to brush her lips with the softest of kisses. She trembled with delighted, delicious anticipation, her knees nearly buckling again. "But are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm still here, aren't I?"

"I know, but I wouldn't want either of us to wake up tomorrow morning thinking this was the biggest mistake of our lives."

"Not gonna happen." With a smile, she drew him down to the bed beside her, every bone in her body turning to rubber when he started raining kisses down upon her face and throat. "I-I, um... I've got a kink or two of my own."

"Tell me."

She blushed all over within seconds. "I've, uh, always had this fantasy about being fucked by a fully-clothed man."

Eric grinned. "You just want to see my cock sticking out of my pants, don't you?"

"Oh, *definitely*."

"Whatever the lady desires. Although I should probably grab a condom before we take this any further." He rolled away for a moment to rummage in the bedside table, kicking off his shoes before he came back. "Let's move up a little, get you more comfortable."

Another minute or two, and he'd slid a nice, fluffy pillow under her head, with another under her hips. When she shot him a quizzical look about the second one, he merely winked and said, "Trust me, you'll love it." But when he opened her thighs and put his face right between them, puffing warm breath on her clit, he nearly had to scrape her off the ceiling.

He sucked, licked and flicked every dripping-wet millimeter of her cunt for what seemed like hours, and if she'd had her druthers, he could've stayed down there another month. He was right about the pillow; it felt heavenly, tilting her hips at the perfect angle to meet his slick, agile tongue. Then he stopped licking and pushed a finger inside her, followed by another. The pressure felt strange at first, until he found her g-spot and began working it mercilessly. She shuddered and screamed, staring up into his triumphant, icy eyes as she came all over his hand.

He waited for her spasms to subside before sitting back on his heels to unzip his pants. His cock popped out as if it were spring-loaded, glistening with moisture at the tip. He quickly rolled on a condom and positioned himself between her legs, dipping down to give her a deep, scorching-hot kiss before sliding inside her.

She could tell within a few seconds that this wouldn't be a lengthy session; he'd waited too long, making sure he got her off first, and now he was hovering on the jagged edge, teeth gritted, desperate for release. Reaching up, she wound her fingers in his sweat-drenched shirt, savoring the rough chafe of it against her skin, but he slapped her hands away, grabbing her by both wrists, pinning them up above her head.

"This is what you really want, isn't it?" he growled, slamming into her now, pounding her so hard he shoved her right off the pillow. "C'mon, do it again. Come for me."

She hadn't thought it was possible, not after the brain-melting orgasm he'd just given her, but the firm, masterful feel of his hands holding her down flipped a switch in her brain that she hadn't even known was there. When he finally threw back his head and let go with a broken roar, she followed suit, tightening her thighs around him, pushing him as far inside her as he could go.

The next thing she was aware of was Eric kneeling at her side, wiping her down gently with a damp cloth. He was naked now, except for a towel wrapped around his waist, his sandy-colored hair slicked back, still wet from the shower.

"Th-that was..." She croaked, then coughed, her throat feeling like it'd been scrubbed out with sandpaper. Eric darted into the bathroom and came back with a glass of water, holding it for her while she took a sip. "That was pretty amazing."

He smiled, pressing a soft kiss to the palm of her hand. "It's been a while for you, hasn't it?"

Going on four months, though she wasn't about to tell Eric that. She'd dated a co-worker from her last paying job for awhile, but she hadn't heard from him since they were both laid off. "That bad?"

"Not at all. It's actually quite flattering, having a partner who's so hungry for it."

As if on cue, her stomach rumbled. Ally blushed. "Oops."

"I suppose club soda and hors d'oeuvres don't make much of a meal." He stood up. "Shall we go see what we can find in the fridge?"

"You sure you want me to stay?"

"Are you?"

It took her a split-second to make up her mind. "Definitely," she replied with a smile.

Chapter 3

Ally awoke the next morning to the tantalizing aroma of French roast. Cracking open one half-comatose eye, she spied a shiny thermal carafe on the bedside table, next to a single cup and saucer. With a soul-deep groan, she sat up and poured herself a cup, every muscle in her body aching from last night's erotic workout. She took a moment to inhale the delectable fumes before chugging it down greedily, relishing its dark, smoky flavor along with the much-needed caffeine.

Sinking back onto a pile of soft feather pillows, she sighed at the sheer, luxurious comfort of it. This certainly beat Holly's lumpy old couch. And as for the rest—well, if sex really was like ice cream, last night was a triple-scoop hot fudge sundae with extra nuts and whipped cream. Ally had never felt so thoroughly, decadently debauched.

She couldn't wait to do it again. And that was what scared her.

"Morning." Eric emerged from the walk-in closet, already impeccably dressed in a dark suit and crisp white silk dress shirt. He finished knotting his tie and came over to kiss Ally on the cheek, then sat down on the edge of the bed to fasten his cuff links. "You slept like the dead last night."

Now she had to stifle a yawn. "This bed's like a slice of heaven. I could stay here all day."

"Feel free to sleep in as long as you like. My housekeeper'll be glad to make you anything you want to eat when you get up."

"Oh." She sat up straight, yanking the lilac-colored sheet up over her breasts. This sudden stab of modesty struck her as especially ridiculous, but she couldn't help it. "Maybe I should go. I don't want to be any trouble."

"It's no trouble, it's her job. Besides, she'll probably be ecstatic to have someone to cook for. I hardly ever have meals at home anymore." He reached for her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "Look, there's no reason to be embarrassed. It was just sex. Nothing between us has to change."

Now she wasn't sure whether to be hurt or relieved. She drew up her knees, hugging them tightly with both arms. "Is that your way of saying you'd rather not do this again?"

"That's entirely up to you. But if it's going to put a strain on our friendship, let's call a halt to it right now." He stood up. "I'm running late. But if you'll allow me, I'll call you tonight."

"That's what they always say when they're walking out the door."

He caught her by the chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. "If I say I'll call, I will."

Whatever doubts she'd had about his sincerity vanished in an instant. "Okay," she replied softly. "But if you could wait till next week, I'd appreciate it. I'd like some time to think."

"All right. I'll drive myself in today, and leave the limousine at your disposal." He leaned down to give her a quick kiss on the lips, then headed for the door. "Talk to you soon."

Despite the coffee, Ally found herself growing drowsy again. The clock read a quarter till ten when she finally opened her eyes. Rolling out of bed, she padded into the bathroom to use the toilet and splash cool water on her face. She wagged her tongue at herself in the mirror; she still looked tired, but at least this time it was a *good* kind of tired. Two robes hung on the back of the door, one flannel, the other thick terrycloth. They were both too big for her, but she rolled up the sleeves of the flannel one, double-knotting it around her waist, before venturing out in search of breakfast.

Eric's housekeeper, a stout, cheerful Latina woman, poured Ally some fresh coffee and started making her an omelette. But she wouldn't hear of Ally sitting at the kitchen table to eat, shooing her into the dining room instead. She plopped down at the far end of the banquet-sized mahogany dining table, feeling doubly ridiculous in her oversized robe and no slippers. Finally she decided to go sit on the balcony.

It had turned out to be a lovely morning, with fat white clouds scudding across the sky and the tiniest hint of a breeze. Eric's housekeeper brought Ally her omelette and a fresh carafe of French roast, along with the *Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. The omelette proved a delicious treat, seasoned with shallots and a dash of garlic, so light it practically floated off the plate.

Ally spent a blissfully unhurried rest of the morning nibbling, sipping and poring over the news. When the clock on the living room mantel struck noon, she pushed the papers away and rose, albeit reluctantly. It was past time she got back to Holly's place and started wrestling her article into submission. If she didn't sell another piece soon, she'd be eating ramen noodles for the next month.

Still, it'd been nice, having this little interlude. It did her ego good, knowing there was at least one person left in the world that found her attractive. She hadn't realized how starved she'd been for simple affection and the glint of unbridled lust in a man's eyes, never mind the amazing sex.

She arrived back in Eric's bedroom to find the bed neatly made, the Vera Wang dress laid out on the pristine ecru down comforter, her high heels on the floor at the foot of the bed. With a sigh, Ally shed the flannel robe and went into the bathroom for a quick shower before putting her party clothes back on and calling downstairs for James to bring the limo around.

The sight of Holly's apartment building left Ally strangely deflated. Her open-toed pump caught on a flap of loose carpet coming through the door and nearly sent her flying. The living room looked cramped and dark, even with early afternoon sun streaming through the window. "Welcome back to reality," she muttered, then went to change into jeans and a t-shirt.

She'd managed to knock out a couple of pages by the time Holly got home around seven. "Hey," her roommate said, tramping into the kitchen to grab a diet Coke from the fridge. "Looks like somebody had way too much fun last night."

Ally tried not to smirk, but it was just too damned tempting. "I guess you could say that."

"So what're you waiting for? Spill!"

"Well, Eric and I, um... we, um..."

"Oh. My. *God!*" Holly dropped into the chair across from Ally, her jaw nearly hitting her chest. "You did it! You really did it! You slept with him!"

“What’re you so surprised for? Weren’t you the one who said I could be wife number two if I played my cards right?”

“When’s the engagement party?”

“C’mon, Hol, be serious.” Ally shut her laptop with a sigh. “Eric’s in no hurry to remarry. I’m not even sure we’ll be seeing each other again.”

“Geez, was it that big of a disaster?”

“No. In fact, it was quite possibly the best sex I’ve ever had.”

Holly let out a whistle. “And Eric’s been sleeping with guys for the past ten years. Who’d a thunk it?” She took another long slug of Coke. “Do you want to see him again?”

“God, yes,” Ally admitted softly. “But that doesn’t mean I will.”

Her roommate grinned. “Girlfriend, you are *so* doomed.”

Chapter 4

As it turned out, Ally ended up calling Eric instead, and it didn't even take a week. The following Tuesday, just as he was getting ready to leave his office for a late lunch, Eric's private line rang. Usually he'd let it go to voice mail, but for some strange reason, he felt compelled to pick it up this time. The second he heard Ally's voice, he started grinning. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you," he said, sitting back down in his desk chair.

