



# Forbidden Passion

By

Mary Eason

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## Chapter One

Even after Erik Sebastian parked his SUV close to the entrance of Sophie's apartment building, he still couldn't bring himself to get out of the vehicle.

Instead, he sat staring up at her apartment and wondering what in the world was wrong with him lately. What had happened to the in control, never-lose-any-sleep-over-a-woman guy. The guy who didn't let anything shake him—especially not a woman.

The guy looking back at him in the rearview mirror had never felt so uncertain about a woman before. Certainly had never tried this hard to make one happy.

This whole friendship slash I-don't-have-any-idea-what-I'm-doing-anymore thing with Sophie McGraw was bordering on obsessive and as out of character as it got for him.

Friendship—with a woman he found attractive? Was this the first real sign he'd finally slipped over the edge? Maybe working twenty-hour days was starting to take its toll on his mental stability. This was not the Erik Sebastian that anyone who knew him would recognize, that's for sure.

Nevertheless, friendship was all that Sophie had left to offer any man. After all, Kevin, Erik's best friend, had been the love of her life.

Still, Erik couldn't keep from cringing all over again at the thought of badly he was betraying his best friend by even having these feelings for Sophie in the first place.

Was it betrayal? If he was the only one who felt this way? Friendship was the only hope he had with her and he was just desperate enough to take whatever she would give him. He could be happy being her friend, couldn't he?

Unfortunately, he wasn't able to convince himself of that now anymore than he had been the dozen or more times he'd had this very same argument. What he felt for Sophie went way beyond wanting to be her friend. It might be all she had to offer him, but it was the last thing he wanted to settle for with her.

No matter how hard he tried to convince himself that he had her best interests at heart, Erik knew he would do anything to keep in his life. Even if it meant just being her friend.

Eight months ago, this whole conversation he was having with himself right now would have seemed pretty funny. After all, the thought of him, one of New York's most notorious bachelor's, falling helplessly in love with any woman was hilarious. Especially one who didn't know he existed beyond that dreaded F word.

Love wasn't even supposed to be a part of his vocabulary. He was business first, and then women, which translated to physical satisfaction, second.

Oh sure, he enjoyed the dating thing—the hunt—but that was all it was. Just a game. There wasn't time in his life for love, or romance, or happily-ever-afters.

At least that was what he'd always believed until eight months ago when Sophie McGraw, brand new wife to his best friend since college, walked into his apartment and destroyed all of those excuses once and forever.

Until that particular Wednesday night at exactly seven minutes past eight in the evening, he'd never believed in the existence of such things at love at first sight—or love at any sight, for

that matter. But then again, he'd never met the right woman.

Until now. Until Sophie.

Unfortunately, now was too late. He was having this earth-shattering awakening far too late to do anything about it. The right woman was wrong in every other way. Ms. Right-and-perfect-in-every-way was Mrs. Kevin McGraw. His best friend's wife.

That he'd been attracted to...no, that he'd fallen helplessly in love with Kevin's wife—, (no need to diminish the depth of his crimes when it was just himself he was confessing them to—was bad enough when his friend had been alive and in trouble and needing his friendship to help him survive.

Now? Kevin hadn't even been gone three weeks yet and during that time, as terrible as it was to admit—again, why not be honest at least with himself?—he had been looking for reasons to spend time with her.

And the latest list in the long and growing list of sins? Convincing her to move in with him. Okay, technically, he'd asked her to help him out by staying at his apartment since he spent every waking minute at the office, but a guy could dream, couldn't he?

Even now on the day he was here, sitting outside her apartment building ready to move her into said apartment, Erik was torn.

If he was a decent guy, not to mention, the friend he should have been to Kevin as well as Sophie, he would just send her packing all the way back to that hole-in-the-wall town she'd come from eight months earlier. After all, wouldn't he be doing her a favor by not complicating her already painfully complicated life any further? Unfortunately, Erik knew he wasn't going to be that strong.

Of all places, why had Kevin even been in Kensington, New York in the first place? The town had a population of what—a thousand at best? Tucked away in the Adirondacks, it was not the type of place Kevin McGraw frequented. There were no glitzy restaurants or clubs. Hell, there wasn't even a place to ski in that town, which made the whole idea that Kevin was there in the first place that much more suspicious.

And then there was the fact that according to Kev, he'd met her outside the local library—even more outrageous—during the middle of a busy workweek when he was supposed to be on a business trip for Sebastian Advertising on the opposite end of the state. When Erik had asked him about all those things, Kevin had given him his usual song and dance routine.

When he'd pushed the subject a little further and asked what he really knew about the girl, it hadn't been much. But then again, Kevin had made it clear that he didn't need to know anything about her. He had just seen her, liked what he saw, and went for it. Nothing close to Kevin's normal MO, that was for sure. Sophie wasn't Kevin's normal type either. Nothing about Kevin was turning out to be what Erik believed he knew about his friend, or his behavior. He wasn't so sure that the Kevin he'd gone through the university with and had later hired as his right-hand man was the same one he thought he knew at all.

Not that anything about Kevin's erratic behavior recently really surprised Erik all that much. Over the last year of Kevin's life, his work ethic had gone from bad to downright nonexistent.

Erik knew all about Kevin's drug problem at the university because he'd helped Kevin get treatment for it. Erik should have realized something was up when Kevin had announced out of the blue, that he'd gotten married to a girl he'd known for less than a week.

He probably would have too, until the moment Kevin had showed up at Erik's apartment with Sophie and Kevin's strange behavior became the last thing on his mind. Some friend he'd

turned out to be.

Erik glanced at his watch, saw that it was seven—the appointed time—but still made no attempt to leave the Range Rover. Instead, he tried again to understand what it was about Sophie McGraw that got to him. He was actually starting to get sick of that question. He'd been asking it for more than eight months now and the answer—well beyond the obvious—still eluded him.

Okay, so she was pretty. Big deal. He'd dated far more beautiful women before—certainly more glamorous. Nothing about Sophie could be described as glamorous. So what if she was just plain, flat-out pretty and seductive in a way that most women would kill for. The unintentional way. Then there was this certain way she had of smiling that just about lit up her whole face, not to mention the room around her.

But it was those eyes. The most alluring brown eyes he'd ever seen. A striking combination with her short blond curls. Sophie McGraw was every bit of five foot two and not drop-dead gorgeous in anyone's book, but damn, he wanted her. More than he'd ever wanted another woman before her.

Add another item to that growing list of sins. Lusting after your best friend's wife had to be the ultimate sin. Especially your *deceased*, best friend's wife.

Erik closed his eyes and leaned against the steering wheel of the SUV. He wondered if Sophie had any idea of the type of man Kevin really was. Clearly, the marriage she believed she had with Kevin was far different from the one his friend was constantly telling Erik about.

Since his death, every single time Erik brought the subject up of Kevin, Sophie changed it just as quickly. Something definitely wasn't right there.

According to Raymond McGraw, Kev's father, it was easy to see what the problem was. Sophie. If Raymond was to be believed, all of Kevin's problems had started about the same time he'd met and married Sophie. Erik couldn't accept any of Ray's accusations.

After all, Kevin could be a little on the self-indulgent side, not to mention downright spoiled at the best of times. The last thing Kevin had needed in his life was to be tied down in a serious, committed relationship with anyone. Kevin still enjoyed the freedom of single life too much. He was known for just disappearing at times without letting anyone know where he was going. He could only imagine how that would have gone over to someone he was supposed to love.

And then, of course, there was the outrageous lifestyle Kevin loved. Erik hated knowing that Kevin had been unfaithful to Sophie but his friend had wanted to talk about it, so he'd forced himself to listen.

