

PRETEND You LOVE Me



Stacia
Wolf

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Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

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Dedication

Too many times we let the cares of the world distract us from our goals. And far too many times we let our goals distract us from the true treasures in this life—the people we care about. This is a thank-you to the ones I love and another way for me to tell you (you know who you are) how much I appreciate you in my life.

And to Sara, my hard-working editor—thanks for all the nudges you've given me along the way!

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Chapter One

"Cassie?"

Mike. Cassandra Ariel Delistraty sighed with sultry exasperation into the phone. At the mere sound of his voice, her frustration level shot up. *So close, and yet so far.*

"Mike, you should know better than to call during my dirty book hour," she said. "Now I've lost my train of thought."

"Cassie," Mike's definitely masculine and oh-so-sexy voice growled. "Quit playing games."

"Self-service is more than a game," she admonished. "It's a serious pursuit that must be given one's full attention in order to reap its rewards." She forced a pout into her voice. "Now you've broken the mood."

Mike groaned. Cassie closed her eyes, imagining him in front of her, shirtless of course, those rippling muscles begging to be touched. His deep brown eyes would be narrowed into slits, and his mouth would be twisted into that endearing little scowl that she always longed to kiss away. And his hair—she'd never believed hair could be hot, but his dark brown, always unruly mess just clamored for her fingers to run through it. Yes, it was worth an orgasm all by itself.

It's a shame I don't do a damn thing for him.

She'd suffered from a crush on him since childhood, and felt no closer to being free from it now than she'd been then.

I was better off in L.A. even if I was miserable.

"Cass," he said. "Can't you be serious for just one moment? Your mother's out of control."

"Now there's a new one," Cassie snorted. "And this is a problem why?"

"Because she's dancing on my pool table!" he roared.

Cassie bellowed out a laugh. "Well, that's different." She could hear Mike's scowl right through the phone line as he started telling her about Lucia's disruptive behavior.

If she were braver, she'd go to Mike and kiss that scowl right off those luscious lips, finally tasting them again after eleven years of starvation. But she knew she couldn't. Where Mike Ashford was concerned, she pleaded severe cowardice. Somehow her insides turned to mush, along with her backbone.

Sometimes she wished she were more like her mom, who didn't let fear or societal restraints stop her from doing what she wanted. Okay, her bungee-jumping episode last *year had* stretched Cassie's patience, but—

"Cass, are you coming down here or not? She's out of control." Mike's impatience only fueled her impish nature.

"Are you going to arrest her?"

Mike snorted. "No, not yet."

Not yet? Well, if it did happen, it wouldn't be the first time. Both Delistraty women felt strongly about their beliefs. Lucia had landed in jail while fighting deforestation. Cassie had wound up in jail battling the closure of a woman's shelter.

"Then, Michael-dear, it can wait until after my dirty book hour. Honestly, I need to turn off the phone next time." Hearing Mike's breathing accelerate, she contained a chuckle. Nice. Now if she could only do that to him in person.

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"Cassie, did it escape you that I'm a guy, and that this kind of talk might be a bit...uncomfortable?"

Boy, I hope so, baby. "Well, I'm glad that if one of us has to be a guy, it's you. Because I tell you, besides sex, I wouldn't know what to do with a penis. Do you just let it flop to one side, or do you tuck it up somehow? I really—"

A dial tone clamored in her ears. With a humorless smile, she hung the phone up and went back to painting her nails, another lovely evening wasted alone. One foot done, one to go. No dirty book, no self-service. Just Cassie, wondering why she found herself alone when she knew who she needed—Mike. If only to scratch this itch she'd had for him for most of her life. But he refused to oblige her.

Because to Mike, I'm like a little sister. Cassie sighed, the movement jerking her hand. Ruby red polish glopped on the tip of one toe. She wiped it off with a cloth.

Really, she deserved more. With a law degree, pretty face and decent body, one would think that she'd have someone in her life. But one year after her divorce from Ken Travers—the scumbag—all she could lay claim to was her recently purchased Seattle home and three rather psychotic dogs. Add her major crush on one Mike Ashford, Eagle Scout with a hero complex, formerly a Seattle firefighter and now a part owner in a trendy U District night club, and her life didn't add up to much.

She needed to get over him, work him out of her system somehow. No way could the reality be as good as her fantasies. No, Mike Ashford would definitely disappoint her, but then at least she could move on with her life and find that

elusive 'Mr. Right.' Maybe, just maybe, she could beat the Delistraty curse.

Then Cassie remembered what Mike had said about her mom.

Her crazy, always-causing-trouble mother. She made Lucille Ball seem tame. From the background sounds, she knew Mike was at his club, *The Electric Wave*. Since she lived only a few minutes away from there, she'd go and see what was up.

Of course, Mike being there was a bonus.

Cassie shook her head in disgust. That didn't matter now. What mattered was her nutcase mother. With a harried mutter, Cassie slipped the polish lid back on. She spread her toes wide to protect the pretty scarlet paint job and headed to her bedroom. Time to go bail her mother out of whatever trouble she'd gotten herself into.

* * * *

Mike fought waves of anger-laced desire as he hung up the phone. Damn Cassie. She did that on purpose. She loved to sexually tease him, like one might taunt a poor damn donkey with a carrot. But at least the donkey had a chance at the carrot. Mike didn't harbor any delusions that he'd ever get Cassie.

"Your five minutes are up." Ernie's plain, squarish face twisted into a scowl.

"Ernie, cut me some slack, man. I'm trying here." Mike raked a hand through his heat-dampened hair. Damn it, he

didn't have the patience for Lucia Delistraty's antics. Or for her daughter's strange little games.

He didn't quite understand what a 'dirty book hour' was, but he'd gotten a pretty good idea. Especially when his 'friend' below started sitting up and taking notice.

The thought of Cassie pleasuring herself while talking to him sent a shiver of need through him. The images smacked him hard: Cassie, lit only by the flickering of scattered candles, lying supine on the bed, a paperback book gripped in one hand while the other touched and caressed and inflamed her intimate—

Damn! He couldn't take this any more. He needed to get his mind off of Cassandra and back into the real world.

Only the real world held very little interest for him. Since Cassie'd moved back to Seattle, she'd sent thoughts of other women flying from his mind. No, all he could think of was the provocative little barbs that she shot at him whenever they came in contact. This happened more often than his overactive libido could handle.

A roar came from the back room and Ernie wheeled on Mike in frustration. "She's going to cause a riot back there, and somebody's going to get hurt. We need to do something—now."

Ernie was right. Mike would be all alone trying to break it up if that hard-drinking group went overboard. Ernie, wheelchair-bound since taking a bullet on-duty three years ago, wouldn't be much back-up. He hated tossing Lucia out, though. He'd tried talking to her, but she hadn't listened.

Damn. His next step would be bodily removing her. *Damn it all.*

"Dad, don't be so hard on Mike. This isn't his fault." Kendra, Ernie's daughter, set her tray down on Mike's part of the bar. With her blonde hair twisted up on her head, she didn't look twenty-one. She was definitely too young for the crush she'd developed on Mike, nine years her senior. Yesterday, she'd actually leaned into him and pursed her lips, inviting a kiss. He'd hightailed it as fast as he could, but he knew that hadn't deterred her. He'd told her before that he wasn't interested, but either she remained clueless or took his resistance as a challenge.

He swiftly filled her order. With a swish of her hips, she headed back into the lounge. Mike kept his eyes glued to the bar, but he felt Ernie's probing gaze nonetheless.

"We don't need trouble right now," Ernie said. "If we're going to get that zone change, we can't have a black mark like a riot against us."

They were close to getting a warehouse on Lake Washington rezoned for use as a second nightclub. The location would be ideal, and if a success, the second club would be a model for a chain up and down the Pacific Coast.

Another loud cheer echoed from the pool room, and Mike gritted his teeth. If only he'd gotten hold of Cal, but Cassie's brother didn't answer his cell phone. Probably out of range deep in a jail-cell while he tried to talk some drug-ridden free-clinic client into a rehab program.

The door whooshed open and the sound of heels on the wooden floor clacked through the thick, late-June air. Mike

didn't need to look up to know that Cassie'd blown into his world again.

No, he didn't need to look up, but he did. He couldn't help himself. Since they'd been kids together, Mike had been drawn to Cassie Delistraty like a moth to a burning, death-wielding flame. Knowing she could never be anything but bad for him still didn't stop him from being fascinated by her.

He just didn't have to let her know how she affected him.

He saw her feet first, in a pair of red strappy things that could break her ankles if she tripped. And she called herself a lawyer. Why couldn't she wear anything sensible?

The sandals dragged his eyes upwards, to her shapely calves and long, drive-him-wild legs. His gaze collided with a way-too-short, way-too-tight, white leather skirt. *Leather in this heat?*

And the top... *Damn.* His blood pressure exploded. Bright as a stop sign, it wrapped around her neck and floated down over her lush breasts, then tied about her back.

Bare midriff, her navel peeking enticingly at him, endless legs, and those sexy, red-painted toes. These things all tore at his fragmented resolve to keep Cassie at arm's length.

No, scratch that. Only one foot sported color. *What the hell—?*

He didn't have time to pursue that mystery. A deep-heaved sigh jerked his eyes back up to her forbidden breasts, then to her sea-green eyes that sparkled with too much life and attitude. And that hair, those strawberry spirals that encircled her head like a cloud. *Damn.* That hair was every man's fantasy.

That hair was *his* fantasy. Every night, for the last twelve years of his life.

Her full, ruby-red lips twisted up enticingly. Yes, she definitely exuded sexy, hot and potentially willing.

His 'friend' perked up just at the sight of her.

She also represented everything he didn't want in his life. High society, flighty, unfettered, unable to commit to anything, not marriage, family or career. She reminded him too much of Sharon, his ex-wife, for him to even imagine getting involved with her.

"Down, boy," he muttered to himself. He'd stay behind the bar until his 'friend' down south settled down.

"Cassie," he growled, fighting a raging blood rush. "That outfit isn't appropriate for here."

Curved brows lifted up. She popped an orange breath mint into her mouth, a habit she'd had since high school. He salivated at the thought of her orange-tinged tongue circling his.

"Really, Mike? I'd have thought this kind of outfit is standard for a nightclub. And considering what you interrupted, then I think it's more than appropriate."

Oh, yeah. Her dirty book hour. He felt his blood supply shifting downward, then he remembered her feet. Glancing at them, he realized what bothered him about the unpainted nails. His call must have stopped her from finishing the other foot.

One hand holding a book and one pleasuring herself.
Where did she get the third hand to paint her nails

His mouth twitched into a smile of victory. *Caught ya!*

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Cassie obviously read his look. She glanced at her feet, then at him. Despite the red that crept over her face, her voice never lost its composure. "Who said I was alone?"

The thought of someone else touching her caused him to see red. He forced himself to return her smile. "Wouldn't be self-service if you weren't alone, now would it?"

Surprisingly, she threw her head back and a full-throated laugh erupted from her. Full of life and humor, it was more intoxicating than the outfit she wore.

"You're right," she said. "You caught me dead to rights." Her smile spread across her beautiful face and right into his heart.

"Are you two done yet?" Ernie demanded, wheeling himself up to his area of the bar that had been lowered to accommodate the chair.

Another roar erupted from the pool room. "Yeah, we're done." Mike nodded toward the back, his eyes clashing with Cassie's, who practically danced in place with energy. "Your mom's back there," he said. "And if she doesn't settle down immediately, we're going to have to have her hauled in."

Cassie laughed, another sure sign of her inability to take anything seriously. "Mike, you'd never arrest my mother!"

"No, he wouldn't," Ernie snapped. "But I sure would for disturbing the peace!"

That sobered Cass up immediately. She fixed her gaze on Mike's partner, then nodded and headed toward the pool room.

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"Cassie, wait!" Ernie called. But her long legs carried her swiftly out of hearing range. He turned to Mike. "Are you going to let her head back into that mess alone?"

Considering his current physical state, Mike could only nod. Cursing at him, Ernie wheeled away, chasing after her.

The noise in the back escalated. Cassie had arrived.

Mike sighed. *This night can only get worse.*

* * * *

Chaos greeted Cassie as she entered the pool room. Her mother, a beautiful, sensual woman just a few years short of her fiftieth birthday, danced on a pool table to loud, pulsing music emanating from an oversized boom box. Her dance partner, a man perhaps five years older than Cassie, looked like he'd died and landed in heaven, the way he watched Lucia's gyrations.

Lucia's blonde hair flew about her face as she laughed at the tall burly man clad in black jeans and a leather vest. Several other men stood watching, enjoying each jiggle of Lucia's generous breasts in a tiny halter top and the contortion of her curved hips clad in a too-short jean skirt. Okay, so it matched the length of Cassie's skirt, but still! Why couldn't she have a normal mom like everyone else?

Lucia Delistraty would never be normal. Beautiful and headstrong, she never conformed to anyone's idea of what she should be. Not society's, and certainly never her family's.

Just like Cassie, who, although she'd become a lawyer in the family tradition, refused to go into politics. And, just like her mother, could never sustain a relationship.

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The Delistraty women were cursed, it was said, to go from one man to the next. Over the last several generations this had held true, with broken marriages, wild flings and horrendous scandals.

And the last two generations were no different. Lucia had never married, and Cassie's one attempt had shattered around her the day she'd walked into her husband's office and found him with another woman. His declaration later that he'd only married her for her family name still stung, making her wary any time a man showed interest in her.

The song faded away and Lucia let out a loud war whoop. Barely breathing hard, she laughed. "Kyle, you're a wonderful dancer! I'd give you an eight; that puts you in the lead. Anyone think they can do better?"

A dance contest? Her mother was conducting a dance contest?

She stepped into the room, frowning and presenting, she hoped, a sobering influence to her mother and this male crowd obviously high on testosterone.

"Mother..." she began loudly.

Lucia's eyes widened as she faced Cassie. "Cassandra! What on earth are you doing here?" She climbed down from the table, then looked Cassie up and down. "Oh, my, don't you look sexy!"

Damn, the outfit she'd slipped into in a bid to tweak Mike. Not her usual look, although she did love to wear sexy, edgy and flirty clothes. This outfit was very bold, even for her. She'd been wanting to raise a certain male's blood pressure.

From the way a dozen pair of hungry males eyes riveted on her, her attire accomplished that exact same reaction in them.

"Whoa! Baby!" Kyle let out a loud whistle that the others echoed, along with ear-shattering whoops. "Lucy, honey, is this the daughter you're talking about?"

Lucy? Her mom hated that nickname, but apparently Lucia was in too good of spirits to take offense.

"This is her," her mother proclaimed with obvious pride. "My daughter, Cassandra."

All male eyes traveled over Cassie, making her feel like a piece of meat. She stopped herself from jerking on the skirt hem to cover more of her bare legs. The sensation escalated when Kyle placed one extremely muscled arm about her waist.

"I'm the leader so far, baby. Want to try me out?" He blatantly stared down the deep V between her breasts.

Curling her lip, she shoved him hard on the chest. The rest of the men whooped, but Kyle didn't budge.

"Aw, baby, don't be like that. Your mama tells us that you've been without a man for a long time. So don't play hard to get, okay?" His hot breath fanned her bare shoulders. Swallowing her distaste, she pushed against him again. This time, he let her go. Now free, Cassie rounded on her mother.

"What's going on here? How on earth did my private life—" she refrained from using the term *love life*, "—become a public forum?"

Lucia shrugged, looking far from repentant. "It's been forever since you've gone out. After all, the divorce was over

a year ago, and you still haven't started seeing anyone. So I thought maybe if I set you up on a date—"

Cassie sputtered. "A date? You're looking for a date for me?" She glanced at all the faces leering at her and regretted the impulse that had resulted in this outfit. "Is that what this is about, your attempt to hook me up?"

The men laughed, and one of them, a burly dark-haired man who made Kyle look small, reached out and grasped Cassie's wrist. "You don't need to look any further, baby. Let's dance."

At the same time, Ernie arrived.

"Let her go!" he demanded.

The man flashed crooked teeth. "Relax, man. I'm just going to dance with her." The lack of music not stopping him, he began to sway, with Cassie held firmly against his protruding belly. Cassie struggled, but with his buddies' cheers egging him on, the man didn't get the hint.

"Let her go!" Lucia demanded. Apparently her mother recognized that look in Cassie's eyes.

"Let go," Cassie warned. "Or I'll be forced to hurt you!"

"Cassandra, don't you dare!"

She heard the horror in Lucia's voice, but that didn't deter her. Neither did her captor's laughter or his reply. "And what could a tiny thing like you do?"

I'll show you, pal. She could easily protect herself. Not only could she handle guns, thanks to her mom's obsession with firearms, but years of attending martial arts classes had earned her a black belt. With great skill and a healthy amount of disgust, she brought one sharp heel down on his foot.

"Ow!" His grip on her loosened, and Cassie grabbed his thumb, jerking it backwards and down while she twisted away from him.

How easily the mighty fall, she thought with satisfaction as he crumpled to his knees. She let him go as an arm encircled her from behind, tugging her up against a hard male body. She gave a token struggle, but her body knew that touch, her eyes knew that hand splayed across her belly.

Mike.

"Cassie, stop it. Hold still." His breath whispered over her cheek, sizzling her blood in her veins.

Masculine heat seared her backside, seducing her. Mike's unique scent of sandalwood and Lava soap reached deep into her, sending her hormones racing. She held still, soaking in the sensations. *Yummy.*

"Hey, man, you can't just show up and take the prize. We've been working hard here to get to do just that." Kyle snickered as he spoke, but from the way Mike's body stiffened against her, she could tell he didn't see the humor.

"This isn't an auction house and Cassie isn't a contest prize." Damn, but his voice sounded almost possessive. If only it was true, she could die now with a smile on her face.

Her assailant stood, rubbed his hand and glared at Cassie with what looked like homicidal intent. Mike swung his body around, putting himself between her and the angry behemoth.

Cassie gritted her teeth. "Mike, let me go. I don't need your protection."

His only answer was a snort.

"Mike."

"You're a menace, you know that, Cassie? Some things never change. You're always getting into trouble. You show up in an outfit like that, then beat up the first guy who reacts to it."

"First of all, he was the second guy," she snapped. "And second, this isn't my fault! I have the right to dress any way I see fit."

"If you used some common sense—"

"Both of you, shut up!"

Ernie's words slapped like a whip and Cassie clamped her mouth closed. Even the angry hulk thought better and stalked out of the room while the others made themselves scarce. Lucia, however, showed no such restraint.

"Cassandra! Was that the only solution you could think of? A man shows you a little interest and you attack him. You're not going find someone with that kind of attitude!"

Any other time, Cassie would've barked out her disbelief, but with Mike's arm still circling her waist—did his thumb just caress her bare tummy?—all she could think of was sex, more sex and hey, just for good measure, let's toss some more mind-curling sex in there!

Sucking in a moan of frustration, Cassie pulled at his hand, and he let her go. Now she could breathe again. She ignored the bereft feeling that invaded her. Instead, she reminded herself of the stark truth.

Kissing you is like kissing my sister. Mike's words at their one and only close encounter shot through her. She couldn't

bear that humiliation again. Stepping away from him, she instead faced her current mortification—her mother.

"I don't need you finding me a man. When, or if, I decide I need someone, I'll do the finding and the judging and whatever else. I can take care of myself."

"Cassie's pretty...self-sufficient in that regard, Lucia," Mike said.

Her face boiled at Mike's innuendo concerning her 'self-service,' but clamped down on herself. Kicking him in the shin would gain her nothing.

"Darling," Lucia said, crossing her arms and clicking her tongue in exasperation. "I've left you alone for months, and you've done nothing but sit at home and redecorate. That's getting you nowhere. You need to move on."

Cass's fingers pressed to her temples. This argument, recycled from so many times before, grated on her last nerve. "You need to stay out of my life. It's not open for your conjecture, or your meddling."

"What's going on here?"

Cassie whipped around at the sound of her brother's voice. Unfortunately, Mike stood too close, and her breast brushed against him, zapping her with awareness. Every sex-deprived cell in her body stood at attention at the contact. Damn the man.

"Cal! What are you doing here?" She turned on Mike. "Don't you have a bar to run? Who's watching the front?"

"Damn!" With a few choice words concerning troublesome women, Ernie wheeled about and headed back to the bar.

Drat. Wrong man left. Mike's mocking smile told her he'd read her mind.

"Mike left a message on my phone. So I came down here to see what ol' Mom was up to." Cal grinned at Cassie. They were so alike in looks, although her twin made the auburn hair and sea-green eyes look very macho. Towering over her at over six feet tall, with wide shoulders and a narrow waist that should show the abuse he gave it with his love for sweets, Cal Prescott was definitely all male. A protective, brotherly male who'd made her love life non-existent as a teenager. Oh, she'd dated, but any guy she'd gone out with soon withered under Cal's disapproving glare. He'd been formidable as a teen guardian.

And as a young adult. Drat it, they'd even gone to law school together, which made sex there almost non-existent.

Except for Ken Travers, her ex-husband. Smooth, handsome, he'd said and done all the right things. She'd thought she'd found the perfect man. Fat lot she'd known.

Just went to show that Cassie was no better at relationships than her mother, who refused to marry her father, despite his asking her every year on the anniversary of their first date.

Of course, the fact that the date happened to be April Fool's Day should tell them something.

"Mom's trying to fix me up," she said through gritted teeth. "She's holding a dance contest, of all things! Cal, could you talk some sense to her, make her understand I don't need a man?" Okay, she didn't need simply any man, just one

and only for a short while until she got over this ridiculous crush. Only he saw her as an extra sibling, for heaven's sake!

"A dance contest? I don't understand. To find you a date?" Cal stared at their mother for a long moment, then burst out laughing. "Mom, that's got to be the lamest. You think dancing skills are what Cassie needs?"

Lucia didn't seem the least bit fazed by her son's reaction. "It's a start. Besides, Cassandra needs to loosen up, to remember what it's like to have fun. And dancing is fun."

"Mom, I don't want to dance. Please let it go. And have you forgotten the Delistraty curse? Why should I try again?"

Lucia rolled her eyes. Despite her failure in the relationship department, she didn't believe in the 'curse.' But Cassie did. She was living proof.

"You have a point, Mom. She does need some loosening up." Arms across his chest, Cal's eyes swept over Cassie. "Looks like you're trolling for a guy anyhow, sister mine. Maybe having someone else check out men for you might keep you out of trouble. Why not let Mom help you? Her taste can't be any worse than yours."

"What?" Cassie stared in disbelief at her brother. Didn't he remember all the guys traipsing through their lives when they were growing up? "I can't believe you said that!"

"Face it, Cass. You've retreated from the world. Mom's methods might be a bit off, but she's got the right idea."

"I haven't retreated from anything."

"What do you mean, off?" Lucia glared at Cal.

Cal raised his hands up. "Listen. All I'm trying to say is that maybe you should look at rejoining the real world, sis."

Find someone. Date him. Use him if you have to, but start living again." Cal looked over the men as if debating on which one to choose. "This isn't such a sorry lot. One of them might do."

Of all the nerve! Cassie wanted to smack him, to knock some sense into him. What happened to her over-protective brother?

"You're acting like this so Mom won't try to fix you up."

Cal's mouth twitched. "I wish. Mom's got enough energy to meddle in both our lives at the same time. Besides, most women don't want a guy who threw away a prominent law career to open up a free clinic. You, however, are beautiful, smart and sometimes even fun to be with. You should find someone." He frowned. "Maybe I know somebody. There's this one guy—"

Oh, God, she did *not* need one of his *uber-liberal, pro-bono* buddies or—worse—some ex-con-with-a-sob-story. "Look, I don't need you or Mom to fix me up! I'm perfectly—"

"Cal, don't be silly," Lucia said. "All you know are homeless people and hippies. I'm trying to help her find a man with substance. Now, take Kyle here, for instance."

Kyle looked up from the pool table, grinning at Cassie with promise in his eyes. Only Cassie couldn't promise that she wouldn't hurt him if he tried anything. Then he winked at her, his 'come-try-me' look very apparent.

She couldn't stand it any longer. Burying her fingers into her hair, she growled in frustration. "Both of you! Stop! I don't need you to fix me up!"

"Cassandra, just once why don't you try things our way? What would it hurt?"

Her head pounded from the relentless onslaught. They were never going to give up, not until she agreed to their hair-brained ideas. "Mom."

"Darling, you'll not regret it. We'll find the perfect man."

Whatever Cassie planned on saying or doing next fled, because a familiar male arm snaked around her waist, pulling her close. "Cass, this has gone too far," Mike said, and why was he holding her again? She hadn't lunged at anyone in attack. Okay, sure, she felt like strangling Lucia, but she'd managed to restrain herself to date. So why the sudden bear hug? And was it her imagination, or was there more *hug* than *bear* in it this time? "It's time to tell your mother the truth."

The truth? She looked over her shoulder at him, at a loss. *What the hell is he talking about*

"You can't let her fix you up with another guy," he said. "Or doesn't the fact that we've been seeing each other matter to you?"

Cassie shook her head. *I think my brain just exploded. Did Mike say we're dating?*

* * * *

Did I just say we're dating?

Mike couldn't help himself. Poor Cassie was no match for her ex-socialite mother who cut her teeth on manipulation, and her savvy, courtroom-honed brother. He couldn't stand by and let them railroad her into anything. Especially when

anything was that creep Kyle, who hadn't raised his eyes from Cassie's breasts since Mike had walked into the room.

But Cassie's expression didn't give him hope that his charade would work. He pulled her closer, pressed a kiss to that mop of curls, then smiled at Lucia, who stared at them with suspicion.

Nope, the pretense wasn't working.

Mike already regretted his impulsive nature, and his instinct to rescue Cassie, which had been honed to perfection with almost twenty years of practice.

"When did this happen?" Lucia demanded.

"Uh... a few weeks ago, right, honey?" He glanced down at his 'sweetheart,' who seemed to be in a sudden catatonic state. "Cass. Right, honey?" He shook her slightly, hoping maybe she'd say something, anything, to salvage this.

She stared at him, her beautiful eyes wide as if in shock. He jiggled her again, which finally seemed to do the trick.

"Oh, yes, right. That's right, Mom," she said, smiling at her mother. "I'm sorry, Mike just surprised me by telling you like this, after we'd decided to keep it secret."

"Why didn't you tell us before?" Cal's eyes narrowed. Was he angry? Mike had as much experience reading his friend as he did his sister, but tonight he didn't understand. Cassie had dated a lot while a teenager and in college, and although Cal had been protective, he'd never reacted in anger before.

"Because we wanted to see if it'd work out before we shared it. You know, just in case it tanked." There, that was good.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

"I don't believe you," Lucia said. "If you two are a couple, why didn't I pick up on any body language between you? And why are you two never together?"

Mike thought fast. "Well, because... Well, we hid it from you, and as for body language... Well, we hid that, too."

"Right." Lucia crossed her arms. "You two have as much chemistry as a pair of dead clams."

Chemistry? She wanted chemistry? He twirled Cassie around, and ignoring her stunned expression and her sputtered "Mike, what are you doing?" he planted his mouth squarely on hers.

Just as he'd expected, the world exploded.

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Chapter Two

Cassie's body sang as she sank into Mike's kiss. Heaven, pure heaven seeped into her soul. Molten need overwhelmed her. Her lips parted and melted into his. A rubbery sensation attacked her bones; if Mike's arm hadn't held her upright, she'd have been a puddle at his feet.

Oh, this was better, so much better than that kiss she'd stolen from him on her graduation day. Then he'd been stiff, barely reacting to her. This time she felt his desire for her, his passion, and her heart leapt at such knowledge.

Only the loud clearing of a feminine throat reminded Cassie that they weren't alone; her mother and brother were watching. With a gasp, she pulled away from Mike, from their kiss.

From pure, unadulterated bliss.

Wow—who'd have known that reality could be so much better than my fantasies

Cal glared at them both, obviously not liking the thought of his best friend with his sister. Cassie couldn't quite read her mother's look. She seemed to be smirking, as if she enjoyed all of this. Then she crossed her arms and glowered. "Very nice, Mike. But you've yet to convince me."

How did he think they'd pull this off? What did he plan to do, pretend to be a couple until her family gave up this bizarre idea of fixing her up? Knowing Lucia, that could be years!

No, this was a bad idea. She'd never been good at lying to her family, although she'd pulled a doozy off. She'd never told anyone about catching Ken entangled with another woman. How could she admit that she couldn't satisfy her husband and that he'd looked elsewhere for sexual satisfaction? That he'd loved her for her name only? How pathetic was that?

Cassie jerked her thoughts away from her failures. *Focus, Cass.* Right now, she needed to get herself out of this mess.

She pulled back, but Mike captured one of her hands in his and held it firmly against his chest. She became aware of his heart thundering beneath her fingers. *Oh, my.* Despite his claim that he felt nothing but brotherly affection for her, could she be affecting him that much?

Or would any guy's heart race after telling such a whopper?

"Listen," Mike said, "I have to get back to the bar, and Cassie needs to finish painting her toenails. We have a date tomorrow and you know how she likes to look her best." He smiled at her mom. "Lucia, no more contests, hear? You gave Ernie a coronary." With a grin, he dragged Cassie out of the room, whether she wanted to go or not.

The thing was, she did want to go. Anywhere with him, if only to prolong this strange feeling of closeness. But she knew it couldn't last. No man ever did.

As she expected, once out of sight of her family, he dropped her hand like a scalded cat. She sighed her disappointment.

"Boy, you're kind of dense, Cass. It took you forever to catch on back there." Mike's glance held censure, and her anger bloomed full force.

"Considering that this is the lamest idea you've ever had, why would you think I'd catch on? This is worse than most of the stunts I've pulled. Do you honestly think we fooled anyone with that pathetic display?"

"Are you calling my kiss pathetic?" His brows arched up in challenge, and Cassie realized he'd cornered her. If she admitted that she enjoyed the kiss, he'd gloat. If she claimed it sucked, then he'd either call her a liar or set out to prove her wrong, which might lead to another kiss.

She'd turn into a panting, mindless sex maniac if that happened. *Wonder how he'd feel with a Delistraty wrapped around him?*

She took a safer path. "It was all right."

She didn't need to see him to feel his disbelief. Or to recognize the teasing note in his voice. "All right? Lady, that was a Mike Ashford special delivery kiss. No woman's ever been able to resist it, and I doubt you're an exception."

Cassie snorted. Hiding a grin, she said, "Boy, do you need your ego popped. Why haven't I seen this side of you before?"

They reached the bar area, where Ernie and Kendra were. Mike stopped, obviously not wanting to be overheard.

"Because I've never treated you like a woman before. Not that I'm going to start now," he added quickly. Much too quickly for her taste. "You'll always be Cassie to me. But hey, anything to bail you out."

His attitude irked her. He still didn't see her as a woman, even after that incredible kiss. Either he was made of stone or he lied through his eyeteeth.

"I didn't need bailing out," she said. His disbelieving look increased her irritation. If he didn't find her attractive, fine. But how dare he doubt her!

Mike leaned close to her. "You know, Cal's right. Emotionally, you're all over the place. You say you don't want a guy, but then you dress like this." His eyes swept over her way-short skirt and her breasts straining out of her push-up bra. "You obviously don't know what you want."

Yes, I do. I want you. She couldn't tell him that she'd worn these clothes on a whim, with him in mind. So instead, she looked like a crazy female who said one thing and meant another. *Face it, I've dug myself a deep hole here.*

"Cass, right now you're obviously going through a lot, and 'dating' me will give you time to think things through, get your head on straight. It has to be better than being forced into a date by your mom. I'm perfectly safe. I won't try anything."

Cass wanted to throttle him. How humiliating. A pity relationship. "Listen, pal, I've been handling my mother and brother for almost thirty years now, and I've done quite well, thank you. Your little act in there didn't help; it just made things worse. How am I going to explain to *my* mother that you were lying, without it getting back to *your* mother? Did you think of that? What possessed you to do such a thing?"

* * * *

Cassie's words kick-started his brain. Mike latched onto her first question.

Mike Ashford feared nothing—not fire, not floods, not even Cassie's sharp tongue. No, he didn't cringe at anything.

Except his mother.

Petite, thin, with short-cropped, silver hair, Jessie Ashford seemed such a soft, mellow woman. Until someone, usually her children, didn't listen to her sage advice, lied or did anything to harm her daughter or her son. She tolerated nothing that violated those three simple rules.

And Mike had just violated two. He'd lied, and he'd gotten involved with Cassandra Delistraty, something his mother had warned him not to do for decades.

The Delistraty's didn't belong in their world, Jessie'd told her son the first week after Cassie's family had moved in next door to them almost twenty years ago. A social princess who'd inherited the middle-class house next door, Lucia would someday return to her own kind. When she did, Jessie didn't want her kids hurt or demoralized when their 'friends' turned their backs on them. Someday, Jessie predicted, Lucia's father would forgive her becoming pregnant by a 'lowlife' and she'd return to the upper echelons of high society. His mom obviously held something against Lucia, although Mike had never known exactly what.

Mike hadn't listened to his mother where Cal was concerned. The two'd become fast friends, and even when Jessie's prediction came partially true fifteen years ago and Lucia and her father had reconciled, they'd remained friends. But he'd taken to heart her words concerning Cassandra.

Friendship was one thing. Love was something entirely different.

Yes, he'd be in deep water with his mom. Lucia still lived next door to his folks and would probably drop this tidbit on his mother's lap. The two women barely tolerated each other. Lucia's reaction of disbelief would be nothing compared to Jessie's outrage.

Well, he'd irritated her before and survived. He'd deal with her reaction when the time came.

Cassie's last question sank in. What *had* possessed him to help her? Was bailing her out his only motivation? Or had he stupidly given in to his attraction to her?

No, it had to be a knee-jerk reaction, brought on by two decades of bailing her out of all the crazy trouble she got into. Like the time she'd egged the mayor's house when a teenager curfew had been enforced. She'd almost ended up in jail for that one. And when she'd rescued some bums from the cold by hiding them in the girls' locker room at school.

He caught Kendra watching them and inspiration hit him. He could cure her crush on him with this 'relationship.' Talking to her hadn't worked; she'd just smiled and kept coming on to him. Seeing him with Cassie could cool her off. Maybe if Cassie thought he had something to gain, then she'd agree.

However, looking at Cassie's beyond-irritated face, Mike knew it wouldn't be easy to persuade her that his plan would work.

But he had to. Right now it seemed vital.

He thought of that kiss. He'd never been so jolted by anyone's touch before. How could one ordinary pair of lips be so soft, so seductive, as to make him forget everything but her?

Damn, but he had it bad. Could he get any more pathetic?

"So we're agreed?" Cassie's voice, which he suddenly realized hadn't stopped, cut through the fog around his brain.

"What?"

"Mike, you haven't heard a word I've said, have you?"

He bristled. "Of course I have." Well, technically he'd heard them, but realistically he couldn't remember them.

Cassie huffed. "I doubt that. Just to be on the safe side, I'll hit the highlights for you." Crossing her arms, she tipped her head back and looked him in the eye. Even with her spiked heels, he still towered over her. He liked that, made him feel more masculine.

"First, you confess to my mother that you were trying one of your misguided rescues again—you know, like the time you tried to stop that mugger from taking Mrs. Rawlins's purse on that field trip, and ended up with a fat lip and a concussion."

"And what was I supposed to do, stand by and let that guy beat up the teacher?"

"That's not the point, Mike. The point is that you have this need to save people, and it gets you into trouble. Like today. I didn't need rescuing, yet you jumped in and did it anyway. You can't help yourself, can you?"

He wanted to wipe that smug look right off her face. "If I hadn't done something, you would've found yourself on a hot and steamy date with Kyle."

Cassie scowled, and he pressed his attack. "Face it. If you don't do something quick, your mom and brother are going to go all out to find someone for you. Could be Kyle is the best thing they can dig up."

"Point made." Cassie shuddered. "Personally, I think that you're afraid of telling your mother you lied."

How well she knew him. "Of course I'm afraid. What sane person wouldn't be?"

Cassie laughed. "You have a point."

Realizing that customers were piling up at the bar, Mike decided to cut this short. "Okay, here's the deal. You don't want to date any 'Kyles.' Someone has a crush on me that I need to nip in the bud. So this'll help both of us. We'll play it up for a while, then we can break up, which'll give us another few months of peace while we 'lick our wounds.' In the meantime, we flirt in public, pretend to be the perfect couple, but in private we're just friends. Deal?"

Cassie's smile turned naughty. Not a good sign. "I'll agree to the first part, since it gets my mom off my back for a while. But that last one? No way, Boy Scout. You started this pressure cooker. I'm going to enjoy turning up the steam."

With a small gurgle of laughter, she bounced upwards, her mouth finding his with unerring accuracy. Her lips lingered for a moment, but before he could react, she pulled away. Brushing one ruby red nail across his cheek, she smiled up at him.

"Consider that a sample. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" She pulled away and headed for the door.

"Tomorrow?" What was she talking about? His nerves still jumped from that brief kiss, and her tantalizing, mind-numbing touch to his face. "What about tomorrow?"

"Boy, you are a mess, aren't you? You told my mother we had a date, so a date it is. See you at eight!" With a mocking wave of her slender hand, she sauntered out of the bar.

Tomorrow. Mike raked his hand through his hair. He'd said that right after he'd kissed her. He hadn't been thinking. Spending more time with Cassie, especially with her drive-Mike-insane attitude, was the last thing he needed.