"I know. But I had to tell you the news." She sounded so excited, he could practically see her bouncing. "I just came from my interview with Martin Atkinson. He offered me the job!"

"That's terrific. Of course, I had no doubts."

"Yeah, well, apparently a recommendation from Eric Courtland is like a platinum calling card. All I had to do was show up."

"Not true. Martin was already familiar with your work before I introduced you. The rest was up to you."

"Eric," she said softly, "learn to accept a thank you when it's given, okay?"

"Okay, point taken." He laughed. "Sounds like celebrations are in order."

Her sigh sent his heart plummeting. "I really do appreciate the offer, but with the job and having to start looking for a new apartment—which I can now afford, thanks to you—I'm not up for another big party."

"No big party, just you and me having dinner. Casual clothes, very informal. I'll even do the cooking myself."

She burst out in giggles. "Are you serious?"

"I've been known to wield a mean roasting pan in my day."

"When you put it that way, how can I refuse? But be prepared for me bringing along my camera."

"This Saturday night, then? Around seven?"

"I'll be on pins and needles."

To his own surprise, so was Eric once Saturday rolled around. He spent the afternoon in the kitchen prepping for dinner, so jittery that he ended up nicking himself with an exceedingly sharp paring knife. Around six-thirty he slid the entrée in the oven, set the kitchen table for two and went to change into a clean shirt and pair of jeans.

Ally was a bit late, of course, since he hadn't sent the limo for her this time. It worked out to Eric's advantage, giving him an extra few minutes to make gravy from the pan drippings, carve the meat and arrange potatoes and carrots around it on the serving platter before covering it with foil and placing it back in the oven to keep warm.

She rang the doorbell around twenty after seven, handing him a bottle of cabernet as he ushered her inside. He couldn't help noticing how adorable she looked in her jeans and plain blue blouse, with no makeup other than clear lip gloss and a light dusting of blush. "I know I shouldn't have, but this is a special occasion, right?"

"I suppose we can make an exception." He glanced at the label, impressed by her choice. "This is perfect for what we're having."

She made a show of sniffing the air. "Wow, that smells amazing. And you haven't burned the place down yet, either. Two for two!"

For a moment, he wasn't sure which he wanted more—to smack her, or kiss her. "C'mon, everything's ready. And I, for one, am starving."

With a grin, she let him catch hold of her hand and lead her into the kitchen. She looked a bit surprised when Eric pulled out a chair for her, then went to get a corkscrew to open the wine and let her taste it first. When she nodded her approval, he filled her glass halfway and left her to sip at it while he got their tossed organic field greens salad with raspberry vinaigrette out of the fridge.

Ally took a couple of tentative bites, her eyes widening in astonishment. "This is *good*."

He hadn't realized how anxious he'd been to win her approval until relief swept over him at last. "Just wait for the entrée."

"I'm almost afraid to ask."

"Trust me, you'll like it."

And if her ecstatic expression when the first juicy morsel of chateaubriand hit her tongue was anything to judge by, she more than liked it. Eric could've sworn her eyes nearly rolled back in her head. His lips quirked up in a perverse, self-satisfied smirk.

Then she set down her fork, looking as if she were about to cry. "Eric, you shouldn't have done this."

"Why not? You're enjoying the meal, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course I am, but... you're gonna end up spoiling me."

All of a sudden, it dawned on him what she meant. "Hasn't anyone else you've dated ever cooked for you?"

"Are you kidding? Most of them could barely afford to buy me a hamburger." She took a sip of her wine, swirling the glass. "So, does this mean we're dating now?"

"Is that what you want to call it?"

"Damn it, Eric, knock it off! I'm sick of this answering-a-question-with-another-question crap. Let's just call it what it is."

"All right." He sat up straight, looking her in the eye. "It's a one-night stand on the verge of becoming an affair. And frankly, I hope it does."

"There are dozens of women—and men—out there who'd love to have an affair with you. I don't understand why you want me."

“Because I know you, Ally. I can be myself with you. We’re past all the bullshit game-playing people indulge in when they first get together. And most of all, you make me laugh.”

She smiled, shaking her head. “I had no idea that was my prime selling point.”

“Laughter’s a true luxury for people in my line of work. Why do you think so many CEOs suffer heart attacks before they’re forty?”

“In that case, I guess it’s my duty to help you stay healthy.”

Over his protests, Ally insisted on helping him clear the table. They wrapped up the leftovers and put them in the fridge, then set the dishes to soak overnight in the stainless steel sink. Eric caught her by the wrist as she turned away, pinning her up against the center island before leaning in for a deep kiss. He buried a hand in her hair and gave a tiny pull, eliciting a choked whimper that let him know how much she liked it. They were indeed well-matched.

She was trembling when they broke apart, pulse fluttering, pupils already dilated with arousal. “Wh-what’s for dessert?” she whispered, nipping none too gently at his earlobe.

“There’s some pastries in the fridge, but I think I’d rather have something else.” His hands dropped to the waistband of her jeans, roughly unbuttoning and unzipping them, yanking them down to tangle around her knees before he lifted her up, plopping her on the edge of the counter. Then he sank to his knees, spreading her thighs wide.

She was soaking wet even before he started diddling her clit with the tip of his tongue, and within seconds she had her fingers wound in his hair, urging him on while she shuddered and moaned loud enough to frighten a banshee. He kept licking and sucking, reveling in her salty-musk taste, until she’d finally screamed herself hoarse.

She slumped forward when he stopped, wrapping her arms around his neck. With a gentle kiss, Eric lifted her off the counter and helped her straighten her clothes, then swung her up into his arms and carried her to the living room. Laying her on the couch, he covered her with a down throw blanket before returning to the kitchen to get them both some coffee.

She seemed to have recovered a bit by the time he came back. Sitting up with a smile, she took her coffee cup from him and sipped at it gratefully. “Can I ask you something?”

It amused and amazed him that she could be so assertive one moment, yet so tentative the next. “You should know by now that you can ask me anything.”

“How the hell did a guy who’s been sleeping with another guy for the past ten years learn to go down on a woman like that?”

Eric almost sprayed French roast all over his two-hundred-dollar-per-square-foot imported Italian carpet. “You’re assuming that the sex I’ve had the most of is the only kind I prefer. I’ve been bisexual my entire life. It’s mere chance that Nick and I ended up together for as long as we did.”

“Wow. I had no idea.”

“What, did you think Barbara was the first woman I’d ever slept with?”

“I don’t know, I never really gave it much thought. I guess I always just assumed that you were exclusively gay.”

“Not always. In fact, the first person I ever slept with was a woman. She was one of my mother’s friends, about thirty-five, and stuck in a rotten marriage to one of my dad’s business associates. The year I turned sixteen, they came to our house upstate for the Christmas holidays. She dragged me into one of the bedrooms and seduced me.”

“Jesus,” Ally breathed. “Did your parents ever find out?”

“No, thank God. It probably would’ve destroyed my mother. But at the time, I thought I’d discovered the key to paradise. She actually preferred oral sex to intercourse, and I was glad to oblige her. I didn’t see her very long, but she taught me a lot about how to give women pleasure.”

“Her loss is my incredible gain.” Ally downed the rest of her coffee in one gulp. “Now, what was that you said about pastries?”

They traipsed back to the kitchen to gorge themselves on napoleons from Eric’s favorite French patisserie, washed down with more coffee. Ally licked every last crumb off her fingers, sitting back with a sigh. “Good food, great company, fantastic sex... you really are gonna spoil me, aren’t you?”

“If that’s a complaint, you’ll have to do a little better.” Standing up, he held out his hand to her. “In fact, I’d be happy to spoil you all night long, if you’d like.”

They practically sprinted back to the bedroom, giggling their heads off. Ally fell back on the bed and pulled him down on top of her. The bedsprings squealed in protest, which only made them laugh that much harder. At last Eric grabbed her by the wrists and pinned her down, kissing her until she turned her face away and demanded, “Are you gonna fuck me, or just tease me?”

Not exactly the cue Eric had been waiting for, but it’d do in a pinch. Rolling off the bed, he snagged a condom from the bedside table, then started unbuttoning his shirt. “I take it it’s all right if I actually *undress* this time?”

“Do whatever you want, but hurry up!”

Apparently rampant arousal had short-circuited Ally’s brain. She’d managed to get off her blouse and bra, but the intricacies of the button and zipper on her jeans seemed to elude her. Eric had them undone in three seconds flat, then grabbed both her pant legs, skinning them down and off onto the floor.

Easing Ally onto her stomach, he nudged her thighs apart with his knee and entered her from behind, sinking in balls-deep with one long, deep stroke. She was so damn wet, he nearly slipped out when he started to move, her moans and cries spurring him to go faster.

He draped himself over her back, burying his face in her soft, sweet-smelling hair, biting and kissing her throat. Her breath puffed hot and rapid on his skin, rent with broken sobs. “Am I hurting you?” he rasped.

Her sole reply was to sink her face into the pillow and lift her hips higher, giving him a better, deeper angle of penetration. Eric almost lost it on the spot. A few more short, ragged strokes, and orgasm slammed into him like a tsunami, dragging him under to drown.

Once the world had stopped swimming, he dropped a kiss onto Ally's shoulder and got up to take a shower. She moaned softly and turned over, already senseless to anything but sleep. He shut the door quietly, startled to see Nick's old flannel robe still hanging alongside his own. He'd thought his housekeeper had packed it up and shipped it back to Nick, along with the other things he'd left behind.

Guilt's bony fingers clutched at him, but Eric shrugged off their grip. Nick was gone, and he wasn't coming back. It was time to stop dwelling on the past and move on.

He dialed the water temperature up to scalding and stepped under the needle-like spray, letting it wash away his last remnants of regret along with his perspiration. When he finally climbed out, he felt infinitely more clear-headed.

Still dozing, Ally rolled over beside him when he slid back into bed. Eric wasn't usually a fan of cuddling, but tonight it didn't bother him. He was grateful to have her here. She helped the time pass more quickly—time he'd otherwise be spending with his old friend Johnnie Walker. In many ways, she'd helped pull him back from the edge.