On more than one occasion, Kevin would complain about how wrong he'd been by marrying Sophie in the first place with one breath, and then how much he loved her with the next. Unfortunately, he'd also gotten to hear all about the other women in Kevin's life. Erik had actually lost track of those numbers.

The whole erratic behavior pattern of Kevin's should have been enough to warn Erik that something was terribly wrong. If he were being honest, he had suspected something—even that it was the drugs again—but he'd chosen to ignore it. Erik had been too lost in his own obsessions to help anyone.

Every single time Kevin suggested they meet after work for a drink to talk, Erik wondered if his friend suspected how he really felt about Kevin's wife.

He'd come so close to confessing everything, especially on the handful of times the three of them had been out on the town. Erik couldn't help but wonder each time if Kevin had figured it out or if he even cared, for that matter.

It had certainly surprised him that Sophie hadn't guessed. There had been several occasions when Erik took her home after Kevin met up with one of his so-called friends. Everything about Kevin's behavior on those occasions had to give it away. Erik had been all nerves. He couldn't think of a single thing to say to her and what he had said came out sounding angrier than how he really felt. Crazy about her.

Now, considering the circumstances, Erik was just grateful he had managed to keep his mouth shut.

There was just no way could he bring himself to believe Raymond's accusations. Someone like Sophie would never allow herself to be involved in drugs. Ray had been hurting over the loss of his son and needed to blame someone.

God help him if he were wrong, because he'd just invited her into his home.

So what was it about Sophie that made him want to throw all of his reservations out just to be close to her? After all, he'd known Kevin for over ten years. He barely knew her at all.

The thing that bothered him the most was that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find an answer to that question. He didn't understand why he felt this way about her but whatever it was it made him that much more determined to find the answer.

"Enough. Let's just get this over with," he said out loud before forcing himself to get out of the Range Rover. "You asked for this, Sebastian, so deal with it."

With any luck, being close to Sophie every single day would kill whatever feelings he thought he had for her. He'd never had a relationship that lasted more than a few weeks. What was going to make this one any different? Just because he'd let his fantasy grow into unrealistic proportions didn't mean the real Sophie McGraw stood a chance of living up to that dream now, did it?

Unfortunately, Erik could still remember the way she'd felt in his arms the night of Kevin's funeral. The night he'd held her close all night long while she cried those useless tears for a man who had chosen to take his own life. A man who hadn't been capable of being faithful to her from the very beginning of their short marriage. A man who didn't deserve her.

He'd come so close to touching her that night. Experience told him she wouldn't have resisted. She'd all but asked him to make love to her. She'd wanted him. But she'd wanted him for comfort. To wipe away the memories of the terrible day. He couldn't accept that from her.

Even today, Erik couldn't look at her and not remember those tears. Or how much he'd wanted it to be him who she cared so much for.

As he locked the Range Rover and stood staring up at the building, the last words Kevin had said came back to haunt him. Some comment made in passing a few days before his death along the line of things coming to a head. At the time, Erik had thought Kevin was simply blowing off steam. No doubt, they'd had another argument and he was once again, regretting marrying Sophie. Erik had simply thought Kevin was looking for sympathy.

The night of the accident, he couldn't get those words out of his mind anymore than he could keep from wondering if somehow, his friend had seen the end coming.

After Kevin's funeral, out of frustration and probably guilt, Erik had brought up Ray's accusations and asked Sophie about the drugs found in Kevin's car.

He could still see the hurt in those brown eyes of hers when she'd answered him. And God help him, he hadn't fully believed her.

That she was hiding something was easy to see. She was almost like an open book. That he wasn't sure he wanted to know what that something was had been just as clear. He hadn't believed a word of what she'd told him that night.

The apartment Sophie shared with Kevin was in one of the nicest buildings in the neighborhood. This building and most of the others in the exclusive neighborhood belonged to Raymond McGraw.

It hadn't really come as any great surprise when Ray insisted that Sophie move out of the apartment but what he couldn't understand was why she was so adamant about not taking a single thing beyond her few personal possessions with her. It was as if she wanted to put her marriage in the past. That had only made Eric that much more suspicious. After all, Kevin was the love of her young life, wasn't he?

The lobby was all but empty this rainy night. Erik headed toward the elevator bank lifting a single finger in greeting to the doorman that now knew him by his first name.

Another sin.

As he left the elevator and walked the half dozen steps to her door, he hated that he couldn't bring himself to dismiss Ray's accusations from his thoughts anymore than he could Kevin's innuendos. God help him, but he hated that he didn't believe Sophie's innocence.

Unfortunate for him, none of that mattered the moment she opened the door. It didn't matter that he had more doubts than answers.

The second he saw her standing there in the doorway, the second he spotted that smile of hers that lit up his heart and dispelled those doubts, he didn't care what she was involved in or how much trouble lay ahead for him. It didn't matter how many broken loyalties he'd committed by being here now, or offering her a place to live. By wanting her the way he did right then.

None of those things mattered anymore. He was crazy about this woman and that was all that mattered to him. He was crazy about her and too far-gone to walk away from her now.

## Chapter Two

“Sophie, what’s going on between you and Erik anyway? I’ve been asking you to get us together for weeks now and all you do is stall.”

Sophie McGraw held the receiver away from her ear and counted to ten. *Not now. Not again. Not today.*

Of course, it certainly didn’t come as any great surprise that her cousin was asking her the same question yet again. Not anymore than she was questioning what was going on between herself and Erik. After all, Sophie had known it was coming the second she answered the phone and heard Marissa’s voice on the other end. It was always only a matter of time.

No matter what the pretense of the call was in the beginning, Marissa always brought the conversation back to Erik Sebastian and each time, Sophie skirted around the whole unpleasant and frankly unsettling question she’d come to hate with the same evasive answer.

*Soon.*

“Sophie!” Marissa’s pitiful wail resounded through the telephone line making her reaction perfectly clear. Even with the receiver held at arm’s length, Sophie hadn’t missed the anger in her cousin’s voice.

From past experiences, Sophie knew Marissa Jennings was not accustomed to having her wishes ignored. Once she’d made up her mind about something, she went after it with the same amount of force as an invading army.

Marissa had made up her mind weeks ago that Erik was the perfect man for her. Just like that. Without a thought for Erik’s wishes, or Sophie’s, for that matter.

The second Sophie had introduced her cousin to Erik Marissa had probably pulled up his financial report in her head. Sophie secretly believed Marissa had every single eligible man’s personal history filed away in some compartment in her mind. Without saying more than two words to Erik beyond that first simple hello, Marissa had made up her mind. It wouldn’t have surprised Sophie one little bit if her cousin hadn’t started picking out wedding gowns already.

“Marissa, I told you I don’t really know Erik all that well. He was more Kevin’s friend than mine.” That was sort of the truth. If she didn’t count the fact that, for all practical purposes, she’d spent the night with him. Would have spent much more than just that single night in his arms, if Erik hadn’t been strong. She certainly wasn’t. Mostly because she’d dreamed about such a thing happening, had wanted Erik since the first time she’d met him.

“I’m not really sure how I feel about asking him.”

“Sophie, don’t you dare. Don’t even think about backing out of this. You promised. It’s the least you can do, considering everything I’ve done for you. Besides, you said yourself, Erik stops by just about every day to see you. He makes it a point to stay in touch since Kevin’s death. I’m sure the poor guy feels some responsibility, although I don’t really know why with the way things turned out. My point is you see him all the time, so what’s the problem? Just ask him about it for God’s sake. I mean, surely you’re not going to tell me that during all those visits you two haven’t gotten close?”