He had nobody to blame but himself.

Yes, he'd definitely started up a pressure cooker, and if Cassie had her way, he'd be the main course.

* * * *

Cassie pulled into her driveway and clicked on the garage door opener. Her tiny Victorian-style home overlooking Lake Washington was dark. She needed to get one of those timers she mused, so she didn't come home to pitch blackness.

As she tapped the gas pedal, a figure emerged from the shadows behind her. Her heart jammed in her throat before he neared the taillights and she recognized him.

Her father. Darn him, he did this to her all the time. Living around the corner, he often walked over to see her.

Jake Prescott, a weary brown-haired version of Cal, waved at her. He flashed a smile as he followed her into the garage. He always seemed tired, faded and perpetually sad, even when he laughed. She couldn't remember a time where he didn't wear his loneliness like a cloak. She never quite

understood why he still pursued her mother, considering she'd rejected him for over thirty years now.

She pasted on a carefree smile for him, never wanting to burden him with her troubles. Funny how she felt her mother to be stronger than her dad.

"Hi, Dad. What brings you over?" She swung out of her vintage candy apple red 1957 T-bird convertible. She loved this car, the only remnant of her marriage. She also had a more practical Toyota Camry, but tonight had felt like a T-bird night.

Her dad grasped her hands and pulled her into a large hug.

"It's good to see you, girlie." Still holding her hands, he stepped back, taking in her short skirt and pink top. "That's some outfit. Wearing it for anyone in particular?"

Cassie started to shake her head, realized it would be a lie, and smiled instead. "I guess I did. I wanted to tweak someone."

He grinned. "I'm thinking you tweaked him but good, wearing that." He let go of her hands and waved her toward the door. Snatching her purse from the passenger seat, Cassie toddled on her heels up the few steps into her house.

Her house. How she loved the living room, with its pale green walls and vintage oak floors. It felt cool and inviting.

With yips of excitement, all three dogs rushed at her. Ruff and Tidbit, her two tiny male Pomeranians, danced happily around her, landing kisses before dancing away to greet Jake. Suzy, the small Chihuahua-Pom mix, let out a tiny howl, then pranced toward Cassie's outstretched hand.

Crouching, Jake petted the two males, chuckling. "I'm always afraid I'll step on one of them," he said.

"Don't worry, Dad. They'll stay away from your big feet."

He held out a hand to Suzy, who'd never quite warmed up to anyone but Cassie. She sniffed at Jake's hand, then stretched herself up against Cassie's leg in a plea to be picked up.

Cassie scooped her up, to be rewarded with a lick on the chin. She laughingly moved her face out of the way. Plopping on the couch, she smiled up at her dad.

"So what's up?"

Jake sat down, allowing Ruff to climb up on his lap. He raked his hand over the long black fur a few times before replying.

"I got a garbled message from Mike on my cell, something about your mother dancing on a pool table? I called Cal, and he told me he was on his way, so I stayed scarce."

"Wise move. Wish I'd done that." Cassie filled him in, debating on whether or not to tell him about Mike's farce.

Finally, since she knew she could trust him, she let him in on the secret. "Please don't tell anyone," she said. "You don't know what it's like having Mom barge in, trying to fix what she thinks is a problem in your life."

Jake snorted. "I don't? Baby, your mom's always held that she knows what's best for everyone, up to and including me." His smile faded.

"Aw, Dad." She covered his hand with hers. Her heart ached for him. In many ways, even though she'd never changed her last name to his, like Cal had, she felt closer to

him than to her mother. "I wish she'd give you a chance." Her father's sadness sank into her, and she hugged him. For a moment, father and daughter leaned into each other, garnering strength.

Jake straightened up and patted her hand. "It's taken thirty years, but I think it's time for me to move on. There's this woman at work...well, she's always flirting with me. It's nice to feel wanted." He worked in the county assessor's office. Quite different from her mom's career as an interior designer.

"Dad, I don't know what to say about Mom. She's never kept you out of our lives. She just doesn't want marriage."

Jake's face hardened. "And I need that. I know she doesn't think I really love her, that I propose to her more out of obligation than love, but you know that isn't true. But I'm almost fifty now, and a few nights here and there when Lucia's in the mood isn't how I want my life to be."

Okay, more information than she wanted. "I wish I knew what to say. I don't know what's right for either of you."

He stood up, went into the kitchen and retrieved two beers she stocked just for him. He popped the top off one and handed it to her. Sitting back down on the couch beside her, he opened his and took a deep swig.

Setting the beer down on her marble coffee table, he said, "I'm not asking for advice, not really. But this year's rejection really stung me. Do you know what she said this last time? 'You think this is a joke, don't you?' Then she shut the door in my face. She didn't even let me in the house."

Ouch. Her mother could be brutal.

"You really need to pick a better day on which to propose, Dad. That one's really lame."

Jake frowned. "It's the anniversary of our first date. I've proposed on that date for the last thirty years."

Boy, he just didn't get it. "Dad, it's April Fool's Day. Kind of takes the significance out of any proposal, don't you think? Can't you pick another day, like the anniversary of the first time you made...err, the best date or something? Give Mom one last shot, but make this one a show of how serious you really are. Pour it all out, and if she rejects you, then give up." She placed one hand on his arm. "Maybe she's not able to care deeply enough, Dad. Remember the Delistraty curse."

Jake snorted. "I've never believed that garbage. That's just an excuse some old women came up with to explain their loose morals. Your mom's capable of very deep feelings. Trust me on that one."

He picked up his bottle and gazed at it. "I'll give your idea some thought. Might be able to come up with something. Now, back to you and this Mike thing." His eyes lifted to her face. "Honey, are you sure you want to do this? You've harbored feelings for him for years. Don't try to deny it. I was the one who called you to tell you that he'd been hurt, remember?"

Yes, she remembered. Two years ago, Mike had fallen through a roof and was in a coma from the injuries that would end his career as a firefighter. She'd wanted to rush to his side, reassure herself that he'd be okay, and to...what? Confess her love for him if he'd been dying? *No, I don't love Mike. It's just a stupid crush.*

"You need to rethink this," Jake said. "You could end up being hurt."

His words slammed into her already skittish heart. But she bore the impact. "It's time I got him out of my system, and sometimes a good inoculation is all that's needed, right?"

Raising an eyebrow, Jake frowned. "Sounds good in theory, but in practice it's going to be pretty tough on you." He raised one hand to ward off her words. "No, I understand. You have to try. But baby, be honest with yourself. Are you doing this to get over him, or in the hopes of him falling for you?"

Cassie couldn't answer that one. She didn't know herself what her reply would be.

Setting down his empty bottle, Jake kissed the top of her head, then stood. "I'll see you later, honey."

She didn't follow. This was their routine, repeated every few nights. "'Night, Dad." She listened to him crossing to the front door, the dogs' tiny claws clicking after him.

He opened the door and set the lock, then said, "Don't forget to set the deadbolt." She smiled, as she always did, assured him she wouldn't, then silence engulfed the house as the door closed.

Mike. Was she really playing with fire? Considering the four-alarm heat in his kiss, getting burned certainly could happen. A shudder of need vibrated through her. *Wowza*. Just thinking about him aroused her.

Getting burnt definitely had some good points.

* * * *

"Sure, Mike, I'll cover for you tonight."

Rats. His one alibi, shot down. "Are you sure it's not a bother?"

"Nope," Dave replied. "Can always use the extra money to help with bills. The baby will be here any day now." Mike could hear Dave's wife say something in the background.

"Have fun tonight."

"Thanks."

He ended the call, then sat back on the couch. Terrific. What could he do with Cass for an entire evening?

His body immediately gave him an answer.

He'd be lucky he didn't get boiled in his own juices, especially if she wore an outfit like last night's. Hopefully she'd have some bad traits that'd drive him crazy, like tossing dirty socks on the floor or never refilling the toilet paper holder. Perhaps she picked her nose while driving.

Something, anything that'd cool his libido. Then he could get on with his life. Cassie reminded him too much of his ex-wife, Sharon. She'd left him for someone more exciting, who made more money. She'd been like Cassie: flighty, passionate, bubbling with energy.

He shut his eyes briefly. He didn't need to dwell on his ex. Right now he needed to deal with Cassie.

Dancing. He remembered her reaction to her mother's mention of dancing. That might be the ticket; maybe she danced all strange or moved like a stiff stick. That could be a major turn-off. He did like to dance, although his knee couldn't sustain it for too long.

He'd figure out some place other than the *Wave* to go to, though, since a date on his home turf could be awkward.

Whoa, he had to quit thinking of this as a date. It was an act put on for her family. Maybe being at the *Wave* would be the best. They could pretend they were out in the open with an established relationship, giving both her mother and Kendra something to think about. *Hmm, might not be a bad idea.*

He put off calling Cassie just yet. He needed quit grouping Cassie and sex together in the same thought.

Yeah, right. Like he could ever succeed at forgetting that.

* * * *

"That's a terrible idea." Cassie wanted to shriek into the phone. He wanted their first date to be at the *Wave*

"Why's that?" Mike's logical voice really grated on her. "After all, we're supposed to be convincing the others that we're a couple, and that means being seen by them. Since your family hangs out there at times, the *Wave's* a perfect choice."

"Except we're not a real couple. Don't you think that we'll seem a bit awkward together? Couples have a language all their own. How can we fake that?"

"Are you suggesting we sleep together?"

Cassie's hand slipped; the red polish slashed across her big toe. Why did he always call when she painted her nails?

She swiped the polish off with a tissue. He'd said that to shock her, but she'd give him a taste of his own medicine. "That'd be the quickest way to solve our problem."

She heard him sputter. Darn, but she liked getting a rise out of him. If only she could do it literally.

"Not an option." Did his voice sound hoarse? "But you have a point. About the body language thing." Nope, darn it, voice sounded normal. "Maybe we could go out for a drink somewhere, talk and devise some sort of plan before we go to the *Wave*."

"Okay." Drinks sounded ideal. Maybe seducing him and finding out that the sex sucked might be a good thing.

Hmm. She'd have to mull that one over. Especially before she picked out an outfit for tonight.

As if he read her mind, he said, "Wear something casual. We'd be past the fancy dates in an established relationship."

Cassie couldn't help but smile. Had her skirt last night done some damage to the thick wall he'd built up against her?

Hmm, casual, but able to tear down a man's resolve.

She might be able to come up with something.

She laughed. "I think I can manage that. See you tonight."

* * * *

Mike pulled his Bronco up in front of Cassie's place. The knots in his stomach grew. That laugh of hers on the phone didn't bode well. She loved to flaunt her beauty. If only she wasn't so flighty, so willing to walk away from a relationship.

So much like Sharon.

The only reason Cassie ever gave for her failed marriage was 'it didn't work out.' Nothing concrete or that justified the divorce. Those words echoed what Sharon had said when she'd left him, along with a few others, like 'boring' and 'dull.'

He wasn't interesting enough for someone like Cassie. So why did she taunt him? Trying on her new role as a single woman, maybe? Did she have him pegged as her rebound guy?

The thought of him being a mere blip on her radar screen bothered him. Well, he wouldn't play that game. No way would he let her use him to salve her battered ego.

He walked up to the front door, feeling like a man entering a gas chamber. His chances of surviving this evening seemed pretty slim.

Her dogs started barking before he even rang the doorbell. He'd met them when he'd helped Cal move her into the house. Another thing against Cassie. He didn't like little yappy mutts.

The door swung open, and she stood there, a welcoming smile on her face.

"Come on in, I'm almost ready." She held up a foot, wiggling bare, red-tipped toes. "I need to go find some shoes." Waving him into the living room, she admonished the dogs to be quiet.

Instead of staring at Cassie, like he wanted to, Mike looked around. "I like your living room."

Cassie glowed with pleasure. "That's right, you haven't seen it since I moved in. I think it's very soothing. I'm glad you like it."

Mike nodded. The decor wasn't quite what he expected from Cassie. He'd thought she'd have gone for bright, bold colors. The soft, peaceful green walls, its rich fabrics and

plush furniture exuded elegance and grace. It felt a lot more restful than his stark white apartment above the club.

"I'll go grab some shoes and be right back." With a smile she headed down the hall. She turned back for a moment. "Don't try to pet the brown dog. She's cranky."

Mike didn't answer; he couldn't. He found himself mesmerized by her curvy behind wriggling seductively as she walked away. A pair of form-fitting jeans, one of those short-legged jobs with the fancy ribbon on the bottom, showed off her shapely calves and those trim, sexy ankles. Her feet were bare and enticing. And that top...okay, it might be casual, but the red top showed too much creamy skin and cupped her breasts so tightly.

Damn. He wanted to follow her right into her bedroom. This wasn't good.

He sat down, and one of the dogs jumped onto his lap. *Don't pet the brown one.* Did that apply when the dog sat on him?

He didn't like having it that close to his privates. Especially since his groin felt tight from his reaction to Cassie. Gave the mutt too much of a target. *Maybe if I just push it away.*

"Augh!" The dog nipped his hand when he tried and he leapt off the couch, knocking it off him and onto the floor. All three dogs rushed him, barking furiously.

Rubbing his hand, he snarled at the nasty mutt. The noise level escalated. Before he knew it, Cassie stood next to him, telling the dogs to hush. They all obeyed, except for the little nasty brown thing, who yipped one more time before retreating to a pillow under the coffee table.

"Your dog bit me."

Cassie frowned. "Suzy? I told you not to pet her."

"Well, you didn't tell me what to do when she sits on me."

He studied his hand, looking for damage.

"Naughty dog. Don't bite," she admonished Suzy. To Mike, she said, "I'm sorry," Did he see a tiny smile? She'd better not be amused by this. "Suzy has a split personality. The Pom part of her wants to be nice, sweet and friendly. But her Chihuahua half...well, it tends to make her a bit—"

"Vicious?"

"Well, that's one way to put it. Quite frankly, her nickname when we're alone is Bitchy." They shared a smile. "Here, let me look at your hand." She grasped it and lifted it up, revealing two faint red marks. "Oh, Mike, I'm sorry."

Without warning, she brought his hand up to her mouth and planted a kiss, a lingering, hot moistness that flamed his senses. He leaned forward, caught a whiff of her hair, a light citrus scent that brought visions of her in the shower, and he stifled a groan. Just then, she lifted her mouth, and her eyes met his.

"Does it still hurt?"

Hurt, no. Ache, hell, yes. Couldn't she see that? But she'd only meant his hand. Not the rest of his anatomy.

"I've been thinking," he said, knowing his voice sounded too husky, too filled with need.

"Yes?" She stroked her thumb over his palm, slowly, sensuously. He could imagine that same thumb stroking another part of his body, swirling the same circles over his hardened flesh.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

Those lips beckoned to him, called him, told him to sink into her, forget about their differences, forget that she'd break his heart, that she'd be all wrong for him.

"Perhaps we do need some practice."

He leaned down, his mouth hovering above hers.

Just another fraction of an inch, and he'd taste heaven.

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Chapter Three

Cassie held her breath, waiting for that first touch, that flash of fire in her veins. She could feel his rapid, shallow breath on her lips, fanning her need for him. She shivered in anticipation as his aftershave, subtle and spicy and mixed with that special male aura, drifted to her.

He's taking too long. She leaned into him, her breasts pressing against his hard chest.

He jumped back as if she'd pinched him, catching her as she toppled over. Setting her upright, he retreated, then grasped her hand, tugging her toward the door.

"C'mon. I don't think we need practice, after all."

"Mike—" she began. What on earth happened here? One moment, she'd been millimeters from kissing him again, something she could become addicted to. The next, she found herself outside as Mike made sure the door locked behind them. Then he bundled her into that oversized testosterone advertisement he called a ride, and pulled away from the curb as if he couldn't get away fast enough.

Or the evening over soon enough.

She arched a brow. "Are we in a hurry tonight?"

He stared straight ahead, both hands wrapped in a death grip on the steering wheel. "We're doing this to convince others that we're an item. We can't do that by staying at your place."

Ah, she understood now. He was on the run from her. Well, she might not be able to keep a guy, but at least she could have fun making this one squirm.

"But think of the talk we'd start if your truck sat outside my place all night long."

Deep red seeped up his face. "I don't think we need to get carried away," he said, his voice sounding strained. "We only have to keep up appearances."

"So that's the goal."

He nodded, and she could see the relief on his features. "Yeah. That's the goal."

"Okay, I think I can handle that." Loosening her seatbelt, Cassie slid toward him, then wrapped herself around Mike's arm. Lying her head on his shoulder, she made sure her breast pressed into him. He immediately stiffened.

She wriggled up against him, loving the feel of him. She rubbed her cheek against his solid shoulder, snuggling closer.

"What the heck are you doing?"

"Why, being a couple, of course. This way, anyone driving by and seeing us will know we're an item. Clever, huh?"

His voice came out a strangled bark. "Yeah, clever."

* * * *

What had he gotten himself into?

He didn't think he'd survive the trip to the restaurant, what with Cassie glued to his side, her breasts pressed against him, enflaming him until he could barely breathe. Every nerve pounded, demanding satisfaction. He couldn't take much more.

At least dinner wouldn't be bad. No reason for snuggling there. Then he'd parade her quickly through the *Wave* and drop her home. *Yeah, good plan, Mike.*

"Chinese okay?" He remembered that she loved Chinese, and he knew a good restaurant only a few minutes from the bar.

He felt Cassie nod against his shoulder. He tried to relax, but her body curled up against him felt too good. If he wasn't careful, he'd find himself in a trap of his own making, the trap of loving Cass even after boredom drove her away.

One of her hands idly played with a button on his khaki shirt. She had to be aware of his rapid heartbeat. Of course, since it pounded every time he got around her, perhaps she'd think it normal.

He pressed his foot down on the gas pedal. The sooner they arrived, the better. Then he could put some distance between them and get his libido back under control.

Too bad it didn't respond well to common sense. He knew better than to buy into something like this. Her snuggling up against him, that had been how Sharon first enticed him, seven years ago. He'd been attracted by her love of life, her free spirit, the way she faced any challenges with head held high.

He'd been devastated by her lies, her games, her sleeping around.

Cassie reminded him a lot of Sharon. Not only in looks, but in her approach to life. Good reason to stay the hell away from her.

Now why couldn't his body understand that?

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They pulled up at the restaurant, and Mike disentangled himself. He opened the truck door for her. His eyes couldn't help but take in her long, shapely legs as she swung them out. *Oh, baby.* His pulse rapid-fired again.

She reached a hand out to him for support. Okay, he'd have to touch her; the Bronco was a bit up off the ground, and those shoes she wore wouldn't support her at all if she tripped.

She slipped her slender fingers into his hand; tightening his grip he pulled her from the truck. True to his thoughts, she stumbled a bit on those ridiculous heels and landed squarely against his chest. His body immediately thrilled at the touch while his mind yelled at him to retreat.

Cassie pushed away from him, then thanked him, looking past him at the pagoda-style restaurant. "This looks interesting." Casual words, but her voice held a hint of sexual tension that he couldn't miss. Husky, soft, her voice contained a promise she tempted him to explore.

She still held his hand; when he pulled back, she clung fast.

"We're supposed to be dating," she reminded him.
"Couples in love hold hands."

But they weren't in love; quite the opposite, in fact. They were using each other to avoid complications.

What a joke. The biggest danger he faced was the very solution he'd suggested: dating Cassie.

* * * *

The canned music assaulted Cassie's ears as she entered the *Wave*. She held onto Mike's hand, wanting him close.

It felt good being with him. She loved touching him, enjoying his male skin next to hers and breathing in his essence. She squeezed his hand, and beamed when his reluctant smile graced his lips.

Over dinner, he'd seemed to relax a bit, becoming the old friend that she remembered from childhood, instead of the man who'd do anything to keep away from her.

She'd relaxed as well, as they discussed their lives apart—her practice in L.A. and some of the people she'd met there; his days as a firefighter; what he missed about it, what he didn't. His sister, Julia, Cassie's best friend from childhood. Her brother's attempt to recruit her to work with him at the clinic he'd started.

Their mothers. They couldn't be more different, yet still the same. They were both stubbornly focused on making their children's lives miserable. Lucia did so by trying to 'help' her children create a better life, even though she herself had never quite found it. Jessie preferred the 'unwanted advice' method.

They'd lingered over their desserts, sharing an oversized piece of cheesecake. Then the image of a slow dance in Mike's arms took hold of Cassie, so she'd suggested heading to the bar and finding someplace to sit before the place filled up.

After they arrived, it only took Cassie an instant to pick up on Mike's problem woman. The young blonde waitress pegged them the instant they arrived; her million watt smile, aimed at Mike, faded instantly when she took in Cassie at his side.

She vaguely remembered the girl from before. Ernie's oldest daughter, she was pretty sure. She'd be beautiful if not for that scowl on her face, aimed directly at Cassie.

Faced with such hostility, Cassie clutched Mike's hand tighter. He squeezed hers reassuringly and spared her a brief smile as he scoped out a table.

Okay, she could survive the evening under the angry glare of the waitress, as long as Mike didn't let go of her hand. She stifled a giggle; she'd faced down meaner people while negotiating multi-million dollar deals as a corporate attorney, yet she needed bolstering up when it came to surviving a jealous girl barely out of her teens. How ironic.

Or maybe she felt more vulnerable where Mike was concerned.

Nonsense. As long as she knew the pitfalls, she could guard her heart against him. She needed to remember some of his annoying habits. Like the way he used to call her 'Duchess' when they were kids. *At least he's grown out of—*

"Hey, princess, will this table do?"

Princess? She chuckled at that one. At least she'd been promoted. She felt rather pleased with herself that his choice of a nickname for her no longer bothered her.

At least, it didn't yet.

The table he'd chosen could be seen from everywhere. Not a spot that two lovers would choose. No, real lovers would want privacy. Looking around, she pointed to a table situated near the back and up a flight of stairs.

"I think that's better. We don't want to be obvious."

He took in her words and a moment later nodded. Still holding onto his hand, she navigated through the already thick crowd.

Digging into her purse, she found the tiny container of orange breath mints and popped a couple into her mouth. The flavor, one of her comfort tastes, helped to calm her. She reminded herself to pick up some more; she'd probably need a lot in the next several days. She offered them to Mike, and he took a couple, biting into them. The thought of an orange-flavored kiss quickened her pulse.

"Cassandra! Over here!"

Even over the noise, she recognized her mother's voice. With a groan, she turned. Sure enough, there she was. Her mother. *With Kyle?*

She glanced up at Mike. He wore a bemused expression, as if he didn't know which way to run. She sent him a warning glance. "No matter what, we don't sit down with them, got it?"

He nodded. "No problem. Your mother's a bit intense for me."

Cassie contained a snort. Her mother generated more energy than the nearest dam. But that wasn't the reason she didn't want to sit with her. No, her reasons were more self-centered than that.

She had designs on Mike, and any kind of company would cramp her 'style.' She'd never seduced anyone before and having her mother right there would definitely deter her.

They reached Lucia's table. Kyle sat too close to her mother for Cassie's comfort, his arm draped over the back of

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Lucia's chair, but she clamped down on her instinct to glare at him. She'd never understood why her mother never married her dad. It was none of her business, so she never asked. Still, she didn't like to see her with just any guy that came along, especially one so much younger than her. Kyle couldn't be over thirty-five.

"Hi, Mom." She managed a half-hearted smile, but Lucia didn't seem to pick up on her lack of enthusiasm. Bouncing up on tall high-heeled fringed bootlets, Lucia pulled Cassie into a tight embrace, then hugged Mike as well.

"Hello, darlings. What are you two up to tonight?"

"Came for a little dancing," Mike said, removing Lucia from around his neck. His arm then pulled Cassie against his chest, as if she'd be a shield from her mother. Fat chance. What Lucia wanted, Lucia got. But she'd take advantage of his defensive action. No sense in wasting an opportunity.

Her entire back tingled as she leaned back, pressing herself against him. She smiled up at him and his answering smile looked very forced indeed. Good. She didn't want him comfortable. No, she wanted him thinking only of her.

"Wonderful!" Lucia beamed up at Mike. "Why don't you two join us?"

"No, thanks, Mom," Cassie said. "We wouldn't want to intrude. Besides..." She emphasized her words by wrapping Mike's arm tighter about her waist. "We really want some alone time."

"Then you shouldn't have come here," Lucia said. "Everyone knows Mike, and they'll all feel like saying hi and finding out about this sudden relationship between you two."

Darn, she had a point. She could feel the tension in Mike, and wondered if he was uncomfortable being seen with her.

"Or is this your way of convincing me that this is for real?"

"Mom..." Cassie sighed. Lucia truly frustrated her, on many levels. Especially with that coy little smile she now wore. What on earth did that mean? It gave Cassie an unsettled feeling, like her mother might be up to something.

The cranky waitress whose name Cassie couldn't remember bore down on them, criminal intent in her eyes. Instead of retreating, Cassie snuggled deeper into Mike's arms.

The girl glared at Cassie, then gave Mike a brittle smile. "Can I get you anything to drink, Mike?"

With the side of her head pressed against Mike's chin, Cassie felt him grin. "Sure, Kendra. Rum and Coke on the rocks. Since I'm not working tonight, I can indulge."

Kendra returned his smile. "Sure, Mike. Coming right up." She turned smartly on her heel and headed toward the bar.

Cassie stiffened. Of all the nerve! She wasn't going to take her order? How childish!

"Kendra!" Mike called out after the girl.

Kendra turned around. "Yes, Mike?" she asked, her voice dripping with saccharine.

"You forgot to take Cassie's order."

"Who?" Kendra blinked, as if seeing Cassie for the first time. "Oh, your friend! Sorry. What would you like to drink?"

Cassie tamped down on her ire and made her voice as sugary as Kendra's. "A Toasted Almond, please."

Scowling, Kendra said, "Never heard of it."

She felt Mike sigh. Apparently Kendra's rudeness got to him as well. "Equal parts Amaretto, Kahlua and cream. Dave knows the recipe."

His steel-tinged voice apparently took the steam out of the girl. "Sorry. Two drinks, coming up." She strode away, her body stiff. Cassie glanced up at Mike.

"She's Ernie's daughter, right?"

He nodded. "Lucky for her right now. Sorry, honey." He kissed her forehead with so much tenderness that Cassie might have believed it genuine, if his stiff body didn't tell her otherwise.

"Well, she needs a stern talking to," Lucia said. "That bordered on rudeness."

"I'll handle it," Mike promised. "In the meantime, we'd better go find a table before the place totally fills up."

"Okay. And I'll be watching you two." With a wiggle of her fingers, Lucia sat down. That sweet tone of voice didn't fool Cassie. Her mom didn't buy this sudden relationship, and she'd just put Cassie on notice.

Mike led Cassie towards the table. "I'm sorry about that," he said over the din. "Kendra's still too young to rein herself in, but that kind of treatment won't be tolerated. I'll—"

"Let it drop, Mike." She raised her voice to make certain he heard her; the crowd seemed to get louder with every passing moment. "I think she learned her lesson."

Luckily the table she'd scoped out earlier remained empty. Mike pulled out a chair, and she slipped into it. He sat down beside her, leaning toward her so she could hear him.

"Cass, she doesn't deserve me to go easy on her. Crush or no crush, you're a customer and a customer's needs come first."

So his anger stemmed at the girl's disregard for a customer, not for her treatment of Cassie in particular. That rankled her more than it should. She wanted him to care about her enough to be outraged!

She leaned into him, making sure she pressed her breasts against him, and placed her mouth close to his ear, closer than she needed to be heard.

Letting out a slow breath that fluttered his dark hair, she said, "She wasn't seeing a customer when she looked at me. She saw a rival, a woman with the man she wants. If you look at it that way, she showed remarkable restraint." Another wispy breath, feathered against his earlobe and brought on a minute shudder that she felt course through his body. "Let it go."

He turned to her, and she soared at what she saw in those deep brown eyes of his. Even in the darkness, she recognized the stark need. His mouth hovered above hers, but she didn't make the first move. Mike would have to instigate this kiss, but that didn't mean she couldn't fan the flames.

She filled her thoughts with wanton desire that she knew would show on her face. Her darling Eagle Scout would have to be made of titanium to resist this onslaught.

He wasn't. Mike's mouth descended on hers, taking in her fevered breath. His teeth raked her bottom lip, then his tongue invaded her mouth, eliminating any vague idea she'd had that he might be kissing her for mere show.

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No, this kiss existed for Mike and Cassie alone. His hand cupped the back of her neck, strengthening the pressure on her mouth. She reveled in it, her tongue dancing with his.

What she hadn't counted on when she'd started this challenge was that she wasn't made of titanium, either. Her body trembled, her heart thudded in her chest, her senses exploded with the joy that filled her. The heat between her legs spread, coiling into her belly, through her tingling breasts, scalding her lungs with intensity. A tiny moan escaped.

Immediately the tenor of his kiss changed. If before it had been about need, this one took Cassie on another type of roller coaster. His mouth softened, gentled, became feather light as he pressed kiss after kiss onto her swollen mouth. His tongue caressed her lips, then he followed through with another soft touch of his mouth to hers.

The tenderness that he conveyed to her moved her more than even his passion had. If she'd doubted that he held any affection for her, now she didn't know if she could contain it all.

He tasted the corner of her mouth, then grazed over her cheek. She held perfectly still, basking in this strange mixture of lust and gentleness. She couldn't get enough, she couldn't take any more. With a soft cry she turned to find his mouth.

She touched his face, loving the faint stubble she felt. He was so masculine. Even the smell and taste of him reminded her that he was all male, first and foremost. Exciting, sexual, aroused.

He broke off the kiss, his breath coming in rapid beats. Resting his forehead against hers, he whispered, "Later."

That one word drove ripples of need through her with its unspoken promise. "I'm holding you to that."

Mike's eyes widened, then a boyish grin appeared. "You're way too tempting, Cass. I've a feeling a cold shower's in my future."

Her heart leapt at his admission, but she decided to play coy. Shrugging, she said, "Your choice."

Before he could respond, Kendra arrived with their drinks. She kept her eyes averted in an attempt to hide her emotions, but Cassie clearly heard the brittleness in her voice.

"One Coke and rum, one Toasted Almond." Not waiting for a reply, she moved on to the next table.

Cassie sipped her drink, glad for a moment to cool off. Darn it. She wanted to get him hot and bothered, not the other way around. Of course, if his gulping down his drink gave her any indication, he'd been worked up, too.

"That was some kiss." Lucia appeared at their table. "I can't remember the last time someone kissed me like that, like they cared about me." She smiled at Cassie, her eyes glistening suspiciously. "I guess you two really are an item."

"Dad." Cassie's voice sounded lighter than a whisper. "Mom, Dad kisses you like that. I've seen him. Didn't you know that?"

Lucia's eyes widened, then grew haunted. "I'm sure you're mistaken, Cassandra." Straightening her back, she said,

"Don't forget the Fourth of July party at your grandparents, and Mike, you're invited."

"Oh, but—" Mike's face reflected his horror, but immediately he hid his reaction. In fact, he did it so well that Cassie almost believed she'd imagined it.

"Sure, Mom, we'll be there," Cassie said. If she didn't go, there'd be hell to pay. And since Mike wanted to pursue this charade, he'd better go, too. She sent him a warning glance, and he lifted his brows as if to say, *This isn't settled*.

Lucia glanced over her shoulder. "I'd better get back to Kyle before he finds someone else."

Wagging her fingers, Lucia departed. Cassie watched her thoughtfully, wondering at Lucia's strange mix of emotions when she'd mentioned her father. Longing, loneliness, disbelief. Self-doubt? Her mother? Couldn't be; she must have misread her. She'd never known Lucia to suffer from lack of confidence. Ever.

Cassie glanced at her mom's date. Was that what waited for her in fifteen years—a dark nightclub with a too-young man, because her heart couldn't settle on anyone for long? Could she ever beat the Delistraty curse?

And if she ever had kids, would they ever know a normal life, the kind of life Cassie had never experienced?

"I wish..." she started, then hesitated. The memories still hurt too much.

"What?" Mike probed.

She shook her head, but he touched her chin, turning her toward him with a firm gentleness that melted the last shreds of her self-control.

"Cassie, tell me. I don't like you being sad."

"Oh, Mike." She leaned into him, as much to soak in the heat and feel of him as for him to hear her. "You can't understand. You grew up with two parents who loved each other, and to you, that's normal. What's normal to me and Cal is an endless rotation of men while our father watched from the wings. True, none of them ever moved in, or even stayed the night, but it wasn't anything like what you had."

"Cass." His voice held sympathy, but no pity. She hated pity, although few people would attach that word to Cassie Delistraty, despite her failed marriage and stagnant career.

"I lived next door for many of those years," he said. "Remember? I'm Cal's best friend. I know what it did to him. I saw what it did to you. I couldn't help either of you, and it hurt me. Especially you, with those sad green eyes."

Stunned, she leaned back and searched his face. Even though she'd suffered from a crush on him, he'd been a year older and her brother's friend. She hadn't thought he'd noticed her much.

She'd always known that Mike was a do-gooder, a Boy Scout to the core, always wanting to fix things and help make the world a better place. It was an impulse he'd never quite gotten control of. But to actually feel pain over a situation like that?

He took her breath away.

The wound she'd carried for years over her parents' failure as a couple lost some of its sting. She'd been surrounded by concern, even though she hadn't quite realized it. It made her childhood memories not as potent.

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She touched his hand. His fingers gripped hers and she smiled up at him, thinking how handsome he was, with his unruly hair, deep chocolate eyes that radiated honesty, and that twisted half-smile that upped her blood pressure to a new level.

"Thanks," she told him. "I never realized you'd cared."

His eyes crinkled. "Well, I did. I still do. Unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?"

His smile widened. "Yeah. Got me into trouble. Had to rescue you one more time. Bad habit I need to break."

The teasing in his voice caused her to laugh. "It isn't all that bad, is it? Gives you an excuse to cuddle with me." To emphasize her words, she snuggled closer.

Laughing, he said, "That's a hardship that I'm learning to live with." He wrapped an arm about her, pulling her even closer. She rested her head on his shoulder, silently agreeing with Mike's statement. She could easily get used to this.

Although it played havoc with her libido. Of course, if she could get Mike to accommodate her itch, then she'd be in heaven.

Oh, honey. The mere thought of what form that scratch could take sent tingles coursing through her. His hands touching her, caressing her, removing her clothes button by button, inch by inch, his mouth following his hands as they traveled downward...

Hot damn.

* * * *

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A tiny mew escaped Cassie, loud enough for Mike to hear. He understood that sound all too clearly; his body tightened at her obvious need. But he couldn't oblige her. Instead, he pressed a kiss to her hair as he soaked in the scent and warmth of her.

Yes, holding Cassie like this, being the one who had the right to call her his, could definitely become habit-forming.

Until she tired of him and decided to move on. He didn't know if he could handle that. Her marriage had lasted three years. How long could he hold on to her? He didn't have the dignified lifestyle that Ken Travers had offered her. He'd been from a wealthy family, just like Cassie's.

No, all he could offer was part ownership in a struggling nightclub that just recently started turning a profit. Things would get even tighter once the second club started up. His life didn't hold any adventure or excitement. Nothing that would interest Cassandra Delistraty for any length of time.

Sure, he challenged her now by resisting her charms, but his resolve grew dangerously thin. Already his body craved her like a drug. But how long would she stick around?

The band started playing; their first song had Cassie moving to the beat of the music. Would she make love the same way, with a natural rhythm unique to her and her alone? He ground down a moan as his body responded to her on an animal level.

But he couldn't give in. It would be easy, but fatal, to convince himself that this was only physical. That he could keep his emotions under control.

Cass looked over at him, caught his look. Smiling, she asked, "What are you thinking about?"

He gave her a half-smile. "Our first kiss." That kiss had told him that she could easily touch his heart.

She eyed him warily. "You mean last night?"

"I mean at your graduation party."

Cassie grimaced. He didn't blame her. It hadn't been the best moment for either of them.

He'd been taking a break from the party that Cassie's mom had tossed for both her children. Music played loudly, and Cassie'd been dancing with quite a few different guys. He'd wanted to ask her himself, but didn't want to wade through all those others. After a while, he'd retreated to his own back yard.

Then he'd heard her calling to him. Turning around, he'd watched her approach, sweet and virginal in a white lace dress that showed a hint of cleavage. Beautiful, inviting. Off-limits.

She'd walked right up to him, and he wondered what twist of cruel fate put him alone with her in the dark, when all he'd thought about all night was exactly that: holding her, with no prying eyes to pull them apart.

Then, without a word, she'd wrapped her arms about his neck and planted her silky soft lips on his.

He couldn't have imagined a more exquisite, torturous kiss than that of sweet, untouched Cassie. He'd wanted to return that kiss, to pull her closer and stake a claim on her heart. But his mother's warnings stopped him. Cal's friendship

stopped him. His own vulnerability at Cassie's whim held him back.

It's like kissing a sister, he'd tried to convince himself. He'd unwrapped her from his neck. But nothing about the way she touched him or the throb of need in his body could convince him that kissing a sister would be anything like this.

But his pulling away had stopped her cold. She'd turned stricken eyes to him, then fled from him and the party. He longed to stop her, but let her go. She didn't belong to him.

He'd kept his distance during their college years, making sure Cal was around anytime he spent time with Cassie. And, if memory served, it was right about that time that Cal had started prefacing any conversation about his sister with, "Cassie's off-limits to you."