It had crossed his mind more than once that he was using her, but he rejected the notion. There was nothing wrong with two friends offering each other a little simple human comfort. He might as well savor it, and hold the memory close for all the other long, lonely nights when she wasn't here.

Chapter 5

The next six months whirled by faster than a tornado. Between settling in at her new job, trying in vain to find a new apartment, and spending as much time as she could with Eric, most nights Ally ended up collapsed on Holly's couch, half-asleep before she could feel that one loose spring poking her in the ass.

On weekends, she stayed with Eric. Usually he had at least one business or charity soiree to attend, but Ally was more than game to accompany him. It was a real education, circulating in this world she'd had only brief glimpses of before, and she made sure to keep her eyes and ears open. But she did her share of talking, too; one memorable evening at a benefit for the New York Philharmonic, she found herself engaged in animated conversation about the global stock market with a soft-spoken middle-aged gentleman with a strong German accent.

She had no idea who he was until Eric came by to escort her into dinner, then leaned over and whispered, "Congratulations. You've just impressed the president of Deutsche Bank."

That night on the way home, he made good on his promise to fuck her in the back of the limo—although, to her relief, he didn't roll down the windows. One more kinky fantasy realized.

But she enjoyed her quiet times with Eric the most, and she was starting to think Eric did too. Now that spring had rolled around, on Sunday afternoons they'd go out for long walks in the park, sometimes heading over to the Metropolitan to wander idly through the galleries. She was surprised to discover how much Eric knew about Impressionist and Cubist art; he had a story for every piece, and she couldn't help noticing how much pleasure it gave him to share it with her.

"I think you missed your calling," she said to him one Sunday when they'd returned to the penthouse for coffee on the living room couch. "You should've been a professor, or a curator."

"If my mother'd had her way, that's the direction I would've taken. She never wanted me running the company. She said it would swallow me whole, like it did my father. And she was right." With a sigh, he glanced at his watch. "I should call down to have James bring the limo around for you, unless you'd like to stay for dinner."

Ally was sorely tempted, but dinner would lead to other, more naked activities, which usually left her running late for work the next morning. "I'd better not," she replied with a touch of genuine regret. "In fact, I should tell you now that I'm going to have to skip next weekend. Holly and I have a hot date with the real estate classifieds."

"Still no luck finding a new place?"

"Being stuck at the office all day makes it a little difficult. Every single time I've gone to check out a place, it's already rented. Holly's even asked her super if we could switch to a two-bedroom unit in her building, but there're about fifty people ahead of us on the waiting list."

"I know a couple of fairly prominent realtors. I could give them a call tomorrow, see if they have any listings."

"That's very sweet of you, but there's no way I could afford their commission."

"I thought it went without saying that I'd cover it."

"No," she replied firmly, reaching over to grasp his hand. "I can't. You've done more than enough for me already."

He fell silent for a moment, sipping at his coffee. "There is a rather obvious solution. You could move in here with me."

Laughter bubbled to her lips, but she managed to stifle it. "Wh-what about your senatorial campaign? I doubt your potential constituents will look any more kindly on you living in sin with a woman than with a man."

"If we were married, that wouldn't be a problem."

Now all she could do was stare at him. "Eric, I'm not marrying you just to put a roof over my head!"

"Think about it, Ally. It makes sense." He sat up, scooting closer to her. Ally wasn't sure whether to relax into it, or bolt for the door. "You spend every weekend here anyway. We get along better than Barbara and I ever did. We already know we're sexually compatible. I can help you with your career, and vice versa. I think we could build a good life together."

When he explained it like that, it didn't sound so bad—except for one thing. "I don't hear any heartfelt declarations of love."

"Were you really expecting any?"

"No," she admitted. "But it would've been nice if you'd made the effort."

"You'd like it better if I lied to you? I witnessed too many lies in my parents' marriage—or omitted truths, which amounts to the same thing. I suspect it was what Barbara and I didn't say to each other that destroyed our marriage. We hardly spoke after the first couple of months anyway, except in public." He got up and went to the bar to pour himself a scotch. "I'm not heading down that road again. If we can't be honest with each other, we shouldn't be together, married or not."

She sat there for a long time, studying the dreggy depths of her coffee cup. Eric was right, it did make sense, when he laid it all out like a grocery list. And she wasn't exactly fighting off other offers. She'd had two serious relationships in the past decade, neither of them resulting in a proposal. Maybe this was the best she could hope for.

It wasn't like Eric's proposal was a fate worse than death—quite the opposite, in fact. He was an honorable, decent man, an absolutely devastating lover, and he'd just promised never to lie to her. At least neither of them harbored unrealistic expectations. Still, it was a lot to absorb.

"I'd like to think about it for a few days, if that's all right with you," she said at last.

He nodded. "Of course. Take all the time you need."

* * * *

Ally got very little sleep the next few nights. A million contradictions swirled around in her brain, all battling for dominance. Once or twice she'd actually come close to accepting Eric's offer, but then this tiny, annoying voice popped up from the depths of her consciousness, telling her she was crazy for even considering such a thing. Talking it out with Holly only left her more conflicted. What she needed was the straight dope from someone who'd been there.

Barbara's number was unlisted, but luckily, having access to a major news network's info database proved advantageous. Ally tracked down the number in nothing flat, then sat staring at the seven scribbled digits on her notepad, drumming her pencil on the desk. Finally she screwed up the courage to pick up the phone.

She'd half-expected to get a message machine, but a crisp, low-pitched voice answered instead. "I-I'd like to speak to Barbara Courtland," she stammered, fighting the urge to hang up.

"Speaking. And it's Thornton, not Courtland. I've gone back to my maiden name—which you would know, if you'd done your research. You do realize it says CNN on the caller ID, don't you?" There was an exasperated huff of breath, before she added, "You're wasting your time and mine. I don't give interviews."

"That's not why I'm calling. You might not remember me, but my name is Allison Taylor. We met a couple of times while you were married to—"

"Of course I remember you. You're one of Eric's friends from college." Her tone softened a bit. "Or should I say, you're Eric's current...friend."

Ally let out a nervous laugh. "God, does *everybody* know?"

"When your photo's splashed all over the *New York Times* society page, I think it's safe to say the mystery's over." To Ally's relief, Barbara laughed too. "What can I do for you, Allison?"

"I was hoping we could talk in person. There are a few things I'd like to ask you about." She sucked in a breath. "Eric proposed to me a few days ago, and I'm a bit...confused."

"If it's any consolation, I felt the same way when he asked me," Barbara replied. "I don't have a problem with us meeting, though I doubt there's anything significant I could add to what Eric's already told you."

"It's not information I'm lacking, so much as perspective. And I'd really like to get yours."

"All right. Let me check my book." There was a rustle of turning pages, and then, "I have some free time this afternoon around three. I'm only a few blocks away, so how about we meet at that café on the ground floor of your building?"

It was a bit late in the day, but if she took a half-hour lunch, she could swing it. "Perfect. I'll see you then."

Ally got there a few minutes early and snagged a table on the sunny terrace. She spied Barbara coming toward her halfway down the block, strolling at a leisurely pace, the afternoon breeze ruffling her khaki linen slacks and plain white silk blouse. She smiled and waved when she saw Ally, pushing up her wide-framed designer sunglasses to rest atop her head.

“How are you, Allison?” She smiled warmly, shaking Ally’s proffered hand before sitting down across from her. Her hair was longer now than Ally remembered, hanging to her shoulders in dark waves. Well, Eric certainly had a preferred type. Once you added in Barbara’s sea-green eyes and lush lips, she could’ve been Nick’s sister. “I must admit, your phone call intrigued me.”

“Thanks for coming. I was afraid I might’ve freaked you out.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, although I should apologize for snapping at you at first. I get so many calls from reporters, and subtlety is completely lost on them.” Their waiter swung by, depositing the iced teas Ally had ordered when she’d first sat down, then scurried away. “I’m assuming this is all about Eric. What would you like to know?”

Too damn many questions. Ally could’ve kicked herself for not writing them down. “I’m wondering why you married him when you knew he was in love with someone else.”

“Well, I won’t lie to you. The kind of life Eric offers is very attractive. It’s nice going to bed every night knowing your bills are paid and you’ll never have to worry about the rent. And the Courtland name opens a lot of doors. I loved being able to walk into any restaurant in town and have a table already waiting for me. Whenever I went out shopping, the clerks fell all over themselves trying to serve me. That kind of status can be rather addictive.”

“Then it was all just about the money?”

“Yes and no. The money was a lovely perk, but it wasn’t the only one. As I’m sure you’re aware, Eric can be quite charming and persuasive when the mood strikes him. He caught me at a vulnerable moment in my life. I’d just gotten out of a long relationship with someone I loved deeply, but our affair had come to a rather unpleasant end. So when Eric suggested that we marry for convenience rather than love, it didn’t sound like such a bad idea. I was actually a bit relieved that his affections were already engaged elsewhere.”

“But...” God, now she was blushing. “It wasn’t purely convenience, was it? Eric told me the two of you slept together.”

“Of course we did. We had a fairly normal sex life at the beginning, until I couldn’t do it anymore. It was too hard, being that intimate with someone who didn’t love me. And yes, I know that makes me a hypocrite, but sometimes these things don’t become evident until they happen.”

“I guess I don’t have to ask why you divorced him.”

“I hung on for as long as I could, because I felt that I owed it to Eric to at least pretend to make it work, but two years in purgatory was all I could stand. In the end, I simply walked out. I didn’t even tell him first. If I had, I knew he would’ve talked me out of it.”

Stunned, Ally sat there, sipping her tea and trying not to tremble. She’d steeled herself for the harsh truth, but hadn’t realized how badly hearing it would hurt. “Thanks for being honest.”

“Listen, I don’t want to leave you with the wrong impression. Eric’s not a callous or cruel man. He never mistreated me. However, he does have a tendency to become focused on his work to the exclusion of everything else. It’s good that you have a job of your own, otherwise you’d be spending a lot of time alone.”