Sophie listened to silence on the other end as Marissa considered another possibility for the first time. Marissa was so close to guessing the truth.



“That is, of course, unless you’re not telling me everything about your relationship with Erik. You’re not avoiding bringing this whole subject with him simply to keep him for yourself, are you? Sophie, don’t you dare tell me you’re interested in Erik as well. Was all that weeping widow stuff just an act to get his attention?” Sophie hated the way Marissa almost sounded impressed by the thought. “Is there something going on between you two that I should know about?”

At that moment, Sophie was tempted to just hang up the phone and let her cousin draw her own conclusions. Did Marissa ever listen to anything Sophie said? How many times had Sophie told her cousin that she never intended on going down that road again? Marriage to Kevin had been enough to turn her off love and commitment forever.

Somehow, Sophie managed to catch the words that were always so close whenever Marissa started in on this subject. The last thing Sophie needed right now was for her cousin to know just how wrong she’d been in assuming Sophie’s marriage to Kevin was perfect.

“Marissa, I’ve told you I’m never going through that again.”

Marissa was right about one thing. Since Kevin’s death, she and Erik had become close. Far closer than Sophie had ever imagined possible with another man. Erik was the one who stood by her through all the scandal that followed Kevin’s accident.

For the life of her, Sophie just couldn’t understand why. After what had happened, she wouldn’t have blamed him one bit if he’d walked away from her and the whole ugly mess, and never looked back.

It wasn’t as if he owed her anything. Erik was Kevin’s friend—his best friend, according to Kevin. They’d known each other since their university days. Erik didn’t know her at all. Not really. She’d lied to him. About her feelings. About her marriage to Kevin.

In the weeks since Kevin’s death, Sophie had come to realize one thing. Erik wasn’t anything like her husband, and she couldn’t understand what had kept their friendship together for so long. Especially the past few months. Erik had to know about Kevin’s addiction. From the way Kevin talked sometimes, it almost sounded as if he were jealous of his best friend and boss.

In those last few weeks before his death, Kevin had treated Erik and everyone around him with reckless disregard. No one other than Sophie knew the whole truth behind Kevin’s behavior until after the accident, although Erik clearly suspected something from the few comments he’d made since that time.

Erik probably knew Kevin better than anyone, Sophie included. Definitely better than Kevin’s own father, who refused to see his son’s destructive behavior for what it was.

While Sophie might not be willing to admit the truth to Marissa, she was closer to Erik than she’d been to her own husband. Far closer than she had ever expected, considering Erik’s relationship with Kevin. Closer than she had a right to be.

Of course, Erik’s concern for her was all due to some misplaced loyalty he felt toward Kevin. That and perhaps the circumstances surrounding Kevin’s death.

That was where Erik’s interest in her began and ended.

In the weeks since Kevin’s death, Erik had treated her with a gentle respect, but there was always a certain amount of distance in his behavior. Their relationship could be neatly summed up in one little word. Friendship. With the exception of the night of Kevin’s funeral, when they’d both been emotionally drained from the event and things had gotten out of hand. It would have been so easy. Thank God, Erik had been strong enough for the both of them, even if she hadn’t exactly felt thrilled about it at the time. It was probably for the best because she was

never going down that road again. *Never again. Not for anyone.* As far as she was concerned, she'd find herself a nice little puppy and leave it at that.

Once, Erik had talked her into having dinner with him just to get her out of the apartment for a while. That evening could not have been a bigger disaster and one Sophie was determined never to repeat again. It was just too awkward being out with Erik and trying to pretend she wasn't attracted to him. She was aware of every little thing about him. She was supposed to be a widow in mourning for crying out loud. Erik, however drop-dead gorgeous he was, had been her husband's best friend, which meant, *off limits*.

Even if he weren't her husband's best friend, Erik was way out of her league. He traveled in a world she'd only caught glimpses. The ultra rich social world of New York's elite.

Erik was probably their poster boy. The all-American success story. A good-looking, middle class guy—tall dark and extremely handsome with the most amazing blue eyes Sophie had even seen—Erik had moved to New York after graduating from a first class university and made it to the top of the corporate world in just five years. Erik's company, *Sebastian Advertising* had just been named one of the hottest firms in all of New York.

Normally, someone like Erik wouldn't even give her a second glance. She'd never even heard of most of the places he frequented. Growing up in Kensington, New York with her grandmother had been light years away from the fast-paced life of New York. She and Erik had nothing in common. Well, besides Kevin.

Often, she'd found herself wondering what Kevin had told Erik about their marriage.

She couldn't talk about her marriage. Not with Erik. Every single time Erik brought the subject back to Kevin, Sophie found all of her old frustrations, and fears resurface. She'd been such a disappointment to Kevin. He'd certainly told her that enough times to make her believe it was the truth. Even now in death, Kevin still held the power of fear over her.

"Sophie, you know you promised," Marissa's growing irritation cut through those unpleasant memories, bringing her back to the present and to Marissa's frustration at not having heard a single word of what she'd just said.

"I realize you may still be in mourning, even if I can't understand why, but you were lucky enough to find your Mr. Right. Some of us are still out there looking for that perfect man. The rest of the world didn't stop living just because Kevin chose to kill himself, you know. I mean, I have needs, even if you have stopped caring about your own. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a single man in New York these days? Especially one who's both wealthy and attractive. Erik has everything. He's perfect for me."

Why Marissa felt it necessary to have Sophie act as matchmaker with Erik in the first place she couldn't understand. After all, Marissa had never had any problem asking a man out in the past.

Sophie couldn't tell Marissa that the very thought of seeing her cousin with Erik was enough to make Sophie physically ill. Erik was starting to occupy way too much of Sophie's thoughts lately, and if she had an ounce of sense left in her head, she would have refused his offer straight out instead of agreeing to it so easily.

"Tell me again why you need me to be involved in this little scheme of yours, Marissa. I mean you've never been shy about going after a man before. Why don't you just do it yourself?"

The sigh that greeted those words had Sophie searching for a chair. Obviously, this was going to be a long conversation if Marissa's tone was any indication.

"Sophie, I told you—Erik's not the kind of guy who likes a woman to go after him. From everything I've heard about him, I'd say just the opposite is true."

As hard as she tried, Sophie couldn't keep from laughing at the image of Marissa pouring over some folder containing all the little details of Erik's personal life.

"Laugh if you like, but I know what works with men and what doesn't, and I know what will work with Erik."

That was certainly true enough. Marissa had gone through more rich, sophisticated, and eligible men in the past year than Sophie could keep track of. Which was why Sophie couldn't understand out of all men Marissa had gone through, none had fit the bill as Marissa's perfect guy?

"Because they were all missing that certain something Erik has," Marissa went on to answer Sophie's unspoken question a little too graphically. "You know that sexy, seductive attraction of his. Not to mention that smile..."

Sophie rejected Marissa's words and the image her cousin had just created without considering it. She couldn't think of Erik like that. Erik was her friend. That was all he could ever be, because she did not intend to go down that road again.

Just like everyone else who knew her, Marissa believed that Sophie had been hopelessly in love with Kevin McGraw. Although there were times, like now, when Marissa suspected something wasn't quite right.

In the beginning, all of those things had been true. Or so Sophie believed. She'd just been too young and naïve to realize the truth.

There were times when Sophie wasn't sure whether to laugh or scream at the utter irony of the way things had turned out.

Once she had believed in the fairy tale. When she and Kevin met and married in just one week, she believed she was crazy in love with him. That was before she'd discovered the truth about Kevin's addictions. Before she'd learned of his violent behavior brought on by the drugs he abused. Before she learned, there was nothing about the real Kevin McGraw that came close to the fairy tale she'd believed in the beginning.