That rule still applied today. Nothing had changed that, despite growing up. If he allowed himself to continue to hold her, touch her, play this game with her, how safe would he be when she finally walked away?

He'd be devastated.

Cassie wiped the grimace off her face. "I'd rather create new memories, wouldn't you?" She stood and reached out to him.

"Let's dance."

Dance? He looked out at the dance floor. Slow dancing. His stomach sank. He couldn't. He didn't think he could hold her, feel her moving against him, and not want to ravage her right there.

He needed some space to get himself under control. The dance floor definitely wouldn't help him there.

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In desperation, he swung his gaze over the club, and lighted on the bar area. There were several people waiting for drinks.

Leaping up with more energy than the situation really merited, he said, "They need my help at the bar, Cass. Next dance maybe, okay?"

Then he did what no grown man with a lick of pride would ever admit to doing when confronted with a beautiful, sexy woman.

He fled.

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Chapter Four

"Mike!"

The pounding music swallowed Cassie's shout, or maybe he'd heard her but decided not to react. Either way, he made it all the way to the safety of the bar. Darn him!

She plopped down in her chair, a string of wild thoughts assaulting her. Did he find her so repulsive that he couldn't dance with her? Was he perhaps embarrassed at being seen with her? Did she have something hanging off her nose?

Or maybe he ran away because he found her too irresistible.

Naw. No real man would retreat from a woman he found attractive, especially one who obviously found him exciting, sexy and sizzling hot.

Maybe he had performance issues?

Mike? She snorted. The man oozed testosterone. No way could he have a problem like that.

Either way, she wouldn't hunt him down. Not yet. Not when she felt Kendra's eyes on her, speculating. No, she'd paste on a happy smile, as if Mike's desertion had been agreed upon.

Sipping her drink, her gaze skimmed over her mother and Kyle on the dance floor. Great, her mom could get someone to boogie with, but Cassie got to watch life passing her by.

The song changed to a bouncing rock beat that had Cassie moving in her seat. *If only Mike hadn't run away...*

Someone touched her shoulder. "Care to dance?" Glancing up, she found herself gazing at a tall, handsome man the color of dark coffee. His smile flashed as he held out a hand.

Why not? Placing her hand in his, Cassie was whirled onto the dance floor with a guy who could definitely move. She caught envious looks from women around her, but it took all her willpower not to stare after Mike, who never looked her way even once that she was aware of.

Fine. She got the message. She'd enjoy her stint out here until Mike got up the nerve to wander back her way. After all, this bizarre scheme had been his idea. He wouldn't abandon it so easily, would he?

Although she'd initially been against the plan, she found the idea of no longer being Mike's 'girl' a bit depressing.

As her partner twirled her, she sent Mike a withering glance.

Don't you bail on me, pal!

* * * *

"That's a pretty hot guy your girlfriend's dancing with," Kendra said, her smug smile grating on Mike's last nerve.

He didn't look Cassie's way. He didn't need to; all his senses were attuned to her. He could feel her now, swaying to the music, her hips sashaying in that sexy manner of hers. He sensed rather than heard her laughter. His jaw twitched in response. Didn't take long for her to replace him.

Just like Sharon. He'd lost count of the many times she'd gone out 'dancing' while he'd pulled extra shifts to cover all the bills. And one day, she'd decided dancing wasn't enough.

Stop it! Cassie's not Sharon. He needed to remember that.

In all fairness, he'd abandoned Cassie. And that guy had asked her to dance, not the other way around. But that didn't mean she'd had to accept.

So she should just sit there and wait for you? Mike sneered at the annoying inner voice that sounded just like his sister.

Yes, damn it, she should. Any good girlfriend would. Apparently loyalty didn't rate high with Cassie. She'd dated constantly in high school and college until she'd met Ken. She'd run through men like most people ran through toilet paper. Why should he expect her to be any different now?

Not fair, that rotten little voice said. *She's only your pretend girlfriend, and she has the right to go dancing, since you refused.*

Self-preservation! he shot back. He didn't like Kendra's mocking little grin as he set drinks on her tray. Her self-satisfied attitude irked him.

Okay, right now everything irked him, including the full garbage can that threatened to spill out onto the floor.

The man whirled Cassie about him in a blatantly sensual move that jarred Mike to the core. He couldn't take it any more. Grabbing the garbage sack out of the can, Mike stalked toward the back door. Maybe the night air would chill him out.

* * * *

The last strains of the song faded away as Cassie watched Mike skulk away, carrying a load of garbage.

Fitting. Considering this date had gone from bad to ridiculous, *garbage* described it well. Here she'd been thinking

seduction, and Mike would rather spend time emptying the trash.

Thanking her dance partner, Cassie retrieved her purse, then went in search of Mike. A helpful waitress pointed her toward the back door. Reaching it, she shoved it open, ready to lash out at his thoughtless, bordering-on-rude behavior.

She found him easily, picking up some loose napkins from the ground. He didn't turn toward her, and she decided she'd take advantage of that and get in closer before attacking.

She walked as silently as her heels would let her. Not that quiet, but he didn't react. Apparently his hearing suffered the same problem his brain did: it wasn't functioning properly.

When she stood directly behind him, she planted her fists on her hips and started with the big guns. "You do remember that this farce was your idea. How is your spending time emptying the trash going to convince anyone?"

Mike jumped and whirled toward her. "Damn it, Cass, do you have a clue what you're doing to me?"

"I'd hoped that I was enticing you onto the dance floor, not for you to go dumpster diving."

Mike snorted. "You can drive a man to many things, Cass, but I doubt dumpster diving is one of them." His eyes raked her up and down. "And that's the problem. You're driving me to—"

"Michael James Ashford, what do you think you're doing?" A tiny, silver-haired sprite burst out of the club, followed by a tall, elegant blond. Cassie easily recognized them: Mike's mom, Jessie, and his sister, Julia. Jessie didn't give her a glance as she rushed past her to Mike.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

With a screech, Cassie hugged Julia tightly. "You're finally home! I haven't seen you forever!" A slight exaggeration. She'd seen her two months ago, and they talked on the phone frequently. She looked Julia over. "You look wonderful. Are you in town for a while?"

A couple of years older than Mike, Julia worked hard at her career as a reporter. She'd done well, going to work for a television magazine called *Crimes*, which reported on and investigated crimes of all sort, from terrorism and sins of passion to welfare fraud. The reporters weren't simply fluff in front of the camera. They researched and developed their own stories, sometimes putting themselves in danger. As a result the show had a huge fan base. *Crimes* hired only the very best.

"Thanks," Julia said. "But I want to hear about you. I called your mom's cell since yours seems to be off and she said that you're here on a date with my brother. Unfortunately Mom overheard, and despite Dad trying to sit on her, she insisted we come. So what gives?"

Cassie'd turned her phone off to avoid any interruptions on her date with Mike. She glanced over at him as he fended off his mother like she was a terrier intent on attacking. Actually, she kind of resembled that as her sharp voice rang out.

"Michael James, how do you think I feel, hearing that you're dating Cassie from her mother, and not from you? Were you going to wait until you'd moved in together to tell me?"

He rolled his eyes. "That would've been preferable."

"Michael!" Jessie's glare could melt most mortals, and Cass could see Mike wilting, but not giving up. Yet. Mike's mother could be very sweet; Cassie still remembered her tears and kind words when their great-grandmother, who'd lived next to the Ashfords, had passed away. But once riled, she could dive for the jugular.

Mike gave his mom a quick hug. "Hi, Mom. How are you?"

Her mouth tightened. "Don't be funny." She glanced over at Cassie, and her lips thinned even more. "Cassandra, you're dressed almost normally. Must be my son's influence."

Cassie smiled, used to Jessie's little barbs. They'd been rare when she'd been growing up, but as an adult, Jessie didn't tolerate her well. "Hi, Mrs. Ashford, how are you?"

Jessie didn't return Cassie's smile. "Fine." She glared at her son, nodding her head down the alley. "You and I need to talk alone." With a sigh, Mike followed her.

Julia watched her mother with amusement. "That's why I'm never home." Both women laughed, and Julia tossed a friendly arm around Cassie's shoulders. "Mom's right, though. Last time I saw you, you were dressed a lot differently. Is this Mike's influence?"

Cassie glanced down at her ruby red tank top and Capri jeans. "A little bit of Mike. But it's still me."

Julia shook her head, her long blond locks blowing gently about her face. "How a redhead can pull off wearing red, I don't know. But you do it so well."

Cassie laughed. "It's all attitude."

"So tell me about you and Mike. When did this happen?"

Cassie hated lying to Julia. They'd been best friends growing up, despite the three year age difference. So she tried a bit of subterfuge. "A while ago. But you know I've always liked him."

"I knew you had a crush on him in high school." Rocking back on her heels, Julia studied Cassie. "I didn't know you were still interested. Every time I mentioned him in the last few years, especially this last year, you'd change the subject."

Because I thought that out-of-mind would equate to out of my system. But it hadn't worked. "Well, I guess I still nursed a bit of a crush." Nursed, heck! She'd tried to kill it, but it wouldn't die. And this last-ditch attempt didn't seem to be working, either. But she didn't want to dwell on that.

"Does our dating bother you?" She clearly recalled the look on her brother's face last night, one of disapproval.

Julia shook her head. "Of course not. Mom, of course, is apoplectic, but you had to expect that. My only concern is..." Julia's brow puckered. "Well, you only met Sharon, Mike's ex, at your wedding, but she treated him badly. He now has a tendency to see all women through Sharon-tinted glasses. You're the first woman he's dated since the break up, and that's been two years."

Stunned, Cassie stared at her friend. "I didn't know that. And here I thought..." Her thoughts weren't too flattering, being along the lines of Mike sleeping regularly with someone. She couldn't see any guy, let alone one as sexy as Mike, going two years alone. But that did explain why he hadn't asked some other woman to cool Kendra's jets.

"Well, never mind what I thought," Cassie said. "But I'm glad you told me. I feel flattered that he chose me to break his dating dry spell." Not quite true, since they weren't really dating, but Julia didn't know that.

Julia nodded. "I hope it works out. Mike might act hard-as-nails, but he's a real softie inside." She eyed Cassie knowingly. "So are you, despite your tough-girl act after your break-up. Although I never felt like you and Ken connected. The few times I saw you two together, well... You two just didn't fit. You and Mike, though. Looks like we walked into a lovers' quarrel, and the way he was eating you up with his eyes, that can't be faked. There's always been a spark between you two." Julia laughed. "Of course, I've never seen a guy around you that didn't burst into flames."

With a smile, Cassie shook her head. "When you're in the room, nobody looks at me." Julia looked so elegant and beautiful, what with her loose blonde curls, the pale blue sundress hugging every curve and her long, slender legs sporting a golden glow. "I look like a frump next to you."

Julia curled her lip, shaking her head. "Honey, men don't even notice I'm—" Her words stuttered to a halt as she looked over Cassie's shoulder. Turning around, Cassie saw Cal standing in the open doorway.

The look her brother and friend exchanged was full of meaning that Cassie couldn't begin to comprehend. But she could read enough to understand she should make herself scarce.

She glanced over at Mike and realized that he wore the same look Cassie'd probably had on her face when she'd been

under attack from her own mother. Then his face turned dark.
Uh oh.

"Time for a rescue," she said, and left Julia to face Cal alone. She forced herself not to look back. None of her business. The curiosity bubbling up inside her needed to stay contained. At least until she could get her brother alone.

* * * *

"How can you date her?" Jessie demanded of Mike. "She's just like Sharon, looking for the thrill of the moment. She's another party girl, wanting to be entertained. You want to be another notch on her bedpost?"

If I thought I could survive it, I'd love that, Mike thought. But he knew Cassie presented more than a threat to his peace of mind. She threatened his heart as well. "I'm a grown man, Mom. I can handle my own life without your meddling."

Jessie's gold-brown eyes flashed her anger. "And you're doing a slap-bang job of it, getting mixed up with her. You think someone like that can be serious about someone like you?"

"Someone like that?" Mike frowned. "You mean a Delistraty, who are judges, lawyers, politicians as compared to a plain old Ashfords, who are cops and firefighters?"

His mom's siblings were police officers, like his dad, Pete. His dad was an inspiration with his devotion to his family and his dedication to helping people. Mike had followed him into public service until his injury had sidelined him, then his divorce had shaken his world up. He'd left his desk job and gone into partnership with his dad's former partner, Ernie.

"Of course that's what I meant, Mike. Don't get me wrong. I'm proud of what you've accomplished with your club, and all the charities you and Ernie help. But that's nothing compared to the Delistratys. You think that you can seriously have a relationship with her—"

"Our relationship is our business, not yours," he interjected. "And Cassie has a serious side, or she wouldn't be a successful attorney."

Jessie guffawed. "Yeah, very successful, coming back home with her tail between her legs after a failed marriage. You know very well that her last name did a lot to earn her that degree. Besides, I don't see her practicing law right now. She's probably living on the money she squeezed out of that poor bastard. Even if she is serious about you, do you think she'll stick around for long? A woman like that—"

"All right, that's the second time you've said that. What exactly are you trying to say?"

Jessie's mouth twisted. "Mike, you know how she is. She's like her mother, a butterfly flitting from one flower to the next. Don't you remember all the boyfriends in high school?" Her frown deepened. "You're not sleeping with her, are you?"

Mike barked his shock. "Mom!"

"Don't act outraged like that. I'm sure, once she's chosen a guy, she doesn't wait long to hop into bed with him. I hope you're using protection. Heaven knows what a woman like her—"

Mike saw red. He could never remember being so angry. Nobody, not even his mother, could talk like that about Cassie. "Shut up, Mom. Now." He heaved in a sharp breath,

trying to calm down. Ignoring the look of shock on her face, he said, "She's an incredible woman and doesn't deserve you talking about her like that. You look at the surface and don't see the depth of her, her spirit or her loving nature. I do. And I thank you not to ever talk badly about her again."

It felt right, defending Cassie. It would be something a devoted boyfriend would do, he thought. Hell, it was something he couldn't help doing.

"What do you have against her anyway?" he asked. "She's never done anything to you."

Jessie's eyes glittered. "She's just like her mother." Her face tightened. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

Cassie chose that moment to walk up. Wrapping her arms about Mike, she smiled at Jessie. How much had she heard?

"I'm sorry to tear Mike away from you, Mrs. Ashford, but he promised me a dance." Her dazzling smile would charm anyone, but on his mother, it just bounced off.

"Fine. I'm done anyway." Jessie went back into the club. Mike didn't see his sister anywhere. He'd hunt her down later. He hadn't even known she was home.

He eyed Cassie. "I don't really feel like dancing," he said.

Letting go of him, she stepped back. "I figured that out already. But you looked like you were ready to chew on your mom, so I decided to rescue *you* for a change." She smiled cheekily, causing his heart to catch in his throat. She looked so sexy right now, with the shadows from the dark alley giving her an air of mystery. "So are you ready to take me home, big guy?"

Home. The thought of ending their 'date' gave him conflicting feelings. On one hand, he'd breathe a sigh of relief when he dropped her off. He'd be free of the worst temptation he'd faced in his life. *Must be the forbidden fruit syndrome*, he reasoned.

On the other hand, he liked being with her. Her smile, her laugh, even the way she popped those little orange mints in her mouth turned him on like no woman had before. He didn't know why, but he felt intoxicated around her, and something deep inside him glowed at the mere sight of her.

Playing with fire, pal. Yeah, yeah, he knew that. But for the time being, he'd indulge himself a bit and simply enjoy her company. Taking her hand, he tugged her toward the street, where he'd parked.

"Let's get you home, and on the way, we'll discuss our next excursion. Some place where my mom can't find us."

Cassie laughed, and Mike's insides churned. How a mere sound could be so sexy he didn't know, but he wondered if she knew how beautiful she was. He longed to tell her. Maybe he would.

For the first time since she'd returned, he actually bought that sweet, innocent smile.

"Yes, I should go home," she said. "It's getting late, and I forgot to give Suzy her medication. She caught a little cold and the vet gave her some antibiotics."

"Suzy, the rabid psycho dog?"

Her mouth twitched at his description of her pet. "I prefer to think of her as identity challenged." With a giggle, she walked around the front of the Bronco.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

He watched her for a moment, admiring the gentle sway of her hips, the way her hair tumbled down her back, and how her jeans hugged her legs, then showed him enough skin to make him fantasize about the rest.

Helping her into the truck, he realized he was starting to get used to this heightened sense of awareness he experienced whenever Cassie came near.

* * * *

"Cass."

"Mmm?" She rolled her head toward Mike, the comfortable drowsiness receding at the sound of his voice.

"We're here, Cass. You dozed. You should go to bed."

Oh, yeah, bed. With warm hands and hot breath traveling all over her skin, kneading, touching, probing. Especially probing.

Except Mike meant she'd go to bed alone. No fun there.

"Cass."

She opened her eyes. He hovered a few inches away. His sandalwood-laced all-male scent did delicious things to her insides; she felt moistness gathering in her juncture.

The instant he noticed her watching him, he pulled back. Great, he still meant to be a Boy Scout where she was concerned.

She blinked, trying to dispel some of the grogginess. She didn't want the night to end. She felt close to Mike, and something inside her that always ached didn't hurt right now. The pain was gone.

But she could tell by the stiffness of his body that he felt uncomfortable. She should take pity on him and let him go.

"By the way, thanks for sticking up for me with your mom. I heard some of what you said."

He frowned. "She needed to be reined in. She didn't have the right to say those things about you."

Cassie'd heard Jessie call her 'a woman like that.' Like what? Someone who slept around? She snorted at the thought. "Yeah, like my one lover makes me a woman of loose morals."

"One lover?"

Cass winced. *Damn, busted.* She wanted to smack her groggy brain. How worldly and sexy could a one-man woman be? "I meant this year." *Gee, Cass, that was lame.*

She felt Mike's eyes traveling over her face. "You're a rotten liar. You always have been. At least when not on the phone." He didn't linger on his reference to her 'dirty book hour.' "You're almost thirty and you've only been with one guy? What about all the guys you dated in high school and college?"

Her laugh felt bitter. "The ones Cal always ran off before anything serious happened? I guess I let him, though. I wanted to save myself for the right guy. I wanted to do better than my mom. And since the divorce..." Her voice faded and she grimaced. "I picked the wrong guy to date. Found out that he was married before we became intimate. Unfortunately, he happened to be my new boss. Hence the move home."

She heard Mike shift in his seat, then felt his hands on her shoulders, turning her toward him. Her bare flesh sizzled at his touch. Her eyes flew open at the shock of it.

"And since then?" he asked.

His face seemed so close; all she needed to do was lean in. "I don't suppose I could distract you with a kiss?"

"Cass." The tension in his body told her that she'd turned him on. "Behave."

He placed his hand over hers. The heat of his touch immediately sent her pulse off the scale. The sudden rush of blood through her body made her dizzy with desire, made her dream of what she'd do with him.

"Cass," he said again. "You've been home for six months. Why haven't you been with anyone?"

She wanted to tell him exactly why so badly she shook. But she couldn't. How could she explain that the only guy who caused butterflies in her stomach, her heart to flutter and her pulse to pound was him? He might bring up the 'sister' thing again, and she'd die of humiliation.

"Nothing's felt right for me. I want things to be right this time, not because someone else believes they are."

His eyes, mostly hidden by the shadows across his face, widened. "Is that what Ken did? Convince you that you two belonged together?"

She nodded, and he kissed her forehead. "Damn, Cass, you shock me."

"I do?" She lifted her eyes to his, her heart tilting at the tenderness in his gaze.

"Yes, you do. I keep thinking, 'I know Cass, I've known her all my life.' But you're constantly surprising me. Like now. You're saving yourself."

Her face burned. How embarrassing. She'd always tried to present a more modern, up-beat personality. More like her mom, who everyone loved, except not as over-the-top as Lucia. She forced out a laugh. "That's me. Waiting for Prince Charming."

Mike's mouth twisted. "And you thought Ken was it?"

She rubbed her knuckles on her forehead. She still felt rummy from her nap, and Mike's questions hit too close to home. "He was the closest I've found that..." The words dried up. She couldn't say what she really felt.

He was the closest guy I found that could come near to making me forget about you. She couldn't say that. Instead, she punted.

"...that I felt comfortable with. I don't feel confident when it comes to sex. If I'm not at ease with a guy, when he starts pushing for more, I tend to run."

How humiliating to have to confess this, all of it baldly true. But Mike, always a Boy Scout, rose to the occasion. He stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. "Cass, you're a sensitive person, you always have been. I'm guessing that you need a pretty strong emotional connection to be truly in tune with a guy. Once you find the right person, the rest will work itself out."

What had started as a way to distract Mike from her real feelings became something else, an insight into herself. "Do you really think so?" she asked. "It could be that simple?"

Mike chuckled. "Finding the right person is seldom simple, honey. We tend to get sidetracked along the way." He frowned, and Cassie knew he was thinking about his failed marriage.

"Is that what happened to you?"

He nodded as his fingers trailed over her cheek, down her throat, settling on her collarbone, tracing the sensitive area over and over again. Her body trembled; a tiny flutter shook her. But she did her best to hide her response, unwilling to break this new level of emotional intimacy that surrounded them.

"I think so. At first, I believed she was the one for me, but that barely lasted past the honeymoon. She became restless and soon the criticism started. I didn't take her out enough, I was gone too much, I didn't make enough money. I shouldn't have been surprised that she cheated on me, but it still hit me hard."

Sympathy for him welled up inside her. "I'm sorry." *I know what it feels like to have that happen.* But she kept silent. Right now, she had his sympathy. She didn't want his pity. Instead, she pressed a soft kiss to his cheek.

The kiss was a mistake. As her lips touched his cheek, she felt him stiffen, and knew that he'd detected her accelerated pulse, her shallow breathing, the excitement that coursed through her. He sat back in his seat, taking a deep breath. "You must be tired," he said. "I'll walk you to your door."

As Mike got out of the car, Cassie decided to let it go for the night. If she pushed too hard, he'd withdraw totally, his

discomfort overriding his need to help her, and himself, out of unwanted romantic entanglements.

Loud yipping erupted from near Mike.

"What the—!" He twisted around. A tiny brown streak shot out from one of the bushes, and Cassie immediately recognized Suzy. Her shock at her pet being outside held her still, then she jumped out of the car to corral the dog.

"Suzy! Come here. Quiet!" she commanded as the tiny dog continued to bark at Mike, who she obviously saw as an intruder. After a minute Cassie finally got a hand on her and lifted her into her arms.

"How did she get out?" Mike asked.

"I don't know." She looked over at the side gate, but it was shut. "They have a doggie door so they can come and go outside as they please." She could hear the other two barking from the living room. "The others are still inside. I don't understand this."

Looking at the house, she felt a sudden, uneasy tension in her stomach. "I didn't leave all the lights on."

He frowned. "You might have had a break-in. Use your cell phone and call the police." He headed for the front door.

Realizing his intent, she grabbed his arm. "You can't go in. Someone could still be in there."

"Cass, I'll be fine. Whoever let Suzy out is probably gone, or running out the back door. Call the police and wait here." He jerked on his arm, but she didn't let go. Fear for him pounded through her.

"No, I won't. I—"

Suddenly the front door flew open. "Cassie, honey. And Mike. Hello." Jake smiled at them, apparently unaware of their stress. "And you found the little rat. When I got here, she flew out the door and wouldn't come in. I finally gave up."

Cassie entered the house, holding Suzy. Mike followed her, shutting the door behind him. Apparently he'd forgotten he'd meant to only walk her to the door.

"Dad, what are you doing here?" Cassie asked.

Her father's eyes darted from Mike to Cassie, then settled on a point over Cassie's shoulder. *Uh oh*. She knew that look. Her brother would get that same scheming gleam in his eyes. But apparently Jake didn't want to discuss it in front of Mike.

"Just came by to see my darling girl. Hope you didn't mind me letting myself in."

"No, Dad, of course not." She set Suzy down on the couch, and she immediately yipped softly, demanding Jake's attention.

He ruffled Suzy's fur. "This dog's rotten, Cassie. Have you thought of a frontal lobotomy for her?"

Mock-growling, Cassie frowned at her dad. "She's fine the way she is. She just happens to have good taste in people."

"Yeah, *me* earlier," Mike groused.

Jake chuckled. "Then she does have good taste." His expression sobered. "Cassie told me what was going on here, Mike. I expect you not to take advantage of the situation."

Cassie groaned, even as Mike nodded. "Dad!" She could feel two pools of color flaming on her cheeks.

His brows knitted together. "Cassie, I'm still your dad, and I have the right to lay down the law." Leaning forward, he kissed her cheek. "Well, it's late. I'll talk to you later." With a tuneless whistle, he let himself out.

Mike turned speculative eyes to her. "I wonder what he's up to?"

Cassie shrugged. "He's a Prescott, not a Delistraty, so it can't be too bad."

Mike laughed. "You've got a point."

Cassie nodded, distracted by his sparkling brown eyes. Mike's nearness drove all thought of her parents out of her mind. Instead, she reversed her decision to let Mike off the hook for tonight. This might be her best opportunity to work him out of her system. Briefly she thought of that 'sister' thing. Time to face her fears.

She popped an orange mint into her mouth, trying to gain courage. "Remember what we were talking about earlier? About me needing to find someone I could connect with, that I could feel comfortable with, before I could work everything out? Well, I think I've found him."

Drat, her intentions must have showed in her eyes, because Mike backed up hastily. "Cass..." he began.

What the heck. In for a penny, in for a pound. "That guy's you, Mike."

And with that, she launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. Then she planted her lips on his and held on for dear life.

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Chapter Five

A tazer couldn't have stunned Mike more than Cassie's kiss. It shot through his defenses, tore away all logical thought, devastated any counterattack he could have launched. Her touch and the feel of her hungry, greedy mouth against his made him think of total surrender, not girding for battle.

Battle. The only thing he could think of fighting right now were her clothes to gain access to the lushness they covered.

His mind fought for some sanity. He gripped her shoulders, pushing her back. Her swollen mouth lifted into a cat-who-had-tasted-the-cream smile. "Do I still feel like a sister to you?"

"A sister?" His hormones raged through him so strongly that those words didn't make sense.

"Yes, Mike, a sister. You told me once that kissing me was like kissing a sister." Her mouth twisted. He could see the hurt in her eyes.

He shook his head, trying to understand. "Did I say that?" He could still taste her and her little orange mints. He couldn't keep things straight when she invaded his every thought.

"Yes, you did, at my high school graduation party. Right after I kissed you." She smiled slightly, and his eyes were drawn to her mouth.

"I remember. Yeah. I was trying to convince myself that was how I should think of you. I was trying to stay away from you. Our parents, Cal, your social status..."

"You're so hung up on that. I don't care if my grandparents are the freaking Kennedys or trailer trash. Either way, I'd still be who I am."

Before he could react, she kissed him again, her tongue teasing his. When she pulled back, a challenging smile graced her delicious mouth. "So here's the question. Do you still think of me as a sister?"

Her question hit him low in the gut. She'd told him so much about her past and insecurities that he wasn't fooled by her flippant behavior. She wasn't as worldly as she pretended. She needed reassurance as to her sexual attraction.

"Honey, I've never thought of you as anything other than the sexiest pain in the ass I've ever had to endure."

Her laughter melted him, and her arms wrapped about his neck, crushing her breasts into his chest. He couldn't resist; he pulled her tight against him. Before his self-restraint totally snapped, he tried one more time to talk sense into one of them. Gripping her shoulders, he held her away from him.

"We can't do this. Your brother's my best friend. *We're* friends. I don't want to ruin that."

Her tongue darted out, moistening her lips. His groin tightened at the thought of it flicking over his body, tasting and exploring, traveling downward...

Damn, the heat she generated with one swirl of her tongue.

"Thanks to your little ruse about us seeing each other, everyone already think we're sleeping together," she said. "Why not do what they believe we're doing anyway?"

She leaned into him, and he didn't pull away. He couldn't fight her logic or her affect on him. After all these years of wanting her, he couldn't battle his feelings any longer.

He met her halfway.

Their impassioned breaths tangled as his mouth devoured hers. He couldn't get enough of her. He gripped the back of her neck and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. Her scent filled him, an exotic mix of spicy perfume and orange breath mints. He'd never get that out of his mind, he knew. One whiff and it would be an instant aphrodisiac.

An ache built inside his chest, a welcome, tantalizing feeling that spread quickly downwards, hardening him to the breaking point.

He thrust his tongue into her mouth, and she swirled hers about his, a fleeting, titillating caress. With a moan, he nipped softly, scraping his teeth across it. Her tiny groan sighed into his mouth, and he knew at that moment that he had to have this woman, more than any other he'd ever met, or his existence would cease.

His free hand trailed a tender path from her delicate ear over her throat, then slipped under her tank top and bra and coursed over the top swell of her breast. Cassie whimpered against his lips, the sound a sexual cry for more. She pressed herself against his hand, demanding his touch, and he gladly obliged, cupping her breast, massaging the tender globe, feeling a heady rush of arousal as Cassie bucked against him, making it clear she needed his caresses to satisfy the need that matched his burning ache for her.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

He'd never get enough of her, taste her deeply enough, fill himself with her enough. No, he'd die dissatisfied, but maybe for this moment he could still the constant craving.

It took Mike several moments to recognize a sudden, persistent ringing sound as a phone. With a groan, he pulled his mouth off hers, wishing like hell that the world hadn't intruded on them. Yet he needed to stop this, before they went too far.

"Answer that," he said, but she tried to capture his lips again. He gripped her shoulders, putting some distance between them. But it didn't matter how far he held her away. He couldn't forget how she felt fused against him, greedy, wanting, wrapping herself around him.

She shook her head as the phone continued to ring. "I'm not going to, so you might as well kiss me again."

Growling his frustration, he strode over to the phone and picked it up. No way would he let this progress any further. Sleeping with Cassie would mean nothing but trouble.

Now all he had to do was convince the rest of his body. And most of his heart.

He fumbled the phone up against his ear. "Hello?"

"Mike." Cal. Damn. "We need to talk, but not right now. Put Cassie on the phone."

"Cal..." he began. He needed to understand why the hell his best friend was so angry.

"Later. Right now, I have a client who needs some help. I need Cassie to meet with her tomorrow. I hope you're not balling her right now, because I haven't had a chance to break them yet. So put—"

"Holy hell." The words hit Mike like ice water. He jerked the phone away in disgust. His best friend was now setting himself up as his enemy. He felt bile rising in his throat. He couldn't handle this, how this farce had suddenly turned the world against him. First his mother, now Cal. His best friend.

"Cass, it's your brother." He handed her the phone. "I'm out of here. I'll talk to you in the morning."

"Mike..." she began.

He couldn't discuss Cal's crass words with her. They echoed in his brain, twisting his stomach into knots. But if he left her like this, he'd be as insensitive as Cal. She deserved better.

He crossed to her and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Cal's wanting you to help him with a client. Whatever he wants, I'm going with you."

Her mouth opened up as if to protest, but he held up a hand. "No argument. Let me know what time tomorrow, and I'll come pick you up." He kissed her parted lips swiftly, then got himself to the door before he could linger on how erotic the faint taste of oranges was on her mouth.

* * * *

"I'm only saying that getting involved with Cal's clients isn't safe." Cassie felt herself subjected once more to Mike's glare as they walked through the King County Courthouse, heading to the cafeteria. Cal would meet them there between court appearances to fill Cassie in.

Cass grimaced. They'd been having this argument for nearly an hour, since he'd picked her up at her house. He'd

summoned her by honking his horn, obviously his way of staying out of her house. Not that she'd been planning on doing anything. At least, not right then.

"Cass, you know Cal's clients aren't upstanding citizens. They live on the edge. They aren't stable. I've done back-up for your brother when he's needed it, and I know that it isn't always safe." Opening the cafeteria door, Mike let Cassie go in first. But she could tell by his frown that he wanted her to turn around and hightail it home.

"Mike, I worked in similar clinics in L.A. for years. Never had any problems I couldn't handle."

"Sometimes cockiness goes before a fall, Cass." His words were soft, reminding her how seriously injured he'd been after falling through a roof during a fire.

"I'm not cocky. I don't take chances." No, nothing in her life matched braving life-stealing flames. "Remember that brown belt in jujitsu I got in high school? It's now a black belt. Like I said, I can handle myself."

Mike shook his head. "And do you remember that scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? Fat lot of good that big sword did against a gun. Same thing with your black belt. Best way to stay safe is to stay out of dangerous situations."

Like what she found herself in with Mike? All last night she'd dreamt of him. When she hadn't been sleeping, she'd been fantasizing. She gave herself a mental shake, trying to dismiss images of Mike naked. Sweaty. Eyes glazed with passion...

Damn, Cassie, you're sad.

"I'll be perfectly safe," she said, turning from him and heading towards the cafeteria. "Cal's way too protective of me to let me get into anything dangerous." Yes, she'd been fighting that quirk in her brother's personality all her life, despite the fact that she, by virtue of fifteen minutes, was older.

Mike grunted. "Cal doesn't think clearly when it comes to his clients. He's always too trusting and optimistic."

"With his track record, he has reason to be. He does a good job for them." She knew that feeling quite well. It was what kept her going as an attorney. Helping at clinics had made up for the hours of boring, uninspiring corporate law.

She laced one arm through his. "Let's go find Cal, and please let's not argue any more. I'll be fine. You'll keep me safe."

She smiled up at him, but he still wore a frown. "Cass, there are limits to what I can protect you from. If you've got to do this, fine, but please don't make a habit of it. Okay?"

She didn't reply, and she knew he didn't expect her to. Her stubborn Delistraty streak ran deep. He could say the words, but they both knew that Cassie'd do whatever she felt was right, damn the consequences. She'd proven that in the past, from her kissing Mike all those years ago to marrying Ken.

Okay, bad examples, but if she decided to help Cal out in his clinic, then she'd do it, despite Mike's protests. Nobody ordered Cassandra Delistraty around.

Well, except for her mother, of course.

* * * *

Mike watched the stubborn set of her jaw, and knew he'd have a battle on his hands. Nothing new. Cassie'd always been a handful, just like her mom, only more intense and focused.

He wondered at the logic of getting involved with such a woman. Here he was, solid and down-to-earth, and Cassie floated in the clouds. Everything she did was unorthodox and usually bent some sort of rule. He'd always wondered if that meant she bent her moral standards as well. Now he knew better.

Actually, he admired her. She'd remained true to herself, and as a beautiful woman she must have surely been inundated with opportunities. But Cassie always remained focused on her goal to find the right guy.

Only now, she seemed to have altered that goal into 'drive Mike insane.'

Although, truth to tell, he looked forward to the next Cassie onslaught. Even though she disturbed his peace of mind, he also felt more alive than he had in years.

He shouldn't have let himself feel that way. Just her being a Delistraty, the darlings of American politics, lifted her way above him. She had cousins and uncles who were senators, congressmen and governors all over the country. Her own grandfather had sat on the State Supreme Court until his retirement a few years ago. He'd met the man twice, and each time he'd felt like a gnat the Judge had dismissed without a second thought.

And Cassie herself—all through her life, she'd been getting in and out of scrapes. Demonstrating to have a beloved

teacher reinstated, circulating a petition to ban a fraternity from campus when they'd discriminated against a black man. Stealing back her friend's diary in junior high, despite the fact said diary resided in the boys' locker room. And the underwear raid in college in retribution for a similar raid. Yes, Cass was nothing but trouble. And Mike had been right to stay away.

But now he didn't want to let her go. It felt too good to have her arm linked with his, to see her smile aimed his way, and to kiss her. How could he walk away from that?

They entered the cafeteria, and Cal looked up, waving as he caught sight of them. As they sat down opposite him, Mike noticed that Cal looked tired. But his voice showed nothing of that as he launched into the case he wanted Cass to take over from him.

"She's from Russia, and American law makes no sense to her. She'd been married to the guy for five years, has a kid with him, then the guy and his mother die in a car accident." Cal handed Cassie a manila file, which she opened while Cal continued. "His father, a real prick, evicts her. He'd sold the house to his son; he's the mortgage holder. Seems that she missed a payment in all the chaos after the accident. Even before the funeral, he tells her to get out, that she has no legal claim to the house. And his grandson? He questioned whether it's really his son's kid."

Mike's stomach clenched. *What a creep.* "So he tossed them out like so much garbage?"

Cal nodded. "It gets worse. Somehow he took all the money from their joint bank account. Apparently he'd been

listed as the beneficiary from before the marriage occurred. So not only is she homeless, but penniless. When she showed up at the downtown shelter a few days ago, they'd been living in her car. They referred her to me immediately. So, Cass, think you can help her?"

Her eyes never leaving the file, Cassie nodded. "I'm sure I can, even if he didn't leave a will. His choice of beneficiaries from before the wedding will be considered null and void, especially with the birth of his child. I'm sure I can get her back in her house in only a matter of days." Her eyes lifted, and Mike recognized the burning emotion he saw. A need to see justice done. He'd witnessed it so much in both Delistraty twins that it no longer surprised him at how zealously they'd work to meet that goal.

The foreboding didn't come from Cassie's driving desire to see things set right. No, it originated from the knowledge that Cassie rarely set limits on what she'd do to see an injustice overturned. He also knew that there'd be no stopping her.

"So when can I meet with her?" Cassie closed the file, her eagerness rather endearing.