“Lucky me.” All of a sudden, something that should have dawned upon Ally weeks ago came crashing down like the proverbial anvil. “Those parties and galas and business soirées Eric dragged me to—that was all an audition, wasn’t it? He was giving me the potential spouse test.”

Barbara laughed. “He did the same thing with me, and I’ve known him since high school. Eric’s very particular about the people he lets into his life, but I’m sure you already know that.”

“I suppose I should be flattered, but I’m not.”

Silence crackled for a few moments, until Barbara leaned across the table to grasp Ally’s hand. “Allison, obviously we don’t know each other very well, but I get the impression that you and I are quite different. The first time I saw a picture of you and Eric on the society page, I was jealous. Eric never smiled at me like that when we were out in public together. He never put his arm around me or held my hand. And it’s evident to me how much you care about him. You two are good for each other. There’s no reason to assume your marriage will end up like mine.” She sat back in her chair, reaching for her glass of tea. “Providing, of course, that you can accept his relationship with Nick. Because that’s not going away, no matter who Eric’s married to.”

“Actually, it already has. Nick broke it off with Eric last September. He married a girl he works with at the *Herald* over the Christmas holidays.”

Barbara’s eyes bulged. “Oh my fucking God.”

“That’s what I said.”

And on that note, they both burst out laughing.

They chatted for a few more minutes, until Ally had to get back to work. Barbara walked her to the elevator, handing Ally a business card with a different phone number on it. “That’s my cellphone. Feel free to call anytime. We Courtland wives have to stick together,” she added with a wink.

Ally smiled shakily. “I still haven’t made up my mind about that yet.”

“Look, I know you’re probably thinking what a mistake it’d be to marry him. I think you’ll regret it for the rest of your life if you don’t.”

“Do you regret it? Because if you don’t mind me saying, it sounds a lot like you do.”

“I regret withdrawing too soon, and not giving it a real chance. Maybe if I’d waited until I was over all the pain from my previous relationship, I wouldn’t have been so afraid to commit. But I don’t blame Eric for any of that. He did the best he could. I was the one who wasn’t ready.”

Ally headed back upstairs to spend the rest of the afternoon staring dully at her computer screen, her mind still awirl from her conversation with Barbara. At last she finished some research she’d been doing for one of the segment producers, shut down her computer and bolted for the door.

Holly was already home by the time Ally got there. She was heating something up in the microwave—something in a small plastic dish that smelled like it had died a month earlier. Ally entertained brief, wistful memories of succulent chateaubriand, and tried not to vomit.

She made herself a green salad out of some half-wilted iceberg lettuce, sprinkled it with vinegar and oil and plopped down at the kitchen table, promptly zoning out. She wasn't even aware Holly was talking to her until her roommate started snapping her fingers in front of Ally's face. "You in there somewhere, or shall I have you declared legally brain-dead?"

"Sorry," she replied sheepishly. "It's been kind of a weird day."

"Aren't they all?" Holly shoved a section of newspaper and a pen in her direction. "If you still want to go apartment-hunting tomorrow, you'd better start circling some likely candidates."

The words swam on the page, blurring together in a big, splotchy mess. She couldn't focus anymore, couldn't think. God, she was so fucking tired of all this—of living in cramped, shitty apartments, eating crappy food, struggling in jobs far below her level of ability. If she weren't so damned exhausted, she would've burst into tears.

She deserved better than this, and Eric was offering it to her. Was it really so wrong that she wanted to accept? No, they weren't madly in love with each other, but they had affection and respect—and great sex. Maybe, given time, love would develop too.

It wasn't an ideal situation, but it could still work. And, Ally realized with a pang, she wanted it to work. She liked the idea of coming home to Eric every night, having a quiet dinner with him, falling asleep beside him after another bout of wild, abandoned fucking. It could be a good life, a comfortable life—and if Eric became senator, an incredibly exciting life as well.

"Earth to Ally," Holly chirped, dinging her fork against her glass this time. "I don't know what planet you were on, but next time, buy me a ticket too."

Ally chuckled, pushing the newspaper aside. "I don't think we'll be needing this."

Holly's eyes went wide. "You mean, you've made up your mind?"

"There're a couple of issues Eric and I still need to iron out, but...I think so."

"Holy shit. Are you sure?"

"Why does everybody keep asking me that?"

"Hey, this is a pretty huge step. I never thought you'd go through with it. But I never thought you'd actually sleep with Eric either." Holly's diet Coke froze halfway to her mouth. "Oh, geez—you're not gonna make me wear some fugly bridesmaid's dress, are you?"

Ally just laughed, and threw the newspaper at her.

Chapter 6

Eric wasn't sure whether to feel overjoyed or apprehensive when Ally turned up on his doorstep the following evening, and the look on her face didn't give him much of a clue which way she was leaning. "I was expecting you to call first," he said, ushering her inside.

"I can't tell you how many times I picked up the phone today, but..." She shrugged. "This is something we need to discuss in person anyway."

"All right. Make yourself comfortable on the couch, and I'll go start a pot of coffee."

"I'd rather sit in the kitchen, if you don't mind."

He couldn't help noticing that she'd clasped her hand together so tightly her knuckles had turned white. His own uneasiness ratcheted up a couple of notches. "Whatever you say."

She waited until the coffee was done brewing and Eric had set a plate of sliced apples and Anjou pears on the table before she spoke again. "I came over tonight to tell you I've decided to accept your proposal, provided we can come to an agreement on a couple of other issues."

"What other issues?"

"I already know there are certain things you want out of this marriage. You wouldn't have asked me in the first place if you didn't have the election coming up next year. So I'll do it. I'll be your perfect little political wife. I'll stand next to you at rallies and parties and smile my head off. But I want this to be a real marriage, Eric. Which means I expect you to be faithful."

Was that all? He nearly keeled over in relief. "With Nick out of the picture, I doubt that'll be a problem."

"Really? So you're okay with no more nightclubs or semi-public encounters?"

"Ally, that history's so ancient, it's fossilized. Believe me, my promiscuous days are long over." He grabbed a slice of apple and bit into it, relishing its sharp, crisp flavor. "What else?"

"There's a new opening for an on-air correspondent with CNN's New York office. I want it. And I know you can make it happen with one phone call."

"I thought you were perfectly capable of landing a job on your own."

"I've already put in my application, but Martin keeps stalling me. He says I need another year of experience before they'll consider moving me up. Well, I don't want to wait another year. I've got a master's degree in journalism from Columbia fucking University. I'm qualified for this job, and I deserve it. And if you want to marry me that badly, you'll get it for me."

He loved it when she turned assertive like this—and so did a certain part of his anatomy. "Consider it done."

"Wow." She sat back, a relieved grin spreading across her lips. "That was a lot easier than I thought."

"What, did you think I'd say no?"

“Eric, you’re not exactly the kind of person other people make demands of and live to tell about it.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Really? I had no idea I was so intimidating.”

“Not anymore. I’ve seen through your gruff façade.”

“Thank God for that.” Rising from his chair, he caught hold of her hand and tugged her into his arms for a deep kiss. “There’s just one more thing you need to decide,” he added with a grin. “Paris or Rome for the honeymoon?”

* * * *

They were married at city hall the last week of April, with Holly and Ally’s father serving as witnesses. Ally held her breath when Eric slipped the platinum baguette band onto her finger, right above her matching engagement ring, which sported a flawless two-carat diamond solitaire. He’d taken her to Tiffany’s a couple of weeks earlier and told her to pick out whatever she liked. Her eyes had nearly popped out of her head when he took out his black AMEX card to pay for it. She hadn’t had the nerve to ask how much the final bill was, but she’d snuck a glimpse of at least five zeroes on the receipt he’d signed.

Then the judge pronounced them husband and wife, and they kissed. Ally’s father stepped forward to shake Eric’s hand, Holly applauded, cried and threw rice, and Ally blushed. The entire ceremony took a grand total of fifteen minutes.

Afterward, all four of them piled into the back of the limo and headed to the Plaza Hotel for lunch. Ally leaned her head on Eric’s shoulder and admired her rings, turning them to and fro in the light so that they glittered and threw shimmering patterns everywhere. She felt like a queen in the gorgeous cream-colored Chanel suit and Jimmy Choo pumps Eric had helped her pick out. He’d bought a new suit for the occasion too, charcoal gray with a silver and black striped silk tie and sleek black Bruno Magli brogues. His white rose boutonnière threaded with pale pink baby’s breath matched Ally’s bouquet perfectly.

They’d barely had time to crack open the chilled bottle of Veuve Clicquot and offer up a toast before the limo pulled up in front of the Plaza. Ally took Eric’s arm and let him escort her inside, but instead of heading for the restaurant, he turned in the opposite direction, toward the rear of the hotel. A uniformed hotel worker flung open a set of double doors at their approach, revealing a huge ballroom packed with tables full of guests, all of whom leapt to their feet and clapped when Eric and Ally entered.

For a moment, Ally wasn’t sure whether to start crying or have a heart attack. She settled for flinging her arms around Eric instead. “Didn’t I tell you I wanted a nice, quiet wedding?” she whispered, giving him a look of mock reprimand.

He kissed her earlobe, flashing her a grin. “You didn’t say anything about the reception.”

She gave the room a quick scan, taking in the crowd, the simple, elegant white and pink floral centerpieces on every table and another, even larger table near the far wall, piled high with gifts. There must've been two hundred people here, at least. "How did you put all this together so quickly?"

"This is where a highly efficient assistant comes in handy. All I provided was the credit card."

He was fibbing, of course. Knowing Eric, he'd probably supervised every minute detail. God, now she really was going to cry. "What am I going to do with you?"

"If your father weren't standing next to us, I'd be happy to give you some suggestions," he murmured. "But why don't we sit down and enjoy our lunch instead?"

All four members of the wedding party took their seats at a raised table near the front of the room, then Eric signaled for the banquet staff to start serving. First came French onion soup, followed by mixed green salad with Ally's favorite vinaigrette dressing, then the main course, a delicious coq au vin with sautéed mushrooms and garlic mashed potatoes, all washed down with glass after glass of ice-cold French champagne.