Kevin had married her on a whim. One, which he quickly regretted.

Now all of that seemed like a lifetime ago. Another girl. She wasn't the same hopeful girl who had married Kevin.

It was only after the changes in Kevin became more frequent and more dangerous that she finally accepted the truth. Their marriage had been a terrible mistake. By that time, Kevin was so deep into his destructive behavior that Sophie wondered if anything could have saved him.

Whatever she thought she felt for him disappeared completely the first time he'd hit her. For the remainder of their marriage, Sophie felt nothing more than pity for the man she'd once believed she loved.

She'd tried to talk Kevin into getting help, but on those occasions, he'd only become more angry and abusive until finally, Sophie was forced to watch as her husband self-destructed into an existence of living off drugs and alcohol. And then there were the affairs. Too many to remember and too much to care about anymore.

Sophie never really understood why Kevin had married her in the first place. He'd told her he loved her at least a dozen times that first week. Even after they had separate bedrooms, he still claimed to love her. In her heart, Sophie believed Kevin never really understood love.

He had just been caught up in the physical attraction. He'd simply desired her, so he'd convinced himself that he was in love with her. In his irrational way of thinking, that made sense.

That had been the reality of Kevin's behavior in the months before his death. Irrational. He hadn't understood that love wasn't supposed to hurt.

Looking back now after surviving that nightmare, Sophie knew that at twenty-three, she too hadn't understood love. She'd only been in love with idea of love. The whole fairy tale image it represented. An image Kevin had deliberately wanted her to believe existed because he'd desired her physically. Unfortunately, after a while, Kevin hadn't been able to fulfill that desire.

Kevin had swept her off her feet. He'd been so charming and attentive, that Sophie ignored all the warning signs that had to be there even before their wedding day.

The truth was she'd never actually been in love with Kevin McGraw. It had all been just an illusion. Everything about their life together had been a lie.

The day Kevin brought her home to meet his father was one Sophie would never forget. Raymond McGraw hadn't even put up a pretense of being polite. He'd made it clear to his only son that Sophie would never be a part of their family. He'd insisted they get a divorce immediately, which Kevin had refused to do. His father accused Kevin of marrying her to get back at him. They'd gotten into a terrible argument and she and Kevin had left soon after.

In Raymond's mind, Sophie lacked the right pedigree, the correct social connections for such a prestigious family. Coming from a small town outside the city, she was definitely from the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak.

Kevin had almost seemed happy with his father's disappointment. He'd told her that growing up, his father had been nothing but cold and unfeeling. In some way, Sophie believed that Kevin had wanted to punish his father for all those things. He'd accomplished it quite nicely by marrying Sophie, someone who Raymond McGraw would never approve of and certainly never accept as his son's wife.

"Come on, Sophie, you owe me and you know it. I was the only one to stand by you after Kevin's death. I mean all those questions by the police...the accusations by Kevin's father. It was quite a scandal for me as well."

Of course, it would be pointless to argue the truth of that statement. Marissa's loyalty had come only out of a need to protect her name, in spite of what she would have the world believe. Preserving the family's reputation was definitely important, as far as Marissa was concerned.

Sure, Marissa had stuck by her in the terrible days following Kevin's fatal car accident when her father-in-law was determined to blame Sophie for his son's death.

It had been Erik who made those days bearable. Erik's visits kept Sophie from going out of her mind with fear.

"Marissa, just let me think about it for a little while, okay? I'm not even sure if he's seeing anyone right now. Give me a little more time."

"But you said you were seeing him tonight, right?" Marissa went on in her usual manner, totally ignoring Sophie's uncertainties. "He's helping you move out of the apartment, right? Why not feel him out a little about the possibility?"

As far as Marissa knew, Sophie was moving back into her grandmother's old house in Kensington. In all the times she'd talked to Marissa about the move, she'd never once been able to tell her cousin that she would be moving in with Erik. Of course, Sophie knew she would have to tell Marissa and soon before one of her cousin's rich, nosy friends leaked it out. Unfortunately, Sophie knew exactly what her cousin's reaction to that news would be.

"Look, I'll think about it, Marissa—that's all I can promise. I really have to go now—I

still have tons of packing to do.” She replaced the receiver without waiting to hear Marissa’s response. She’d had enough of Marissa and her ridiculous demands for one day.

Sophie glanced around the apartment cluttered with moving boxes. Eight months she’d shared this apartment with Kevin. Eight months of mostly bad memories. Eight months of watching while Kevin sank deeper into the life of drugs and deceit until that final night, and the last tragic scene of their marriage. The final argument that had taken place in this very kitchen before Kevin had walked out in a fit of rage and never returned.

The drugs found in his car at the time of the crash and later, in Kevin’s blood system were ruled the cause of the fatal accident.

All the proof needed as to why Kevin had failed to even so much as slow the car’s excessive speed as he neared the intersection.

The officer who came to the apartment that night to tell her about the accident said Kevin probably hadn’t even been aware of the light when he’d ran it at more than sixty miles an hour.

There was no indication he’d tried to break, reinforcing the police officer’s belief that Kevin’s reflexes had been so impaired by the drugs and alcohol, that he never even realized what was happening until it was too late. The Mercedes slammed into a family of four killing them on impact, along with Kevin himself and leaving his father, Raymond McGraw, one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in New York, alone.

Even today—three weeks after the accident—Sophie still couldn’t bring herself to go near the kitchen. Maybe some things never truly died. The memories of that night certainly hadn’t. There were times when Sophie wondered if she would ever be able to put Kevin and that night in the past.

It hadn’t helped that Raymond had been determined to blame her for Kevin’s problems. Raymond tried to convince anyone who would listen, including Erik that the drugs, which had caused Kevin’s death, belonged to Sophie.

Even though Erik managed to talk Raymond out of pursuing those accusations, Sophie had only wanted to leave New York and her past behind.

She was planning on moving back to her grandmother’s small house in Kensington but Erik talked her out of running away.

He’d pointed out the obvious. Running away never solved a thing. All she would be doing was adding more fuel to Raymond’s accusations.

“If you run away from this now, Sophie, you’ll be answering it for the rest of your life. Is that really what you want?”

“No, of course not but what am I supposed to do, Erik? The apartment belongs to Raymond. I can’t stay here. I need to find a job and—”

“You can stay with me.” That had been so unexpected, that Sophie couldn’t think of a single logical reason to refuse him.

“Erik, I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” he’d countered, forcing her to search for a valid reason other than, *I’m deeply attracted to you and if I move in with you, I don’t know how long I can remain strong.*

“Erik, you’ve been so good to me since Kevin’s death. I need to start looking out for myself. You have your own life to live, and I would only be in the way.”

“Sophie, I have this huge apartment I rarely use because I spend most of my time at work. Trust me, you wouldn’t be in the way, and you’d be doing a huge favor. Someone should get some use out of the place. It would be nice having you around—to keep an eye on things.”

*To keep an eye on things?* Not exactly what she wanted to hear.

The whole idea had been so crazy, that Sophie had refused to discuss it any further. Erik let the subject drop for the moment, but he hadn't given up. He'd insisted she would be helping him out by moving in. Of course, Sophie didn't believe a word of what he'd told her but she did owe Erik an awful lot and if he wanted her to stay with him, then how in good conscience, could she refuse?

That had been over a week ago, yet Sophie still couldn't bring herself to tell Marissa about it. She hadn't really been sure why until today. After Marissa's earlier accusations, she knew exactly what her cousin's reaction would be.