"How about right now?" Cal nodded toward a corner of the room, where a tiny dark-haired woman sat, holding a baby on her lap. "She's over there, waiting for you. She's pretty scared and confused, and her English is a bit rough. But she's very bright. You shouldn't have any problems getting her to understand you."

Cassie nodded, standing up with the file held loosely in one hand. Mike could see the wheels turning in her head. She sparkled with energy, even in the somber circumstances. He

realized that Cassie needed something like this in her life, a niche where she could make a difference. It reminded him of how he'd felt being a firefighter. He only wished she'd find something safer.

"Mike, do you mind?" At the last moment, she'd turned to him, asking his permission. Like they were a real couple.

He surprised himself with the feeling of warmth and closeness that filled him. "Of course not, babe. Go get 'em."

Smiling, she walked away. Mike watched her fawning over the baby, which immediately erased the tension on the mother's face. *Good tactic, Cass*, Mike approved silently. He couldn't help but admire her for wanting to help the young woman.

"I'm glad we have a moment alone," Cal said, his voice holding a knife edge. "I want to talk to you regarding your intentions toward my sister."

* * * *

"You can help me?" Irina Richter clutched her baby to her, her dark eyes luminous with hope.

Cassie nodded and forced a smile. That wasn't an easy task over the mound of bile that rose from her stomach. She'd never heard of such callous, cold behavior as Stan Richter, Irina's father-in-law, exhibited to this petite beauty. She couldn't wait to make the bastard squirm, and return Irina's home and money to her.

But that would never wipe out the pain in Irina's eyes. Her agony hung about her, as apparent to Cassie's eyes as the black mourning outfit the young woman wore. How did

someone survive such loss, Cassie wondered, then suffer through such horrible treatment as Irina had at Stan's hands? She admired the young woman's strength. Even under such circumstances, she held her shoulders back and her chin up.

"Yes," Cassie told her, "I'm positive we can help you. It's going to take a while, though. Do you have a place to stay?"

Irina nodded. "Yes, at the shelter on Ames Street."

Not good enough. That shelter, although adequate, lacked good security. Plus it was crowded and noisy. Opening her purse, Cassie removed some money and placed it in Irina's hand. "Here. Find somewhere safer to stay."

The young woman shook her head vigorously. "No. I will not take money. It is not right."

"You want me to help you and your son?" At Irina's nod, Cassie smiled gently. "I can't do my best work if I'm worrying about you and the baby. So humor me, take the money and take your son somewhere safer. You can pay me back when I get your money and house returned to you. All right?" She closed Irina's fingers around the bills. "Could you do this for me?"

Irina studied her with clouded, troubled eyes. Cassie heaved a sigh of relief when she nodded at last, her shy smile lighting her face. "Very well. I will pay you back."

Sitting back, Cassie grinned at her. She loved the way taking on such a challenge felt, the way her blood pumped and her mind raced from one fact to another. *Old Stan Richter had better be ready for an ass-kicking, Cassie-style.*

She could think of only one other thing that felt better than helping people. Glancing over at Mike, she remembered

the excitement of being in his arms, his erection hard against her belly, his mouth devouring hers. If she melted into a puddle at mere kisses and caresses, how explosive would it be when she finally convinced him to let go and make love to her?

Mike's face didn't look like he harbored any good thoughts at the moment. She'd never seen him so dark and unapproachable. Cal was talking, but Mike raised a hand and interrupted him. Both men looked as if they could kill the other. She knew that her dating Mike would be an issue, but to bring the two best friends to blows?

Then he glanced over at her, and their eyes met. He smiled and his gaze filled with tenderness. It was the kind of look that touched her heart.

The kind of look that two lovers shared.

An ache built inside of Cassie. She wished they truly were lovers, that Mike felt something for her other than lust and a time-worn affection. That they could truly have what others thought they did, a close intimate relationship with the promise of so much more.

With the promise of forever.

She turned away. Dangerous thoughts. She shouldn't have them. She couldn't let them grow. He'd never accept her for what she was: a Delistraty. Not that many people could live with that kind of legacy. Her mother hadn't. She'd rebelled and chosen a middle-class lifestyle, surviving on her own.

She snuck a look back over at Mike and her brother and realized that things were heating up. Both men were red-

faced and their voices were getting louder. Others closer to them were openly staring and eavesdropping.

"Your sister's old enough to know what she's doing."

"Damn it, Mike, you're going to destroy her and you're too damn stupid to realize that."

She had to stop this before they started swinging. In a flash, she turned to Irina. "I need to go. You have my card. My cell phone number's on there. The instant you get checked into a hotel, call me." When she was certain Irina understood, she gave her a smile and a swift squeeze on her arm. Gathering up her attache, she went off once more to rescue Mike.

* * * *

My intentions? Mike thought. *What the...?*

He didn't like Cal's question. Or his tone. "That's between me and your sister. Stay out of it."

Cal's eyes hardened. "Because she *is* my sister, I won't stay out of it. I'm not going to see her hurt again. That asshole she was married to did a number on her, and I'm not going to stand by and watch someone who hasn't worked through all his baggage take it out on her."

Briefly, Mike longed to ask Cal what 'number' Ken Travers had done to Cassie, but stopped. If this relationship was real, he'd already know. So he attacked the rest of Cal's statement.

"I'm not carrying any baggage. Even if I was, I respect Cassie too much to take anything out on her. So back off and let us work this out."

Cal leaned forward, the knuckles on his folded hands whitening. "Have you ever noticed how much Sharon was like Cassie?"

Mike jerked at the idea. "Are you trying to say I'm involved with Cassie because she reminds me of my ex-wife?"

Cal sneered. "No, I'm saying you married Sharon because she reminded you of my sister. She felt comfortable and familiar when you first met her, didn't she?"

Blood pounding in his ears, Mike barked his disbelief. "You think I married Sharon because I couldn't have your sister?"

Cal's tone showed his temper was rising as well. "I think that you're not seeing Cassie for what she truly is, and that's going to stop you from treating her right. Your view of her is clouded by your marriage, and I'm damned if I'm going to stand by and watch my sister be hurt."

Mike leaned forward, trying like hell to keep his voice low. "Cal, you might be my best friend, but if you think I'm going to sit here and let you say garbage like that..." He bit off his words. "I'd never hurt Cassie."

Cal shook his head, his eyes hard. "You might not mean to, but she's not as tough as she likes to make out. Of all the guys she could have picked, you're the only one that could break her heart." Cal stabbed the table with one finger. "Think about that before you touch her again."

Break her heart? No. He couldn't believe that. Cassie was tough, feisty and capable of taking care of herself. She'd made it very clear she lusted after Mike, but no indication that her heart was involved.

If he thought that, then how would he feel?

He glanced over at her, and caught her looking his way. The warmth in her eyes lit him up immediately. Damn, she was beautiful, and so sexy. And she made him laugh. It felt good to laugh so freely.

Catching the look between the two, Cal's hand formed a fist. "Don't play with her. You can't see the real her; you just see another person like your ex. So back off."

"Your sister's old enough to know what she's doing."

"Damn it, Mike, you're going to destroy her and you're too damn stupid to realize that."

He couldn't take much more. "Why the hell don't you trust her to make her own decisions? She knows what she can handle."

Cal stood up, leaning over the table. "Because you're her blind spot! And that makes whatever game you're playing with her thoughtless and cruel."

Mike stood as well, barely stopping himself from knocking his friend on his ass. "What the hell can I say to make you back off?"

"Hey!" Like a heat-seeking missile, Cass showed up out of nowhere and shoved her brother. Hard. "I don't need the over-protective brother act, Cal. Mike's right. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself and make my own decisions." Her jaw thrust out. "And right now I've decided to be with Mike. So although I do appreciate your concern, I don't need your interference."

Cassie lifted her chin under her brother's glare then moved close to Mike, wrapping one arm through his. Mike admired her for that. She had spunk, even more than when she'd been

a kid. And now, intermixed with a certain class, she was sexier than hell. Sexy, classy, spunky and never boring. She had it all.

Cal moved his gaze from Cassie to Mike. "I'm watching you. You break her heart, I'll break you." Snatching up his briefcase, Cal stalked off.

Mike watched his friend for a moment, then glanced at Cassie. She turned a brave smile to him, but he saw the cracks through her facade. *She's not as tough as she likes to make out.* Muttering a curse, he pulled her in his arms.

She snuggled into him, and he tightened his hold. He wanted to believe she was indestructible, that she could withstand anything. Right now, she felt less like a pillar of strength, and more like a woman in need.

He discovered he liked being needed. Especially by Cassie.

He pressed a kiss into her hair. Cassie glanced up, plastering on a brave smile, then stepped back from him. "I'm fine, Boy Scout. You're right, I know what I can handle. I'll be okay."

He let his fingers drop from her as he watched her closely. Those were the words he wanted to hear, the words that let him not worry about Cassie's feelings or her vulnerability. Those simple words could set his conscience free. Even if they made love, she understood the situation and was free to walk away.

What was that smile truly hiding?

Was she truly a woman of flight and fancy? Or did her smile hide the beginnings of love, the same emotion he fought in himself?

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by Stacia Wolf

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Chapter Six

Mike's fingers let go of her, but Cassie felt their reluctance. His eyes lingered on her face and he frowned, as if he saw her for the very first time. The sensation unsettled her, and she prayed that whatever he saw pleased him. Her heart would break if he didn't like what he found in her.

She wanted his hands back on her shoulders; she wanted to feel that zing that always happened between them when they touched. Anything to wipe that frown off his handsome brow. He was much too serious much too often. She loved his laugh and that slightly devilish smile that he flashed on occasion. She loved the ways his eyes danced when he looked at her.

Face it. You love everything about him, including his frown, because you're hopelessly in love with him.

She shook her head. She couldn't be in love. No, this time spent with him was supposed to cure her of her ridiculous crush on him. She couldn't have fallen in love with him!

She stared at him in shock and confusion, wondering how this could have happened while at the same time acknowledging it as inevitable. Since meeting him all those years ago, he'd stolen a chunk of her heart. Despite her attempts to continue life without him, she'd never quite succeeded. Now it would be even worse. He owned her entire heart, not just a piece.

She was in love with Mike Ashford. How ironic. How sad and stupid. She'd wanted to get over this mad feeling she'd had for him. Now it threatened to tear her into pieces.

Her eyes stung. Damn. How pathetic.

"Princess? Are you okay?" Mike's voice reached through the foggy recesses of her brain, and she recognized the concern in his voice, and saw the worry in his eyes. She could also see deep affection and caring there.

But no love. No, he might someday have sex with her, but he'd never love her. He was too hung up on her Delistraty roots, and too bothered by her impetuous nature. She'd never hear him say, "I love you."

At this thought, tears stung her eyes.

"Cass." Mike pulled her into his arms. He held her against his chest, and she could feel his heart beat a rapid staccato that hers matched, beat for beat. It felt good. It felt right.

Damn, she had it bad. What was a girl to do?

Bundled against the solid warmth of the man she loved, Cassie swiftly came up with an answer to her self-posed question.

What was a girl to do? Why, make sure she showed this man the depth of her feelings and make it very, very difficult for him to ever walk away. What did she have to lose?

And she had so much to gain.

It was high time this girl convinced the man of her dreams that she was *his* dream.

* * * *

"Take me home, Mike."

Cassie smiled at him, her bravado hiding the upset she'd obviously experienced over the altercation with her brother. The tears were gone, and her eyes gleamed with purpose once more.

He felt a momentary twinge at what shape that purpose might take, then decided not to worry about trouble until it happened.

A few minutes later, heading back to Cassie's place, Mike didn't flinch or try to pull away when Cassie curled up against his shoulder. It felt good to have her leaning on him, both literally and figuratively.

"Feeling better?" he asked her.

She nodded against his shoulder. "Yes, much. Thank you."

He nodded, resisting the urge to plant a kiss on her soft cinnamon hair. "I have some paperwork to catch up on at the club." He felt her body tense. Damn, she didn't want to be away from him any more than he wanted to say goodbye to her.

"All right. I've kept you busy the last couple of days, haven't I?"

If she'd protested or complained, he'd have stuck to his guns to put some distance between them. But she didn't. She understood that he needed to get some things done. Faced with such a caring gesture, his determination melted.

"I'll pick you up tonight for a bite to eat before the band starts up. If you like, you can stick around and I'll teach you how to bartend."

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Cassie lifted her head and her breath fanned the side of his neck as she laughed. "You're going to trust me in your precious club? What will Ernie say?"

He worked hard to laugh lightly, despite his stomach clenching at her words tickling his neck. "Tonight should be a slow night, and Ernie will be fine with it."

He could feel her smile as she laid her check on his shoulder. "You know, that sounds like fun. Thanks."

"You're welcome." He couldn't help himself. "And Cassie?"

"Yes?"

"Wear something... non-provocative."

Cassie's amusement bubbled right over him and into his heart. "Yes, sir! One gunny sack coming up!"

* * * *

The next few days went by swiftly. Cassie loved spending time with Mike, even though he always insisted on being around others. But that suited Cassie fine. It gave them opportunities to get to know each other better.

She discovered that she liked the adult Mike even more than she'd adored the teenaged version. Once he relaxed, his sense of humor kept her laughing.

Right now, though, she was running late. She'd gone to the home improvement store to get a new light fixture for the master bath. This final touch would finish the room off, and other than the kitchen, her house now sparkled with her personality.

Over the last six months, she'd used the skills she'd picked up as a child helping her mother redo their house and applied

them to her own home. New paint, molding, light fixtures. Most home repairs she could handle on her own. She liked that her house reflected her true personality so well.

Her living room felt relaxing in soft greens, her office soothed her in warm browns and her bedroom's mixture of greens and gold, coupled with the gorgeous white woodwork, gave her such a feeling of peace. Now the master bathroom, a soft gold and cream, would be done and she could sit back and enjoy her little haven.

The light before her turned yellow and Cassie gunned it, knowing that Mike waited for her. At this pace, she'd be about ten minutes late. One more red light and she could add five more minutes to that estimate. Darn it, how had time gotten away from her? Mike hadn't been too excited about coming over and helping her install the light. Would he still be there waiting for her?

To top it all off, she'd left her cell back at the house, so she couldn't even call him to say she'd be a few minutes late.

She hadn't remembered where she'd bought the light fixture for her bedroom, and she'd wanted the bathroom sconce to match. This meant going to three different stores, but now she had it, and it would only take a few minutes to install.

And since it took two pair of hands to put it up, it gave her a good excuse to have Mike in her house. In her bedroom. Alone. He'd asked if her brother or dad could help her, but Cal was tied up with a clinic session, and her dad had declared himself too busy to help. Of course, Mike didn't know that

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Cassie had chosen today to do this, after discovering that her family would be otherwise occupied.

So he'd reluctantly agreed to give her a hand. She knew he planned on a hasty retreat, but she'd find a way to cut him off at the pass. Up to and including a strip tease. She planned on nothing stopping her.

Because tonight would be the night she'd seduce him.

However, at the moment, her chances of any sort of encounter with Mike were dwindling fast.

She thumped her hand on the wheel in frustration. Darn it, she'd meant to be home and ready for him, setting a subtle mood with candles and soft music. Instead, she'd taken way too long getting the rotten fixture. She could howl in anger at herself.

Finally, seventeen minutes late, she screeched up to her house to find Mike's Bronco nowhere to be seen. Futility roiled in her. She'd given him the perfect excuse to avoid her today.

Pressing the garage door button, she ran some alternate plans in her head. Plans that would only work if Mike wasn't too miffed at her no-show performance.

Okay, first step would be to grovel and hope she caught him in a good mood. Second...? Well, if she accomplished the first, she'd worry about the next step then.

Pulling the car into the garage, she pressed the button to close the door, while sadly thinking about what could have been.

* * * *

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From his vantage point down the street, Mike watched Cassie enter the garage. He could feel her disappointment from here. He felt rather smug. She'd been late again. It wouldn't hurt her to suffer for a few minutes.

It occurred to him that he could simply leave and she'd never be the wiser. She'd been looking for the Bronco, not this slick Mustang convertible he'd bought only that afternoon. He'd seen the sleek silver machine and the image of Cassie in the passenger seat, her hair whipping in the wind and her laughter exploding from her lips, made it impossible for him to walk away. It was a Cassie type of car. So he'd bought it.

He didn't want to leave. He planned on helping her install the light, then he'd take her for a car ride with the top down. Starting the car, he pulled up in front of her house just as his cell rang.

"Mike?" Cassie's anxious voice caused him to smile.

"Cass. Where are you? I tried calling your cell." He pretended to be angry, but she'd been late her entire life, so he'd always planned on it. Cal joked that the only time she'd come early was her birth.

"I'm so sorry. I forgot the phone at home. I'd been trying to find the light fixture that matched the one in my bedroom, and I couldn't—"

"Cass." He couldn't take it any longer. "Look outside."

He didn't need to tell her twice. The curtain moved, then the door flew open, and there she stood, her cell on her ear, staring at him in delight.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed in the phone as she rushed to him. "It's silver! Mike, it's adorable. Take the top down."

Laughing, he spoke in the phone, even though she now stood in front of him. "All right." Pressing a button on the dashboard, he listened to the satisfying hum of the top retracting. "I have to hang up now. There's this incredibly gorgeous woman wanting me to take her for a ride."

She laughed. "Honey, with me, you could have so much more than that." With a shriek, she clicked the phone off, then hopped into the car. Her eyes danced. "Mike, this is awesome." Then her lips pouted. "Although I'll miss you helping me out of the Bronco."

Laughing, Mike pulled away from the curb. "I still have the Bronco. We can switch off and on."

Her look of rhapsody hit him the instant he realized he'd made their relationship sound permanent. Yet instead of shocking him, it felt right. In one form or another, she'd always been part of her life.

They pulled out on the main strip, and just like his fantasies, her eyes closed and she lifted her face into the breeze. Her wild curls whipped about her face as her lips parted in delight.

Beautiful. Fascinating. Addicting.

He turned back, pulling up in front of Cassie's home a few minutes later.

"We're home, princess."

A smile formed on her lips before her eyes opened, and a hand lifted up, contacting his cheekbone in a soft caress.

Before he could react, she slid the hand back behind his neck and pulled herself up to plant her lips on his.

If he'd ever thought he could resist her, he found himself sorely mistaken. A lightning bolt of need lanced through him, shattering his self-control in one solid blast. His nerves jumped, his bones melted, and his body instantly responded to her kiss with a massive hard-on.

Then her tongue slid over his bottom lip, and he abandoned all pretense of resistance. Unbuckling both belts, he jerked her into his arms. He tangled his fingers into those curls and sank himself into the feel and sensuality that made Cassie so unique.

He thrust his tongue into her mouth, and nearly died from pleasure when she nipped, then sucked on it. Her instantaneous responses to his touch enflamed him and he tightened his arms, wishing he could simply melt into her, become one with her so he'd never have to be without her.

"Mike," she gasped, pulling her mouth away and skimming hot moist lips over his cheek. "Let's go inside."

His internal alarm went off, reminding him of his resolution to keep away from her. "Cass, you're not thinking straight."

"I'm thinking fine," she said, her raspy voice inflaming his skin. She nipped at his earlobe and his erection throbbed against his zipper. "I'm thinking that I want you in my bed. Naked. Now."

Then her hand slid down between them, to settle with intimate familiarity on his crotch, rubbing against his jeans and sending all thoughts of walking away out of his head.

"Naked..." He gasped as her probing fingers found his tip and pressed down. "Naked sounds—damn, Cassie, you're driving me insane—good."

He never remembered the trip into the house, and he vaguely recalled dodging three excited, yapping dogs on their way to her bedroom, then Cassie shutting the door on them.

Her fingers went to work at the buttons on his shirt, while he pulled her cotton blouse up and over her head. His pulse went through the roof and his hard-on jumped when he discovered she didn't have a bra on.

"Cass." He sucked air into his oxygen-starved lungs. But she didn't cut him any slack. Smiling at him like the temptress she was, she cupped her breasts with her hands. Her thumbs drew circles over her pebbled nipples. He could feel his pulse throbbing in his neck and thought his zipper would burst from the pressure his rock-hard penis put it through. He knew that he'd die if he didn't slide into her soon.

One of Cassie's hands remained on her firm, round breast while the other slipped down and pulled her skirt off her waist and past her hips. It slid down to pool at her feet, revealing Cassie in front of him, naked. Mike shuddered with need as her hand slipped down between her legs and plunged one finger into her wet heat.

She tipped her head back and a tiny mewl escaped her lips. That one sound ripped away the last of Mike's control. He had to have her. Now.

In one stride, he reached her. Gripping her about the waist, he pushed her back onto the bed. Her skin smelled of exotic spices; no wimpy floral scents for Cassie.

Lying beside her, he tasted her hot flesh, traveling from the base of her throat down to one tempting peak, sucking it into his mouth. She gasped and her pelvis pressed against him while both of her hands curled into his shoulders.

His head spun at her sensual response. He couldn't think of anyone or anything other than Cassie and how he'd never been so hooked on one woman before.

"Damn, Cass, do you know what you're doing to me?"

* * * *

Cassie didn't answer him. She couldn't. The feel of his body pressed against hers robbed her of all coherent speech. Instead, she'd have to show him.

Cassie pulled his shirt the rest of the way off, tossing it aside. She touched his chest, thrilling at the hard feel of muscles beneath her palm. Sheer heaven. The sparse dusting of dark hair tempted her to run her fingers through it, and she readily gave in.

"Cass." Mike's breath hissed between his teeth; she could see raw desire in his eyes.

He shuddered under her touch. Emboldened, she trailed her mouth after her fingers, her tongue tasting his slightly salty flesh just waiting for her exploration.

Her tongue circled his nipple, and she thrilled when he jerked beneath her probing mouth. His reaction to her made her feel so powerful, so feminine. She felt moisture pooling between her legs, and wanted him to touch her there. If exploring him enflamed her this much, what would happen when he caressed her?

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She traveled downwards, teasing and tasting, until her hands hit his waistband. She didn't stop, didn't hesitate. His muscled torso enticed her to explore further; she knew she wouldn't be disappointed. The pants had to come off.

But he captured her questing fingers before she could go any further. "Honey, slow down. We have all night, and if you keep this up, I'm not going to last ten minutes." He kissed her fingers, and she could hear the hitch in his breathing.

She stroked his bottom lip with her index finger, and as if tasting a tempting candy, he sucked it into his mouth, taunting it with his hot tongue and sensuously scraping teeth.

A spasm tore through her core. Cassie buried her face into his shoulder, nipping at him. His hand slipped down and flattened against her buttocks, pulling her up against him. The feel of his straining erection sent her blood roaring and her eyes rolled back in pleasure. What a glorious experience to be so close to the man she loved.

She could fantasize that he loved her as well, that they'd declared their love for each other and that this coupling would be a consummation of those feelings. If only reality wouldn't shatter her imagination...

She opened her eyes. He gazed down at her, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand as if he found her to be the most treasured thing he'd ever seen.

She could almost believe her fantasy now.

"You're so beautiful, Cass. Do you know what you do to me with your smile and those gorgeous green eyes? Do you know..." He swooped down, stole a tantalizing kiss from her parted lips. "...What touching you does to me? You drive me

wild with just a look. Getting to hold you like this...woman, I'm not made of steel. If I don't have you I'm going to break."

Cassie closed her eyes and let his desire for her sink in. A warm glow built in her chest and formed a smile on her lips that she couldn't contain. She'd never felt this way, like she could float away on a veil of happiness. She pressed her cheek against his fingers, soaking in the tenderness she felt in his touch.

"You have me, Mike. I'm not going anywhere." A tiny laugh escaped. "And here I thought you felt only brotherly toward me. Or is this pity sex?"

Mike growled and rolled on top of her. His throbbing penis pressed against her, and she angled her hips so it would pulse against her womanhood.

"Does this feel like brotherly love?" he asked, rocking his engorged erection against her. "Does this..." and he kissed her, long and hard. "...feel like pity to you?"

"No," she gasped. "It feels like heaven."

Mike chuckled against her lips. "Honey, you ain't seen nothing yet."

Her eyes beamed up at him. "Then show me."

He didn't hesitate. He kissed her, his mouth devouring her, bearing into her. She opened to him, accepting his passion, his intensity, and giving it back to him with her mouth, her hands and her body, moving underneath his weight, demanding more in her quest to feel as one with him.

His fingers buried themselves in her tangled curls, imprisoning her head. Lifting his mouth from hers, he stared into her eyes, his own a dark pool of passion. "Cass, be very

sure this is what you want, because I swear if you keep moving like that I won't be able to stop."

At that moment she understood what power she held. This man, this strong, capable man who'd saved lives and even helped deliver babies, who ran a successful business and rescued crazy women, this man was under her spell. She'd never felt beautiful before, never felt that being a woman held much mystique, but she understood now.

It was a heady sensation, and a whisper of a smile twisted her mouth as she basked in the sexual energy that flowed through Mike into her. Sister, indeed. She'd make him think of her as anything but.

She writhed under him, and Mike groaned. "Cass, please. I've wanted you for too long to handle you playing games with me."

"I'm not playing," she said, knowing her heart would be at stake if they continued. Then she comprehended what he'd said. "You've wanted me for a long time? How long?" She traced the line of his jaw, reveling in the short stubble that would soon be rasping against her breasts, her stomach, her thighs.

The very thought caused her to buck against him, a movement he took as intentional. "Forever, Cass, okay? Forever."

He cut away all thought by taking possession of her mouth, plunging his tongue into her, sending her blood raging like molten fire through her. The dampness between her legs made the feel of his erection more intense. She couldn't take it any more. She needed to feel him, all of him.

She needed him inside of her.

Grabbing his hand, she pressed it between them. Needing no more hints, his probing fingers reached between her thighs, then plunged into her. With a gasp, she thrust against them, matching his rhythm. Her hands slipped between them, found his jeans button and fumbled it loose. Then she reached for the zipper, but once again his hand caught hers.

"No, baby. If you touch me, I won't last five minutes. I want to make this good for you. I want you to never forget this night."

She stroked her hand up and down his zipper. "It'd be the best five minutes of my life," she whispered.

Groaning out a laugh, he nipped at one breast. "Wench." At her laugh, he buried his face against her hot flesh, his teeth finding and teasing her nipple. She gasped at the roughness and the wanton feeling that raged through her.

"I want more than five minutes with you," he rasped.

His mouth sucked her nipple in and he teased it with his tongue, driving her wild with the waves of pleasure that pummeled her. Pressing up against his fevered mouth, she gripped his head, holding him tightly against her.

He swirled his tongue around her nipple one last time, released it, then trailed his mouth downward, giving massive attention to every inch of her along the way. Small sounds escaped her; she matched the rhythm of his fingers as they thrust in and out of her.

"You're so beautiful, Cass. So perfect." Even in the darkness, she could feel his eyes devouring her. "Fantasy didn't even come close to reality." He kissed her slightly

rounded stomach. "You look incredible, you feel wonderful, and you taste..." He sucked and nipped her heated skin. "...like heaven."

Something coiled inside her, threatening to snap. She felt so feminine, so powerful. Fiercely, she arched against him, her escaping words a plea for fulfillment. "Mike, now...Mike!"

He chuckled against her stomach. "Not yet, love. I'm going to enjoy your orgasm with my mouth, then the next one we'll celebrate together."

His statement both stunned and excited her. She'd never climaxed to oral sex before. But she didn't think it would be enough; she wanted more. Once more, she tried to unfasten his jeans. But he wouldn't stand for that. He pulled her hand away, then spread her legs apart.

The instant his tongue touched her there, she thrashed from the exquisite feel of it, hot and wet and teasing her engorged flesh. His tongue tasted her, flicking and pulsing with a rapid motion, while his fingers increased the rhythm inside her, dipping in and out and driving her wild with need.

The sensation was so wonderful it became torture. Her hands gripped his shoulders as she tried to hold herself still, but her hips moved with his hand, slight yet intense movements that increased the pressure of his mouth.

His tongue pressed on her inflamed clitoris, then moved with a wild beat that reverberated through her. Her body rocked as an orgasm so intense it threatened to tear her apart shuddered through her. Writhing in ecstasy, she cried out his name.

He let her ride the waves, then he scooted up and wrapped one arm about her, his fingers still inside her. "That was incredible. *You're* incredible. You're so damned sexy. Don't ever doubt that again."

I'm only like this with you. As a final wave whispered through her and his fingers left her, Cassie kissed his shoulder, then wiped a tear of happiness on it. She'd never felt anything so fantastic before. Her entire body felt alive, like an instrument, and Mike played her perfectly. But she wanted more; needed more. She needed him inside her.

She angled her head to find his mouth and pressed a thank-you kiss on it. Then her hand slid down to find him and encountered his jeans.

"How can you still have clothes on?" she demanded.

He laughed. "I don't know, must have been an oversight on your part."

"What?" She nipped his lip. "I recall trying to get in your pants, pal, and you kept stopping me!"

"Hey, is that any way for a high society miss to talk?" His lips found hers in a teasing taste, then he leaned over her, his grin twisting her insides, he looked so delectable.

"I'll show you high society," she said, sliding the zipper down. She slipped her hand into the front of his boxers, exulting in the coarse hair that rasped her fingers. It would be dark, she knew, dark and inviting, sexy as it curled into hers.

She encircled his rock-hard penis, and he surged into her hand, driving her fingers into the base.

"Honey," he moaned. "You keep that up and I won't last more than a minute."

"As long as you're in me." She pushed his jeans down and he jerked them off the rest of the way.

"Cass...!" he gasped as she slid her hand up and down over his length, and he throbbed at the rhythm. She wanted to lick it and taste it, an urge she'd never before experienced, but with Mike it seemed right and natural. But he dug his fingers into her hair, holding her prisoner.

"Wait," he said, his voice hoarse. He fumbled in a pocket, retrieving a condom. For a moment she thought about teasing him about anticipating getting lucky tonight, but she caught sight of his enlarged penis and her throat dried at the erotic picture. Instead, she helped him cover it in its rubber sheath, then pulled him back down to her.

His erection felt hot and heavy against her pelvis; she wriggled until her core pressed against the tip of it. As he sucked in a harsh gasp, she slid her wetness up and down it, exulting in the slick friction and heat that raged inside her.

"Damn, Cass, you're driving me insane. I won't last—"

At the unspoken plea in his voice, she angled her body and guided him into her. She felt too tight, then he slid in, the heat of his flesh scalding her.

His mouth found hers, sucking her breath into him, then his tongue teased hers as he held still; she could feel his penis throbbing against her tight walls. She pulsed her hips up into him in tiny, tight movements, and he groaned into her mouth. Gripping his butt, she pressed harder against him, rocking under him, tightening her muscles, squeezing his throbbing erection.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

He began to move, driving into her, each thrust stronger than the one before. She understood what she'd done then: she'd broken his control and he no longer could contain his need for her. The thought that this man, who always reined his emotions in, could be torn apart by her, enthralled her.

She moaned as he buried himself into her again and again. The pressure began building up inside her once more, hardening and rolling through her. She wrapped her legs about his waist and thrust hard against him. His seed burned into her, and she matched him, wave for wave.

They collapsed together, their breathing ragged, and Cassie clung to him until he eased away. For a frightening moment, she thought he was leaving, just like her ex had every time they'd made love, to go shower as if she'd been something dirty.

But instead, Mike curled up against her, pulling her close. With a sigh, Cassie settled her head on his shoulder, then allowed her heavy eyes to close.

Later, she decided she only imagined a kiss pressed to her hair, and a whispered, "I love you, Cassie."

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Chapter Seven

"Hey, son. I'll take one of those."

Mike looked up from restocking bottles into the cooler to see his dad sliding onto a bar stool. Pete Ashford, a vital-looking man with a thick mane of silver hair and laughing eyes, tapped the spot in front of him.

"Dad, hi." Mike eyed him with more than a hint of suspicion. Even though his dad's former partner was part-owner of the club, Pete rarely visited. "What brings you down here?"

"What else?" He sighed in satisfaction as Mike opened a bottle of his favorite brew and set it in front of him. "Your mom's having a fit over you spending the Fourth with little Cassie Delistraty." Pete took a swig of beer. "Personally, I'm surprised it's taken this long for you two to get together. There's always been a connection."

Mike stiffened. Even after making love to Cassie, an incredible experience that paled all other women in comparison, Mike couldn't trust any 'connection' he felt with her. It all seemed too good to be true. "What does that mean?"

Pete lifted one shoulder. He grinned slyly. "I saw that kiss on Cassie's graduation day. You looked like you'd been hit by a truck."

Mike couldn't wriggle out of this one. "Okay, I admit there's something there. But I don't know if I'd call it a connection." Before his dad could reply, he decided to change

the topic fast. "So what does Mom have against the Delistraty's? Did they approve a shopping mall where her favorite park was or something?"

His dad chuckled at his reference to Jessie's dislike of shopping. "No, doubt it was that. Truth to tell, I'm not sure why she's so bitter against Cassie's family. Lucia's grandmother—her mother's mother—lived next door to us. She used to baby-sit Julia, and later, you. So did Lucia, for that matter. When she was in high school, she'd come spend almost every weekend with her grandmother. She swore she loved the 'getaway,' Although I suspect it was to see Jake. He lived down the street from us. She was a great babysitter, very down to earth. She and your mom seemed to get along great."

"So what happened?"

Pete studied the amber bottle in his hand. "Not sure. Lucia was seventeen, I think. I'd just gone next door and asked Lucia to baby-sit for that night, but when I got home, your mom said we didn't need her, she'd found someone else. Then Lucia broke up with Jake, and a couple months later, she disappeared. Came back ten years later with Cassie and Cal in tow for her grandmother's funeral. When she moved in to her grandmother's house, instead of selling it like we thought she'd do, I thought your mom would have a coronary."

Mike remembered the hushed arguments between his parents around the time Cassie moved in next door. Personally, he and Julia had been excited to have some kids in a neighborhood otherwise filled with elderly couples.

Pete took another swig of his beer. "If your mom asks, tell her I tried to talk some sense into you. Of course, my idea of sense is to grab onto that girl and never let her go. She's the only person I've ever known who can take the starch out of your shorts." Setting the bottle down, he stood. "I'd better get home. What time are you picking Cassie up?"

Mike glanced at the clock. Damn, he'd been thinking so hard about how to handle his attraction to her, he'd let time slip away. He was going to be late.

"I'd better get, Dad."

"Mike." Ernie wheeled up. "They're going to reject the zone change. Zigretti just called, said it doesn't look good."

Double damn. John Zigretti was Ernie's pal who worked in the county office, but unfortunately he didn't carry much weight. A re-zoning change wouldn't be very popular with the nearby residents, and they'd been afraid someone might make a stink.

Apparently it had happened. Mike curled his fingers into a fist, fighting the helpless feeling that pounded him. "So where's that leave us?"

Ernie's mouth tightened to a thin line. "Start over, lose the thousands of dollars we've invested in the site, or we try to fight back." His anger-filled eyes jumped to Mike's. "Or maybe you can ask Cassie for some help from her family."

"Ernie, you can't ask Mike to do that." Mike's father said.

"Pete, you think I like this?" Ernie hissed through his teeth in frustration. "But if Mike has pull with some of the most powerful people in this country, why shouldn't we use that? A location is a make or break for a nightclub. And we'd have to

start over trying to find another place even half as good as this one. That could put us back nearly a year, and we'd be out all the money we've already sunk into it, including the earnest money we had to ante up to hold onto that property. If saving it means Mike has to ask a little favor, then so be it."

"Damn it, Ernie, I can't ask Cassie for something like that," Mike said. "We're not—" *We're not what?* Not a real couple? Not committed to each other? Not at the point where they could ask help of each other?

Yes. No. Damn, Mike didn't know what the hell they were anymore, since they'd made love. The jumble of thoughts and emotions that ran through him had kept him from going to her for days. Just being with her messed with his mind.

"Ernie, we'll discuss this when I get back." Glancing at his watch, he cursed softly. "I'm late. Dad, thanks for stopping by. Tell Mom I'm a big boy and I can handle this."

As he walked off, Mike wondered to himself if, for the first time since entering adulthood, he'd just lied to his father.

* * * *

"Darn it, Suzy, he's late."

The dog tilted her head at Cassie, but didn't offer any insight into the workings of Mike Ashford. Not that Cass had held out any great hope, but still, anything would've been nice.

But Suzy simply twitched her ears and tucked her head between her legs on the couch pillow she occupied next to Cassie. After much wheedling on her part, Mike had promised

he wouldn't forget their trip to the 'summer home.' She'd been looking forward to having someone with her while she once again justified her lifestyle to her growing-more-cantankerous-every-year grandparents. But since they'd made love, he'd made himself rather scarce.

Sighing, she stood up, dragging her bags to the door. She'd promised to be there by noon, and it was already ten. It would take almost two hours to get there, if the interstate wasn't bumper to bumper. If she left now, she could make it to the ferry. Or she could hitch a ride with Cal, if he hadn't left already. Unlike Cassie, he liked to arrive early for everything.

She'd seen Cal yesterday, when they'd met with Irina, who'd be moving back into her house right after the holiday. The father-in-law still made noises about stopping her, but a court order gave him three days to vacate the premises. It made Cassie feel good to get this solved for Irina, who'd shown great relief to know she'd soon be home.

Cassie enjoyed a strong sense of accomplishment. Despite Mike's misgivings, she planned on helping Cal out more often.