Ally chatted, giggled and stuffed herself silly, reaching over every few minutes to clasp Eric's hand. Finally he leaned over and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"What's the matter, can't a wife hold her husband's hand if she wants to?"

"I'm here, Ally. And I'm not going anywhere." Pressing a soft kiss to her palm, he got up, dinging his spoon against his wine glass to get everyone's attention. The room fell silent. "I'd like to thank you all for coming today, especially on such short notice. I promise you, it won't happen again." The room buzzed with laughter. "Most of you are used to hearing me give long speeches, but today is a day for celebrating, not talking, so I'll keep my remarks brief. To my bride's father, Gabe Taylor, and her good friend, Holly Martin—thank you for standing up with us today. Since my own family's unable to be here, I'm both touched and grateful for your support." He raised his glass. "And to my wife Allison, whose humor and wisdom have guided me through difficult times. Here's to happier times for both of us, for many years to come."

Eric drained his glass, and the entire room followed suit. Blinking back joyful tears, Ally was just about to leap up and plant the world's proudest kiss on him, when Eric's gaze locked on something in the distance. Every last drop of color bled from his face.

The banquet staff was wheeling in the cake, a four-tiered confection dripping with fresh flowers and whipped cream icing, but Eric barely glanced at it. Instead, he tossed his napkin on his plate, whispered, "I'll be right back," and bolted for the nearest door.

Stunned, Ally stared after him, torn between following and staying put, but her body's stubborn refusal to move effectively solved that dilemma. Holly flew to her side in an instant, looking every bit as bewildered as Ally felt. "What's going on?"

Ally shrugged helplessly, apprehension settling in her chest like a cold fist. Every pair of eyes in the room was focused on her now, and she didn't care for the attention one bit. It felt like a million tiny, invisible pins, all jabbing at her at once. "I-I have no idea. Maybe he's not feeling well. But he seemed perfectly fine a couple of minutes ago."

"I'll go see if he's in the men's room," her father said, giving Ally's shoulder a comforting squeeze before heading out the same door Eric had exited.

Holly shot her a quizzical glance, but Ally just shook her head. What else could she do? It'd look pretty damned odd if both the bride *and* the groom ditched their own reception. So she sucked in a deep breath, poured herself another glass of champagne and waited.

* * * *

When Eric saw that familiar tall, dark-haired figure lurking at the back of the ballroom, at first he thought he was hallucinating. Then the figure looked right at him, dashing out the nearest exit once he realized he'd been spotted.

Eric reacted without thinking, practically sprinting from the ballroom, down the hallway to the hotel lobby. Frantic, he scoured the lobby from one end to the other, but there was no sign of Nick anywhere. He ran out to the curb, scanning the block in both directions, then came back inside to check the restaurant. Nothing.

Nick wasn't there. In all likelihood, he'd never been there. Eric had probably caught sight of some hotel worker who happened to resemble him, and his own overactive imagination filled in the rest.

Flushed and sweating, Eric dragged himself to the men's room to splash cool water on his face and neck. He hadn't realized how badly he was trembling; he had to grip the edge of the sink to steady himself.

"Eric?" The firm grip closing over his shoulder nearly had Eric leaping out of his skin. It was Gabe, forehead crinkled, peering at him with genuine concern. "You all right? Ally thought you might be sick."

He forced a shaky, relieved laugh. "I just needed to take some air. The room was getting stuffy, and I think I've probably overindulged a bit on the champagne." Accepting a hand-towel from the attendant, he quickly blotted his face and wiped his hands. "I'm fine now, really."

Gabe gave him a wary look but didn't say anything more, merely clapped him on the back and escorted him back to the ballroom. Ally shot to her feet when she saw him, reaching up to cup his face in both hands. "My God, you look like you just ran the marathon. Where the hell did you disappear to?"

"I'll tell you later," he replied, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. "We should probably cut the cake before it melts under all these lights."

"B-But what about—"

"Later, Allison. I mean it."

She stared at him for a long moment before pasting on a tight smile. “Whatever you say.” Then she took his proffered hand and went to help him cut the cake.

Chapter 7

The reception ended around four. Holly and Gabe piled back in the limo with the happy couple and rode out to JFK airport, where the Courtland Industries jet waited to whisk Eric and Ally off to Paris. After more tearful hugs and kisses, followed by a bon-voyage toast, they were airborne at last. Ally ducked into the bathroom to change into jeans and a sweater, then lounged in a comfy leather chair sipping club soda until Eric returned from changing his own clothes.

She waited several minutes for him to address the elephant in the room. When he didn't, she figured it was time to lead her own charge. "Are you planning to tell me what happened this afternoon, or do I have to guess?"

Eric swirled the scotch in his glass, then set it back down on the small table between them without taking a sip. "I thought I saw Nick standing at the back of the ballroom when I finished making my toast. But it wasn't him, Allison. I looked everywhere, and he wasn't there. It was just my mind playing tricks on me."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Would you rather it really had been him?"

"If it was, I probably wouldn't be sitting here right now, would I?" When he flinched, she knew she had her answer. "You made me promises, Eric. You told me you'd never lie to me, and that you'd remain faithful. I'm holding you to both of them."

"I have no intention of violating your trust, or our marriage vows. You should know me well enough by now to know that I always honor my obligations."

That last word stung, but she gritted her teeth until it passed. "Is that what I am to you now—an obligation?"

"No, of course not," he replied slowly. "You're my wife."

"Exactly." She finished off the last swallow of her club soda, wishing she had something stronger. A slight buzz still lingered from all the champagne she'd drunk that afternoon, but it'd probably be gone within the next hour or so. "You proposed to *me*, remember? And when I told you the kind of marriage I wanted, you didn't blink an eye. So when you up and deserted me in the middle of our own wedding reception, it came as a bit of a shock."

He nodded, rubbing a hand over his face. "Nothing like that will ever happen again."

"Look, don't make me any more promises, okay? I never should've pressed you about the other issues. Forcing someone to give their word never works out."

"You didn't force me. I agreed of my own free will." When he extended his hand to her, she looked at it for a long moment before accepting it. His fingers closed over hers, solid, warm and comforting. "Nick's gone now. He's in the past. There's only one person I want to spend the rest of my life with, and I'm looking at her."

He sounded so completely sincere, there was no way she could stay angry with him. Her last traces of annoyance melted away in an instant, accompanied by a relieved grin. “You sweet-talker, you.”

“I mean it, Allison. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Okay, okay, I believe you. But what’s up with calling me Allison? You’ve been doing it all day.”

“Because it suits you. Ally was a twenty-year-old college girl. You’re a poised, assertive, beautiful woman.” He smiled. “But if it bothers you, I suppose I can go on calling you Ally.”

She thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. “No, Allison is fine. It’ll just take some getting used to, I guess.”

They sat in companionable silence for awhile, until they both ended up stifling yawns at virtually the same time. Eric glanced at his watch before heaving himself out of his chair with a groan. “We’ve got about six more hours of flying time ahead of us. Might as well get some rest.”

The banquette sofa at the far end of the cabin folded out into a double bed, but they didn’t get to sleep for another hour or so. Eric had her jeans off and his face between her legs in nothing flat, and he stayed there until she came so hard, Ally was pretty sure they could hear her moaning all the way in Paris. Then he eased into her waiting arms, pushing deeply inside her. They moved together with exquisite, unbearable slowness until Eric shuddered and gasped, face buried in her shoulder as he came.

“Welcome to the Mile-High Club, Mrs. Courtland,” he murmured, rolling off her to grab an extra blanket and spread it over both of them.

She giggled. “What do you know—it *is* better at forty-thousand feet.”

“Really? I didn’t think you came that last time.”

“Don’t worry about it. Thanks to your busy tongue, I’m already well past my daily quota.” Sighing, she snuggled in closer, one arm wrapped around his waist. “I don’t have to come every time, you know. I love watching you get off too, but that’s a little tricky when I’m seeing God at the same time.”

“I’ve never had a woman—or even a man, for that matter—complain that I’ve given them too *much* pleasure.”

“If you think that’s a complaint,” she mumbled drowsily, “you’d better not leave the toilet seat up.”

* * * *

They slept through the rest of the flight, arriving in Paris around five o’clock local time the next morning. A limousine and uniformed driver were waiting to drive them into the city. Ally drowsed, leaning her head on Eric’s shoulder until they pulled up in front of the Plaza-Athénée Hotel. At her first glimpse of the place, she came wide awake.

“Oh my God!” she gasped as Eric helped her out of the limo and escorted her inside. Her jaw nearly hit her chest at the sight of the lobby, all gleaming marble, with a plush red and silver carpet and glittering multi-tiered chandelier. “It’s like a palace!”

“Wait till you see our suite,” Eric replied with a smirk.

Ally had to remind herself to breathe the entire elevator ride to the sixth floor, but when the hotel manager, who’d insisted on accompanying them upstairs himself, proudly threw open the door to their room, her legs almost went out from under her. It looked more like a luxurious private apartment than a hotel suite, with a full-sized living room, bedroom and *two* bathrooms, both in the same pale cream marble as the hotel lobby. Plum, gray and black dominated the rest of the stunning Art Deco décor. Their living room window opened onto a gorgeous view of the Avenue Montaigne, still shimmering with city lights. Fresh roses and lavender sat in cut-crystal bowls on every table, their sweet scent lightly perfuming the air.

An army of bellhops toting luggage followed them inside and started to unpack for them, but Eric dashed over to grab his black leather carry-on bag before anyone could open it, tucking it away in a corner next to the bed. Then he returned to Ally’s side to listen to the manager rattle off his litany of the suite’s many accoutrements, interjecting his own questions and comments in fluent French. Ally just stared, caught between admiration and complete astonishment.

Luckily, she managed to regain her equilibrium by the time the hotel staff finally vacated. “Ten years we’ve known each other, and I had no idea you spoke French,” she said, toeing off her shoes before collapsing on the plum silk-covered sofa. “Guess I’ve still got a few surprises in store.”