Marissa would take that as positive proof that Sophie was interested in Erik as more than just a friend. Nothing could be further from the truth, could it? Erik was a wonderful guy and a truly good friend, but that was it. Friendship was all that could ever be between them. Sophie wasn't interested in anything more with Erik, or any other man for that matter. She couldn't. Not after Kevin.

## Chapter Three

The second Sophie opened the door and saw Erik standing there, she knew she'd just made the second biggest mistake of her life.

The first clue came when the sight of him practically knocked the breath right out of her, right before it hit her again just how sexy Erik truly was.

"Hi, I'm sorry I'm a little late. Traffic..." When Sophie could only manage to stand there looking up at him, hopefully without her jaw dropping, she saw that smile appear. The one that started slow, at the corners of his mouth and spread into a beautiful grin that crinkled the tiny lines around his eyes and took her remaining breath away.

"Can I come in?" It took another full minute or longer for it to hit her that he'd actually asked her something. It was embarrassing enough to be standing around gawking at her husband's best friend. Even more, that she hadn't heard a single word of what he'd just said.

"I'm sorry?" The words came out sounding something along the lines of a really bad Daffy Duck imitation to which she was blessed, or cursed depending on your opinion, by the sound of his laughter.

"Well, I was hoping you were actually going to allow me to come inside, instead of standing out here in the hallway like some teenage suitor."

To that far-too-close-to-home-for-comfort statement, Sophie backed into the apartment and held the door open.

"Sure...of course, I'm sorry, Erik. I don't know that I was thinking. Come on in, I'm just finishing up."

"So are you ready for this?" Sophie turned back to look at him, uncertain of what he'd meant. It was as if the sight of him had taken away all coherent thought.

"I'm sorry?" Jeez, were those the only two words she knew how to say?

"I mean are you okay with leaving this?" Erik waved his hand to encompass the apartment and it finally clicked what he was talking about. "I know it must be...hard for you, Sophie. Leaving the home you and Kevin shared together. Are you going to be okay?"

"Oh..." Of course, he was only thinking of Kevin. "Yes...that is, I will be okay. I just want to get this over with, Erik. You know, put it all in the past."

Probably not what any loving wife would be saying about the life she'd shared with her husband, but it was the best Sophie could attempt in the way of an answer. She couldn't tell Erik the truth. That in the last eight months of Sophie's life, the only thing she didn't want to put in the past was him.

Erik stepped closer making Sophie only that much more aware of him. Of all the little things about him that drew her to him, even while sending warning signals throughout her far-too-aware-of-him body. She fought the urge to back away.

He stood in front her, those incredibly gentle blue eyes searching hers just before one hand reached up to touch her hair.

"I know it's hard. I know you don't think you'll get through this, Sophie, but you will. It just takes time. You'll see. You have to give yourself time to heal. In time, the pain won't hurt so badly. Maybe someday, you'll even be able to love again."

Those words coming from Erik was enough to guarantee it would never happen. His words made her realize just how impossible that dream would ever be. At least for her. Kevin had been a mistake but that realization had come too late. And now, standing close to Erik and feeling the way she did about him, made her that much more aware of all those things. Against her will, Sophie wondered what it would be like being loved by someone like Erik.

Impossible, that's what. Hadn't Kevin told her more times than she could even remember anymore just how impossible that was? Erik was not the marrying kind. His life revolved around the company he'd created. Everything else came second to that. Not that there hadn't been any lack of women wanting to change that, at least according to Kevin.

Erik dated some of the most beautiful, glamorous women in all of New York. What made Sophie think that someone like her, lacking all those qualities, could make Erik change his mind?

"The boxes are through here." Sophie stepped away from Erik and was finally able to breathe again. Those all-seeing blue eyes hadn't missed a single thing about her nervous retreat.

If Erik were close to guessing why she'd needed to put space between them now, he chose not to acknowledge it. Why would he? She was nothing more than his best friend's wife.

"You're all set then?" Erik asked casually as he followed her to the bedroom she'd used after she and Kevin gave up on the intimate part of their marriage. After the first few months, Sophie and Kevin had never shared a bed again.

"Are you sure you don't want to take anything else with you?" Erik asked once again when he surveyed the three boxes neatly stacked on the bed.

He had no way of knowing that the very thought of remembering this place was almost as painful as her marriage had been.

"No. No, Erik, I just want to put it all behind me. I need to focus on the future and finding a job. I don't want to be a burden to you."

Sophie saw his reaction immediately. He hated her words. She hurried on before he could deny them. "I know you've told me I won't be in the way, but, Erik, that's not really the truth. You need your space. I mean, after all, you are single and..." She'd been so close to saying handsome and desirable when she'd caught the words and turned away again.

What was she thinking? That she could simply move in with this dangerous distraction and not be aware of everything about him? There was no way this would work out as anything but bad.

"Sophie, believe it or not, and in spite of what Kevin may have told you, I don't spend every waking minute of my day pursuing the opposite sex. I mean I do have a business to run, you know?"

Sophie started for the door. She felt like such an idiot giving away to Erik that she'd listened to Kevin's gossip.

Erik caught her before she reached the door and turned her to face him. "Sophie, you are not going to be in my way. I want you there. If I didn't, I would never have asked you to move in with me. Once you're settled in and ready, I can help you find a job if you'd like. There's always something available at *Sebastian Advertising* and I have an idea, but we can talk about all that later..." he added.

"We can talk about it now. There's no way I'm letting you find a job for me, Erik. I can do some things on my own, thank you very much. You've done too much as it is."

"We can talk about this later, Sophie, once you've had a chance to get settled in."

"It doesn't matter when we talk about it. I'm still not leaning on you any more than I



have already. I owe you far too much as it is and I don't like that, Erik."

"Sophie—this is crazy. You don't owe me anything. We're friends. This is what friends do for one another. You'd do the same for me if the situation were reversed, so stop worrying so much, would you. I want you there with me. End of discussion."

"Uh-uh. Not by a long shot. I meant what I said about the job, Erik. I can find my own. I intend on paying rent while I'm living with you, so don't even think about arguing with me about it. That's the way it's going to be, if it's going to be. Understood?"

"Whatever you say, love. Just as long as you're in my apartment by tonight, I really don't care."

Sophie looked into his blue eyes and wanted more than anything at that moment to simply walk into his arms and hold him close. Truly let herself be close to Erik just once. Something of that struggle within her must have shown in her eyes, but Erik misunderstood.

"Sophie, I know how hard this has been for you, but Kevin's gone. No amount of grieving will bring him back, you know? Kevin's dead—by his own hand. He chose to take his own life, just as if he'd taken a gun and shot himself. This way, he ended up taking four innocent victims with him. Not to mention the ones behind. Yourself...Raymond. Me. Kevin chose his own path in life, Sophie, and it led to death, however unimaginable that may be.

"But you're still so young, Sophie. Far too young to give up living. In time, you will move on with your life. You may even find love again."

Sophie shook her head denying those words immediately. "No. No, I can never go through that again, Erik. I can't. I don't ever want to feel this much pain again."

He moved closer to her, inches away. She could feel the tension inside him once more. Erik hadn't liked her answer and she didn't understand why.

"Sophie, I know you're hurting, but believe me, it will pass in time. You can't stop living. Do you honestly think if it had been you who died instead, that Kevin would stop living? I know he was your husband, but he was also my friend and I know him too well to believe that. Kevin was my friend but for the most part, he was extremely selfish.

"You weren't the one who died in that accident, Sophie. You're still alive. You need to accept that you have to move on with your life. Time will ease your hurt but you have to do your part as well. You can't stop living." She felt his hands on her arms once more turning her to face him. "It's okay to hurt. Don't let it destroy you. You have far too much to live for to let that happen."