Ruff and Tidbit started to bark, and Suzy launched herself off the pillow toward the door. Cassie's heart tripped in excitement. Mike must be here. She set the bags down by the front door, then turned her attention to the dogs.

"Quiet, guys." Ruff and Tidbit obeyed immediately but Suzy, continued to bark. "Suzy, quiet!" Cassie scooped her up, squeezing her muzzle. Suzy, with one last growl, fell silent.

Straightening her red and white floral sundress, Cassie sucked in a deep breath, then heaved it out. She knew Mike had been avoiding her for days. Mentally girding herself for the bone-melting reaction she always had with Mike, Cassie schooled herself on staying cool.

"Dad!" Her libido took a nosedive. She pasted on a smile and opened the door wider, holding the dogs back with one foot.

"No, Cass, I'm not staying. I wanted to give you a hug before you go. When are you leaving? Are you going with Cal?"

She looked past her dad; no sign of her errant boy scout. "Mike's coming to pick me up any moment now. Mom invited him."

Jake's mouth twitched in amusement. "She told me that she's not sure if you two are really an item or trying to get her off your back. I think she figures if Mike survives the weekend with your grandparents, he must be serious."

Cassie frowned. "Mike's going to be miserable there. They're such snobs. Maybe I should pretend to have the flu."

Jake shook his head, his affection for Cassie glowing from his eyes. "They won't buy it. They'll be offended and you'll never hear the end of it. You'd better go."

Sighing, she nodded. "I will, the second Mike shows up. What are you doing for the Fourth?"

Jake shrugged. "Nothing definite yet. You taking your mom to see the fireworks at Gasworks Park?"

"Probably. Why?" Her mother loved going there each year; they'd done it since moving to Seattle. It would be quite a

haul from Bainbridge Island but the three of them—Cal, Lucia and Cassie—made it every year. Sometimes Jake met them there. "Thinking of joining us?"

His smile told her nothing, but raised a few suspicions. "I might," he said. "Keep your cell with you just in case." He kissed her on the forehead. "See you."

His mood didn't seem quite right, not like the dad she knew. "Dad," she said.

The dogs started barking again. Cassie pulled the door open, and she sighed in relief. Mike.

"You're late." She lifted her face for a kiss, and his lips touched hers, but too briefly. He shook hands with Jake, then reached down and pet the dancing dogs at his feet.

"Sorry, got a bit tied up. Ernie and I were discussing the zoning change for the new club."

Cassie took in his slight frown. "Not going well?"

"It'll be fine. We have another hearing next week. We'll present our argument and go from there." He straightened up and smiled at Jake. "Going with us?"

Jake shook his head. "No, have other plans today. Besides, I'm not quite welcome at the Delistraty stronghold. Haven't ever been quite forgiven for knocking up their princess."

"Dad!" Cassie smacked her father's shoulder. Suzy barked, and she scooped her up, silencing her.

Jake chuckled. "Well, I call it as I see it. I'd better get going and let the two of you hit the road."

Jake walked away. Cassie shut the door and gave Mike her full attention.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

He'd dressed for the rare sunny day they were having, in a black tank top and crisp khaki shorts. It revealed too much of his lightly bronzed skin to keep her blood below boiling point. *And those legs!* Lean and muscular, with a fine dusting of dark hair, those legs alone could melt her bones. Without any time to prepare, his presence hit her hard. But she pulled herself together.

Then she looked into those sexy brown eyes and found the purest look of lust she'd ever experienced. And something else, something deeper she couldn't quite name. He hid it swiftly, but she still felt its impact. Her heart leapt in her chest and melted into a puddle that pooled between her legs and left her wanting to cling to the door for support.

* * * *

Over the last few days, Mike had thoroughly convinced himself that the impact Cassie had on him could be nothing more than an aberration, a weakness due to his lack of intimacy with a woman for a very long time. Yeah, that was it. He'd been overwhelmed by a sexual need that had been starved for far too long.

Yes, he believed that. Told himself that over and over again throughout the long days at the bar and the sleepless nights in his lonely bed until his stubborn heart started listening and that fist that surrounded it eased its grip.

Then he'd seen her again. That was all it took to shoot all his progress to hell.

"So, are you done avoiding me?" Damn, even through the sarcasm, her voice exuded that take-me-to-bed aura that surrounded her.

He opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out. Instead, he couldn't look away from her.

Her cinnamon curls were loosely pulled back, emphasizing those huge emerald eyes, eyes that raked him up and down and glazed over with a sexual arousal that instantly hit him well below the belt.

He pulled his gaze from her eyes and they fell lower. Bad, very bad. His groin tightened at the sight of her round, firm breasts straining against the floral fabric of her summer dress, barely held into place with two micro-thin straps. The frilly ruffles about the V-neck did nothing to soften her raw impact to his senses.

"You look beautiful, Cass."

He wanted to rip that dress right off her body, bury his face between her breasts and drink in the citrus scent of her. He could smell it now, tantalizing him, mingling with his own essence in the air and reminding him of what it felt like to sink into her, to fill her with his arousal.

To become one with her.

"Mike." He could hear the passion in her voice. "If you think you can sweet talk me into forgiving you...ah, hell."

His fingers stroked her cheek. It felt smooth and seductive as the heat of her shot up his arm and straight into his chest, expanding his heart to painful proportions.

The damned dog in her arms growled in a menacing manner and snapped at the air too close to his hand. He

snatched it back. He'd already experienced psycho dog's bite once before. He didn't want to do it again.

Fine. Point taken. Look but don't touch. He could live with that. He had to live with that. It was his only chance for survival in Cassie-land.

Reaching down, he retrieved her two over-stuffed floral bags. Her perfume assailed him and sure enough, it traveled right to his nether region, which tented his shorts up in no time. Terrific. Two hours alone in the car with Cassie and he'd be subjected to a perpetual hard-on.

Without a word, he went to the Bronco and opened the back door to toss her bags into the large expanse of space back there.

Too large. Too much space. In the back of the Bronco, there was plenty of room for them to...

Breath hissed between his teeth as he realized how much he wanted to make love to her back there. Pulled along the highway, where anyone might see. Or hidden behind some trees. On the ferry. Hell, anywhere there was a vertical or horizontal surface.

Damn, he should have brought the Mustang. But he'd been wanting to avoid that sexy laugh of hers as the wind touched her face and her hair floated about her, inciting fantasies.

Twisting away from the Bronco, he found her right behind him. Too close for comfort. And for his throbbing erection.

Was it possible for a thirty-year-old man to come in his pants on the sidewalk?

Hell, yes

He sidestepped around her.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

"Let's take your car," he said. "It'll fit on the ferry better. You drive. I worked late last night, so I need a nap." Good idea. That would keep her hands busy and give him time to calm down his flaming libido before it burst into flames.

* * * *

Bad idea. Very bad idea.

Cassie's classic T-bird didn't leave much room between them. Even crushed up against the door, she still brushed his arm whenever she shifted the powerful vintage car. With the top up he couldn't escape her. Her spicy perfume, her humming along with the radio, her laugh at the sight of a deer alongside the road, the toss of her hair as she peeked over her shoulder, preparing to change lanes—it all assaulted him, tore at him, reminding Mike that the only thing standing between him and a long, satisfying sexual encounter with Cassie was himself.

That and the fact that in every way, she was wrong for him. *Wrong, wrong, wrong.*

But for his body, she fit him perfectly.

So he gritted his teeth, crossed his arms, hunched up against the door and pretended to sleep, thinking that if he couldn't see her, then he couldn't react.

Again, bad idea. With his eyes closed, her perfume soaked into his brain, reminding him of how the scent had altered when mixed with the aroma of their slick, sweating bodies as he'd pounded into her. His nether regions rose up in the hope that hormones would override reason. He shoved one leg up against it, attempting to block it from view.

No such luck. As they joined the long queue of cars waiting for the Bainbridge ferry, Cassie's hand slid across his lap and encircled his erection, right through the fabric of his shorts. His body jerked and he gasped. He wrapped his fingers about her wrist to pull her hand away, but she resisted.

"Relax, Mike, and enjoy. Nobody can see what I'm doing, and you need some release. Let me do this for you."

With her other hand, she unsnapped and unzipped his shorts, slid inside and with minimal fumbling through the slit in his boxer briefs, slipped him out. A towel from the back covered up his lap, and he resigned himself to her touch.

Resigned, hell! He couldn't have said no even if he'd been able to find his voice.

Her finger swirled about the slit, then below the ridge, using the moisture from his tip to lubricate her movements. Her hand then circled his shaft and with a firm, swift rhythm, she pumped up and down, all the while keeping her eyes peeled on the car in front of them, looking as if she did something like this every day. Only the slight hitch in her breath and the way her eyes fluttered shut briefly told him different.

He surged against her fingers, trying to minimize the rocking of his hips. He opened his eyes and glanced at her. Her head was rolled back against the seat, her eyes half opened and her hips moved slightly, with the same rhythm as his own.

As if she was fantasizing that he was inside her.

That thought pushed him over the edge and he bucked helplessly under her caresses as he came. Riding the spasms,

he watched her lips form a very smug smile, one that showed she was rather pleased with herself. That she was in control.

Well, hell, he couldn't let her think that. After all, he *was* the guy here.

Before she could react, he slid one hand under her flowered gauzy sundress. With the other hand, he used the towel to clean up the 'mess' she'd created with her attentions.

He splayed his fingers over one of her inner thighs, kneading the trembling flesh.

"Mike, stop," she gasped. "The line's starting to move."

"So move," he replied, loving the flushed appearance of her face. He could do this for her. Nothing could be more erotic to him than watching Cassie being pleased.

And pleasure her he would. Zipping up his shorts, he leaned into her, capturing her mouth with his own. His tongue tasted and teased her parted lips; her tiny gasps fanned the heat in his blood, bringing him quickly back to a boil.

Trailing his mouth down her neck, he concentrated his efforts on the base of her throat as his fingers made delicate circles on the inside of her thigh, moving ever closer to that hot, beckoning juncture. She whimpered against his mouth, urging him to hurry, but he took his own sweet time getting there.

Finally, he made contact, dipping one eager finger into her folds. She moaned and shuddered, tilting her pelvis to afford him more access. He thrust in and out of her slickness, and could feel her muscles bunch and tighten while her outer flesh swelled to bursting. His thumb brushed over her hardened nub, and he pressed down on it, sending her over the edge.

Quickly catching her mouth in a kiss, he swallowed her cries of ecstasy as she came against his hand.

"Oh, baby," he said against her lips, laughing at the sheer delight of her eager reaction to his touch. Continuing the kiss, he wrapped his arms around her, and as much as the cramped confines of the car would allow, pulled her against him.

"Damn, but you're hot," he said.

As a car honked behind them, he gave her one last kiss, then reluctantly slipped back into his seat.

"Time to move on," he said with a smile, although his heart dragged downward at the words.

When would it become time for him to move on?

And when the time came, how would he survive?

* * * *

Cassie hummed the rest of the way to her family's estate on Bainbridge Island. She couldn't help herself; the fact that her staid, conservative, clean-cut, Eagle Scout man had actually given her car sex gave her hope that maybe they could bridge the personality gap and find a way to make this work.

Mike, however, after that particularly impressive feat, curled up and continued his nap. No matter. They'd be together for two days. Admittedly, her family would be there, but the huge estate afforded many places that she could take Mike and continue her campaign to...what? What did she want? To have a brief affair with him? Given her history with men, that would probably be all she could handle. Never in

her life had she sustained a relationship for more than a few years. Ken had tired of her quickly, finding other women much more fascinating than his wife. She knew that she already drove Mike crazy, and not just sexually. For years he'd been trying to keep her out of trouble, even though he rarely succeeded. And each time, she could see the frustration that boiled through him at having to once again save her behind from whatever trouble she'd gotten herself in.

How long would it take before she frustrated him right out of her life?

They reached the gates with Cassie still torn over what she truly wanted. Rolling down the window, she waved into the camera she knew would be aimed directly at them.

"Hello, Miss Delistraty. And may I ask the name of your guest?"

"Hi, Jeffrey." The security guard must be in his late sixties, Cassie surmised. Yet his voice, coming over the intercom, sounded the same as when she'd met him almost twenty years before. "Mike Ashford is with me. Say hello, Mike."

Mike waved a lazy hand, but declined to sit up.

"Mister Calvin's friend? Yes, I do remember him. Your grandparents are in the solarium."

"Thanks, Jeffrey." Cassie put the car in gear and followed the winding path up to the 'summer house,' which was actually a large mansion smack in the middle of some of the most prime real estate in Washington State. Yet to Cassie, it seemed rather cold and sad, especially since that huge structure only housed two people.

She glanced over at Mike, who now sat up, watching the house grow ever nearer. He'd always been very good at hiding his feelings. But Cassie'd studied Mike for decades now, and she could almost read his mind.

He didn't want to be here. He hated this symbol of the upper crust. He'd be miserable all weekend, but to keep up 'appearances,' he'd stand it for her.

Well, couldn't say she disagreed with him. But she'd show him that even here they could have fun. Of course, it might mean giving her grandparents fits, but hey. Everyone needed their lives shaken up a bit, right?

* * * *

He hated this. Stepping in the marble foyer that was larger than his entire apartment, Mike stiffened his spine and tried to unlock his already tense jaw. He didn't belong there. Nothing in his past helped prepare him to fit in a place like this. He'd been there a couple times as a kid, and had spent the entire time open-jawed and staring at all the opulence. He'd hoped he'd do better this time.

The jaw remained closed, but the symbols of money and power still grated on him. He didn't need the reminder that he didn't belong in Cassandra Delistraty's world. But he'd promised to help her with her family, and if that meant being here for a few days, he'd find a way to survive.

"We put you in the usual room, Miss Cassandra," the elderly butler that Cassie'd called Steven said as he led them up the stairway. "Your friend is down the hall in the red room."

"Actually, Steven, Mike's staying in my room."

Both men ground to a halt and turned to stare at her. She gazed back, unblinking. Mike's pulse accelerated at the idea of spending the next two nights with Cassie wrapped around him. But horror quickly killed his ardor. He clearly remembered Cassie's grandparents from his visits as a kid. Stuart and Loretta Delistraty had made it very clear that they put up with his presence for Cal's sake. He'd felt like a bug that they'd tolerated, but barely.

He didn't want to imagine how they'd react to Mike staying in Cassie's room.

"Miss," Steven's voice cracked. "I don't think that would..."

Then Mike saw it. That little spark of mischief in Cassie's eyes. She'd wanted to shock them, and she'd succeeded.

"It's okay, Steven. I'm gay, so she's safe with me."

Cassie choked, and Mike grinned. *Gotcha.*

"Don't listen to either one of them, Steven. Mike's not gay, nor is he sleeping in my daughter's room. The red room will suit him just fine." Lucia floated down the curved staircase, looking gorgeous in a black pair of short pants covered in red poppies and a matching red shirt tied at the waist, leaving her flat tummy exposed. She looked exotic and many years less than the almost fifty he knew her to be.

"Darling, you're right on time. Lunch will be served in an hour in the solarium." She hugged Cassie, and Mike once again marveled at the similarities in the two women. The same energy level, the same walk, the same 'look-at-me' air about them.

Yet, even though her outfit made Cassie's look conservative, Lucia didn't have that mischievous glint to her eyes or the lilting laugh, or that way Cassie tilted her head as she thought over something puzzling. No, Cassie was her own unique person.

Too bad they shared negative similarities. If only Cassie could sustain a relationship. If only she weren't so impulsive.

The 'if only's' could kill him.

"Mike." Lucia gave him a once-over. "You look so yummy. I do hope Cassandra knows what to do with you."

Mike felt his face flush at her obvious innuendo, and it only grew worse as Cassie laughed and said, "I'm working on it, Mom."

Lucia chuckled. "Well, darling, if you need any tips..." She swept down the stairs, leaving them alone with Steven.

The butler carried Cassie's bags to her room, then led Mike to his own. It took him only a moment to realize that he wouldn't be able to stand more than a few minutes in there.

The walls vibrated with red, compounded by the red and white floral bedspread and window coverings. Even the wooden floors weren't left alone; they were inlaid with red wooden roses.

Too much color. He could bet that Lucia designed the room. He set down his single duffel bag and decided to head back to Cassie's room. He'd wait outside for her, of course. After the car incident, he'd realized that anywhere with Cassie could be a great place for sex. The car, the ferry, the car *in* the ferry....

No, the only way to break this cycle would be to stop being alone with her. Otherwise, his hormones and her sexy smile would override his common sense every time.

It shouldn't be too difficult. The estate would be filled with servants and Cassie's family. All he needed to do was stay in a crowd and avoid being alone with her.

Good plan. Satisfied that he now could survive the weekend, he knocked on Cassie's door.

Of course, he'd not built Delistraty quirks into his plan. Before he could say a word, the door opened, a hand snaked out, grabbed him by the tank top and jerked him into her room. A room with all the shades closed. A room that smelled like Cassie, aroused.

"There's a new Jacuzzi tub in my bathroom," she whispered against his mouth while one hand pushed the door shut. "And I need you to help me try it out." Her tongue flicked against his lips, and his erection surged against her stomach, demolishing any protest he could muster up. But he still tried.

"Cass, lunch—"

She laughed against his mouth. "Well, love, if you insist, I think you'll be a great appetizer."

She jerked off his tank top, tossing it aside. Her hand slipped down his chest, followed closely by her mouth. Coherent thought fled as purely debauched pleasure made him forget how much he didn't want to be involved with Cassie.

"Damn, Cass," he groaned.

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Her sultry laugh intoxicated him. "Mike, whatever's happening between us is too strong to ignore. I'm tired of fighting it. What about you?"

With a growl, he pulled her upright, then swept her up. Carrying her to the bed, he asked, "How long until lunch?"

Her breathy chuckle tickled his nipple. "Almost an entire hour. Think of all we can do in an hour."

Oh, yeah, there was a lot he could think of doing with her in an hour.

And he proceeded to make his imagination become reality.

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Chapter Eight

"Cassandra!"

"Hello, Grandmother." Mike turned, Cassie's hand firmly holding his, and watched Loretta Delistraty sweep down the ornate staircase toward them. He hadn't seen her in thirteen years; she still exuded that elegant air only money could buy.

Thirteen years. A lifetime ago. He'd just discovered his growing feelings for Cassie, and seeing Stuart and Loretta Delistraty had reminded him how he'd never fit into her life.

He watched the two women exchange air kisses, another thing that never happened in the real world. It seemed so phony and cold. Real families hugged. Real families smothered each other in love. They didn't deliver their affection to thin air.

Cassie introduced Mike. Loretta held out one slender hand to him, her polite smile not quite reaching her faded green eyes. He smiled, murmured the appropriate thanks, then dropped her hand, hoping she'd missed his awkwardness. But to help Cassie, he'd endure even this.

Loretta led them out to the atrium, a glass-walled room filled with antiques that Mike bet cost more than his entire club. One wall was devoted to the Judge's extensive coin collection. The rest opened up to the massive gardens. Mike had always preferred this room to the rest of the house because of its informal and almost casual air.

Lucia waved at them, sitting at a little cluster of chairs with Cal. Cal smiled for his sister, but his cool gaze told Mike exactly how he felt about having him there.

At least Mike looked the part. He'd changed into a pair of off-white slacks and a sage green polo shirt, looking every inch the country club set, an image that couldn't be farther from the truth. But even though he might fit clothes-wise, he'd never feel comfortable in this stilted not-quite-real atmosphere.

Damn, he could use a beer. And maybe some pretzels.

He stifled a snort. Like they even had stuff like that here. Cassie glanced at him, looking concerned, and he touched her cheek then watched her tiny frown disappear. She smiled and that simple connection with her lifted his spirits.

A maid asked Cassie, "Would you like anything to drink, miss?"

As if she'd read his mind, she said, "Two beers, please."

Although everyone stared at her in shock, Mike wanted to kiss her for the sweet gesture.

"Cass, I think I'd prefer lemonade. I wouldn't want your family to think I've driven you to drink." He laughed gently, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. He understood her gesture, and it touched him deeply.

Grinning, she kissed his cheek. "Good point." She pulled him to her grandfather, and instead of an air kiss, planted a smack right on his aged cheek. Stuart Delistraty, thin and autocratic, scowled at her, but Mike swore he saw a twinkle in the old man's eyes as Cassie introduced them.

"Forgive me if I don't stand," Stuart said. "Recent hip surgery. Cassandra, you're as cheeky as your mother. I'd always hoped you'd grow up with more sense." Ouch. Stuart Delistraty, former Congressman and state Supreme Court Justice, still didn't pull punches.

"Cassie's got her own brand of sense," Mike said, trying to keep some friendliness in his voice, but he didn't like Stuart's attack on Cass. She didn't deserve it.

"Sense is way overrated, Grandfather. And seldom any fun."

Stuart snorted. "Fun isn't what life's all about, Cassandra. You're nearly thirty. It's about time you concentrated on something other than 'fun.' Have you decided on what you're going to do next in your law career?"

Mike bristled, but Cassie squeezed his hand in warning. She didn't seem to be upset over the old man's barbs. Did this happen all the time?

"I'm taking a break from work," Cassie said. "Today I'm pretending I haven't a care in the world, so I refuse to discuss anything serious. You know, I should have brought the dogs. They love the beach."

"Last time you brought them, that damned brown rat bit me." Stuart's mouth tightened, then he caught Cassie's poorly hidden grin. "You're teasing me." His mouth twisted as he obviously fought off a smile of his own. "I'll have to buy a Rottweiler to protect me from your nasty little dogs."

Laughing, Cassie said, "You'd stand a worse chance of getting bitten from your own dog, then, than from any damage poor Suzy could inflict on you."

"True," he conceded.

"And," she laughed, hugging Mike's arm, "You have something in common with Mike. Suzy nipped him as well."

Cassie's good humor infected Mike. He couldn't hold back an answering grin. "Cassie tells me it means Suzy has good taste." Stuart chortled. "Of course, I think it means the dog has a nasty temper and is more suited for taco stuffing than a pet."

Stuart roared, and Cassie tried to look outraged, but Mike could feel the silent laughter shaking her. He planted a swift kiss on her lips just as a servant announced lunch.

The meal started off in a pleasant if somewhat stilted manner. Cal didn't look at Mike, and Mike weighed every word he offered carefully. He wanted to make this lunch enjoyable for Cassie, and although she seemed very at ease, he could feel the tension in her, even from across the table. Did she always face family meals here this way, or did it have something to do with his presence?

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Ashford?" Loretta waited for his answer with polite detachment.

Caught with his spoon in mid-air, Mike set it back down in the chilled soup he'd been eating. "Please, call me Mike. I'm part owner in a nightclub near the U District."

He saw the look of displeasure on Loretta's face. "Really?" Loretta said. "You make a living selling alcohol?"

"I provide good entertainment to people in a safe environment. I make sure our patrons don't drink to excess."

"Mike was also a firefighter, before he injured his knee," Cassie said, her voice full of admiration. "His dad was a

policeman, and Mike started the nightclub with his former partner, who'd been disabled in a gunfight. Nobody else would take a chance on Ernie, and Mike stepped forward."

Mike couldn't help the warmth that filled him at her words of praise. Did she truly see him that way, as some sort of hero for helping Ernie out? He'd been unable to continue the work he'd loved, and when his dad mentioned Ernie's business ideas, it had seemed a natural solution to pitch in. That didn't make him a hero, but he discovered he liked being one in Cassie's eyes.

"Where were you a firefighter?" Stuart asked.

"Seattle." Mike sipped his lemonade, then set the glass down. Suddenly he wished he'd let Cassie get him that beer.

"Why'd you quit?" Stuart asked bluntly. "Even with a knee injury, you could have worked in some capacity."

Mike's face felt his face harden. Leaving the fire department hadn't set well with him. But he'd tried a desk job and had gone quietly insane.

"I like working with people." A bare foot touched his leg, rubbing up and down his calf. Cassie. He caught the wicked gleam in her eye, and suddenly this conversation, and defending himself to this old man, didn't seem so important.

"Mike holds charity drives and benefit events all the time. Last month, they raised money for a burn unit. A while ago, they helped a patron of theirs get a seeing-eye dog."

Ouch. She made him sound like a saint, just for doing the right thing. Then her foot skidded upwards, and he dropped his soup spoon, diving a hand under the table to stop her

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from going too far up. Everyone looked at him strangely.

Cassie lips twisted in silent amusement. *Damn wench*

"Sorry, he said. "Had an itch. Must be the salt air."

He sent her a warning gaze: *Wait until later, baby.*

I'm looking forward to it, her look responded.

* * * *

Cassie lifted her face towards the pale sunshine, closing her eyes as she soaked in the warmth. Rocking back on the dock edge, her fingertips holding her steady on the weatherworn wood, she laughed. "Mike, wasn't that a rush?" She leaned into him where he sat next to her, their feet dangling inches above the chilly Puget Sound water.

"Yes." Something in his voice told her he didn't mean the sail they'd just come back from, where strong winds had them skimming over the water at a rapid pace. Her blood still hummed from those perfect moments: the wind in her hair, stinging her face, the blue skies overhead and the man she loved by her side, laughing along with her, his eyes dancing with excitement.

Opening her eyes, she gazed at him, and her heart twisted in her chest at what she saw there. His dark hair, tousled by their heart-pounding ride, made him look roguish instead of the safe, solid picture he usually presented. He'd put his black tank back on, and she loved the contrast between that and his golden tan. She considered a bonus that it left his broad shoulders bare. His dark sunglasses dangled from his long fingers. A small half smile tilted his sensual mouth upwards as he watched her, which usually would be enough to make her

senses reel. But his gorgeous brown eyes sent her over the edge.

They radiated with tenderness, happiness and a deeper emotion that she feared to call love. But her hungry soul dared to dream and it lifted her toward him to plant a gentle kiss right on that sweet, sexy smile.

He kissed her back, their lips clinging together. One hand caressed her cheek as he whispered, "You're so damned beautiful you take my breath away."

With any other guy Cassie would have laughed or considered it a come-on. She knew her hair, tugged out of its pony tail by the wind, laid twisted all about her face, and her cheeks, wind-stung as they'd raced over the water, were probably too bright. Her gray tank top clung to her with sweat, and her blue capris weren't anything she'd call sexy.

But Mike thought she was beautiful, and she knew he believed it or he wouldn't have said it. All the years she'd known him, he'd never lied to her. Which was why when he'd said kissing her felt like kissing a sister, she'd been devastated. Not any more, though.

She wanted to make this temporary thing with Mike more solid. The love swirling around inside her demanded it, craving a more permanent foothold in his life. She knew the odds were against them, but this was Mike. She'd cared for him most of her life, since Cal first brought him home on their tenth birthday and she'd later that day declared him to be her best present. Wouldn't that caring be enough to make them last, even if some day this incredible love she felt somehow

faded? It had to be. This could be her only chance for long-term happiness when stacked up against the Delistraty curse.

She kissed him again, tasting his lips with her tongue, the tangy, salty essence sending her pulse rate up even higher.

"You love me," she said, tossing the words in between them, knowing that whatever happened in the next few moments, her life would change forever.

* * * *

"You love me."

Her statement slammed into him, shattering his happiness. He'd let too much show; the afternoon with her spent chasing clouds had made him forget who he was, who she was.

He shoved his sunglasses back on his face, hiding his eyes. The damage was done, but having her read his soul unnerved him. He needed his wits about him.

She was Cassandra Delistraty, who made cloud-chasing her life goal. He was Mike Ashford, failed firefighter and the owner of a nightclub, too far down on the social ladder from her to even register on her family's radar.

He'd felt her grandparents' disapproval. He'd been slapped with Cal's strenuous objections. What else did he need?

He tried to laugh, but it came out forced. "What's not to love?" He kept his voice light and teasing, hoping to deflect her words into something less significant. But her eyes told him she didn't buy any of it. She was on a fishing expedition and she wanted to bring home the prize.

Him.

But how long would it last before their differences tore them apart? He didn't belong in this world, and it would always be a part of her. He remembered when her mother had reconciled with her parents and first took her children to meet their grandparents. Cal'd struggled with the relationship. He'd found their world to be phony and unappealing.

Cassie, however, had adapted quickly. She'd loved her new relatives immediately. And with her bright smiles and bubbling personality, he was certain they'd warmed right up to her. She'd adored her grandparents until they'd tried to dictate her future. Then that famous Cassie stubbornness rose up and she'd rebelled.

Watching her today, he wondered if she still fought them in her own way. Perhaps her relationship with him was simply another form of rebellion.

That stung.

"Mike, I'm not joking."

"Cass, I never promised you anything. We both know that this is temporary, for me to keep you safe from your mom, and me from Ernie punching me out." He tried a smile, but her eyes sparkled with temper. *Uh-oh.*

"How can you say that, after making love to me? Temporary? Can you deny that there's a connection between us? That we mean more to each other than sex?"

Her words echoed his own heart. Yes, he'd felt that bond in every cell of his body. He'd be a fool not to recognize that he'd fallen in love with her. He'd also be a fool to not realize that it had no future, no matter how much he wanted it.

"Even if I did love you, which I'm not saying I do," he said. "Sometimes that isn't enough. Just because you love someone doesn't mean you're meant to be with that person."

She rocked back. "You can't be serious. You're willing to walk away from what we've shared?"

His eyes closed at the pain that clenched his chest. The thought of leaving her shattered him, but if he got any deeper, would he ever recover? Would he ever be satisfied with something less than Cassie in his life?

But he'd watched as she'd flitted through boyfriends like he went through socks. He knew she'd have the best of intentions, but intentions changed, faded away as reality set in. Witness her marriage: barely a few years before falling apart.

He wanted more than a few years with his next commitment. He wanted forever.

"Cass, this is all an illusion. Don't you understand that? We wove this little fantasy, filled it with great sex, and somehow fooled ourselves into thinking it's a good idea. But you and I both know we've nothing in common. Right now those differences seem wonderful, but trust me, you'll get tired of them and want to move on."

The breeze carried her scent to him, immediately tightening his groin. Damn, why did she have to be so enticing, so wonderful? He wished he could point to one thing that turned him off, but everything—her smile, her slightly crooked nose, her wild crown of hair, the way her mind didn't work quite like anyone else's—enticed him. Even the sheen of tears coating those gorgeous green eyes tugged at his heart.

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"Mike, I love you. I'm *in* love with you. I know it's not an illusion or a fantasy, and I can't see myself ever getting bored with you. I'm not living a fantasy. I want to see where it goes. Can you honestly say you don't want that, too?"

She loved him. His chest expanded a thousand times as joy filled him, carrying him up into the clouds for a perfect instant before he forced himself back to earth.

"I'd love that, but I'm not stupid enough to fool myself into thinking it would last. I'm not exciting enough or glamorous enough for you, and you'll want to move on. If you did stick around, it would be because of obligation or pity, and I couldn't live with that. Cass, we're not meant to be together. Can't you see that?"

Her mouth quivered. "What you're trying to say is that you don't trust me enough to commit to me. That my track record shows I can't stick with one guy for long. But I've never felt this way before. It's stronger, it's more deep inside me. I don't want to spend the rest of my life wondering if you were the one who could break the pattern." She reached out, caressing his cheek. He wanted to lean into that touch, capture her hand against his face and hold it there forever. But could he trust it? Could he trust her words?

"I don't want to be some sort of experiment, Cass."

She smiled her reassurance. "You're not. You mean so much to me. I can't picture my life without you. Can you honestly say you don't love me?"

No, he couldn't honestly say that. But he needed to say it, to give her the release she deserved. So he came as close to a lie to her as he'd ever come.

"I don't want to, Cass. I'm sorry, but I don't want to try. I don't want to end up like your father."

She froze, her hand still touching him. He could feel her flesh chilling against him, and his heart fractured. Her eyes became a swirling mass of pain, then her hand fell away.

The skin where it had rested immediately felt like ice, mirroring his heart. Sharp agony expanded inside him.

She lurched to her feet and with a sob whirled away from him, heading toward the house. He wanted nothing more than to call her back, enfold her in his arms and tell her he loved her with more than all his heart, with his soul and every fiber of his being. Yet he watched her go, knowing he'd done the right thing.

Knowing that he'd never be the same.

* * * *

Blinded by tears, Cassie flung herself on her bed. Giant sobs racked through her and she smothered her face into her pillow, hoping nobody could hear her. But someone did, and she felt a hand caressing her hair and soothing words falling on her ears.

Mom. With a cry, she twisted around into Lucia's arms as she gasped through her cries, trying to get some air into her starving lungs.

"Hush," Lucia soothed. "You'll be all right, baby. Shhh."

"Mom, it hurts so bad."

"Yes, baby, I know." Lucia hugged her tighter, one hand stroking her hair, like she'd done when Cassie was a child and had come home in tears after being teased about the thrift

store clothes she wore or her lack of a father in her home. Always she'd given Cassie some words of wisdom to strengthen her or help her understand why fate could be so cruel. But Cassie couldn't imagine anything that would help her now, so she curled into her mother's arms and cried.

"I know, baby." Lucia never missed a stroke on her hair. "You've loved him for so long, and now you face losing him."

"He's afraid I'm too much like you, that I'll leave him when I get bored."

Lucia's hand stilled, and she tilted Cassie's face towards her with one finger under her chin. "What do you mean, 'too much like me?'"

"You know, Mom." How could she say this without hurting her mother's feelings? "You... you've never been able to settle down with one man."

"And you think that's because I'm fickle?" Lucia's laugh sounded bitter. "Honey, the exact opposite's true. I lost my heart to one man, and despite all my attempts, I've never been able to get him out of my system."

One man? "I don't understand," Cassie said.

Lucia's sea-green eyes, so much like her own, stared out the window. "I fell in love long ago. In fact, I was probably about the same age as you were when you fell for Mike. Seventeen."

Seventeen. Her mother'd been in high school. Had her father been a rebound? "Is that why you didn't marry Dad?"

Lucia frowned. "I don't want to discuss your father."

"Why aren't you with this guy, Mom? Did he doubt you like Mike doubts me?"

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Lucia smiled, her eyes tender. "No, baby. I fell in love with the wrong kind of guy. He cheated on me. The girl took great delight in telling me. But unfortunately, that didn't stop me from loving him. God help me, I still do."

Cassie's head swam. Instead of being fickle, Lucia'd been in love with the same man all this time. Had her father been Lucia's attempt to move on?

Cassie wiped the tears from one cheek with the back of her hand. "What did you mean, that I was seventeen when I fell for Mike? I admit I had a crush on him before, but it wasn't love."

Lucia shook her head. "Baby, I saw it in your eyes. Whenever you looked at him, your feelings were right there for me to read. I recognized it, because I saw it in myself. If you're truly like me, you've loved Mike ever since. You can fool yourself all you want and call it a crush, but it was love."

She'd always had feelings for Mike, since before their first kiss. But love?

She remembered that kiss; it never faded from her mind. She'd wrapped herself around him, burying her fingers in that thick, dark hair like she'd dreamed of doing forever. Then she'd planted her mouth on his, using all the tricks she'd learned from all the bad dates she'd been on to get him to feel *something* for her, and all she'd gotten was 'It's like kissing a sister.' But for her, fireworks and toe curls didn't come close to describing it. It had been as if she'd awakened from a dream and discovered reality wrapped up in her arms.

Then he'd walked away. Just like today.

"He doesn't want to try, Mom. He's not willing to fight for what we have. He doesn't love me."

"No, baby, that's not true. He does love you. He's as easy for me to read as you are. But he's convinced himself that he's not good enough for our family, and your marriage and your dating history gives him more ammo to fend you off with." Her mouth twisted. "And so, apparently, does mine."

Cassie hiccupped, wiping away another hot tear. "So he loves me and I love him. Big, fat hairy deal. All it means is that I get to be miserable for the rest of my life, never happy with anyone else. This is what happens when you let hope derail you from reality."

"Cassandra." Lucia's stern mother-voice ceased Cassie's diatribe. "I'm shocked that you're letting self-pity speak for you. You're too smart to let a man's opinion stop you from getting what you want. And in the end, that's all it is: his opinion that you're not right for each other. You and I both know opinions can be changed. The question is how."

Curling her legs underneath her, Cassie eyed her mother. She made it sound so simple. But Cassie'd learned the hard way that nothing in her life worked that way. "Fine, you have an idea? Then let's hear it."

She didn't try to soften the sarcastic tone of her voice, but Lucia didn't react to it. "Use his sense of fairness to your advantage. Get him to agree to give you some time. A month, a week, whatever, so you can convince him that the two of you are meant to be together."

Meant to be together. She liked the ring of that. But it wouldn't be easy. "Mom, I've already told him I'm in love with

him, and he pointed out my track record and basically told me that someday I'll get bored and wander off."

Lucia smiled. "There's your weapon right there, my love. Convince him that you've always loved him. And because of that, your marriage didn't stand a chance. I mean, you loved your husband, but not with your whole heart. How could you?"

Lucia tapped Cassie's chest lightly with one red-tipped finger. "Mike still had a huge chunk of it."

* * * *

The leaden weight that had settled in Mike's chest grew heavier with every article of clothing he placed in his duffle bag. He hadn't brought much, so packing shouldn't take long. But the finality of it multiplied the pain he felt.

He'd done it. He'd walked away from Cassie, giving them both a chance at a better future with other people who'd suit them more. Someday, when all the passion dissipated, maybe he and Cassie could become friends again.