“And sooner than you think, too.” Plopping down next to her, he reached for the phone. “But let’s call down for some breakfast first, before we pass out.”

He ordered café au lait, brioche, omelettes and fresh fruit. They ate it sprawled barefoot on the floor next to the coffee table, wrapped in fluffy Turkish terrycloth bathrobes bearing the hotel’s monogram. Blissfully content, Ally sank back in Eric’s arms and gazed out the window, watching the sky fill with pale morning sun.

She sighed. “I hate to waste such a lovely day, but I think I’m too tired to go out.”

“We’re still on New York time. Don’t worry about it. By tomorrow, you should be feeling more acclimated.”

“Hmm. Wonder what we can do to pass the time till then?”

“I have a few ideas. Like ravishing you in every room in this suite, for starters.” Grinning, he stood up and held out his hand to her. “C’mon. I brought along something I think you’ll like.”

She followed him into the bedroom and perched on the edge of the bed while he retrieved his carry-on bag. Her breath froze in her throat when he pulled out a coil of glossy black rope. “You love it when I hold you down,” he said. “This way you can still be restrained, and it’ll leave my hands free for...other things.”

“O-Oh, I, um... Wow.” Swallowing hard, she ran her fingertips tentatively along the rope, amazed to discover that it felt every bit as soft and smooth as it looked. “I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“I know. And if you’d rather not, that’s fine. But I’ve got a feeling you’d really enjoy it.”

If her stiffened nipples and the sudden hot twitching in her clit were any clue, she’d have to agree with him. “I guess I wouldn’t mind trying it at least once. But what if—”

“If you don’t like it, we can stop anytime. But we’ll have to agree on a safe word, so you can let me know when you’ve had enough.”

“What’s wrong with plain old ‘stop’?”

“How many times have you told me to stop when you really didn’t mean it?”

“Good point.” She pondered it a moment before starting to giggle. “How about ‘Laura’?”

He stared at her, a tiny grin tugging at his lips. “Oh, you’re evil.”

“And you love it.”

“All right. ‘Laura’ it is.” Gesturing for her to stand, he reached down to unknot the belt of her robe, then slid it off her shoulders. She shivered as the room’s cool air wafted over her naked skin. “Do you trust me?”

The question made her heart race that much faster. “O-Of course.”

“Good. Then lie down in the middle of the bed, and stretch your arms above your head.”

She did as he asked, barely holding back a whimper as she watched him uncoil the rope, running it through his hands before he looped it over her wrists and knotted it firmly enough to hold her in place, but not so tightly that it would cut off her circulation. After that, he took the ends and threaded them through the slats at either end of the headboard, knotting them again.

She was trembling and breathing hard by the time he was done. Leaning down, he gave her a deep kiss and whispered, “You look so beautiful like this,” before removing his own robe. His erect cock popped up like a tent pole, already wet at the tip. The sight of it made Ally gasp. Apparently this was every bit as big of a turn-on for him too.

She’d half-expected him to crawl on top of her and start fucking her to a fare-thee-well, but instead he said, “I’ll be right back,” and disappeared into the living room. He returned a few seconds later with a glass of ice water from their breakfast tray. He took a sip, then set it on the bedside table, rolled onto the mattress beside her and started licking and sucking her nipples.

She nearly screamed the house down when she realized he had an ice cube in his mouth, writhing and shuddering at the brain-melting contrast between the cold, cold ice and Eric’s hot tongue. He kept on for the mercifully few seconds it took for the cube to dissolve, then moved down, raining kisses along the length of her torso before stopping briefly to dip his tongue into her navel and give it a quick swirl or two.

Groaning, she pulled hard at the ropes, tossing her head in frustration. But of course, they wouldn't come loose. Eric would never make it that easy. Today he expected her to work for her pleasure—and if his triumphant smirk was any clue, he was already more than satisfied with the job he was doing.

When he reached for the glass to take another sip, she knew what he was planning to do next. Part of her wanted to beg him to stop; her safe word hovered on the tip of her tongue for an excruciatingly long moment before she choked it back down. If she called a halt now, she knew she'd never have the nerve to do this again. And she couldn't bear to disappoint Eric—or herself.

Her hips arched off the mattress the second the ice cube touched her clit. Eric grabbed her by the waist and held on tight, riding her like a rodeo cowboy. He swirled and sucked, teasing the hard, throbbing little button in his mouth until pleasure and pain collided, mingled and finally melted into each other, along with the last tiny sliver of ice.

He licked her until she came, flooding hot and sticky right into his mouth, then until she couldn't come anymore. She was just about to give her safe word when he lifted his head at last, shooting her a grin so smug she wished she had her hands free, so she could slap him. "I guess I don't have to ask if you enjoyed that."

"Y-You fucking bastard," she breathed, still shivering with the aftershocks of her orgasm. "I can't decide if I want to kiss you or kill you."

"Well, I'll let you think about it for a few more minutes. It's my turn now." He got up for a moment to rummage in his bag for a condom before kneeling between her legs to roll it on. The sight of his cock, swollen and angry with frustrated arousal, made Ally's mouth go bone-dry.

"E-Eric, I-I don't think I can—"

"Come again?" His eyebrows shot up. "I don't expect you to. I seem to recall you saying you loved watching me get off. So go ahead and watch. This time's for me."

He spread her thighs wide and entered her roughly, sliding his hands under her ass to lift her up, pounding her hard and utterly without pity. Ally choked back a sob and stared up into his eyes, icy blue and remote, until he saw how close she was to losing it. Then he stopped, reaching up to grab the end of rope dangling from right corner of the bed; one good yank was all it took to loosen it. He did the same with the left side before unknotting the rope from about her wrists and massaging them gently until the pins-and-needles sensation faded. "Better?" he whispered.

Her sole reply was to tangle her fingers in his hair and drag him down to her for a tender kiss. She sighed with delight when he began moving in her again, slowly this time, building to a climax that engulfed both of them, leaving them shattered and wrecked in each other's arms.

It took a few minutes for the world to right itself again. Ally opened her eyes to find Eric gazing down at her. He looked proud and a tiny bit worried at the same time. "You okay?"

“Mmm.” Her arms hurt a little, but it didn’t feel that bad—it was actually more of a tingle than a pain. Snuggling closer, she drank in the spicy-musk scent of him, all sweat and sex. It was rather touching that he’d apparently been so concerned for her, he hadn’t gotten up to take his usual après-fuck shower yet. “What did you say about doing it in every room? I think I’d like to try that silk couch in the living room next.”

Chapter 8

Two mornings later, Ally sat up in bed, stretched like a cat lying in the sun, and sighed. “I hate to admit this, but I think I’m all fucked out.”

Eric laughed. “I was expecting you to say that yesterday. Insatiable slut.”

“You should talk, Mr. Let’s-Do-It-in-the-Shower-Again,” she retorted, grabbing a pillow and smacking him with it. “I’m still all wrinkled up like a prune from last night.”

“I didn’t recall hearing you protest at the time. However, it might be a good idea if we left the room for a few hours, and let the housekeeping staff in to tidy up. There’re a couple of places I’ve been dying to take you.”

She leapt to her feet, practically bouncing with delight. “Oh, I can’t wait to see Versailles and the Louvre! And Notre Dame and Montmartre and the Left Bank—”

“We’ll do all the requisite tourist attractions before we go, I promise. But I had something a bit different in mind for today. What would you say to me buying you a brand new wardrobe?”

“Uh... wow.” Momentarily stunned, she dropped back onto the edge of the bed. “Well, I won’t say no, but what’s wrong with all the dresses you’ve already bought me?”

“Nothing. But you’re going to need a couple more formal gowns and some business attire, as well as casual wear. A soon-to-be senator’s wife can’t be seen out in public in jeans and a ratty old t-shirt.”

“O-Oh.” All the air sailed out of her at once, as if she’d been punched in the gut. “I had no idea you thought I was such a mess.”

With a sigh, he sat up, raking a hand through his hair. “You’re not a mess. You’re lovely. I think of you as an unfinished diamond—all you need is a little polish and the right setting, and you’ll be perfect. Besides, isn’t it a husband’s prerogative to shower his wife with gifts?”

“Is dinner down in the hotel restaurant tonight part of the deal?”

Eric grinned. “I was counting on it.”

“Okay.” She grinned back. “You’ve convinced me.”

They showered—separately, this time—dressed and ate a quick room-service breakfast, and then it was downstairs to the limousine and off to experience the City of Light. Ally peered out the window, goggling at everything like a greedy six-year-old with her nose pressed against the window of a chocolate factory. She’d felt this same way the first time she’d set eyes on New York, with its indefinable aura of energy and excitement. It was all she could do to refrain from ordering the driver to pull over so she could hop out and go skipping down the street.

Luckily, it was a short jaunt to their first stop, the Chanel boutique on the Rue Cambon. The second she saw the place, Ally's exhilaration fizzled. She'd never seen so much plain black clothing in a shop window in her life, and the styles didn't appeal to her at all. It looked nothing like what she'd seen in the Manhattan store. Heart plummeting, she took Eric's arm and stepped inside.

A tall, slender saleswoman dressed completely in black approached, scarlet lips curled in obvious anticipation of throwing out the American riff-raff. But the moment Eric opened his mouth, her frown flipped one hundred eighty degrees. Rattling along in exuberant, rapid-fire French, she led them to a private sitting room with floor-to-ceiling mirrors along the far wall and brought them coffee, then disappeared.

Ally gave the room a quick scan, but it only served to increase her confusion. "Where are all the clothes? Or did she go to find me something to try on?"

"We came in through the ready-to-wear side of the shop. This side is a bit different." He started to pour her a cup, but stopped when she shook her head. "They'll bring out several outfits for you to look at. Pick out the ones you like, and you can try them on for size. Then they'll take your measurements and make a new outfit, tailored especially for you. A few weeks later, voila! A brand-new couturier wardrobe, delivered right to your doorstep."

"Sounds like an awful lot of fuss for a few suits and dresses. Not to mention expensive as hell."

"And it's worth every franc. When you see the difference in quality between what you get here and off the rack stuff, you'll never want to shop at Bloomingdale's or Saks again."