Erik pulled her gently into his arms and Sophie went too willingly. He felt so strong. Erik had so much strength to offer. It might be wrong, but for the moment, she needed to be close to someone who was strong to make her feel alive again. She needed Erik's strength more than she'd ever needed another human's touch before him.

Sophie moved closer, her arms going around his waist. She could feel his tension coming between them once more before Erik slowly untangled her arms. Sophie was surprised to find reluctance in his eyes before he released her.

"I'm sorry..." She turned away fighting the rejection she felt at that moment. Friendship. That was all there would ever be between them.

"I'm sorry...we should just get this over with. I know I must be keeping you from...something. We can do this tomorrow if you'd like, Erik. I don't want to interfere with your plans. That is, I mean, I'm sure you must have much better things to do with your Friday night than this?"

"Sophie, what exactly are you trying to say? Do you really think I would plan a date with

another woman on tonight of all nights? That I'm thinking about someone else while I'm with you? That really doesn't say much for your opinion of me, now does it?"

She turned back to Erik surprised once more by the anger so clearly visible in his blue eyes. He resented her intrusion into his private life.

"Do you really think I can't take time out of my busy personal life to help a friend? I'm not sure I want to know what Kevin told you about me. I do have other things that need my time other than going out with the countless women you seem to think I date. Somehow, I manage to find time for work and friends as well." He smiled back at her and once more, all the anger in him disappeared. This was the Erik she knew and loved.

That smile alone could turn her day completely around. Erik made her feel special just by being close to him. She hated thinking about the time when they would no longer be this close.

Something a little too disturbing was happening to her. Sophie had this same out-of-control feeling every single time Erik looked at her the way he was now. If that smile was any indication, he was reading her reaction quite clearly. But then again, maybe Erik was used to women falling for him.

"And, as a matter of fact I do have plans for tonight," he added very slowly. "I plan on taking you out to dinner. So don't argue...please. Just say you'll come."

"Alright," She told him slowly. "Yes, I'll come."

Sophie wondered if Erik thought it strange, she was sleeping in the guest bedroom instead of Kevin's.

He hadn't said a word about it that night they spent here together. Maybe he just assumed it was less painful for her to sleep in another bedroom than the one he believed she had shared with her husband.

Erik took the boxes down to the Range Rover insisting she wait in the apartment. She didn't hear him return but she felt his presence and knew he would be watching her again as she looked around the apartment for the last time feeling nothing but a sense of relief. She would miss nothing about her life as Kevin McGraw's wife. Nothing at all.

Especially not that final night.

On the night of his death, Kevin had been high and looking for any excuse to argue. He'd started drinking the moment he walked into the apartment. The mixture of alcohol and drugs had a terrible effect on him.

Kevin started pulling out drawers and tossing their contents across the room looking for the money he kept hidden around the apartment. When he couldn't find it, he accused Sophie of taking it.

Kevin was so much stronger than she was. He'd literally thrown her against the sharp edge of the kitchen counter. The pain in her side was so intense, that she had lost consciousness for a while.

When she awoke, Kevin was gone, the door to the apartment was standing open, and the house was in total chaos.

Somehow, she'd found the strength to get up off the kitchen floor. Hours later, a police came to tell her about the accident.

Even today, three weeks later, she still carried the painful bruises on her body from that night.

"Come back to me, Sophie." Erik's voice quietly cut through the memories bringing her back to the moment. He was standing in the doorway watching her. Seeing things she never

wanted him to see.

"Are you sure you don't want to keep any of the furniture? We could always put it in storage if you like. Someday, you may change your mind."

"No. No, Erik, I will never change my mind. I don't any of it. I don't want anything to remind me of..." She stopped when she realized how close she'd come to telling him everything. The truth about just how sick Kevin really was and what had happened in this very apartment the night of his death.

"I just can't bear the constant reminder of what happened, Erik. It's best if I leave this part of the past behind me." She turned away from him before he saw through her lies. Erik knew she wasn't telling him the truth. It was all there in his expression. He wasn't going to press her just yet. One day, he would.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie had only been to Erik's apartment on a couple of occasions. She and Kevin had dinner there shortly after their marriage. It had been a night Sophie couldn't forget. The first time she met Erik.

She still remembered Erik's reaction when Kevin introduced her as his wife. Like everyone else, he had been shocked Kevin had chosen to marry someone like her. That had only been a few days after their wedding, back when she still believed marrying Kevin had been the best thing to happen to her.

Had she been thinking clearly and not acting on her attraction to Kevin McGraw, it would have hit her that nobody got married after knowing someone for just one week.

She didn't know a thing about Kevin, other than he was gorgeous and had the most amazing manners. He was kind and attentive. That hadn't lasted much longer than their first week of marriage and the night of Erik's party.

That night was her first real glimpse of Kevin. The first time he'd hit her. The change in him shocked her. Gone was the sweet person she'd married. In his place was a man filled with rage. It wasn't until weeks later that Sophie discovered the truth about Kevin's radical change in behavior. After that, Kevin didn't even try to hide the drugs from her. They were everywhere around the apartment. Soon after, Sophie had moved into the guest bedroom. He hadn't tried to stop her, which only confirmed the truth. Her marriage was nothing more than a mistake.

Sometimes, Kevin would come to her room simply to talk. During those times, he was almost like the man she'd married. But then, something would always happen to set him off and the abuse would start again.

Sophie believed Kevin saw their marriage as just another failure in his life. He chose to ignore her for the most part, spending time with his friends. The ones who supplied the drugs he needed.

Now, sitting next to Erik as he maneuvered the Range Rover through the heavy evening traffic, Sophie prayed this decision wouldn't prove to be yet another mistake in what was becoming her life story as of late.

Erik's apartment occupied the entire top floor of the apartment building.

Very little had changed since Erik had shown her around the place months earlier. It was impeccably decorated to reflect Erik's simple masculine tastes and no doubt cost a small fortune. There were three bedrooms, each with their own spectacular view of the Manhattan skyline.

Erik stood close by watching as she walked into the living room.

"You remember the apartment from when you and Kevin were here before, don't you, Sophie?" Suddenly and for no apparent reason, Sophie felt awkward being this close to him. She

knew Erik had picked up on her uneasiness by the gentle way he spoke. “Why don’t you let me show you to your room? I’ve put you in the room next to mine. I thought you might feel more comfortable knowing I’m just next door to you in case you needed anything during the night.”

The room, like everything else about the apartment, was tastefully decorated with a queen-size sleigh bed dominating it.

“Oh, before I forget, I’ve left the extra key for the apartment for you on the dresser, and there are extra keys to both the Corvette and Rover in the table near the door. Feel free to use either of them any time you want. It’s sometimes better to have your own way around the city as opposed to depending on public transportation.”

Erik left her alone then to get settled in but Sophie found she could do little more than stare out the window at the city lights.

She was exhausted all the way down to her soul, yet she couldn’t help but wonder if moving into Erik’s apartment, beyond the obvious trouble it posed to her willpower, was only taking the easy way out. She was leaning on him when she didn’t have that right.

Erik was her friend, that much was true, but the truth was just as clear. She was attracted to him. Had been attracted to him from the beginning. It was useless to deny it. She knew the truth, whatever that made her. How much longer would she be able to continue this charade of being the grieving widow? How long before Erik knew the truth and hated her for it?

\* \* \* \*

“Wake up, Sophie. You can’t fall asleep here.” The sound of amusement in Erik’s voice brought her eyes open in an instant. She glanced across the table of the small Italian restaurant he’d taken her to in embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, Erik. I guess I’m lousy company tonight.”