A sudden vision invaded him, of Cassie sitting in the bar, laughing while she leaned into another man whose arm encircled her possessively. He'd be the man to take her home, away from Mike; the one who would strip off her clothes and make love to her.

It hit him like a physical blow to the gut, and he reeled from the pain. *No!*

Another man? Someone else touching her?

No! No! No!

Turning away from the bed, he leaned against the wall, smacking it over and over with one fist as he fought to silence the agony.

After a few minutes, he regained a fragile hold on his emotions. Needing air, he opened the French doors and stepped out onto the balcony. He didn't notice Puget Sound stretching before him, or the tangy salt air blowing across the grounds. All he could see was the sailboat he and Cass'd used earlier, bobbing without a care at the end of the pier.

He'd never sailed before. He'd never thought he'd like it, but under Cassie's expert guidance, he'd actually found it to be an intoxicating experience. He could see himself owning a boat like that someday, skimming across the waves. But there the image faded. Because he couldn't see himself out there on the water like that without Cassie by his side.

Closing his eyes, he rubbed his fist across his chest. Could he actually go through with this, if mere packing tore him apart? How could he recover?

How could he live without her?

He didn't have a choice. They weren't right together. Nothing in their past gave them a chance for a future. Failed marriages, different backgrounds. Hell, she'd been a high-powered attorney, hobnobbing with CEO's, politicians, people who made the nation's policies and economics. What did they have in common, after all?

Again, the sailboat grabbed his attention. He'd discovered a liking for one of her activities, maybe there were more they could share? And other things they could discover together?

Uninvited, images of her making love to him danced through his head. She'd been so responsive, inventive and uninhibited. The way her eyes rolled back in her head, and the tiny little gasps she'd made; he'd never experienced something so erotic yet so innocent at the same time.

It hadn't been simply sex. He'd never felt that level of belonging with anyone before. As if they shared the same blood, the same breath.

I'm in love with you. He could still hear her voice, filled with passion and need, saying those words to him. But could he believe her? He didn't think she'd been lying, but was it truly love or a passion that would fade quickly? Could his darling Cassie, falling in and out of love all her life, actually know what true love felt like?

He sure as hell did. He just wished he could be sure about her.

He knew her so well. He understood that her quirky little half-smile meant she'd come up with a scheme that wouldn't sit well with him, that a tiny shoulder shrug meant something bothered her but she wanted him to figure out what. If her fingers twirled her hair, she was bored and no longer following the conversation or event. And if she closed her eyes and her luscious lips twisted into that delicious little smile, so full of mischief, watch out, world! The Delistraty penchant for trouble would burst out soon.

He wondered if, after being lovers, they could ever go back to being only friends. He hoped so; he'd miss her otherwise. Hell, he missed her already. But friends? *Well, any crumbs are better than starving, right?*

Then his earlier vision of Cass leaning against that other guy, obviously her lover, returned, and jealousy kicked him hard. No, scratch the 'friend' idea. He'd probably end up pummeling the guy just for looking at her.

Maybe he could move to Timbuktu.

"Enjoying the view?"

Glancing down, Mike saw Stuart Delistraty standing on the smooth concrete path below, his hands firmly holding onto a walker. Even with that evidence of his frailty, he still exuded a power and strength Mike could only guess at.

"It's great," he said, not wanting to encourage a long conversation, but not wanting to be rude.

"Yes, that it is." Stuart gazed out onto the water, then looked back up at Mike. "Sometimes I forget how blessed I am to have all of this. One of the greatest sins a man can make is taking for granted all the blessings he's been given. Like family, for instance."

His eyes held a challenge in them. Mike didn't feel like picking up the gauntlet, whatever it might be, so he remained silent.

"My granddaughter. She's quite a woman, much more than I'd hoped for. Bright, feisty, with a heart of gold. It's going to take a special person to understand all of that and find a way to enhance her, not drag her down or try to turn her into something she's not."

"You should tell her this, not me."

Stuart smiled. "I still have hopes that she and her brother will want to become true Delistraty's, for all that name

means. A little disapproval, a bit of strife, helps them both reach a little higher."

Despite his scowls and hard stares, Stuart was a fraud. But no matter. Mike didn't plan on sticking around long enough to understand the true man.

"Is there a point to this conversation, Judge?" Damn, he sounded curt, but right now Mike didn't care. He simply wanted to finish packing and head home.

"Of course there is. I'm not one to waste my time. And I don't want to see anyone wasting my granddaughter's time, or using her to further themselves. You're a businessman. In fact, I hear that you're an ambitious man, planning on expanding your club."

"And this is a problem?"

Stuart shook his head. "Not in itself, no. But the Delistraty name is a powerful thing, and you wouldn't be the first man to play on that." He gazed at Mike, no doubt taking in the sharp anger Mike felt rising up inside him. "I don't know you well enough to gauge your motives, but take this as a sign that I'm watching you." With a nod, Stuart picked up the walker and with a determined gesture, moved it down the path.

With a stifled curse, Mike went back into his suite. The red walls slammed into his anger, fuelling it. He'd never use Cassie like that. Ernie's request came to mind, but he dismissed it. If they couldn't finagle that location on its own merits, then they were better off looking somewhere else. Sure, it would be a blow, but they'd recover.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

A knock sounded on his door. He knew instinctively that it was Cassie. Cursing his leaping heart, he twisted his face into what he thought would represent a neutral facade, then left the balcony and crossed to the door.

The knock sounded again; he laid his palm on the wood, feeling her on the other side. His pulse fluttered and that damn rock in his chest gained weight. Eyes closing, he heaved a sigh. If she could affect him this strongly by simply being near, how could he hope to withstand her in the same room?

Jerking open the door, he kept his face impassive as his eyes feasted on her. She'd clipped her hair into a soft ponytail on the top of her head, leaving a few curls cascading down her neck. She'd obviously been crying; her eyes were reddened with faint smudges of mascara under her naked bottom lashes. Her cheeks were pale and her lips, barren of lipstick, couldn't hold onto the smile with which she greeted him.

"Hi," she said. Even her voice sounded tear-laden. Damn it, he wanted to whisk her into his arms and wipe away that sadness. But at what sacrifice for both of them?

He couldn't bear to see her like this, so bereft. Yet did he see hope deep in her jewel-toned eyes?

"Are you alone? I thought I heard voices."

He didn't want to discuss her grandfather with her. "There's nobody in here but me," he said. "So what brings you by?" He hoped he'd kept his tone jovial. From the look on her face, a mixture of pain and misery, he'd failed miserably.

"I thought we could talk some more," she said. Her voice, husky and sounding brittle, barely reached him.

"Cass." Sucking in a deep breath, he knew he needed to keep his distance from her, to force home the point he'd made earlier, that they weren't right for each other. But her eyes pleaded with him, and he caved.

"Come in," he said, standing aside for her to enter. She walked past him, and he noted that her feet were bare, an unusual state for her, considering her love of fancy and usually lethal footwear.

Shuddering under the effort to control his reaction to her, but not wanting anyone to see Cassie upset, Mike shut the door. He shoved his hands into his pockets to keep them from reaching out to her. Her perfume, though faint, grabbed at him, reminding him of making love to her, when that same scent had mated with the aura of their passion. Would he ever be able to smell that fragrance without being thrown right back into that bed with her?

He turned from the door to face her, but she wasn't looking at him. Instead, she stared at his duffel bag. Her back stiffened and she stepped away as if she'd been struck.

Damn, he could feel the pain radiating off of her. Her face angled toward him; fresh tears pooled in her eyes.

"You're leaving?" She sucked in a shaky breath. "Were you even going to say goodbye?"

Would he have? "I hadn't thought it out that far. I thought it would be better if I made myself scarce."

One glittering drop escaped; she wiped it away impatiently. "Good for whom? Not for me. When did you become such a coward?"

His control jangled at her question. "I'm not running away, Cass. I thought you'd need some time to work through things."

"Really?" He could hear the anger in her words, anger that would spill over onto him at the slightest provocation. "What happened to your great plan to keep my mother and Ernie's horny daughter at bay?" She glanced at the duffel bag again, and her face tightened. "I certainly had you pegged wrong all these years. Never thought you'd run from a challenge, or judge someone unfairly. Like you're doing to me now."

Ouch. She certainly didn't pull any punches. "How'd I misjudge you?"

She crossed to the window and stared out over the water. One elegant hand fingered the sheer drapes contained by a silken tasseled rope. She didn't turn back to him, instead tossing her words over one shoulder like so much debris.

"You decided that I'm fickle, that I can't sustain any feelings for anyone long term. I can't really blame you there. I'd kind of jumped to the same conclusion. But what if I was wrong, Mike? What if you're wrong, and I'm capable of a love that would last until the day I die?"

"What if I told you that I've loved you since that first kiss so many years ago, and that every attempt I've made at relationships since then failed not because I was fickle, but because you still laid claim to most of my heart?" She glanced back at him. "Would that change your perception of me?"

Those sparkling eyes tossed a challenge at him: *I dare you to find out.* "Give us a chance. One month. That's all I ask. Let me show you how much I love you."

He couldn't look away. Like a tiny flame, the idea burned its way into his heart, and he savored her words, running them through his mind to weight their validity. Could that have been the case? Had they both felt that pull of attraction, that touching of the souls so long ago and been under each other's influence since then? Because he knew, if he'd be honest with himself, that he'd never quite recovered from that passionate yet innocent kiss she'd given him eleven years ago.

Part of him held back. If he believed her, then he'd be risking his heart, or what remained of it. But could he gain even more of it back? Wouldn't even a tiny slice of time with this wonderful woman who invigorated him, who helped him break out of his rut and truly enjoy life, be worth any risk?

As he crossed to her, he slammed his mind's door shut on any nagging doubt. Pulling one hand out of his pocket, he stroked his fingertips over her satin-smooth cheek. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she leaned into his hand as if craving his touch. She reached up and cupped the back of his neck. The contact seared through him, lighting every nerve on fire.

Hell, how'd he think he could leave her? What a fool he'd been! He could no more leave her than he could stop breathing.

He pulled her into his arms, holding her, letting her body heat seep into him. The heavy weight in his chest disappeared.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

"I believe you, Cass." Then he kissed her, and she sobbed against his mouth, a tiny sound of joy that he'd remember forever.

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Chapter Nine

"How about over there?" Navigating through the thick Independence Day crowd, Mike pointed to a rare vacant spot on the grass, but Cassie shook her head. Although they were nearly three hours early, finding somewhere to sit presented a challenge. Ever optimistic, Cassie hoped for a better spot.

Swinging a canvas bag filled with snacks and a few cans of pop, she nodded toward the large hill in the park's center. A huge balloon bust of the Statue of Liberty crowned the hill, glowing from lights highlighting its beautiful profile.

"I want to get on the other side of the hill," she told him. "It's usually better viewing over there. They always put on a show, with parachutists, lights and things like that. You can't see that from here."

She glanced over her shoulder to make sure they hadn't lost Cal and Lucia, but they were only a few feet behind them. Lucia, decked out in a short, fringed black skirt and flaming red peasant blouse, could easily pass as Cassie's more flamboyant older sister. In fact, compared to Cassie's own white camisole and pink floral skirt complimented with strappy pink cotton and rattan sandals, Lucia definitely made the stronger statement.

It didn't matter. Let Lucia outshine her. Tonight, she was with Mike, in every meaning of the word.

In fact, everything looked rosy. Mike and her family seemed to be getting along okay; even Mike and Cal had been grudgingly polite to each other. They'd shared a

pleasant meal with her grandparents before they'd hopped into Cal's car.

Leaning into Mike, she relished the heat that curled through her. "I'm looking forward to the fireworks tonight."

His brows raised. "Oh? Why is that making me nervous?"

She laughed. "Relax. Can you think of anything more exciting than making out while the sky's exploding above us?"

His eyes closed briefly as her words impacted him. Oh, my, when his lips parted like that, all she could think about was tasting them.

Yes, the sparks she'd felt for the man had definitely burst into full-fledged skyrocket. And judging by the huge smile plastered on his face, he felt the same way.

She'd loved spending time with him the last twenty-four hours. She'd forgotten what a great sense of humor Mike possessed. The last six months, she'd kept him so off-balance with her outrageous flirtations that he'd always been a bit defensive around her. Now both of them could relax and be themselves. And Cassie discovered that he fascinated her no end, with his openness and his tender heart.

Despite his protests that she'd become bored with him, she couldn't think of anything more exciting than waking up next to him, like she'd done that morning. He'd still been asleep, and she'd laid there, curled up next to him, just watching him breathe. Her heart thumped madly at the feel of her breast crushed into his side and of his arm curved possessively about her, holding her firmly in place even while he slept.

Then his eyes had opened, and she'd sunk into the depths of them, the deep chocolate color mesmerizing her. He'd smiled, that sexy, hungry smile that told her exactly what he was thinking of.

"What the—?"

Mike's stunned voice jerked Cassie back to the present. They'd gone around the hill and were approaching her preferred viewing spot only to find that the majority of it was cordoned off with bright, colorful streamers.

Balloon bouquets decorated the space, their white, green and silver colors matching the flower-covered trellis that marked the entrance. Even at this distance, she could feel the display's effect on her own heart.

A man, decked out in a black tuxedo, stood next to a table. The small glass table held a vase filled with vibrant wildflowers and two silver candlesticks. A bottle of champagne chilled in a silver bucket, and a tray held hors d'oeuvres.

It was a lovers' dream. Someone wanted the object of his affection to know without a doubt how much they were adored. To drag all of this down to the park, to get permission to put on such a display, then to wait patiently for their intended paramour to arrive took a lot of guts.

Cassie's eyes traveled to the tuxedoed man. He looked very familiar, she realized. His stance, the tilt of his head, he resembled...

Dad!

Her heart missed a beat and her feet stumbled to a halt as she realized that it was indeed her father, intensely

handsome in black tails and bow tie, who looked at them with hope and trepidation. He held a single white daisy in his hand.

Daisies. Her mother's favorite flower. Her heart began to pound. Jake planned on proposing to Lucia again. And even knowing she'd probably turn him down, he'd planned a very spectacular, extremely public way in which to do so. Only a callous heart wouldn't be moved by such a sight.

Cassie's gaze flew to her mother, who stood a few feet away, one hand pressed to her chest, the other clinging to Cal's arm for support. Her eyes never left Jake.

Cassie's breath caught. Far from being chilled or annoyed by Jake's romantic display, her mother's face gave it all away; her features radiated love and adoration. Her emerald green eyes shimmered with tears, and her trembling lips parted.

Cassie stared from one parent to another. Even from a distance Jake radiated tenderness, and Lucia gave every sign of being a woman in love. She'd never seen such raw emotion on their faces. All her life, they'd been so guarded around each other, even during the brief periods they'd been together. But now, her father's surprise declaration caught Lucia with her guard down. All her feelings were on display for the world to see.

Following her brother and mother, Cassie gripped Mike's hand, needing his support to counteract her rubbery knees. Only vaguely aware of the crowd of people gathering, she couldn't take her eyes off of her dad, standing there with such hope in his eyes.

Cal led Lucia to Jake, who held out his hand to her. She placed her trembling fingers in his, and he led her through the trellis. A few feet from the table, he stopped and removed something from the tuxedo pocket, then knelt down on one knee. Lucia's sob was swallowed by the crowd's collective sigh.

Cassie felt hot tears streaming down her own face. Mike's arms encircled her and she thankfully leaned her head back against his solid chest. After all these years, her parents might finally come together. The aching bubble growing in her chest threatened to burst, and she welcomed it.

After all the private proposals Jake had subjected their mother to, a public one seemed to be what she wanted. Had she been holding out all these years for him to shout his love from a rooftop? Was that all it took?

Holding her breath, Cassie strained to hear her father's words. She and Mike halted right outside the trellis. Cal joined them, and she reached out and grabbed his hand. He squeezed hers tightly, his eyes never wavering from their parents.

Jake took Lucia's hand in his own. His face tilted up to hers, and his voice sounded raspy as he said, "Lucia Delistraty, I've loved you for as long as I can remember. You're the sun and moon, the reason I wake up in the morning."

Lucia sobbed, and Jake kissed her hand. "I've never loved anyone but you. Will you—"

At his words, Lucia's face hardened and before he could finish his thought, she snatched her hand back from him. Her lips twisted in anger.

"I don't have to listen to your lies, Jake. If I let you, you'd make a mockery of marriage." She twisted away and rushed out of the ropes. Cassie reached for her, but she jerked away.

Were those tears of despair coursing down her mother's face?

With a sigh, Jake stood up. Although he tried to hide it, Cassie could tell he was shattered inside.

"Well, that's my final answer, I guess. I've been a fool, holding out for her for all these years. It's time for me to call it quits and move on."

"Dad," Cal said.

He held up his hand. "No, son, there's nothing you can say that I haven't thought of myself. Your mom obviously wants nothing to do with me, and I need to get that through my thick skull and let her go."

He brushed past them; Cassie didn't try to stop him. Hot tears scalded her cheeks. But her mother's anguish and her father's shattered look wouldn't let her wallow in her weakness. She pushed away from Mike, stroking her fingers across his chest, reluctantly leaving the shelter of his arms.

"Do you think Mom headed to the car?" she asked Cal.

"Hell, I don't know. Leave her alone and let them cool off. Let's clean up this mess for them, then get out of here."

"No," she said. "We've tiptoed around their relationship for too long. I've never understood why they're not together. Have you even seen two people more in love than they were

tonight?" She lifted her chin as her resolve strengthened. "We've left them alone for years, and it's accomplished nothing. I want to know the truth. I think we deserve it, and I'm going to get it now."

"Cassie, wait." Mike held onto her hand, refusing to let go when she tugged at it. "Cal's right, let them work this out. I know how Jake feels, and frankly, he's probably better off without your mother. This is probably for the best."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She knew her anger spilled over into the tone of her voice, but she didn't care.

"Mean?" Mike look confused. "It means that your mom's not exactly the most faithful or stable woman in the world." When her blood pressure rose and it obviously showed on her face, he added, "Now, Cass, that's not a criticism, just a statement. I know what it feels like to be cheated on, so I know how your dad feels. People like your mom, they don't quite get it."

"Get what?" Cassie couldn't believe the garbage coming out of his mouth. "People like my mom don't get what?"

"I don't want to start a fight. But if you haven't been cheated on, then you don't know how much it hurts. Your mom, well, I think she'd always be the cheater, not the *cheatee*. I know it's hard for you to understand—"

If he'd physically slapped her, it wouldn't have stung as much. "I don't understand? I think that walking in on my ex doing one of his clients gives me some understanding, don't you?" She let her words sizzle in the air for a moment before giving in to her urge to get away from Mike and his 'exclusive club' attitude, of which, unfortunately, she happened to be a

card-carrying member. Add to that his criticism of her mom, and Mike suddenly looked like 'jack-ass' should be tattooed on his forehead.

Turning on her heel, pointedly ignoring Mike and not daring to look at her brother, Cassie stalked away.

Of all the moronic, pig-headed idiots! Was she the only one who'd recognized that look of betrayal in her mother's eyes?

Her dad was the love of Lucia's life. Cassie was pretty sure of that now.

The fact that her mom thought he dad hadn't been faithful was something she would get to the bottom of, or die trying.

* * * *

Mike raked his hand through his hair, heaving fresh air into his tortured chest. What a mess he'd gotten himself in with his big mouth. She'd never told him, but he'd sensed an air of pain about her. Why hadn't he put two and two together?

Cal picked the flowers off the table, dumped them on the ground and put the empty vase into a box. "You really are an ass, you know that? Where the hell do you get off talking about Mom like that?"

Fighting for calm, he untied the balloons and handed them to some kids walking by. Taking his action as a cue, other kids ran to the balloons anchoring the corners in an adolescent feeding frenzy. One looked for permission, and Mike nodded as he put the candlesticks next to the vase.

"I'm sorry, but I lived next door to you guys, remember? I saw those guys coming and going all the time. I never saw your dad with anyone else."

Cal's eyes iced over. "You know how many guys we found in our mother's bed? Do you have any idea what we really went through?"

Mike opened his mouth to reply, then decided to take the higher road. "I don't have a clue."

"None, Mike." Cal shoved the two glasses into the box. "Those guys might have come over, but none of them ever spent the night. And to my knowledge, my mom never spent the night away from home. She may dress a little over-the-top sometimes, and sure, she can act a bit nutty, but that doesn't make her a whore. And it sure as hell doesn't give you the right to imply that she is one."

"Does Cassie know this?" It might change her image of her mother. Hell, it changed *his* idea of who Lucia was.

Cal shrugged. "We never discussed our parents' relationship or Mom's dating habits." He folded a chair and laid in on the ground, then added the other one.

Mike didn't care for Cal's cold shoulder, but he had one more question. "Did you know that Cassie's husband cheated on her?"

Jerking off the tablecloth, Cal glared at Mike. "It didn't take a genius to figure out that battered look in her eyes. No, she didn't tell me, but I knew."

"Then why didn't you say something?"

Cal's gaze turned hot. "It was none of your damned business."

Mike rubbed his fingers on his knotted forehead, hoping to stop the frenzied thoughts in his mind. Cal's over-the-top attitude really grated on him, but nothing would be solved if

he reacted the way he wanted to and punched his best friend in the face. Instead, he'd concentrate on the woman he loved.

"I'm going to go find Cassie." Turning away in disgust, he scanned the crowd for the fastest way back to the car.

"Mike." Cal's clipped tones ground him to a stop. Turning around, he met his bitter gaze.

"Your screwing around with her isn't going to help her find happiness. You still don't see the real Cassie, and because of that, you can't appreciate her for what she really is. You see her as this flighty, unreliable woman, and all she can see is that guy she kissed eleven years ago. How fair is that line-up?" Cal turned away, tearing down the streamers, every movement showing barely contained anger.

Mike couldn't take any more. With a muttered curse, he strode off. He didn't need Cal's garbage. No, he needed to find Cass.

* * * *

"Mom."

Lucia sat on the grass by Cal's car, wiping tears away with the hem of her blouse. Trust her mother to wear waterproof mascara. Cassie probably resembled a raccoon.

She sat down on the curb by Lucia, studying her. Of course she'd seen her upset before, but somehow this seemed different. Today, she seemed fragile and uncertain. Even at her flightiest, Lucia had always been strong and determined. Now, for the first time, Cassie saw her in a different light, as a lonely, uncertain, middle-aged woman.

She put her arm around her mom, realizing as if for the first time how tiny Lucia really was. It added to Lucia's delicate air, making Cassie feel as if her mom could shatter at any moment.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Lucia nodded. "I'll be fine. I just didn't expect it, that's all. He usually only does this on April Fool's Day, just like everything between us is a big joke."

"But isn't that the anniversary of your first date?"

Lucia snorted, an unladylike sound coming from her mother. "That's just an excuse so Jake can make light of marriage. But when he did this today—well, it was like all my fantasies had come true and he really meant it this time."

Cassie leaned back, staring at her mother. "How could you not take Dad seriously? He's proposed to you every year. He came to see you every Sunday. He sent you cards and flowers on Valentine's Day, Mother's Day and Christmas. How could you think he wasn't serious?"

"Cassandra, please. He did all of that for you and Cal, not me. I'm the mother of his children, so he felt obligated. That's not love. That's not what I wanted from him."

"Mom, I'll give you that maybe when we were kids, he might have been motivated by us to do some of the things he did. But we haven't been kids for eleven years. Why didn't he stop then?"

"I don't know." Lucia sniffled and wiped her face on her shirt. Definitely unladylike, and very unlike Lucia, who, even though she operated by unconventional methods, always maintained perfect manners. "Habit, perhaps?"

"Or maybe love," Cassie said. Her mother stiffened.

"He never loved me, Cassandra. He felt obligated because I was pregnant with you and your brother, but he never loved me."

"Mom! Of course Dad loves you. Didn't you see it in his eyes today?"

Lucia shook her head, and her face became hidden in her blond tangle of hair. "I don't know what I saw today, but I do know he never loved me."

Cassie could feel the pain raging through her mother in her voice. "Why do you believe that? What proof do you have?"

Lucia stood, one hand slicking her hair away from her face. "Because the night we made love, the night we conceived you, he went and slept with someone else. He slept with Annalise Thompkins."

That name sounded familiar. Cassie hopped up. "Do you mean Mike's aunt?" Jessie's sister? It couldn't be!

Lucia nodded, her eyes hardening with bitterness. "Yes, I do. She took great pleasure in telling me about it."

"Mom, that can't be true!"

Lucia's mouth twisted in sourness. "She bragged about it to me. Told me she'd finally gotten her man. She'd been dating him for quite a while, she told me. When he started spending time with me, I didn't know he was her boyfriend. So, Cassandra, now you know the truth. I never married your dad because he betrayed me."

Cassie couldn't believe it. Her father, who'd been faithful to his mother for all these years, cheated on her the first time they were together? No, it couldn't be.

"You never talked to him about it, confronted him with it?"

"I asked him, when I was pregnant with you, if he'd ever been with anyone else, and he lied, Cassandra. He said no." Fresh tears shimmered in her eyes. "I gave him the chance to come clean, and he never did."

Lucia lifted her chin. "Go back to Mike. Enjoy the fireworks. I'll call for a taxi and catch the ferry back to Bainbridge Island."

She walked away, leaving Cassie stunned. Trembling, she fumbled for her cell phone and punched in Cal's number. When it went immediately to voice mail, she called Mike. She was still angry with the man, but she needed his help.

When he answered she said, "Mike, is Cal with you?"

"No, he isn't. Are you all right?"

She paused for a moment, enjoying the warmth his concern caused. "I'm fine, but I need to find Dad. And Mike, this is going to sound strange, but have you ever heard anything about an affair between my dad and your Aunt Annalise?"

"What? No. Where did you hear something like that?"

Cassie quickly explained, asking, "Do you know why she'd make up something like that?"

"No," Mike said, and Cassie thought she heard sharp anger in his words. "But I'm starting to think my mom might have a clue."

* * * *

"Mom." Mike stood inside his parents' kitchen, not wanting to be there, not wanting to confront his mother, but knowing

he had to. If she'd done what he'd begun to suspect she had, then he needed to know it. And he needed to know why.

"Mike." Spinning away from the sink, Jessie's face showed both pleasure and confusion. "Your dad's not here. We didn't think we'd see you today, since you're spending it..." Studying Mike's face, she frowned. "What's wrong?"

"You tell me, Mom. Why does Cassie's mom believe that Jake slept with Aunt Annalise?"

His mother's face paled and she gripped the countertop behind her. "What?"

Did he see guilt there? His law-abiding, too-honest mother was hiding something. "I'm talking about the reason Cassie's mother always turns down Cassie's father, who proposes to her every year, who's waited years for her. I'm talking about the fact that Cassie's mom has loved this man for over thirty years and has denied herself—and him—because she believes he betrayed her with my aunt!"

Jessie reeled at his words. "I...I don't know what you're talking about."

Damn, he'd stumbled onto something. In two strides he reached her. Gripping her shoulders, he asked, "Mom, what did you do?"

Uncovering her face, she stiffened her shoulders and her eyes turned hard and angry. "She's the only black mark on my thirty-five year marriage. Your father's been the perfect husband and father, except for her. Lucia." Her mouth twisted in a sneer. "He doesn't know I saw them that day. Holding her in his arms, kissing her, going upstairs to her bedroom." She sucked in a harsh breath, her eyes swimming with pain.

"I couldn't confront him. That could have chased him right to her. Julia was a baby, I was pregnant with you, and I couldn't be a single parent. I made sure there was no more opportunity. I found another sitter, and whenever she came to visit her grandmother, I kept your dad so busy that there was no chance of anything happening." Tears formed in her eyes. "Months later I told Annalise that Lucia hit on your dad. I figured she'd do something. I didn't know Lucia was pregnant with Jake's babies, not at first. I only meant to break them up. I wanted her to know what true heartache felt like."

"Dear God, Mom," Mike said. He dropped his hands to his side. His father had cheated on Jessie? With *Lucia*? He couldn't even wrap his mind around that.

"Jessica, how could you have thought that?" Pete strode into the room, his eyes incredulous and angry.

"Pete...!" Jessie reeled again; without Mike holding her up, she stumbled. "I saw you two! I went next door to see what took you so long, and I saw you holding her. And you took her upstairs."

"I never had an affair with her. She was a kid, for God's sake. And I was happily married to you!" He raked one hand through his hair. "The only times I ever went next door was to ask her to babysit for us."

She looked up at Pete. Mike saw confusion in her face, heard the accusation in her voice. "But I saw you holding her, then going with her into her bedroom."

He frowned, staring at his wife. "She'd been crying once. Apparently she'd dropped something down the upstairs

bathroom sink, and it had clogged. A ring some boy had given her, I hugged her to calm her down, then I helped her retrieve it." He gripped her by the shoulders. "Jess, I never slept with her. Do you hear me? Never."

Mike eyes shut as his anger melded with shame. One lie, and an entire family suffered. He remembered the anguish he'd heard in Cassie's voice as she'd discussed her childhood. "Well, Mom, time to fix what went wrong," he said to Jessie. He picked up the kitchen phone and held it out to Jessie. "Call Aunt Annalise, tell her it's time for the big confession."

* * * *

Angry tears burned Cassie's eyes. "How could she have done this?" She held her cell phone tightly in her hand, having just hung up from talking with Mike. She sat in Cal's Camry at a traffic light, on their way to meet up with Jake.

Cal gently pried the phone from her fingers. "I assume you're not expecting an answer from me on that one."

"No." Bitterness twisted in her gut. "I want to strangle all of them. Look at what they did to our family, and why? Because that shrew's a jealous—"

"Cass." Cal gripped her hand. "You can't let this screw you up. What happened, happened a long time ago. It's over. What's important now is seeing if we can set things straight."

She nodded, fighting down the bile. "You're right. I know you're right. But I don't know how I'm going to be able to stand being in the same room as that woman."

"That's going to be quite a problem, isn't it?" Cal said quietly. "Considering you and Mike are now a couple."

Cal's words chilled her. Normally not a person who held a grudge, Cassie realized that in this case, she *wanted* to hold a grudge. She wanted that woman to know how much pain she'd caused. But she didn't want Mike to suffer in the process.

"We'll work it out somehow," she told her brother, wondering how on earth she'd accomplish that when all she wanted to do was throttle her boyfriend's hateful mother.

* * * *

Mike stood by Cassie at the ferry's rail, watching the moonlit water skim by on their way back to Bainbridge Island. A few feet away, Cal and Jake stood, talking quietly.

She'd wrapped her silence around her like a blanket; he didn't dare touch her. Nothing in her body language told him that she'd welcome it. He could feel the nervous tension coursing through her; stress sizzled off her. She'd been distant since he and Jake had met up with her and Cal. But now, perhaps he could make peace with her.

He'd been way off base concerning Lucia; although the woman wasn't exactly an average mother, she was Cassie's mom, and for that fact alone, she deserved respect. In reality, there were many reasons to respect Lucia, but Cassie would be the best one.

"Is everything all right?" he asked, raising his voice to be heard over the thrum of the ferry's engines.

She nodded, remaining silent. But her ramrod straight spine told him differently.

"I'm sorry about my mother's meddling. I know it's not enough, but she's truly sorry for the problems she caused."

Cassie turned her face toward the water. "I don't want to talk about your mom," she said, and he had to fight the wind to hear her words. "At least, not until after I calm down."

Mike nodded, hoping that this wouldn't cause a rift between them. At least, not any bigger than he'd caused himself. "I'm sorry for my remarks earlier. I was talking through my own narrow viewpoint. Sometimes when things happen to you, you think you're the only one who's ever experienced them and you don't see things clearly."

She nodded, but he didn't know what that meant. Before he could ask her, a tap landed on his shoulder. He turned to acknowledge Jake, who'd worn that tense, wary yet hopeful look ever since Cass and Cal had pitched their plan to him.

"I sent Cal to get us all some coffee so I could talk to the two of you." Jake leaned against the railing, facing Cassie and Mike, his voice loud to overcome the wind.

Mike didn't like the sound of this. Any time a dad wanted to talk to him in the past, it had taken the form of 'if you ever hurt my daughter...'.

"Looks to me that you've grown past your play-acting, and I wanted to be sure you've discussed this and not just slid into a relationship without knowing what the other really wants," Jake said.

Mike knew what he wanted: Cassie beside him for eternity. "We've talked, and we're clear on everything," Mike said. But at his words, Cassie stiffened. No, damn it, he'd mucked things up, and with everything going on, he didn't know when

he'd get a chance to fix them. What could he do to close this rift?

You never said you love her. The realization slapped him hard. She'd said she loved him, but why hadn't he said the words back? He knew he loved her, had been in love with her for forever, but what held him back from telling her?

Because he felt vulnerable and exposed with her. As if he was merely waiting for her to wound him. But if he couldn't trust her completely, did they have a shot at a future?

He remembered the bravery she exhibited by chasing after her mother and confronting her, then later hatching this plot to clear the air with her parents. When she believed in someone or something, she showed a fierceness and tenacity that transcended fear, that often overrode even common sense.

How much nerve had it taken for her to come to him like she'd done yesterday and bare her soul to him? More than he could comprehend. For her to have been able to do that, she must love him deeply. He understood then and there that she'd fight for him just as steadfastly as she battled for her parents right now. And as he realized that, the lingering doubts melted away.

He wrapped his arm about her and placed his mouth next to her ear. This wasn't the best moment to declare himself, but he couldn't let her suffer any more.

As his heart slammed in his chest in fear and joy, he said, "I love you."

Cassie slumped against him as if her knees had turned to rubber. Her face angled toward his, and the love shining from

her dancing green eyes filled him to the brim with happiness. She planted a kiss on his mouth, then with a laugh, broke away.

"Yes, Dad," she said. "Everything's fine."

* * * *

"Mom?" Finally, Cassie had found her.

Lucia sat outside on the darkened terrace overlooking the water. Only a candle on the glass tabletop, enhanced by the soft moonlight, lit her features.

"Cassandra, I don't want to talk about this."

Cassie stood next to her mother, who kept her face turned away from her. "I don't want you to, except to answer one question."

Lucia sighed, but Cassie knew by the tone of that sound that she'd comply. "What?"

"Is Dad the one you've always loved?"

Silence stretched for nearly a minute, but Cassie bid her time. So did her father, standing back in the shadows just inside the open French doors.

"Of course he is, Cassandra. But that makes no difference."

"Yes, it does, Mom. It makes all the difference in the world." Cassie held out her cell phone. "Here, Mom, this is for you. It's not Dad," she added when her mother hesitated. "It's an old acquaintance, who wants to tell you something."

Curiosity overrode her reluctance and Lucia took the phone. Cassie hoped like hell that Annalise Thompkins could be as convincing telling the truth as she'd been telling lies.

Leaving the terrace, Cassie passed her father, who kissed her cheek. "Thanks, honey."

She hugged him fiercely. "You're welcome, Dad. Now go talk to that foolish woman."

She could see his grin, even in the darkness. "You bet, and this time I'm not taking no for an answer."

"Good for you." He moved past her, his eyes only for Lucia, and Cassie contained a whoop.

She stepped into the shadows of the library, looking for Mike. He'd said he loved her. Her heart swelled. Surely with love like that, they could work through anything, including his mother's bitter machinations.

Yes, they needed this night to themselves, free of anger and misunderstandings. He'd said he loved her, and she wanted to hear those words over and over again.

As if her thoughts brought him to her, Mike's arms circled her, and his mouth fastened on to hers. Laughing, she wrapped her arms about his neck and her legs around his butt.

"Hey, stranger, wanna neck?"

Mike's laughter warmed her almost as much as his kisses. "How could you be so sure I wasn't the butler?"

Giggling, Cassie nipped his bottom lip. "'Cause he has a moustache." Planting fleeting kisses on his mouth, his cheek, his throat, she asked, "Why are we still upright?"

"Don't you want to see the outcome of this?" Mike nodded toward the deck.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

Leaning back, Cassie peeked outside. Her dad, kneeling in front of Lucia's chair, held her sobbing mother tightly in his arms, soothing her with soft kisses and tender whispers.

She felt her own eyes misting. Her parents' dreams were coming true. Now, she needed to concentrate on her own.

Smiling, she tasted the base of Mike's throat. "I already know. Now I'm more interested in the outcome of tonight."

Mike's brows arched upward. "Oh?"

She laughed, her world finally all right. They could work through anything as long as they had this chemistry, this connection, between them. "I've been remembering our last 'session' all day, and I've been thinking that nothing could have been that good."

"Oh, really?" She felt rather than heard his laughter. "Are you trying to tell me that fantasy is better than the reality? Woman, familiarity breeds even more ecstasy. What do you think of that?"

She thought the world of that. "So show me the goods, pal."

Laughing, Mike lifted her up in his arms.

"Baby, I'll show you good. In fact, I'll show you great."

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Chapter Ten

Cassie heard a tinny melody from far away. "What's that?" she mumbled against a solid warm object.

Mike's chest. It felt so natural, waking up next to him. They'd been home for several days now, and usually ended up together at her place. Being in love was great. She snuggled closer, planning on going back to sleep.

But that noise kept nagging at her.

"It's your phone." Mike's voice, mildly annoyed, cut through her sleep-ridden mind, and she lifted her head up to stare at the clock. It was a bit after seven. She didn't like mornings, not at all. Whoever was calling her, she'd shoot them.