Her skepticism lingered, but not for long. When the saleswoman returned, pulling along a clothing rail crammed full with various outfits, Ally was intrigued. When she saw the gorgeous skirts, blouses, jackets and dresses in sleek, flowing silk, feather-light cotton and rich wool, she fell instantly in love. And when she tried them all on one by one, to Eric's fervent approval, she'd never felt more elegant and sophisticated.

They left nearly five hours later, after ordering three new formal gowns, four suits, a half-dozen dresses and several pairs of shoes. She'd even let Eric entice her over to the ready-to-wear side, where she picked out three everyday dresses, as well as some slacks and blouses. The plain black Chanel signature style, so stark and boring on the hanger, was actually quite stunning once she tried it on. All it took was a grin from Eric, and she knew she'd made the right choices.

Their driver had apparently kept himself busy with a few errands while they were inside. In the back seat of the limo there was now a bottle of Moët in a standing silver ice bucket, along with a small wicker picnic basket. Ally, now so famished she could barely walk, was overjoyed to find a loaf of baguette, some delectably runny Brie cheese and a bunch of red grapes inside.

"This is wonderful," she mumbled between shoveling ravenous bites into her mouth, "but why can't we go back to the hotel for a real meal?"

"Because we're not quite done yet. One more stop and that's it, I promise."

“Eric, I never thought I’d hear myself say this, but I’m done. I have literally shopped till I dropped. I’m not even sure my poor exhausted legs can carry me back up to our suite.”

He chuckled, giving her hand a sympathetic squeeze. “Don’t worry, you’ll be sitting down for this next adventure.”

At least he hadn’t fibbed about that part. A couple of hours later, Ally emerged from the Salon David Gabriel with a bouncy new mid-length bob and platinum highlights woven through her natural golden blond. Eric’s eyes opened wide as church doors when he saw her; for a second or two, Ally thought he might actually applaud. He settled for giving her hairdresser a handsome tip, then paid the receptionist and whisked her out to the limo to head back to the hotel.

Ally rested her freshly-coiffed head against the limo’s leather cushions and let her eyes drift shut. “It’s funny, but my stylist spoke fairly good English, and yet she didn’t even ask me what kind of cut I wanted, or what shade for the highlights. She just started working on me as soon as I sat down, like she already knew what to do.”

When Eric’s reply made itself conspicuous by its absence, Ally sat up and looked right at him. Eric simply shrugged. “I saw a photo in a magazine, and I thought the hairstyle would look beautiful on you. And it does, by the way.”

“So you called up the salon ahead of time and told them what you wanted? Like ordering a pizza?”

He sighed. “It’s not like I sent you in there to be experimented on. Barbara used to have her hair done at that salon whenever we were in town. I knew they’d do a superb job.” A few moments of awkward silence, and then, “Is this your way of telling me you don’t like it?”

“I love the haircut. I’m not crazy about you trying to micromanage me. Believe it or not, I did an okay job deciding what clothes to buy and how to style my hair before you came along.”

“Look, I didn’t mean to put you on the defensive. I was simply trying to help you be your best. I’m a control freak—I admit it. But I thought that was part of what you loved about me,” he added with a tiny quirk of his lips.

His casual use of the word ‘love’ jolted her at first, but once that wore off, so did the rest of her anger. It was all so silly anyway. How many other women would object to their husbands taking them out for a day of shopping and beautification in one of the most exciting cities in the world? Besides, this was her honeymoon. She didn’t want to waste another minute of it arguing.

“I guess I could have told her to cut it my way, but I didn’t,” she murmured. “It was just a little unnerving, that’s all. Next time, give a girl some warning, okay?”

“I thought it would be a nice surprise.”

“Haircuts are no time for surprises. Ask anyone who’s been scalped by Fantastic Sam’s.” She leaned her head on his shoulder with a sigh. “You really enjoyed playing Pygmalion today, didn’t you?”

“You seemed to rather enjoy being my Galatea.”

“I did enjoy it. But I’m not used to all that attention. It freaked me out a little.”

“Don’t worry,” he murmured, pressing a gentle kiss to her temple. “Give it a few months, and you’ll accept it as your due.”

Somehow that didn’t reassure her.

It was after five when they got back to the hotel. Ally wasn’t sure she could make it down to the dining room, but then she remembered that the French dined much later in the evening. She collapsed on the bed fully clothed and tumbled into a murky black pit, waking two hours later with Eric gingerly stroking her arm. “You were really out of it,” he said. “Would you rather stay in tonight, and order room service?”

“Again? No, thanks.” It took a minute or two for her head to clear, then she rolled to her feet. “Anyway, what’s the point of you buying me all those gorgeous new clothes if I never take them out of the closet?”

She padded into the bathroom to splash some water on her face and reapply her makeup before putting on her new black linen slacks and cream-colored silk blouse. A dash of perfume, her mother’s strand of pearls, and she was ready.

But she stopped dead when she caught sight of herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. For one frozen moment, she didn’t recognize her own reflection—and then she did. Except for her hair length and color, she looked exactly like Barbara.

Eric was waiting for her in the living room. He had on the charcoal gray suit he’d worn to their wedding. She forced a smile in reply to his, took his arm and let him escort her downstairs.

From the way Eric crowed over their meal, Ally supposed it must’ve been delicious, but she couldn’t tell. She barely tasted a thing, from the foie gras appetizer to their entrée of roasted blue lobster with gnocchi, baby leeks and truffles. It all sat in her mouth like so much lead. She picked at it, staring at nothing, letting Eric rattle on unheeded.

By the time their waiter served the coffee and crème brûlée, she was itching to go back to the suite. Evidently she’d telegraphed her restlessness, because Eric’s brow crinkled with concern coupled with irritation the moment they left the restaurant.

Luckily, he waited until they were behind closed doors before the dam burst free. “What’s wrong with you tonight? I’m trying to show you a nice time, and you’re off on another planet.”

“You don’t even want to be here with me, do you?”

He stared at her. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. We’ve just spent two days in this suite fucking our brains out practically every minute. If I accidentally shouted out someone else’s name, I think you would’ve mentioned it before now.”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it. You’re trying to make me into somebody else, somebody I don’t recognize, with all these clothes, and the new hair, and...and...”

He had her in his arms in the next instant, stroking her hair, making soft shushing sounds. “Allison, how many times do I have to tell you, you are *not* a consolation prize. I married you for one reason, and one reason only—because I *wanted* to.” Smiling, he planted a sweet kiss right on the tip of her nose. “And as far as the clothes go... Look, you can wear anything you want around the house. You can even walk around stark naked for all I care.”

“I’ll keep that in mind whenever I don’t want you to go to the office.”

“Don’t make it too often, or the board’ll fire me.” When he started laughing, she couldn’t help it—she burst out in giggles too. “Which, come to think of it, I probably wouldn’t mind that much.”

Neither would she, Ally realized. She was already dreading their return trip to New York, where she’d be lucky to see him an hour or two each day. God, she was missing him already, and here he was, standing right in front of her. If she weren’t careful, she’d find herself falling in love with him. But she suspected it was already too late.

Chapter 9

They flew back to New York on the Courtland Industries jet a week later. Allison sighed as she peered out the cabin window at Paris, growing tinier and more distant the higher they rose in the sky. “That was a lot of fun,” she murmured wistfully.

“You make it sound like we’re never coming back.”

“I’d rather not take anything for granted.” She slid her hand across the table to grasp his. “Or anybody.”

With a smile, Eric lifted her hand to his lips and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. “No worries on that score.”

“I wanted to tell you I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Oh, for being so damn stupid about even stupider things. I know you only want me to be my best. And I know you’re not going to bolt at the first opportunity, either. I guess I just need to learn to relax and enjoy this new life of mine.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you for the past week.”

“Well, sometimes it takes awhile to sink into my stubborn brain. So sue me.”

“I can think of better ways to spend our time,” he replied with a wink.

* * * *

It didn’t take them long to settle into a calm, easy routine together, for which Eric sent up a fervent prayer of thanks. He’d been a bit apprehensive about fitting Allison into his busy life, especially since his last two experiences with cohabitation hadn’t exactly ended well. This time, however, everything seemed to be smooth sailing. Sometimes he had to pinch himself to make sure he hadn’t wandered into some weird alternate universe. He wasn’t used to such a drama-free existence.

True to her word, Allison had calmed down quite a bit once they’d returned home. Maybe it was because her new promotion into on-air reporting kept her too busy to sit and brood. But maybe the fact that he genuinely looked forward to coming home to her radiant smile every night had something to do with it too. For the first time in recent memory, Eric realized he was truly happy.

One afternoon he returned to his office after a particularly tense business luncheon that dragged on till well past five. His assistant had already left, so he picked up his messages from her desk and darted inside, hoping no one else had seen him. He didn’t need to get caught up in another convoluted discussion with one of his vice presidents. His head was already pounding.

He’d only intended to knock back two aspirin, return a few calls and check his email one last time before he left. But when he looked up from his desk to see who was sitting on the plush leather couch at the far side of the room, every last fiber of Eric’s body turned instantly to ice.

"H-How the hell did you get in here?" he demanded.

Nick just shrugged, raking a hand through his dark curls. He looked... well, even through his rising fury, Eric had to admit his former lover had looked better. With his rumpled gray suit, shaggy hair and a trace of five o'clock shadow dusting his cheeks, he should've been hanging out down at the corner bar, nursing his second round of the night. The observation shook Eric to his core. He'd never known Nick to drink to excess, but he certainly looked like a man in desperate need of liquid courage.

Eric wasn't sure whether to feel perversely proud, or even more angry. He settled for the latter. "Are you going to answer me, or do I have to call security to throw you out?"

"Your assistant told me I could wait for you," Nick replied, staring down at his folded hands. "I guess she didn't get the memo about me being persona non grata around here."

"I don't normally inform my staff about changes in my personal life. But if you don't tell me what you're doing here, I might just have you thrown out anyway."