“You’re just tired is all. Why don’t we get out of here before I end up having to carry you out?” She had to fight hard to keep from showing him just how disturbing that image was to her. Erik paid the bill, then took her hand as they left the restaurant.

Outside, the night had turned colder. There was just a hint of the winter to come in the air. The Range Rover was brought around and Erik held the door open for her as she slid into the passenger seat. Sophie closed her eyes wanting only to climb into bed and sleep for days. The weight of Kevin’s death had taken its toll on her. She was exhausted. Physically and emotionally drained.

“Sophie, wake up, love—we’re home now.” Slowly, she opened her eyes and looked around in surprise. She must have drifted off to sleep soon after they left the restaurant.

“I’m sorry. I don’t normally fall asleep at the drop of a hat.”

“You’ve been through a lot lately. More than most people could handle in a lifetime. You’re entitled. Kevin’s death is finally starting to sink in, isn’t it? You know you keep things bottled up inside far too much, don’t you, Sophie? You need to let it out. Keeping your emotions inside isn’t good for you.” He closed the apartment door and stood watching her once more. “You haven’t shown any real emotion since the night of Kevin’s funeral. You’ve done everything possible to keep your feelings closed off. Why is that, Sophie? Why is it so hard for you to show your emotions? Do you think it makes you any more vulnerable than the rest of us? When you lose someone you love, you’re entitled to hurt. We all feel pain. You have to let that pain out in some way, otherwise, it will destroy you.”

Sophie turned away, praying that Erik would never come to understand the truth. She hadn’t realized he’d noticed her lack of emotion following Kevin’s death.

It was almost as if he were waiting, expecting her to fall apart at any moment. What

would he say if he knew that the only emotion she felt capable of feeling toward Kevin now was pity.

Sophie shook her head avoiding all the unasked questions in Erik's eyes.

"You're right, I am exhausted, and I think that I should go to bed. Thank you for dinner, for being there for me...for everything. You know you're probably the only real friend I have. I would never have gotten through this without you, Erik. I don't know if I can ever repay your kindness."

\* \* \* \*

Sophie closed the bedroom door, completely missing the bitter regret that touched Erik's eyes at her words.

She didn't know just how little he wanted her thanks or how much it hurt to consider friendship only with her. He couldn't tell her any of those things.

Kevin was the love of her life. She believed she could never love or be loved by any other person in such an all-consuming way again.

At that moment, Erik almost hated Kevin for being the one to make her feel that way.

## Chapter Four

Sophie lay silently staring out the window, listening to the sounds coming from Erik's room next door. In this darkness of the unfamiliar room, everything felt alien. She'd never felt so alone.

She wondered for the countless time, how someone as compassionate and caring as Erik had managed to remain unattached for so long. Although Kevin had been extremely jealous of Erik, he was still one of the few people in the world who Kevin respected as well. Kevin told her Erik dated some of the most beautiful, most desirable women in New York and although he might choose to sleep with such women, he never planned to marry.

According to Kevin, Erik had watched his father go through a bitter divorce when he was just a boy. His mother abandoned Erik after the divorce and ran away with the man she had destroyed her marriage for.

In the years following the divorce, she never once attempted to contact her son. Watching his father struggle with depression after the divorce had left Erik permanently scarred toward marriage.

Sophie lay sleepless, watching the lights of the city play across the room. The exhaustion from the weeks of living in fear seemed to have become a part of her, but still, it was almost impossible to sleep. When she did, Kevin was never far from her, reaching out to her through her dreams.

It was always the same. Each time she dreamed of him, she was back at the apartment once more and he was hurting her, forcing her to go with him that night. She could almost feel the cold fear that overpowered her as the Mercedes sped through the red light into the blinding headlights of the oncoming car. She could hear the horrendous sound of metal against metal becoming a raging inferno. Sophie tried to free herself from the seatbelt, crying out for help just before the flames, hot and scorching, engulfed her body searing her skin. She could almost smell the burning flesh. She turned screaming in terror only to see Kevin laughing through the raging curtain of flames, reaching out for her beyond his fiery grave to take her back with him. Her lungs filled with smoke and she began to struggle against him fighting to break free of his deathly grip, screaming in terror, forcing herself awake.

Sophie realized then it wasn't Kevin who held her but Erik. Erik was shaking her, trying to wake her from her nightmare.

Her hands touched his bare chest. Erik gathered her close, gently stroking her hair.

"It's okay, Sophie. It was just a dream. You're okay. It was only a dream."

"Oh God, Erik, it was Kevin! It was the night of the crash! I was there with him. I, I tried to get out but I couldn't get the seat belt free. The fire was everywhere—all around me, burning me." Sophie began to shiver, unable to control the fear that went through her at reliving those memories. "It seemed so real, Erik. Kevin was holding me there...he wouldn't let me go."

Erik shifted, switching off the light before pulling the covers over them both and tugging her close to the warmth of his body. She could feel the heat from his body as it slowly began to penetrate her fear. His fingers massaged the tension from her.

"Shh, Sophie, it's okay, I'm right here. I won't let anything hurt you ever again. It's

okay. Go to sleep now. Everything will be okay.”

“Erik, promise me that you won’t leave me. I don’t think I can be alone. I don’t want to see him again.” Sophie moved closer to Erik, her arms going round his waist. He felt so safe. So warm. So...tempting. So forbidden. She could feel the tension that vibrated throughout his body.

Erik caught his breath, his anger reached out to her in the darkness. “It’s okay, Sophie, I’m not going anywhere. Just go back to sleep, okay? It’s late.”

Reality washed over her in an instant. She had no right to be this close to him and he had no desire for her. Sophie remembered the last she had been this close to him. What his reaction was. Erik had only offered her sympathy, but things had gotten out of hand. If Erik hadn’t stopped it when he did, then...

Erik was strong, and she was his best friend’s wife. Sophie pulled away and tried to control the hurt and the breathless sound of her voice, she turned away.

“I’m sorry, I’m okay now. I, I didn’t mean to wake you. I’m okay now, Erik.”

He swore softly before reaching for her once more, his hands going firmly around her body making contact with the bruises along her ribcage still painfully tender after all these weeks. Sophie was unaware that she cried out, flinching away from him.

“Sophie? What is it? What’s wrong? Are you hurt?” Erik didn’t wait for her answer. He pushed her back against the bed and lifted her tee shirt above her waist; his fingers gently touching the fading blue bruises just below her breast. She wanted to die with shame. She tried to push his fingers away acutely aware she wore nothing but the thin white bikini panties and tee shirt, but Erik didn’t let her go. His searching eyes met hers expecting answers. She could see all the accusations clearly, before he even asked the question.

“Who did this to you, Sophie?” His hand reached up to grasp her chin tenderly, forcing her to look at him. “Answer the question, Sophie. Who hurt you?”

“No, no one. It’s nothing. I fell. That’s all. It’s nothing, Erik.” She closed her eyes against the disbelief in his. He hadn’t believed anything she’d said. She wasn’t really expecting him to,

He made a contemptuous sound before releasing her as if her touch contaminated him.

“I hope to God he was worth it.”

Sophie couldn’t stop the bitter laughter that bubbled up inside at those words. She turned away, wishing he would just go and leave her in peace.

“He wasn’t.” The last thing she could face right now was his disappointment.

He swore softly once more before pulling her back into the circle of his arms holding her tight when she tried to push him away. “Let me go, Erik!”

“Shut up, Sophie. Just shut up and go to sleep.”