The cell stopped ringing, and with a sigh, she dropped her head back on Mike's chest. All she wanted was to fall asleep again in his arms, wake up later in the same position, then to make long, lingering love to him again.

For an instant, the thought that they still skirted around some major issues bothered her. His mother, for one, and his over-protective manner toward Cassie's desire to work with her brother. But she refused to let those problems keep her awake. Her eyes fluttered shut to Mike's slow stroking of her hair, and she let herself sink into the contented veil of sleep.

Almost immediately the cell started that annoying sound again. Darn it, when she'd downloaded that song the other day, she'd really liked it. Now it only grated on her nerves.

"I'd better get that," she muttered, still not moving.

"Yes, I think you'd better." Mike kissed her forehead, and she reluctantly separated her body from his. Groaning, she tumbled off the bed, landing onto her clothes, where her phone nagged at her from its perch on her skirt's waistband.

"Hello?"

"Cassandra?" a woman sobbed, and it took several moments to recognize the voice through the choking tears and the baby screaming in the background.

"Irina?" Sitting up, she dragged her hair out of her eyes. Last time she'd talked to her one and only client, she'd been happily planning on moving into her house. Cass had arranged for all the locks to be changed, and a security system installed. That had happened a few days ago. "Irina, calm down and tell me what's happening."

"It-it's Stan. He came here and knocked so loud that he woke the baby up. He told me...!" Her sobs choked her for a moment, but she continued. "He said that he would see us dead before we live off him. He left when a neighbor yelled at him, but I know he'll be back." Baby Andy wailed and Cassie heard Irina try to shush him, but the mother's panic must have transmitted to the baby, because he cried even louder.

"Irina, take a deep breath, I can barely understand you." Sitting forward, Cassie grasped her skirt and slipped the rumpled mess on. Her client was in trouble, she didn't have time to find something else to wear. "Did you call the police?"

"Yes, I did, but it will take them time to get here. Cassandra, what do I do?"

Cassie thought fast. She'd only met the father-in-law once, but he'd struck her as a loose cannon.

"I'm on my way. Take Andy to that little coffee house down the corner, and I'll meet you there, okay? Lock the house up, and I'll call the police and tell them to meet us there. He won't get away with threatening you."

Hanging up the phone, she stood up and found Mike watching her. She could tell by his deep frown he'd overheard and had a pretty good understanding at what the dilemma was.

"I have to go," she said.

He nodded. "I know. I'm going with you."

Cassie bristled. This over-protectiveness grated on her nerves. "Mike, you don't need to. I'll be fine."

"Cass, I know you feel you can take care of everything, but humor me here. This guy's been threatening her, and that could spill over onto you. Until the cops have him in custody, then I don't want you taking any chances."

Swallowing her own doubts, she said, "More than likely he's just a hothead spouting off due to too much booze. Besides, I don't want to panic Irina. If you're there looking this grim, you'll scare her to death."

Pulling on his jeans, Mike snorted. "I'm sure that she's already terrified. I doubt I'll add to it. Cass, I'm going with you. Deal with it."

Rolling her eyes, she slipped her shoes on and snagged her jacket. "Fine, come along. But if you rip open your shirt and show off the big 'S,' I'm never speaking to you again."

* * * *

The little coffee shop teemed with chaos as the uniformed police officers wrote down Irina's statement. Mike leaned against the door, glancing out the glass panes as if keeping watch for Irina's father-in-law. Cassie didn't want to remind him that he'd never seen the man, but at least he'd stopped harping on her about getting involved in cases like this.

Damn, he looked sexy in this protective mode, with his dark eyes narrowed, one brown lock hanging over his brow and his muscular arms crossed over that very broad, very manly chest. If it weren't so irritating, so smothering, she'd drag him off somewhere and do him right now.

But it did bother her. She didn't like leaning on anyone, even if it were the man of her dreams. The fact that he forced such help on her made it harder to accept.

"Is that all, ma'am?" the officer asked. Irina nodded, and he walked out to his patrol car to call in. Cassie gripped the other woman's hand, handing her a tissue when a tear escaped.

"Will this stop him?" Irina asked.

"This will help," Cassie told her, making her voice soothing. "The fact your neighbor overheard the threats and is making a statement as well will help. They can pick him up on that alone, and in the meantime we'll file a restraining order. If he comes anywhere close to you, we can have him arrested."

Irina turned hopeful eyes to her. "Then it's over?"

Cassie longed to lie to her, and tell her yes. But lies wouldn't protect Irina in the long run. She needed to know the reality of the situation. "It's the first step, and hopefully it'll knock some sense into him. But they won't be able to hold

him for long and he might cause some more trouble. If you see him, you call 911. We'll go get you a cell phone—" Cassie lifted one hand to stop Irina's protest. "You won't be paying for it. There's a program for endangered women that'll set you up. I already called and they're expecting you. And they'll also set you up in a shelter."

Irina's chin lifted, and for the first time Cassie saw a glimpse of strength that must have been core in her personality before the loss of her husband. "No, I will not run," she said. "This is my home. Is it not?" Cassie nodded. "My husband and I were married for five years. I worked until I became pregnant. Much of my money went into our home. It is as much mine as anyone's. I will not run."

Cassie squeezed her hand. "That's a great attitude, but you have your son to think of as well. Until we know it's safe, you should probably go to a shelter for endangered women. He won't be able to find you there, since they keep the location secret. I'll make sure nothing happens to your house."

Irina's head slumped in defeat, but she nodded. "I cannot go to a hotel this time?"

Cassie shook her head. "Last time, he wasn't threatening you. This time, he is. The place I want to send you has a security guard. You'll be safer there, okay?" Irina nodded again, her eyes sad. Cassie gave her hand another squeeze, then slid out of her chair and crossed to Mike.

He held an arm out to her, and she slipped up against him, soaking in his strength. She felt him press a kiss to her hair, and she smiled up at him.

"She okay?" he asked.

Cassie nodded, sadness touching her. "Yes, she's a lot stronger than she looks. I think I've talked her into going to a shelter. Right now, though, I'm going to take her to get a cell phone. That's the first step."

Mike's smile seemed grim. "Sad world we live in that there has to be a program to give out phones to victimized women."

Cassie raised her brows. "You're right, but at least this society cares enough to provide such a program. Most of it's funded by donations."

Mike pulled her tighter. "I know. I don't like you involved in this, though. I have a bad feeling."

Cassie rolled her eyes. She'd already heard this several times today. "I'll be fine. I can handle myself."

"I know, but that doesn't stop me from worrying. Listen, I need to get to the club. Ernie and I are making a last-ditch proposal to the city planning office, to see if we can get that zoning change."

She studied his face, and saw the worry in his eyes. "It's not going good?"

He gazed out the window. Hiding his feelings, she realized. His distancing himself from her disturbed her; it felt as if he were trying to hide something. "It'll be fine," he finally said. "If this site doesn't work, we'll find another."

Cassie knew from her days in business law that it was a much bigger deal than what he made it out to be. Time and expense went into research and developing any potential site. She almost offered to help him—the Delistraty name often

opened shut doors—but vivid memories of Ken telling her that he only married her for her name rushed through her. No, she wouldn't start down that road again. Let Mike love her for her, not for her family legacy.

So she bit her lip and returned his smile, hoping that he'd be right, that everything would work out for the best.

But if it didn't, would she forgive herself for not helping him? And if she did step in, would she always wonder if he stayed with her out of desire for her, or for her name?

"I'm going to take them downtown and get the phone and shelter set up. Tell Ernie hi, and let me know how it goes."

Her heart thrilled when he pulled her tightly against him and pressed one hot, savage kiss to her mouth. "I will. And promise me something."

His warm kiss filled her with happiness, but the seriousness in his eyes chilled her. "What's that?"

"Don't go to that house alone. You don't know what this guy's capable of."

His frown gave his request more weight. Cassie couldn't think of a reason why she'd go there, so she nodded. "No problem."

* * * *

"I don't know why I keep having to repeat myself," the cranky woman at the police station said. "But it's going to be at least an hour before an officer can escort Mrs. Richter to her home to gather her belongings."

They'd gone to the woman's resource center, who'd helped Irina with a shelter for endangered women, some food

vouchers, a cell phone and had even set her up with counseling. The only thing they'd not provided her with was an escort to help her pack. Their one and only resource officer had called in sick, so they'd referred her to the police, urging her not to go home unless escorted.

Cass matched the cranky woman's attitude tone for tone. "You have to repeat yourself because you've been saying the exact same thing for the last three hours. So once again, can you tell me *exactly* how long it'll take for an officer to go with us?"

The woman's mouth tightened to a thin line, and her pointy face turned to the computer screen. "Like I said, it's going to be—"

"At least an hour. Yes, I think I got it." Pushing herself up and away from the extremely unhelpful help desk, Cassie searched out Irina, and found her walking up and down with an irritated Andy. The woman took one look at Cassie's face, and her welcoming smile faded.

"Not yet?"

Shaking her head, Cassie smiled grimly. "No, and I don't see us getting bumped up to the top of their priority list."

Irina nodded. "I talked to an officer and he says that many of them are directing traffic at a Mariners game."

Cassie groaned. "I'd forgotten about that. We could be here for a while. I could call Cal again." Once again, her brother wasn't answering his phone.

Irina shook her head. "This is so...how do you say? Asinine. We are two grown women, and he is behind bars, is he not? Why can we not go?"

Cassie glanced around, hoping an officer would come to her rescue. She'd promised Mike, but all this waiting was stupid, and poor Andy showed every sign of starting a major meltdown any moment. How much longer could he last?

"Do we know when he will be released?" Irina asked. Stan Richter had been found a couple of hours ago in Irina's house. They'd been told that he would be having a bail hearing soon.

Cassie shook her head. "I asked earlier. They wouldn't give me any information. Just that he'd be processed in the next few hours." She hesitated, then dove in. "I'll be honest with you. If we go over there, he could show up. But I don't think he'd really do anything too stupid, and we both have cell phones. But sometimes desperate people do crazy things."

Andy started to cough, and Irina thumped his back. "His cough, it is getting bad again. I forgot his medicine at the house."

"Medicine?" Cassie's brows arched in surprise. "You didn't tell me he was sick."

Irina nodded. "Yes, he has...what is the word? Ear defecation. He is taking pink stuff."

Cassie smiled. "Ear *infection*?"

Irina nodded. "Yes, he has ear infection, and he needs to take medicine. Plus baby Tylenol, for the pain. I left it at home." She rocked Andy, who, as if trying to emphasize his mother's statement, tugged at one ear.

Cass watched the distressed baby with a growing sense of doom. If she waited, Andy would get worse. They could try to get more medication, but that would be another delay. The house was twenty minutes away, tops. They could go there,

swoop in, grab what they needed and be at the shelter within the hour.

Stupid Mariners. Actually, Cassie loved a good game, but right now she'd love a police escort more.

She tried Cal's number, but once again it went directly to voice mail. Either he had no signal or he'd shut it off again. She'd called Mike as well, with the same results.

She heaved in a deep sigh. "Okay, fine. Let's just do this. In and out, ten minutes, and we go back for the rest of your stuff when we have a proper escort."

Irina nodded.

* * * *

In the bright sunlight, Irina's tiny home, with its vibrant rose beds and cheery annuals, didn't seem very threatening. Cassie pulled the T-bird up front and killed the engine. "I don't have a lot of room in this car, especially with the other car seat," Cassie said. The woman's resource center had loaned them one until Irina retrieved her own. "So let's grab necessities—medicines, clothing, toothbrushes, some favorite toys, things like that."

Irina nodded. She'd grown up in a war zone, Cassie had learned, so quick exits must have been common. She didn't like the haunted look in the other woman's eyes, though. Smiling to reassure her, she hopped out of the car.

"Let's go do this."

Entering the house, Cassie stopped, shocked. "Irina, what happened in here? It looks like you have demolition going on." There were two gaping holes in the drywall, a spot where

the carpet was pulled up, and the ceiling sported a large hole as well. Drywall dust covered the room and chunks lay scattered across sofa cushions tossed on the floor.

Irina's mouth tightened. "The hole in the ceiling was not there this morning. The carpet, it was fine this morning, now look! The other holes were there when we moved back in. I do not know why."

Cassie eyed the damage. "Looks to me like he's looking for something." She stepped over some drywall and picked up a sofa cushion, tossing it on the couch. "What a mess."

"I do not know what he would be looking for." Placing Andy in his playpen, Irina glanced up the stairs. "I will go pack clothes. There is formula and bottles in the kitchen. Plus some baby food."

"I'll grab them." Cassie entered the kitchen to find dry goods tossed over the counter and on the floor. Drawers were pulled out and cupboards left open. The fridge stood open as well. Shutting it, Cassie surveyed the mess with disgust. More of Stan Richter's handiwork, she figured. When his wife and son had died in that car accident, he must have slipped a few cogs.

Her cell began to chirp. Fishing it out of her purse, she glanced at the display. Her stomach knotted. Mike. His meeting must be over. And here she stood in Irina's house, having broken her promise. Now she'd have to hide her whereabouts from the man she loved. Or not answer it.

No, then he'd worry and come looking for her.

Man, this really sucked.

Answering the phone, she said, "Hi, Mike. Meeting all done?" Darn, she sounded too chirpy.

"Yes," he said, his tone clipped.

"Is everything okay?"

"Better than I expected, but we'll talk about it later. Where are you?" No, he didn't sound happy at all.

Trying to lighten the mood, she said, "Are you in a hurry, big guy?"

She didn't even hear a chuckle. "No, just worried about you. I don't like this situation with Irina. I have a bad feeling."

"Well, we had to wait for the police to escort us to Irina's house, and we're on our way to the shelter." *That's not exactly a lie*, she told herself.

"Great. So what do you think, about another hour? I'm thinking that tonight would be a great movie and take-out night, before we head to the club."

"Cassie, he tore apart my bedroom. He even cut my mattress." Irina rushed into the kitchen, carrying Andy. Stumbling over some jars of food, she grabbed Cassie's arm for balance.

"Cass?" Mike's voice barked in her ear. "You're at her house now, aren't you? And why do I have the feeling that there's no cop with you?"

Heart hammering as she took in Mike's anger and Irina's distress, Cassie played her one lame card. "You said alone, Mike. I'm not alone. Irina's with me."

"Damn it, Cass, you know what I meant. Either with me or the police. She's no protection."

"As far as I know, he's still being processed. We're fine. Please don't overreact."

"I'm not overreacting. Get out of there, and we'll go back later and get their stuff."

Glancing out the window, Cassie wondered how it could look so serene outside and be so chaotic in here. "We're almost done. We'll be leaving in a few minutes."

Mike's anger seeped into his voice. "No, get out now. Damn it, I can't believe you did this. You never had any intention of keeping your word to me, did you? We've barely begun this relationship and you've already started lying."

Dread sank into her gut like a rock. "Mike, please don't overreact. I—"

"Cass." Irina crushed her upper arm in a painful grip. Twisting around, her heart stopped.

A gun pointed in her direction. Stan Richter held it chest high, his beefy hand shaking. His voice however, sounded cold and calm. "Get off the phone, lady. It's time we settled this. Once and for all."

* * * *

"Damn her." Mike stepped on the gas as his heart raced out of control. He held his cell phone to his ear while he navigated traffic one-handed. Cassie hadn't turned hers off, instead slipping it somewhere, in a pocket or her purse, where Mike could listen in. He could hear bits and pieces of the conversation. He'd called the police from the bar phone, but he didn't know if they'd get there soon enough to help the two women and the little boy. Luckily, Irina was listed in the

phone book and the address was only a couple of miles away. He didn't know what he could do, but he had to try to save Cassie.

He couldn't believe she'd lied to him. Especially about something so dangerous. Didn't she have any common sense? Did she value the truth and their relationship so little that she'd lie to him to get her own way?

It smacked of Sharon and their relationship. She'd lied all the time to him. Her outings with friends, shopping, movies with her mother. All turned out to be cover-ups for her dates with other men. Mike couldn't stomach another relationship like that.

"Tell me what you want, Mr. Richter." Cass sounded calm and in control. Good. If she showed fear, that could rile the man. Even in his anger, Mike admired her for keeping her head.

Keep him talking, Cass. I'm coming as fast as I can.

* * * *

"Tell me what you want, Mr. Richter. You're looking for something. Walls torn up, floors damaged. What do you think it is that Irina has?"

Cass stood facing the man, Irina and Andy tucked behind her, between Cassie and the counter. *Stay calm, Cassie. Keep your face impartial and unemotional. Don't let him see you're afraid.*

Stan Richter's face reddened. The gun wavered in his hand, a clear sign of his unfamiliarity with the weapon.

Cassie's heartbeat accelerated. *Please, don't panic and start shooting.*

"What is it, Stan? Did you leave something in here when you sold the house to your son? Something you want back?"

His hand shook even more. She must have hit a nerve. Cassie pressed Irina further behind her, felt the baby kick her back.

"It's mine. My wife's gone. Anything that belonged to her belongs to me now. She had no right to give it to my son, and he had no right to leave it to her." He almost spat the last word; Cassie felt Irina tense.

"What's yours, Stan? What is it you think Irina has?"

"I know she has it. My wife told me she'd given it to the boy, and when I told him I wanted it back, he said it's for the brat. Hell, I doubt that baby's even his."

Irina's breath sucked in harshly. Cassie didn't have to look at her to know she bristled with outrage. "So this thing—this is what it's all about? Your kicking her out of the house, your tearing the place up, even the threats? It's all to get back this whatever it is?"

"A coin collection." Stan's mouth tightened. "My father-in-law left it to my wife. It should be half mine, but she wouldn't let me around it. She was afraid..." He stopped abruptly, glancing away from Cassie. Ashamed, perhaps?

"He gambles," Irina said, her voice barely above a whisper. "He doesn't know when to stop."

"Shut up!" Stan yelled. His panic hung over all of them like a thick fog. "How did I get into this? All I want is that damned coin collection. It's mine, I deserve it. Not her."

"Coin collection? You mean that box of old coins? This is all over that?" Irina stepped out from behind Cassie before she could stop her. "That's what you're after? You put us through all of this for those?" Her laugh sounded bitter. "They're not here. They are at the bank. Eric put them there right after his mother gave them to us."

"Coins?" Cassie stared at Irina. "What kind of coins are we talking about?"

Irina shrugged as she shifted Andy to her other hip. "I do not know. Andy tried to explain it to me, but I do not understand United States money very well. There were many coins, in little containers, and in many coin books. Some coins are gold, some are silver, most are old. Many of them are gold with a lady on them, twenty dollars each."

Gold coins? Cassie tightened her gaze on Stan. "Liberty head golds? Twenty dollar pieces? Is that what we're talking about?"

He sneered. "There are some, if I remember right." Under her unbending stare, he added, "Probably a hundred."

Worth about a grand each, and if in decent condition, thousands more, if she remembered right from her grandfather's discussions about his collection. After politics and trying to control his family, coins were his greatest obsession. "That's only some of the coins? What are the rest?"

"Rolls of Morgan dollars, some Peace dollars, some others." He smirked. "Addie's parents collected them for years, then she added to it. But she wouldn't let me around it, said it was for our son." His laugh sounded hollow. "Fat lot

it'll do him now." He waved the gun barrel toward Irina.

"What is someone like her going to do with all that money?"

All that money. If that box held as much as she thought it did, they were talking about at least a quarter of a million dollars, if not more. "Stan, we can talk about the coins and who they belong to later. Right now, we need to figure out how to get you to put that gun down."

"Those coins are mine!" He waved the gun in the air; his eyes widened as his voice grew louder. "We're going to go get them. Now." He pointed the gun toward the front door.

"You're going to get the coins for me, Irina, or I'll hurt the baby. And your bitch lawyer here. Now move."

Irina started toward the door, retrieving her purse on the way. As Cassie passed him, he wrapped his arm about her throat. "I know you were talking to someone on the phone. If the cops show up, you're my shield. And don't try any crap or I'll shoot Irina in the back."

Cassie swallowed hard. If she were alone, she could easily disarm him. But right now, with Irina and the baby Stan's main target, she couldn't take any chances.

Irina opened the door, with Cassie a few steps behind her. As they headed to Cassie's car, Mike's Mustang pulled up at the curb and he leapt out.

"Stay back!" Stan held the Beretta in front of Cassie's face and pointed it right at Irina's head. "Get out of our way, and nobody will get hurt."

Cassie knew that gun. She'd learned to shoot one year ago, and had used one for target practice. Irony that one would be used against her now.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

Suddenly something came into focus.

"Oh, for Pete's sake!"

Anger surged through her, fueling her body. Vaguely she heard Mike shouting at her, but she didn't hear exactly what he said. Everything blurred except that gun. If she was wrong, someone would die.

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Chapter Eleven

Mike's heart dropped into his shoes. Cassie came out of the house, a man holding her around the shoulders with a gun pressed against her head. Cassie's client, Irina, walked in front of her, clutching her baby, her eyes wild with terror. Mike wanted to save them somehow. But unarmed, he didn't stand a chance. All he could hope for was that the man would calm down and give up willingly.

Then he saw that look in Cassie's eyes, that gleam that always meant trouble.

His pulse stopped. "Cassie, don't!"

But she either didn't hear him, or didn't listen. She stomped backwards, one of those nasty heels digging into the man's foot. At the same time she grabbed his arm, the one without the gun.

"Cassie!" Mike started to run. He had to get to her, save her.

Cassie twisted and the man flipped over, landing with a loud thump. The gun flew out of his hand, landing several feet away. She held the guy down by wrenching his arm back and up.

"Cass, what the hell are you doing?" Mike finally reached them. Damn, he wanted to shake her.

The gunman roared in pain and thrashed around, trying to get away. Mike picked up the gun, pointing it at him. "I'd stop if I were you. I'm not as nice as Cassie. I won't let you off with just a few bruises."

Letting go, Cassie stepped back. "Irina, are you all right?" The woman nodded, her body shuddering in reaction.

The police arrived and in moments they took charge, relieving Mike not only of his prisoner but of the gun as well. They escorted Irina inside to get her statement. Mike stared at Cassie as she talked to an officer. She seemed so cool and collected, while anger raged through him, twisting him into knots. He couldn't believe she'd done such a stupid stunt. It was a miracle nobody had died.

Finally, they were alone. "What the hell were you thinking?" His words came out sharp and harsh. But he didn't care. She could have been killed. Or Irina, or the baby.

"I was thinking that I couldn't let that idiot get away with it. Irina was terrified."

Mike ran his hand roughly through his hair. He couldn't believe this woman. "And you thought getting her shot would calm her down?"

Cassie rolled her eyes, and his temper rose. "Cass, you can't keep doing crap like that. This time, you were lucky."

"This time," she snapped. "I saw that the safety was on."

Stunned, Mike stared at her. Her eyes shot daggers at him as she continued. "Do you honestly think I'd risk Irina and Andy like that if I wasn't sure I could take him down? He'd obviously never touched a gun before. Do you really think I'm that careless?" She studied him for a long moment, then gasped. "You do! You truly think I'm that dumb."

"Not dumb, Cassie. Just impulsive. You run with your emotions instead of thinking things through." He lifted his

hands. "C'mon, you can't deny that you leap before you look. It's almost your signature."

Her lip curled back. "You truly think I don't think things through? That I don't weigh things out before I take that leap?" Her eyes searched his face. Apparently not liking what she saw, her expression tightened. "Look, Mike, I didn't take any chances with Irina and the baby."

Mike barked, cutting her off. "You didn't take chances? What do you call bringing her here without police escort? You *lied* to me, Cass. You told me that you wouldn't come here alone, and you led me to believe that you were coming here with a cop. You misled me, just like—" He bit off his words before he said something he'd regret.

But Cassie didn't miss anything. "Just like Sharon, right? Like your darling ex-wife who lied to you and cheated on you. You don't think I see you looking at me, searching for little ways I'm like her so you can distance yourself from me? You don't think I gauge my every word, my every move, wondering if it'll remind you of her and give you an excuse to walk away?" Her eyes glimmered with tears. "When are you going to realize that I'm not her?"

His chest constricted at the sight of her pain, but his own hurt drove him on. "When you quit doing crazy things like this. Next time you might not be so lucky. Then what?"

"Then I guess I'll deal with it. In my own crazy, impulsive way." Pressing a fist against her forehead, she sighed.

She lifted her gaze to his face. "But that's not the entire problem here, is it? The truth of the matter is that you can't trust me to do the right thing. So you try to manipulate me

into doing what you want me to do. Like today. You made me feel guilty about doing what I needed to do for my client. Because of that, I ended up twisting things. I shouldn't feel guilty about doing my job, Mike. You're trying to control me, because you don't trust me."

Her chest heaved, as if fighting for breath. "How can we build any sort of relationship if you can't trust me?"

Her words shafted through him. Was she breaking up with him? "I don't think it's that bad, Cassie. We can work it out." Reaching out, he grasped her hand.

Pulling away, she took a few steps back, then crossed her arms. "Can we?" A sob rattled in her throat. "You know, I've been struggling with the fact that your mother kept my parents apart. I'm not sure if I can ever forgive her, but I was willing to give it time, for you."

Tears sparkled on her lashes, and she slapped them away. "Now I see you take after her, jumping to conclusions without any facts, twisting things around to get what you want."

"Now who's jumping to conclusions?" Bile twisted his guts. Mike balled his hands into fists. "I'm nothing like my mom, and if I've been overprotective, it's from twenty years of habit. You have no common sense. You don't think things through before you act. And you have the nerve to be caught in a lie, then tell me that somehow it's all my fault?" Sucking in a deep breath, he forced it out over his clenched jaw. "You're right about one thing. We don't have anything to build a relationship on."

He dragged his eyes away from her and turned them to the road. His feet didn't want to cooperate, but he forced

them. Every step shoved daggers further into him, but he accepted them as part of the package deal that went with loving Cassie.

"So that's it?" Her voice, sounding broken and torn, stopped his footsteps.

He didn't allow himself the luxury of looking back at her. "I trusted you, Cassie, and you let me down. You lied to me, and I don't know if I can forgive that. It's over."

He felt her eyes boring into him. "Fine. You've always wanted to judge and label me. You wanted to justify your opinion of me. And now you've found it. And you're wrong. You never trusted me. I need that, but you give me nothing but suspicions." Her stiletto heels clicked sharply on the concrete path as she strode into the house.

Mike ignored the faint sob he heard as he walked away and started his solitary journey back to his old, lonely life, a life torn apart by one Cassie Delistraty.

* * * *

Cassie pulled up in front of her house, barely able to understand what had happened. All she knew was that Mike had left her. And she'd let him. She'd allowed the only man she'd ever truly loved to simply call it quits.

Her hands shook on the steering wheel. Unshed tears burned her throat. This couldn't honestly be the end, could it?

No, she couldn't let it end like this. She'd go find him, talk to him, try to work things out. Jerking the car into reverse, she stomped on the gas pedal, and within minutes found

herself outside the club. Mike's car wasn't there, but she'd wait for him.

It was late afternoon, so the place felt almost empty. Cassie ignored Kendra's slanted glare and headed toward the bar, where she saw Ernie mixing a drink.

He nodded at her as she slid onto a barstool. "Hey, Cassie. Where's Mike?"

She tamped down on the lump that rose into her throat. "I'm not sure. We had a fight."

Ernie pierced her with a slanted gaze. "Bad one, I take it from your voice." At her nod, he flipped over a glass, squirted some pop into it, and slid it to her. "Don't go away." Picking up the mixed drink, he delivered it to another customer at the end of the bar, then returned.

"Cassie, I don't know what the fight's about, and frankly, I'm not sure I want to know. But I do know this. Mike loves you. And from the look on your face, I'd say the feelings are mutual. So don't give up on him, okay?"

Cassie remained silent, her thoughts bouncing through her mind. She knew Mike loved her, but that didn't mean he'd be willing to work things out. He still saw her as headstrong and impulsive, and now she'd added the stain of her lies on top of that. With a sigh, she sipped her soda.

The Delistraty curse was alive and well. Her mom might have been able to defeat it, but Cassie didn't feel so confident.

"By the way," Ernie said, "I wanted to thank you for what you did."

"What?" she asked, puzzled.

Ernie lifted his brows. "For saying something to the zoning commission." At her confused look, he said, "Didn't Mike tell you? They changed their minds. They're letting us open the club in the waterfront warehouse."

"Ernie, I didn't say anything to anyone. And Mike never asked me for help." She didn't know what she would have done had he asked. She hated using her family connections for anything. She did things on her own, without using her family name to open doors. After discovering that Ken had married her for the Delistraty political clout, she'd always wondered if she'd ever be loved for just herself. With Mike, she'd never worried about him wanting her for that reason. In fact, the opposite had held true. "If they agreed to rezone, it's not because of me," she said. "You two must have been very convincing."

Ernie's brow furrowed. "That's just it. We didn't even get a chance to say anything. The commission announced that they were granting our request. So I thought that... Huh, I wonder."

"What?"

Ernie shrugged. "Well, I asked him to talk to you about helping us right before you two went to visit your grandparents. Maybe he said something to your grandfather?"

"No, he never got a chance," she said. Then she remembered hearing voices in Mike's room. Had Mike spoken to him then?

No, he wouldn't have. But doubt ate at her. Ken had used her for her name. Surely Mike wouldn't?

No, he'd always said he'd never fit in with her crowd. Why would he turn to her family for help when he'd known how she'd been hurt by Ken using her?

But the proof stared her in the face. Ernie and Mike now had their precious zoning change. Her heart shattered.

She'd been used again.

"Cass. I'm glad you're here. We need to talk."

Her gaze whipped upwards and found Mike in the kitchen entrance, staring at her. Crazy, her heart leapt at the sight of him. How it could break one moment, then fill with joy the next, she didn't understand. But she did know something else with certainty.

It was over.

Holding his gaze, she slid off the stool, picked up her purse. Straightening her spine, she mentally cut their bond.

"Goodbye, Mike."

She spun around and walked out the door, never looking back.

* * * *

"You really are a jackass."

Mike didn't look up. He continued wiping down the bar with a vinegar-water solution that cut through the film on the sleek black finish. This attack was merely another in a long line. "Shut up, Cal."

Large hands with whitened knuckles slammed into his view. "No, I'm not shutting up. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't beat you to a pulp."

Mike tossed the towel into the bucket. "She made her decision." He'd killed himself by breaking up with her. Finding her in the bar had been like a reprieve from hell. Then she'd walked away.

He headed into the kitchen. He'd finish the bar later. Bad enough he couldn't work past the blinding pain that clung to him like a third degree burn. It showed no signs of letting up, even though a week had passed since he'd last seen Cassie. Now he had to have his ex-best friend tear at the scabs like a lunatic.

Apparently madmen didn't give up easily. Cal followed him right into the kitchen. "No, instead you accuse her of lying, proving my point."

Resisting the temptation to dump the dirty water somewhere else, Mike emptied the bucket into the sink, then haphazardly tossed it under the floor. Garbage. He needed to empty it. He grabbed it, can and all, and headed to the back door.

Reaching the dumpster, he tossed the entire can in, then realizing what he'd done, reached in and pulled it out. Turning around, he came face-to face with Cal.

"Okay, fine. I'll bite," he said. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that you keep confusing her with your ex-wife. Sharon lied because she was a using, heartless bitch, who married you because you looked good on her arm and impressed her shallow friends. Cassie lied because you backed her into a corner, making her choose between you

and her client. Not a fair choice, given how much she wants to help people."

Mike jerked the bag out of the can, tossed it in the dumpster with more force than necessary, then hefted the can off the ground, glaring at Cal.

"Cassie lied. Justifying it doesn't make it go away. I don't have her confused with anyone, Cal. I know her for exactly what she is—someone I can't trust."

* * * *

Cassie poked listlessly at the strawberry shortcake she'd made for herself. Why had it sounded so good while she'd prepared it, but now tasted like sawdust?

The same reason everything else went flat, that annoying voice in her head told her. She placed the dish on the coffee table with a feeling of defeat. Immediately Suzy jumped on her lap, plopping her head down on Cassie's knee. Cassie scratched her, welcoming the presence of the tiny body.

"I'm glad you're here," she said to the dog. Suzy glanced up at her, while keeping her head firmly on Cassie's knee. "You make me feel needed, even if it is as a source of warmth."

Suzy didn't reply, not that Cassie had expected her to.

This must be how Batman feels. Hidden in a dark cave, all alone and misunderstood, with only bats to talk to. Yep, that fit her perfectly. All she needed were some of the winged rats flitting about to perfect the mood.

The other dogs began to bark as Lucia swept through the front door. Her bright red summer dress hurt Cassie's eyes.

"Hello, darling. I have news for you."

Suzy leapt off Cassie to dance enthusiastically around Lucia's feet. Abandoned again. Sighing, Cassie sat up. "What is it, Mom?"

"We've set a wedding date. Labor Day weekend. And you're my maid of honor. It won't be quite a normal wedding, but it's going to be close." Lucia petted the dogs, then swept her blonde hair back and frowned at Cassie.

"Are you still moping around? I thought you and Mike would have made up by now."

Pain shot through Cassie, and tears burned the back of her eyes. "I told you, Mom. We're not getting back together. It's over." Even though she'd faced the reality, it still killed her to say it aloud.

"Nonsense. You two are meant to be together." Lucia sat down by her, shoving Cassie's feet off the couch.

A tear escaped her tight control. "No, you're wrong. Just chalk it up to the Delistraty curse."

Lucia snorted. "You're copping out. We're in charge of our own lives. You and I aren't going to let a simple curse stop us from getting what we want."

Cassie laughed with disbelief. "Mom, it took you thirty years to get what you want. I don't think I can hold on for that long."

The dam broke and she swallowed a sob. With a soft exclamation, Lucia folded her into her arms and Cassie let the tears fall.

"Oh, honey," Lucia said. "I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. I should never have interfered."

Cassie stifled a sob. "Interfered?" She hiccupped. "What do you mean?"

Lucia flushed. "Well, I'm afraid I decided not to let nature take its course. I set up that little dance contest, knowing Mike would call you, then he'd have to rescue you." She smiled slightly. "Did you really think I'd be that crazy?"

"You what?" Confusion and shock tore away her tears.

"I'm sorry, Cassandra. But quite frankly, waiting for you and Mike to figure it out on your own was driving me crazy. You'd flirt with him, he'd run, you'd pout, then drive him crazy with your sexual innuendos. You two weren't making any progress."

"Mom, did it ever occur to you that Mike and I don't belong together? That your meddling simply made things worse?" Cassie pulled away. Needing something to do, and she popped a glazed strawberry into her mouth, chewing liberally.

"Well, no, not until now," Lucia admitted. "I guess my little plan messed things up, rather than fix them." She reached out and smoothed a random lock from Cassie's face. "But I still believe you two belong together."

"Mom, I can't take any more of this." A chunk of cake followed the strawberry. "Promise me you won't interfere any more." Lucia's gaze skittered away from her, and Cassie raised her voice. "Promise me."

Lucia sighed. "All right, I promise. No more meddling. But you need to quit sitting around here, pouting. Trust me, I have thirty years of experience with this. Staying active is the best thing for you."

She glanced at her watch and gasped. "Heavens, I'm going to be late. Your father and I are interviewing officiates this morning." She turned a stern frown Cassie's way. "Get dressed, go out and do something. Now."

After the whirlwind that resembled her mother flew out the door, Cassie sighed and popped another strawberry into her mouth. She should have known. Sometimes she felt like a victim of peoples' needs. Ken's need to be a political success. Her mother's need to see her happy.

Mike's need for his stupid zoning change.

Her own need to be trusted and loved for who she truly is.

The phone rang, and she checked the caller ID. Cal.

"Hey, sis, got another client for you. Can you come in today? Remember, casual dress is better for my clients."

Cass looked down at her flame boxers and black tank top. Probably too casual. But the prospect of leaving her cave sounded appealing. She ignored the fact she'd be following her mother's advice. Pure coincidence.

"How about in an hour? No, make it an hour and a half. I need to shower." Spying a container of orange mints, she popped one into her mouth. Amazing how her appetite returned.

"Yeah, good idea." Cal chuckled. "Wouldn't want you to stink out the place."

"Ha ha." But her face twisted into her first smile in a week. "Just make sure that this time I'm not held at gunpoint, okay?"

"You've got it. See you."

Minutes later, Cassie lifted her face up into the hot shower spray, letting it warm her. Darn it, her mother was right. Getting on with life would be her only way to survive this. She squirted some soap into her hand and smoothed it over herself, letting the citrus smell invigorate her.

In the living room, the dogs started barking insistently. For a moment, she debated ignoring them, then the doorbell pealed. Her mom, perhaps? Back to finish her lecture, or maybe make sure she'd taken her advice?

She buried her face in the hot water again, not wanting to deal with her life right now. But the doorbell rang again, and the dogs became even more enraged. With a sigh, she stepped out and grabbed her towel. Wrapping it around her, she dripped her way to the front door.

"Hush, you guys."

She peeked out the window, and her stomach dropped. Mike's mom stood there, looking almost lost. Cassie shook her head to clear it, then looked again. No, not an illusion. Jerking away, she debated jumping back into the shower, but knew that Jessie would have heard her silencing the dogs. With a sigh, she cracked open the door.

"Hi." She shoved a dripping lock of hair out of her face. How awkward, to be practically naked in front of your ex-boyfriend's mother. "I was in the shower, so right now's not a good time."