"Believe it or not, this is a business call." Nick pulled a mini-cassette recorder from his pocket and set it on the table in front of him. "My editor wants an interview with you about the wedding. I'm the lucky stiff who pulled the assignment. So," he added, rolling his eyes, "here I am."

"If you think I'm giving you an interview, dream on." Eric leapt from his chair, crossing the room in four long strides. "In fact, you've got some nerve, showing your face here at all."

"Oh, don't talk to me about nerve," Nick snapped, standing up to meet him nose to nose. "How's Ally, by the way? Did you have to bribe her to marry you, like you did Barbara, waving your credit cards and your fancy private jet in front of her face?"

"No, actually, I didn't. Believe it or not, there is one other person in the world besides you who can stand to be in my presence for longer than five minutes."

"Not anymore. I'm out of here." Grabbing his recorder, he turned and headed for the door.

All of a sudden, Eric realized something that should have dawned on him as soon as Nick mentioned the interview. "Wait a minute... how did you find out about the wedding? We haven't released an announcement to the press yet."

Nick froze with his hand on the door handle before swinging back around with a sheepish shrug. "I was having lunch with Holly about a week or so before the ceremony, and she sort of... let it slip."

"Y-You..." The world tilted, and threatened to drop out from under him. Eric had to grab hold of a nearby chair to steady himself. "Th-that really was you I saw at the reception. I-I didn't imagine it."

"I snuck in behind some of the banquet workers. I didn't think you'd see me. I didn't even want you to. I just... I needed to know for sure."

"Needed to know what?"

"That you really were gone. That I'd never get you back."

“Oh, Jesus Christ.” Eric’s legs finally buckled, and he crumpled into the chair, burying his face in his hands. But when Nick came to kneel by his side, sliding a firm yet gentle hand onto his shoulder, Eric came that close to losing it completely. “Stop it. Get the hell out of here.”

“You don’t want me to go any more than I want to go.” He let out a deep sigh, verging on a sob. “God, Eric... you have no idea how much I’ve missed you. Not a day goes by when I don’t wish I could take back that afternoon at the restaurant.”

“There is this little invention called the telephone.”

“Would you have listened to me? I doubt it.”

Eric was just about to contradict him, but managed to bite it back. No point splitting hairs over past regrets. “For what it’s worth, I did wait for you to call. For four months, I waited. Then, when Christmas came and went without a word, I figured that was my final answer.”

“I-I didn’t marry Laura.”

If the world had tilted before, now it came hurtling down in sharp, tiny pieces. “*What?*”

“I called it off a couple of weeks beforehand. I couldn’t go through with it, not feeling... the way I still feel about you.” Swallowing hard, he reached up to cradle Eric’s face in his hands. “I’ve never stopped loving you, even when I thought I hated you. How crazy is that?”

“I can think of something crazier,” Eric murmured, then leaned forward to capture Nick’s mouth in a deep, soul-scalding kiss. It hurt like a knife through his heart, feeling Nick’s warm, soft lips and the tentative flick of his tongue again, tasting his bittersweet flavor. It was wrong, being here with him like this when Allison was waiting for him at home, but suddenly none of that mattered. He couldn’t let this moment pass, and risk Nick slipping through his fingers again. He simply couldn’t.

Somehow they stumbled to the couch, kissing and tearing at each other’s clothes, drinking each other down like two men dying of thirst. Naked at last, they stretched out side by side, hard cocks rubbing together, smearing sticky moisture on their bellies. Eric endured the heady torture for as long as he could before reaching down to grasp both their cocks in one hand. Nick gasped first, mouth open in a silent scream as warm ribbons of semen coated Eric’s fingers. Eric couldn’t resist taking a taste; it was every bit as salty-sweet as he remembered.

Nick slid to his knees on the floor once he’d recovered, and took Eric’s cock in his mouth. Already painfully aroused, Eric gritted his teeth and buried his fingers in Nick’s curls, urging him on while at the same time trying to stave off the inevitable. But the warm, wet paradise of Nick’s lips and tongue proved too great, and when his eyes locked on Eric’s, that was it. Eric’s last scrap of restraint crumpled like tissue paper, and so did he, tumbling forward into Nick’s waiting arms once orgasm had finally wrung him dry.

There were a few moments of lingering bliss before guilt came crashing down on him, in all its annihilating glory. Nick must have been feeling it too, because now his lover couldn’t even look at him.

"I should go," Nick mumbled, starting to sort his own clothes from the haphazard pile on the floor. "I'll make up some lame story about the interview, tell my editor you refused to talk to me. Don't worry, I'll see to it that they don't send anybody else."

"Thank you," Eric replied numbly. He moved back up to the couch, perching on the edge while he watched Nick get dressed. Every moment felt like another stab from an incredibly sharp blade. "I suppose I won't be seeing you again."

"Do you really think that's such a great idea?"

"No, but that's never stopped us before." They both laughed awkwardly, until Eric added, "You're right. We can't go on doing this to Allison."

"Somehow I don't think it'll matter to her if we've done it once, or a hundred times."

Right again. Betrayal was still betrayal, no matter what the degree. All Eric could do now was stare at the floor while Nick slipped on his shoes, tucked his recorder in his pocket and left.

He took a quick shower in his private bathroom and changed into a clean shirt before heading home. It was almost seven when he got back to the penthouse. He found Allison lounging on the couch with her laptop, typing away. When she jumped up to throw her arms around him and give him a kiss, he could barely keep from screaming.

"God, you're exhausted." Her concerned gaze swept him, studying him much too closely. "Why is your hair damp?"

He started to answer, then hesitated. Part of him wanted to sit her back down and explain, as simply and gently as he could, exactly what had happened between him and Nick tonight. It was an aberration, a momentary lapse in judgment that would never be repeated. But he'd told her that before, and now he'd broken his word. How could he ever expect her to trust him again?

He couldn't—and she wouldn't, not if he told her. Their marriage would die, drowning in cold silence, just like his marriage to Barbara had. He couldn't bear to go through that again.

"I took a run on the treadmill in the executive gym, then grabbed a shower before I left. I got stuck in a hellacious luncheon meeting all afternoon, and I thought some exercise might help me burn off the tension." Even Eric was amazed at how smoothly the prevarication rolled off his tongue. He didn't know whether to be proud of himself, or utterly disgusted.

"Looks like it did a really great job." With a sigh, she brushed back a lock of his still-wet hair. "C'mon, let's have some dinner. There's a Caesar salad in the fridge with your name on it."

They sat in the kitchen and ate, then retired back to the couch to watch Allison's latest on-air segment, which she'd set to record on the DVR. It was nothing earth-shattering, just a three-minute report on a controversial political-thriller author making a stop on his latest book tour, but Eric was impressed enough by both her professional reporting style and bubbly on-air persona to give her a brief round of applause.

She blushed and shrugged it off, then started flipping channels. Finally she landed on a World War II documentary on the History Channel that they'd both wanted to see, but within a few minutes Eric wasn't paying much attention to anything except his watch.

Finally catching a clue, she flicked the remote off and tossed it on the table, then turned to look at him. “My God, you really are tired. And I thought dinner might perk you up a bit.”

Now he wished she’d left the show on—at least it kept him from having to make inane small talk. “This is what my life’s like most of the time,” he replied, irritation creeping into his tone. “You’d better get used to it.”

“Well, I can’t say I wasn’t warned.” Standing up, she held her hand out to him. “Guess it won’t hurt us to hit the sack early for a change.”

He followed her back to the bedroom, put on his pajama bottoms and tumbled face-first into the pillow. She slid under the covers a few minutes later, rolling over next to him to run her fingertips up and down his arm. “You’re still so tense. I know something that’ll relax you.”

His sole response was to turn over and face the wall. He could feel her eyes boring into him for a few anxious seconds before she rolled away with an angry sigh. It was the first night since their wedding that they hadn’t had sex.

Weariness enveloped him, but actual sleep mocked him with its elusiveness. At last he’d had enough. When the clock on the bedside table read two, he got up, threw on his robe and padded out to the living room to pour himself a scotch. When the clock on the living room wall read three, he reached for the phone.

At least a dozen rings later, a sleep-fogged voice answered. “H’lo?”

“It’s me.” Eric swallowed hard. “I-I really need to see you again.”

There was a pause, followed by a sharp, resigned intake of breath. “Okay,” Nick replied softly. “Just tell me when and where.”

About Cat Grant

http://www.lyricalpress.com/cat_grant

I've been writing off and on ever since I was old enough to hold a pencil. I still remember my very first 'published' story, a Jonny Quest adventure I penned in sixth grade. My teacher liked it so much, she had one of the other students illustrate it. That other student went on to become a Hollywood horror-film director.

I've poked around in many different genres. I've written fan fiction for a number of different TV shows, tried my hand at horror and fantasy, but in the end I came back to what I enjoy most - writing about the intimate relationships between men and women, and how love doesn't always happen the way we expect.

Back in 2004, when I became unable to work outside my home, my incredibly supportive husband suggested that I turn this setback into an opportunity, and pursue my dream of becoming a published author. Several years—and untold buckets of sweat later—that dream's finally coming to fruition.

Cat's Website:

<http://www.catgrant.com>

Reader eMail:

bittermint2007@gmail.com

About the Courtland Chronicles Series

Book I: *The Arrangement*

Available in ebook and print from Lyrical Press, Inc.

Book II: *Strictly Business*

Available in ebook from Lyrical Press, Inc.

Book III: *By Chance*

Available in ebook from Lyrical Press, Inc.

Book IV: *Complications*

Available in ebook from Lyrical Press, Inc.

More from Lyrical Press



Where reality and fantasy collide

Ready for more?

Visit any of the following links:

[Lyrical Press](http://lyricalpress.com)

[*http://lyricalpress.com*](http://lyricalpress.com)

[New Releases](http://www.lyricalpress.com/newest_releases)

[*http://www.lyricalpress.com/newest_releases*](http://www.lyricalpress.com/newest_releases)

[Coming Soon](http://www.lyricalpress.com/coming_soon)

[*http://www.lyricalpress.com/coming_soon*](http://www.lyricalpress.com/coming_soon)