"Please, Cassie. This will only take a few minutes. I wanted to make my peace with you." Her eyes, that same golden brown as Mike's, pleaded with her. "Then I'm going to apologize to your parents."

Her vulnerability sucked all the fight out of Cassie, and amid the dogs' yipping, she opened the door wide, then shut it firmly after Jessie entered. "Give me a minute. I'll be right back. And don't pet the brown dog." With a firm 'quiet' to the dogs, who for once listened, Cassie headed into her bedroom and grabbed her bathrobe. Slipping it on, she tried to still her thumping heart and swirling thoughts.

What did it mean, Jessie showing up here? Had Mike sent her?

Rubbing her hair with the damp towel, Cassie wished she could take time to put some make-up on or at least comb out her hair. Her desire to do so rankled her, because it showed a lack of confidence. That wouldn't do for Jessie to see that. Mike's mom had never liked her, and despite her apparent need to set things right, Cassie needed to remember that.

Re-entering the living room, she found Jessie still hovering by the door.

"What is it you want?" She didn't bother hiding her lack of friendliness.

Jessie obviously recognized it as well. "I don't blame you for not being happy to see me. I owe you an apology. No, I owe you more than that, because you always treated me nicely, despite the fact I didn't return the favor. But all I have to offer you right now is to say I'm sorry. I judged you based on my feelings for your mother, and that wasn't right or fair." She spread her arms wide. "I'm sorry."

Strangely, Cassie felt the hardness in her melt away. Jessie's sincerity touched her. "Thanks. I know how hard this must have been for you." Impulsively, she reached out and

gave Jessie a hug. Conscious of her wet hair, she pulled back, and caught Jessie's startled look.

"Thanks," she said, her voice warm. "I didn't expect that. Of course, I must say you've always surprised me. Usually in a good way, but I was too stubborn to see that."

"That's sweet of you to say." Cassie motioned to the couch. Maybe a longer conversation would be good. She ignored the fleeting thought that hearing about Mike might make some of the ache go away.

But Jessie shook her head, although her face glowed with a rare smile. "Funny thing is I'd love to, but I need to get this done. Talking to your mom—this is going to be a rough one. I feel like I robbed her of thirty years of her life, simply because I couldn't trust my own husband. How can someone forgive that?" Tears glimmered in her eyes, and Cassie squeezed her arm in comfort.

"I think you'll find that my mom has a huge heart. It'll be fine."

Jessie nodded. "I'm not sure if that makes it better or worse, but I'm glad you and I are okay." She smiled again, then turned to go. Pausing at the door, Jessie glanced back.

"Oh, and Cassie? Concerning my son, trust comes hard to him as well. He told me what happened, and I understand why you did what you did. In the same circumstances, and knowing my son's overprotective streak, I probably would have done the same thing. Give him some time, and understand that he learned some of that behavior at his mother's knee. Hard to overcome." With that, she slipped out

the door, and Cassie sank into her pillowed sofa, letting out a confused breath.

What a morning. Had Jessie actually encouraged her relationship with Mike? And her advice: how could she give him time, and still heal herself? Could she live with this raw pain and survive each day without him?

No, she couldn't. That door had slammed in her face. She needed to accept it and move on.

* * * *

"Kendra, replace the poster outside the door, will you? This one lists the new bands we added." Mike handed her a rolled-up poster depicting the fund-raiser they were throwing for a local cancer unit. He hoped the dance on Labor Day weekend, only a week away, would help pay for some new diagnostic equipment.

Yet he didn't count time as 'one week from the dance' or 'one month of summer left.' No, he counted it as 'six weeks and three days' since he'd last seen Cassie.

And each day seemed like a year.

His life was totally Delistraty free. No Cassie, no Lucia or Jake. No Cal, either. He'd received an invitation to Lucia and Jake's wedding, scheduled for next Saturday, but he planned on sending a gift while passing up on the wedding itself. They'd understand. They'd probably only sent it as a courtesy. Considering how things stood with him and the twins, they wouldn't expect him to show up.

The rest of his family would be going. Even his mother, who'd been honestly touched when she'd received the invite. Go figure.

But he wouldn't be there. Seeing Cass would be like ripping a bandage off an unhealed wound. Too painful to contemplate.

Damn, he missed her. His brief affair with her had been more incredible than he could have imagined. She'd been so eager for him, so excited about being with him. Hard to imagine that she'd broken away from him so quickly. But he'd witnessed it with his own eyes. She'd turned and walked away.

"Done." Kendra grabbed another poster from the pile. "Jerry next door said he'd put one up, too."

The posh restaurant would be a great place for a poster. "Thanks, Kendra."

"No prob." She didn't send one of her flirtatious smiles at him. She'd realized that Mike didn't return her interest, and she'd moved on with a nice guy she'd met at college. Steve something-or-other, who spent a lot of time at the bar.

Kendra hovered, and Mike glanced up, his brows lifted in inquiry.

"I saw her."

He didn't have to ask who. Her tone of voice told him.

"Oh?" Not too much interest, he reminded himself. He was over her. Yes, completely, totally over her.

Yet he still wanted to be under her in the worst way.

"Yeah, Steve's been volunteering at Mr. Prescott's clinic. So I went down there with him." Steve was starting his fourth year of law school and Kendra her second.

"She looks sad, Mike. And she didn't ask about you."

Ouch. That stung. He wanted her to be dying to find out how he was. "No reason she should."

Kendra rolled her eyes. "You know, you're an idiot. She deliberately didn't ask. If you'd meant nothing more than a casual fling, she'd have said something. She's obviously pining over you, and you're pining over her. Why don't you try to work things out?"

I need trust, and you give me nothing but suspicions. She'd been right. He hadn't trusted her. He hadn't believed in their love enough to see it through. And she hadn't loved him enough to be honest.

"It wouldn't work, Kendra, so drop it, okay?"

"You know, besides being an idiot, you're also a poor judge of character. Steve says Cassie's loyal to the core. He says she's like a bulldog for her clients." She pulled a video tape out of her apron pocket and set it down in front of him. "Here. I taped this last night. You should watch it. Maybe then, you'll quit acting like a jerk." She hesitated, then glared at him with renewed force. "My dad told me some stuff about your marriage. Sounds to me like you never recovered." With that, she spun on her heel and stomped away.

Mike snorted. "You sound like Cal now. That's utter crap." But he was talking to thin air. He'd been over his marriage for a long time. No way did he confuse Cassie with Sharon.

Even as he thought it, he knew that he had indeed felt some *deja vu* when she'd lied to him. Just like his ex had about her lover before he'd found out.

He looked at the tape, picking it up to read the label. 'News broadcast' and last night's date was all it said. He stared at it for another minute, then heaved a sigh and headed to his office, where he had a VCR.

Popping it in, he sat back on the couch and pushed the play button on the remote. A scrolling text bar at the bottom stated that Stan Richter had pled guilty. He saw Irina Richter, holding her son, looking gravely into the camera. She started speaking, and he turned up the volume.

"Yes, I'm glad it's over. It was very frightening thing, and I have been afraid ever since. Now I no longer have to fear. Six years is a long time."

"Mrs. Richter, is it true that he held you at gunpoint, and your attorney, Cassandra Delistraty, rescued you?"

Irina paused, then a huge smile broke out. "Yes, it is true. I did not know that the...the thing that stops the gun from shooting was on, but she did, and she flipped him. I heard him thump, and I screamed, then turned around and she had him twisted on the ground. It was most exciting." She laughed. "My lawyer is wonderful. She risked herself to save me and my son. She is a loyal friend and has helped me through this, every step of the way." She kissed her son's head. "It is good, is it not, to have someone you can trust so completely?"

The camera cut from Irina to the male reporter. "Ms. Delistraty couldn't be reached for comment. Granddaughter of

retired State Supreme Court Judge Stuart Delistraty, she now works at a free clinic with her brother, Attorney Cal Prescott."

The female anchor smiled. "It's an amazing story. And how different to hear someone say they trust their lawyer."

The tape ended, and Mike turned the VCR off. Sinking into the couch, he stared at the fuzzy screen. Cassie was now considered a hero, and for that exact same act, he'd walked away from her. Had Cal been right, that he'd pushed her into a corner with his attitude?

Okay, he'd admit it, at least to himself. He'd felt vulnerable after telling her he loved her. Had he started waiting for the axe to fall? Had he expected history to repeat itself, so he'd jumped to conclusions?

Perhaps. But still, she'd lied to him. Despite her reasoning, it all boiled down to the fact she'd chosen to lie.

Cassie's loyal to the core. Yes, he knew that. He'd seen it from the time she'd been a young child. Even when she'd been pulling crazy, off-beat stunts, she'd always had good reasons: loyalty to a family member, a friend, her school or a just cause. He'd admired her for that, even when he'd pulled her out of more scrapes than a cat in a dog pen.

So when did his respect turn to distrust?

When his heart had become entangled. Damn, was Kendra right? Was Cal right? Had he become so distrustful that he'd painted Cassie with the same brush as Sharon? As a kid, although he'd always suspected she'd find trouble no matter what, he'd never worried about her motives. Could he be that trusting again?

If it meant having Cassie back in his life—hell, yes.

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

His eyes strayed to the phone. Maybe he should call her. They could talk, perhaps figure out what'd gone wrong between them.

Or maybe he could act like a man and go find her, take her into his arms and tell her that no matter what, he wanted to be with her. And that he'd trust her, no matter what.

Inspiration hit him.

Or he could show her he could play, just like a Delistraty.

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Chapter Twelve

Sitting on her front steps, Cassie eyed her watch impatiently. That limo her mother insisted she use was late. She plucked a stray dog hair off her antique lace, one-shouldered maid-of-honor gown. The bright sunlight made the deep gold color dance, but she didn't feel like being entertained. She'd had to get up way too early to meet her mother's 'you-need-to-be-three-hours-early-for-photos' schedule, and frankly, she needed her sleep. Now, to be standing there, waiting for a lift to the lush gardens her parents were to be married in, rankled. She could have driven her own car, but no! Her mom had to control her one more time. How Lucia-like.

Her mom swore it was because of the media attention Cassie'd garnered since Irina's interview on national television last week. Cassie didn't want to discuss overpowering Stan Richter with anyone, because it still hurt too much to remember Mike's anger. But her reluctance to talk didn't faze the reporters. They followed her around almost daily, tossing questions at her.

Wanting her wedding to remain private, Lucia felt that a trained driver could lose a determined reporter better than Cassie could.

If only he showed up.

Finally, a burgundy limo turned the corner and pulled up in front of her. A dark-haired suit-clad man, wearing black sunglasses and a goatee, leapt out of the car and silently

opened the back door for her. Cassie's pulse jumped. He reminded her so much of Mike.

Giving herself a mental shake, she slipped by him and into the dark recesses of the limo. *Get over it, Cass.* She needed to quit seeing him in other men. It had been over seven weeks since she'd last seen Mike, and he'd obviously made a clean break. She needed to do the same.

Sinking into the plush fabric, she dug into her ridiculously tiny purse and retrieved an orange mint. Biting into it, she sighed and closed her eyes. Letting go of her stress in one deep breath, she smiled. This was her parents' wedding day. Her dad had pulled massive strings to find an open time for them to get married at Kubota Gardens, and this beautiful, sunny day would mark the beginning of a new life for the two of them. This was their day, and she could burst with joy at how happy they'd been these last two months.

She felt the limo accelerating and opened her eyes, found them merging onto Interstate 5. *We shouldn't be heading north, though; Kubota Gardens are south.* She tapped on the glass separating her from the driver. "Hey, you're going the wrong way. Hey!"

She tapped again, but he ignored her, not even flicking an eyelash her way. Instead, he picked up his cell phone and punched a couple of buttons, said a few words she couldn't hear and hung up.

Cassie fumed for a moment, then a shocking thought crossed her mind.

She'd gotten into the limo without even making certain this was the driver her mother had hired. Could this be a kidnapping?

Fear cluttered her thinking. She had her cell phone. She could call for help, describe the limo and driver to police and they could find her. She dove back into that too-tiny purse right just as her phone began to ring.

It was her mom's cell number on the caller ID. Flipping her hair back, she pressed the tiny cell to her ear. "Mom, your driver's heading the wrong way. What's up with that?"

Lucia's laugh rang out. "Relax, darling. He's making a small detour. I'm hoping you'll enjoy it."

Cassie's brow furrowed with suspicion. "What kind of detour? I'm not in the mood for your games, Mom."

Lucia chortled. "I'm sorry, darling, but just one more. Oh, and Cassandra?"

"Yes?"

"I broke my promise." With that, her mother hung up.

Cassie almost tossed the phone in frustration. Oh, yes, her mom was up to something! *And on her wedding day! You'd think she could behave herself on this one day at least.*

Cassie banged on the window again. "Hey, you! Turn this car around. Whatever scheme my mother cooked up, I don't want any part of. Are you listening?" No response. "Hey, I'm an attorney, and I know my rights. This could be considered kidnapping!"

In reply, the driver took off his sunglasses, turned to face her, and winked.

Cassie's heart slammed into her throat as shock hit her.

Mike!

He slid the window open, all the while watching the traffic. His mouth twitched under the goatee. "Actually, Cass, it's not your mom's scheme. I called her and arranged this. I wanted a couple of hours with you, and this seemed like a good way to get it. Besides," and his eyes slid over her in appreciation. "You all gussied up is a bonus I couldn't pass up." With that, he slid the window shut and returned all his attention to his driving.

Cassie was torn between excitement and anger. How dare he manipulate her! But then again, if he went to such effort, could it mean he wanted to be with her again?

That tiny kernel of hope that had refused to die flared to life inside her, and she tried to tamp it down. There could be a dozen reasons why he'd done this. Perhaps he wanted to salvage their friendship. Maybe he'd made up with Cal, and her brother wanted him to talk to her. Maybe...

Oh, give it up, Cass! He wanted her. Her heart knew it; her body knew it. Otherwise, he could have called her or written to her if it were any other reason. No, he wanted her.

Her heart leapt with joy and she swallowed a whoop. Darn him, he'd given her seven weeks of hell, and now he just showed up? No, she wouldn't make this easy on him. They still had issues to work out. Like his using her family to further his business pursuits. Or his lack of trust.

And her need to do something worthwhile with her life.

Feigning an angry scowl, she banged on the window again. "Mike! Where are you taking me?" No response. "Darn it, Mike! Tell me where you're taking me!"

He didn't respond, but they took the Lake City exit. Cassie sat back, figuring he'd pull over any moment and then they'd talk. But he continued, winding around the hill to Thirty-Fifth.

She resisted thumping on the window again. He'd just ignore her. Stealthily she dialed his cell number, and hid a grin when he picked it up and answered. Only then did she lift hers to her ear.

"Would you mind telling me what you're up to?" she asked.

"You have a new cell number. I didn't recognize it."

"Otherwise you wouldn't have answered it?"

She could see his cocky grin. "Well, I'd rather wait until we get to where we're going. It's not much further."

"Coward." It felt so good to hear his deep voice, to feel his chuckle rippling through her.

"You'd better believe it. I saw you take out two big guys. I've seen you argue yourself out of any predicament. You think I'm going to give you any chance to take me out, physically or verbally, until I know you've calmed down?"

She looked out the window, hiding her mouth from the rear view mirror. "I'm calm now. Pull over, so we can get this over with."

"No. Maybe I like being the bad guy instead of your knight in shining armor. Maybe it's fun acting outside the box this once. Besides, I can see your eyes."

"So?"

"They're smiling." With a chuckle, he hung up.

Irritating man. She didn't glance his way. He knew he'd won. If she weren't aching to be in his arms, she'd make him suffer.

Even though she wanted to be held by him, she wondered if he felt he could trust her now. Or would that keep cropping up and causing them heartache?

She needed to know that. She couldn't live with someone who'd weigh her every word, her every action, looking for her to lie or fail or betray him.

No matter how much she loved him, or how much her heart broke without him, she needed that total trust.

That thought stole her joy away. Even if he missed her and wanted to be with her, that didn't mean they could work things out. Missing her didn't mean he now trusted her.

More sober now, Cassie stared out the window. After a few minutes, they pulled up in front of a wooden fence. Mike parked the limo, then came around to her door.

She ignored his outstretched hand, instead sliding out of the car on her own. He placed his hand in the small of her back, and her body sang at the contact. She wanted to sag back against him, soak in his warmth, his feel. But she fought the impulse, instead holding her spine straight and her gaze forward as he guided her through an opening in the fence.

She found herself standing in a small park, a charming space with a stream running through it. A path led through the trees and he pointed in that direction.

She walked down a sun-sparkled path, Mike lightly touching her arm, and soaked in the beauty around her. But she couldn't forget why they were there. This confrontation could mean she'd walk with him by her side once again.

Or she'd forever be alone.

They followed a curve and found themselves at a large pond. Cassie heard a splash and gasped.

"Was that a beaver?" She pressed against the split rail fence, searching the water.

Mike smiled and nodded. "I thought you'd like this. Most people don't even know this park exists." He pointed.

"Watch."

She stared at a pile of sticks out in the pond, and to her delight, a beaver emerged from the water, dragging some twigs.

"Oh, Mike, this is wonderful. Thank you." She laughed in joy when a smaller beaver emerged from the water.

"You're welcome. Of course, I had an ulterior motive."

She arched a brow at him. "Oh?"

"Yes." His mouth twisted under the unfamiliar facial hair. "I wanted to see you smile."

She couldn't stop herself from complying with his wishes. Almost against her will, she reached out and touched his goatee. "Is this real?" she asked.

His eyes closed at her touch. Grasping her hand and holding it still, he chuckled against her fingers. "The beard or being together?"

"The beard. No, both." His lips teased her skin, and hastily she pulled back, lest he muddle her mind more than he already did. "Why am I here, Mike? Why did you kidnap me?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he tugged off the goatee, leaving pieces of adhesive on his face.

"I needed to talk to you. I know you have every right not to want to see me, so I decided not to give you a choice. This seemed like the best idea."

"This doesn't change anything. You don't trust me." She swallowed hard, but the words needed to be said. "And I don't trust you. Not after you used me to get your stupid zoning change."

Mike's eyes widened. "What?"

"Don't act dumb, Michael Ashford. Ernie told me that he asked you to get me to help you get the change."

"But I never asked you, Cassie. Or am I missing something here?"

"No, of course you didn't—you didn't need to, did you? Not when you talked to the source. My grandfather."

Mike's soft chuckle irritated her. "Cass, baby, do you really think that your grandpa would help me out? I think he'd rather kick me to the curb. In fact, I know it."

Cassie snorted. "Oh, come on, Mike! If you didn't talk to him then how do you explain that the board suddenly reversed their decision and gave you the zoning change?"

Mike shrugged. "I don't know, and right now, I honestly don't care. All I know is that I never even mentioned the zoning board to your grandfather. Other than Ernie or my dad, the only person I talked about it to is..." His voice faded and his eyes widened. "Your dad. He was there that day when I talked to you. He works for the city. You don't think...?"

A weight lifted from Cassie's heart. But it was only one of several. "You could be right. He might have been able to help. He's worked in that department before."

She couldn't control her smile. Mike hasn't used her, after all. It made sense, her dad trying to help. "But that's only one obstacle," she said. There's the fact I'm a Delistraty."

His mouth quirked. "I can live with that, if you can handle the fact I'm an Ashford. Your parents can. And I talked with Cal, as well. He's willing to accept me in your life as long as I understand that if I make you cry again, I'm a dead man. As for your working at the clinic, he's promised to beef up security if I'll trust him not to put you in any more danger." He captured her hand, pressing a kiss on her palm and causing her heartbeat to dance in her ears.

"Mike, I can't think when you do that."

He chuckled. "Good. I get into trouble when you think."

Pulling her hand away, she scoffed. "You told me that my not thinking is what gets me into trouble. Make up your mind."

He leaned forward, his breath tickling her ear. "I want you to think before you leap into trouble, but I don't want you to think before you leap into my arms." He kissed the corner of her mouth. "I want you to listen to your heart."

A shiver of need ran through her, curling into her womanhood. No, she couldn't give in. Not yet. "Do you trust me now?"

He kissed her again, inching further up her mouth. He pressed her hand against his chest. "With all my heart."

She pulled away. It would be too easy simply to buy his words. She needed actions to back them up. "Forgive me if I don't quite believe you."

Mike nodded. "I don't blame you. I'll just have to convince you. Can I be your date at the wedding?"

"I don't think so. This is my parents' day, and I'm not going to disturb it by arguing with you."

His smile seemed easy, but she could feel the tension underneath. "I'm not planning on arguing with you. I'm hoping that we can start over again. That this can be a new beginning for us."

Cassie shook her head. She didn't want to forget those glorious days and nights they'd shared before they'd parted.

Mike's face hardened. "I see. You won't even give me a chance. You've already moved on."

She winced at his bitterness. "No, that's not true. I'm as stuck as you are. But I don't want to forget what happened before. I like the start we had."

Heat bloomed in her stomach as hope returned to his eyes. "So I have a shot here?"

She laughed at his boyish smile. "Perhaps. But you'd better tell me a good reason why it took you over seven weeks to figure things out."

Reaching out, he lifted her up and perched her on the top rail of the fence. This brought her almost eye-to-eye with him. A heady feeling. Or perhaps that was brought on by the love glowing from his eyes.

He grasped her hand, and electricity zapped her, sucked her breath away. "I'm an idiot—how's that? I'm too dense to know when I've stumbled onto the real thing, and not a cheap knock-off."

She laughed. "And you're sure now?"

He pressed his lips to the base of her throat; she felt her pulse leap. "I should never have doubted it. But I discovered I hadn't worked through my marriage to Sharon. I judged you by her standards, not understanding that two people can do something similar with entirely different motives. She meant to deceive me. You meant to help out a friend."

Tears stung her eyes. She could hear the sincerity in his voice. "I never wanted to hurt you," she said.

Mike nodded. "I understand that. Now. Then, all I could feel was bitterness. Very stupid of me." He kissed the tip of her nose. "From now on, I'll trust the goodness of your heart instead of my rotten past."

"Oh, Mike." Cassie couldn't hold back any longer. Her arms crept around his neck, and she pressed her face into his warm, solid shoulder. "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you, too. So damned much. I don't plan on ever missing you like that again." Finally, finally he kissed her fully, slowly and sweetly.

His tongue skimmed her lips, and she could feel his smile. "I don't care what it takes. I want to make this work. You can help your brother with the clinic, adopt all the tiny, nasty dogs you want. Hell, I'll even tolerate daily dinners with your grandfather if that's what it takes. All I ask is that you let me be with you." He kissed her again, this time lifting her off the rail and into his body, molding her against him. It felt like heaven.

It felt like home.

"I love you, Cassie," he said. "I'm not whole without you. Please say you'll be mine."

Cassie knew that all her life, she'd waited for this moment. When her heart would become one with her soul mate, with Mike Ashford, Boy Scout extraordinaire.

"I love you, too," she said. "Just do me one favor."

Even as he laughed, his eyebrows rose. "And what's that?"

"No more rescuing damsels in distress. It always causes trouble."

Mike laughed. "Only you, love." He captured her lips in a long, satisfying and blood-boiling kiss. "Only you."

Cassie laughed, loving the boldness of his embrace. "I *meant* me."

"Honey, you're the best kind of trouble," he said. "You're the kind I need in my life." Kissing her again, he set her down. "Come on, Ms. Delistraty. We have a wedding to go to. Then if you're willing, we have another one to plan."

Her heart soared. Oh, she was willing. To settle down with her own Dudley Do-Right, she'd plan a thousand weddings, walk a million miles.

As long as he was by her side.

Smiling up into those eyes she'd always loved, she took his hand.

"You're on."

* * * *

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About the Author

Stacia grew up in Spokane, Washington, where she still lives out her life as a devoted mother, daughter, grandmother, sister, home-owner, pet-owner and slightly deranged author. Writing is one creative outlet for her, and she enjoys many others: renovating her home, running a craft business with her best friend and gardening, to name a few. She loves to travel, take pictures and share good times with those she loves. She also loves to hear from her readers.

To learn more about Stacia Wolf, her family, pets and her stories, please visit www.staciawolf.com. Send an email to her at stacia@staciawolf.com.

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You'll Be The Death of Me!

By Stacia Wolf

While Allison gave her attention to the list of clues, Jay stole a few moments to observe her. He liked her height; she reached up to his chin, a good fit to his six-foot-two frame. He thought he saw a faint dusting of freckles across her nose, but in the dim light cast by the elegant lampposts, he couldn't be sure. He liked the idea of freckles; he wanted to get closer to be certain.

He loved her riot of curls; they caused his fingers to ache with the need to run through the cinnamon-colored tresses.

She glanced at him, a tiny smile playing on her lips. She'd finally started talking to him and seemed reasonably intelligent. Too bad she was off her rocker.

"I wonder who Paige has as 'suspects.'"

Her gaze became confused as she caught his expression. She stepped into the light and he confirmed that yes, light freckles did dance across her nose and flushed cheeks.

"What?" she asked.

I never knew freckles were so sexy. "Nothing." His stride lengthened. The sooner he got this over with, the better. He couldn't control his reaction to her, especially now that he knew she could accomplish more than a fish imitation. She was too potent, too sensual; he didn't trust that. He didn't like the feelings she brought out in him, the ones that caused

him to ache with desire, the ones that demanded he get closer to her.

Perhaps if he got to know her better, it would nip his attraction to her in the bud. Nothing like an obnoxious personality to kill a man's libido. Hopefully she had one.

"So, Mrs. Talbot tells me you're a mystery writer." She stiffened instantly; he could tell she didn't appreciate him knowing what she did for a living. Maybe she got tired of talking about it. Perhaps she didn't enjoy much success.

Or perhaps she felt a bit embarrassed by her career choice. After all, writers didn't always get the respect they deserved. At least Jeff had told him that. He'd been a screenplay writer before he'd turned his hand to acting.

"It must be a great way to make a living," he continued, trying to show her he respected her job. She must be published; the way Mrs. Talbot had talked about her with reverence hinted at that. "Must pay well, right?"

The spark of anger that lit her face left him in no doubt that he'd royally messed up. Great. Why couldn't he at least have gotten an ounce of that charm his brother oozed so easily?

Obviously book writing didn't pay well for her. He should have kept his mouth shut. He'd seen her apartment. Its starkness should have given him a clue that her finances weren't in great shape.

"My income is none of your business, and neither is my writing. So why don't we concentrate on solving these clues, and then you can go back to writing parking tickets or whatever it is you do."

Pretend You Love Me
by Stacia Wolf

Parking tickets? His jaw tightened in outrage. Before coming to Spokane, he'd worked the vice squad, one of the most dangerous and stressful departments to which a cop could be assigned. He opened his mouth to let her know what he really thought about writers, but her animated, angry gaze sparked a surge of emotion in him, one he recognized as excitement. Sexual excitement.

No. Not now. The timing stunk for this. And not with Allison Leavitt, wacky mystery writer. No matter how much she tantalized him, what could she have in common with a cop?

Nothing. The blunt answer was nothing.

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Excitement, danger and falling for the man of her dreams all
have...

Grace Under Pressure

(C) 2006 Melissa Schroeder

College professor Grace Michaels has enough on her plate with her research, her ex-fiance showing up in town, her parents parking their RV in front of her house, and her attempt to entice her sexy neighbor, new sheriff, Ren Morello, into having an affair, when someone breaks into her house and office.

Ren wants nothing to do with Grace. So what if she looks like a pinup girl from the 50's or that every time she's in his vicinity, he sports a hard-on? She is a woman who would demand commitment and after his nasty divorce from his cheating ex-wife, Ren wants nothing to do with marriage. All he wants is hard fast sex. The problem is, the only woman he can picture it with is Grace.

When the threats to Grace turn almost deadly, Ren finds himself in her company more often than not, and keeping his hands off her becomes impossible. But as the danger grows closer, the attraction grows deeper, and Grace must chose between protecting her heart or her life.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Grace Under Pressure* by Melissa Schroeder:

Grace sat in the passenger seat of Ren's truck with her head back and her eyes closed. Every time he glanced at her, the streetlights cast a pallor to her skin he knew wasn't as bad in reality, but it still irritated him. Hell, anger boiled so hot in his blood he worried what he would do when he found out who had pushed her down those stairs. He pulled into his driveway. "Grace," he said in a husky whisper. "Honey, we need to get you in the house."

She smiled then opened her eyes. She looked around in confusion. "What are we doing here?"

"I think you need stay with me tonight. As soon as I get you into the house, I'll go get your mutt."

The smile returned, but a with a seductive edge. "So, you were lying to Gabriel?" It took him a second or two, then he remembered his comment about jumping her bones.

"No. It's probably safer at my house." Okay, a stupid argument, but even he could not explain the surge of protectiveness threatening to black out any of the good intentions he had. She wrinkled her nose at the stupid suggestion. Okay, so even she knew it didn't ring true. Maybe she would take pity on him, and let it pass.

"You mean your house, across the street from mine, is safer?"

No luck. He had no luck when it came to fooling women.

"Your house was broken into yesterday. You have to admit that."

That cute little crease formed between her eyebrows like every time she was thinking. Before he knew what he was doing, he leaned over and kissed the little wrinkle. Surprised,

she looked up. Then, her lips curved into a smile full of warmth and sex that shot right down to his gut. Electricity crackled between them. Her lips parted as if waiting for a kiss. Craving but not taking her had been driving him insane. He wanted her with a need that bordered on sexual obsession. He was in serious trouble, but there was nothing he could do.

His hand slid to the nape of her neck, and tangled in those amber curls as he drew the two of them close. The minute his lips touched hers, he knew he'd lost the battle. Her lips were cool and dry, but this time he hadn't surprised her. She had seen the kiss coming, and returned it with enthusiasm. His tongue tickled the line of her sealed lips, and she opened them without hesitation, moaning in appreciation.

His other hand found her breast, and as he plundered her mouth, he massaged and kneaded. The fabric of her jacket hindered his exploration. Without breaking the kiss, his hand slid down the front, unbuttoning it. Once undone, his hand stole inside her jacket and he realized she wore nothing beneath but a bra, one of those lacy half-cup ones that pushed up her breasts. His finger traced the edge, while lightly skimming her flesh that pressed against it. He ignored the fact that his hand shook when he touched her. He teased her by sliding his finger into the cup and gliding it over her nipple. His balls tightened as he moved his finger to the strap, and pulled it down off her shoulder. One extra little tug, and her breast sprang free.

She broke off the kiss, allowing her head to tip back, her eyes still closed. His lips traveled down her exposed throat,

flicking his tongue against her hot flesh while his finger began to trace a circle around her nipple. She moaned, an earthy, sensual sound that slid into his stomach and down his spine. Completely genuine, that one little moan was one of the most erotic sounds he'd ever heard.

He continued the descent down her neck to her chest and was within centimeters of devouring her nipple. There wasn't much light inside his truck, but he could make out the puckered bud in the weak glow from one of the nearby streetlights. Blood rushed to his cock. He groaned, and took the nipple into his mouth. He suckled and licked, and her moans increased.

A different beam of light shone through the back window of the truck. Grace let out a groan that skittered through his system. He decided to ignore it.

"Grace," a soft female voice said. "Are you in there?"

Somewhere in his hormone-soaked mind, he recognized that voice. He lifted his head and looked at Grace. Her jacket was undone, her bra half off, and her beautiful rosy-brown nipple glistened from his kiss.

Reason warred with hormones. Reason finished a distant second. He bent his head to take the nipple in his mouth again, when he heard the voice again, only much closer this time.

Then it clicked. That soft, southern voice belonged to the woman he'd rented his house from: Adrienne Michaels, with whom he'd spoken on the phone frequently enough to recognize by voice. He abruptly lifted his head.

"Grace, honey, your mother is standing at the rear of the truck with a flashlight," he said as he pulled the bra strap back up on Grace's shoulder, and had to work the cup back up over that beautiful puckered nipple. He couldn't help himself, and brushed the back of his knuckles over it, happy to see a rush of goose bumps across her chest. Hastily he buttoned her jacket, and looked at her.

"My mother?" she asked, her voice was still husky with passion. The implication of what he said registered and her eyes widened. "My mother?" Her voice raised in worry. Her smile disappeared. "What the hell is my mother doing here?" The last question came out in a whisper, and she crouched down in her seat, trying to hide.

"I have no idea."

As he reached for the door handle, her mother said, "Grace Beatrice Michaels, get out of there right now!"

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Shy girls need to talk dirty, too...

Talk Dirty to Me

(C) 2006 Michelle Miles

In this, the first in the Coffee House Chronicles, commitment-shy Claudia has found the perfect man. He never leaves his dirty socks in the living room floor, eats all the cookies, or leaves the toilet seat up. In fact, he's just a voice on the other end of the phone. And, as Trixie, she's been talking dirty to him every night for the last week.

"Jack" calls the Talk Dirty To Me phone sex line nightly just to talk to Trixie. She loves his silky voice and he has a way with words that lights her fire, leaving her hungry for more.

Then Claudia meets the tall, striking Dr. Blake Marsh, a man with a familiar voice she can't quite place. After spending time with Blake (and her nightly calls suspiciously stop), she begins to suspect he is Jack.

Now that she's falling for the sexy doctor, can she prove he really is the bad boy on the other end of the phone?

Enjoy the following excerpt from *Talk Dirty to Me* by Michelle Miles:

After paying for her latte and a nice, thick slab of New York cheesecake with strawberry puree drizzled on top, Claudia settled into one of the oversized brown leather chairs with the latest *Vogue* magazine on her lap. She sipped and ate and

browsed the latest in haute couture. It couldn't get much better than that.

"Well, hello there."

And with three little words, her day was ruined. Glancing up, she stared into the familiar face of Dr. Blake Marsh. He smiled broadly, his cheeks crinkling with the forced grin. Claudia's heart lurched in her chest, dropping down somewhere in the middle of her burning gut. Her stomach churned acid, the cheesecake swimming like a lump in her coffee. She blinked, trying to decide what sort of mood the man was in. From the look on his face, she was pretty sure he had read her column, too.

"Mind if I join you?"

Before she could answer, he dropped down into the chair across from her, a mere three feet away. A cherry wood coffee table separated them. He planted one ankle on his knee and leaned back into the chair. He looked rather appealing, not to mention appetizing, wearing khaki Dockers, loafers with funny looking tassels, and a black golf shirt.

Golf. She knew it.

Calmly, she took a sip of her coffee and then stabbed the last bite of her cheesecake, mopping up some of the puree with the creaminess. May as well not let it go to waste. She wished he hadn't caught her with her only meal of the day. But she was thankful she had at least showered, put on a little makeup and wore her jeans without the holes in the knees.

"Read your column," he said without preamble.

Glancing at him, she noted the devilish gleam in his eyes and winced. "Did you now?" A feeble reply at best, but she still sounded cool. Never mind her innards jangled like a ring of a building super's keys.

"I'm flattered you wrote about me." He gave her a sly wink.

Oh, if they weren't in public, she'd climb into that lap of his and... She shoved away the erotic images forming in her mind.

"I didn't write about you." Her lie didn't hold up either, because a grin broke out on her mouth.

"You're a poor liar, Claudia." He took a sip of his coffee and then set the paper cup on the table in front of him. He leaned forward, close, and dropped his voice. "By the way, I don't play golf."

"Really?" One eyebrow quirked and she tried to keep her mind focused on the conversation at hand. Not the visual of his naked body pressing against hers. Or his hands roaming over her breasts. Or his hot mouth licking her erogenous zones. "I thought all doctors played golf. Goes with the territory, right?"

"Another stereotype." He kept his gaze pinned on her face, his voice low and sultry. Reminding her of...someone...but she couldn't quite place it. "I'm not a stereotype."

"Then what are you?" The question bolted out of her mouth before her brain could stop it.

"Why don't you go out with me and I'll tell you?"

He suggested it so casually, she almost said yes. Almost. "No, thanks."

"Is it because of the other night?" He picked up his cup and taking another sip.

Why did his gaze never waver from her face? It left her feeling unsettled.

"No," she quipped.

"Come on, Claude. We're both adults here—"

"Don't call me that," she snapped, her defenses up and raring to go. No one called her that but Gayle. *And, okay, Tony, too.*

"Sorry." He looked miffed and settled back into the chair once again, his coffee in his hand. "I thought it was your nickname."

"For those who are closest to me, yes."

"And I'm not?"

The verbal duel was beginning to get on her nerves. Claudia pursed her lips and glared at him. "Is there something you want from me?"

"Your phone number."

"Ha!" Her outburst startled a few afternoon customers who gave her a cursory glance. She lowered her voice. "I don't think so."

Blake cocked his head, realization dawning on his face. "You're pissed because I left the other night, aren't you?"

She huffed out a breath, tucked her magazine under her arm, and then rose. "Don't you have some heart patients to see?"

"I'm off duty." He gave her a lopsided grin.

Rolling her eyes, Claudia stalked off, hoping to get outside before he caught up to her. To her horror, though, he

followed her out into the blazing Texas heat. Squinting against the bright afternoon sun, she slipped her Oakleys over her eyes.

"So now you've decided to follow me? Are you going to start stalking me, too?" she snapped. "I'm still not giving you my number."

"Claudia, maybe I need to explain about the other night."

"No need to explain." She approached the corner, pausing to look both directions before crossing the street. "I get it."

"You get what?"

"You're taken. Or not interested. Whatever. I totally get it."

He snagged her arm and spun her around before she could step off the curb. "I'm very interested."

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