His words hurt. What he believed about her was even harder to accept. Erik believed she had been unfaithful to Kevin. She wanted to laugh at the irony of it all. Kevin had been unfaithful to her from the beginning. She’d never once thought of cheating on him, although he’d certainly given her plenty of reasons to.

She wished she could just push Erik away. Not care what his opinion was of her. She couldn’t.

The warm strength of his arms was far more welcoming than the lonely darkness would ever be.

Sophie hated that she was actually crying. She wasn’t trying to push him away anymore. She would take whatever comfort Erik chose to offer her tonight because she wanted to be close

to him almost as much as she needed to keep the demons away.

\* \* \* \*

Erik listened to the soft, steady breathing of the woman who he still held cradled in his arms. He could smell the faint perfumed scent of her hair. Her skin felt like sheer torture. She felt so good. He wanted her so bad.

He should leave her. Slip quietly away while she slept knowing she would never miss his presence now. She had only reached out to him for comfort. She'd been frightened by some nightmare and needed someone—anyone, not specifically him—to comfort her. He had no right to be this close to her. Holding her this way as if she belonged to him completely. Sharing her bed. To have her this close after all the long months of trying to put her out of his every thought and struggling with his feelings for her was far too dangerous.

He looked down at her, wondering if she had any idea how much he wanted her. Now just as strong as that one night. The night of Kevin's funeral. It had taken everything inside of him to refuse what she was offering him that night. Because she'd been offering to fulfill all his dreams.

Did she feel the way his body reacted, almost against his will, to her touch, sending him up in flames? He closed his eyes and hoped she didn't. Otherwise, she would never let him near her again.

The last thing on earth she wanted was for someone whom she openly proclaimed to be a friend to be thinking the thoughts he was thinking about her. She was strictly *off limits*. She was his best friend's wife, for God's sake. His recently deceased best friend's wife. He had no claim to her beyond that.

At the thought of Kevin, Erik found himself wondering once again if Kevin's confession to him just a few weeks before his death were true. Had Sophie cheated on her husband? Hadn't she all but admitted as much to him just now? He'd certainly seen the proof with his own eyes, hadn't he?

Kevin had made it graphically clear that Sophie actually enjoyed men who were physically rough with her. The fading bruises on her body seemed to confirm that fact.

So why then did everything else about the woman he had come to know so well, in spite of her resistance to reveal anything about herself to him, tell him that something in Kevin's words didn't quite ring true. He hoped he was right about her, for his sake as well as hers.

For the past eight torturous months, he had thought of her and tried desperately to deny his unexplainable reaction to her. He'd made it a point not to see her again until Kevin's death. During that time, Erik had to remind himself she was strictly off limits. Most of the time, it didn't work. Every woman he went out with only reminded him of the one he wanted. The one he could never have. He found himself constantly comparing them to Sophie, but there really wasn't any comparison for him.

At that point and out of sheer frustration, he'd thrown himself into work with a fervor that both surprised and alarmed those who were unfortunate enough to come in contact with him.

Erik had gone through more assistants than he cared to think about, with the last one quitting after only an hour of working for him. Now, he was forced to borrow assistants from the secretarial pool his company employed, to help keep the workflow from becoming completely out of control. He was quickly becoming his own company's joke. No one wanted to return to the empty assistant's desk after sitting outside his office for more than one day. Even though his personnel department had tried to find someone to fill that need, as of yet, there weren't any takers.



As much as Erik hated admitting it now, with Kevin gone, his friend had been made to suffer the most for his choice of wives. On more than a few occasions, Erik had deliberately given him the worst possible assignment, sending Kevin to parts of the country that few would ever choose to go willingly. Kevin had been forced to work on advertising campaigns that were all but doomed from the start.

The long hours had eventually taken their toll on Erik's health as well. The endless trips abroad he was making on a weekly basis had made it virtually impossible for his body to wind down, or acclimate enough to find peace in sleep.

On more than one occasion, he'd had been forced to call his personal physician to prescribe something to help him sleep, or fight off some bug that his weakened immune system couldn't shake on its own, until finally, Doctor Stephens had made a rare house call to Erik's apartment and almost forced him into the hospital. The doctor insisted on bed rest for a week with no travel and Erik had obliged reluctantly when the doctor told him how close to having pneumonia he'd come.

That week had been a turning point for Erik. He had slowed his travel schedule considerably, making only a few trips out of the country each month.

For Erik, work proved the only thing that kept him going at times. The one true, tangible thing in his life he could hold onto and say was his. Although he forced himself to cut back on the long work hours, he'd come to despise going home to an empty apartment, because it only gave him too much time alone to think about her.

Sophie said something unintelligible in her sleep, the hand that lay against his chest dropped a little lower. He froze. Then Erik reached to capture it before she could do anymore damage to his self-control. He should do the right thing and leave her bed. Before he gave into the desire threatening to drown out all of his good intentions.

With another angry sigh, he pulled her closer, his hands going round her body, curving her into his tautness being careful not to hurt her bruised body, before closing his eyes and willing himself to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie awoke as the sun's rays filtered through the wall of windows close to her bed.

She opened her eyes, lost for a moment. She glanced around the unfamiliar room. Then she remembered. She was in Erik's apartment now. At least until she could find a job and support herself. She sat slowly up in bed while faint disturbing memories played through her mind. Had it been real, or just a figment of her troubled imagination? Some displaced need in her conjuring up Erik's comforting arms after the nightmare of Kevin that haunted her sleeping hours, leaving her physically exhausted.

Sophie's hand slid down the sheet, touching something. She glanced down at the white piece of paper that held Erik's distinct handwriting. Her gaze going to the pillow next to hers, a wave of weakness swept through her.

It was real after all. Erik had been there with her. Several times during the night, she had dreamt of awakening as some unsettling uneasiness crept into her dreams and always, his arms had been there, around her, comforting her. She had been so certain they were just a dream. Just a figment of all her hopeless longings.

Now faced with the evidence of his presence, Sophie was afraid of what her reaction to him had been. She still remembered the way he had looked at her after he had forced her shirt up and had seen the bruises Kevin left on her body. She remembered Erik's reaction to them. How easily he had believed the worst about her. She hated Erik's reaction. He was her friend—the

only true friend she had left. He had come to her out of friendship.

So why should the thought of him holding her while she slept fill her with so much hopeless yearning? Because she wanted so much more than just his comfort. She wondered just how many other women had wanted the very same thing from Erik. How many others had shared his bed with a different outcome and craved to be loved by him?

Sophie shook her head trying to dispel the dismal mood that had come over her. She had no right to even think about such things. They were none of her business. They were out of reach for her. Erik was her friend and that's all he would ever be.

She glanced at the piece of paper reading his words. His note was impersonal. He was letting her that his housekeeper, Mrs. Taylor, would be stopping by later that morning to restock the fridge and pantry and clean the apartment.

Erik had been considerate enough of her feelings to let his housekeeper know Sophie was there and Sophie shouldn't hesitate to ask her for anything she needed. Sophie wanted to cry at the selflessness with which this man watched out for her, knowing she would be feeling misplaced somehow in her new surroundings. How could anyone so kind and considerate ever have been Kevin's friend and not known the real evil within him? The drugs and mental instability that drove Kevin over the edge?

Sophie dressed in a trouser suit, fitting to wear for her day of job searching. She looked at herself in the full-length closet mirror. She had lost weight since the last time she wore the suit. Its dark blue cut hung loose around her slim figure. Her short blond curls had lost some of their luster. They framed her face in an unruly mass of spirals. Her hair seemed to have a will of its own. Which usually meant it did exactly what it wanted, no matter how hard she tried to control the curls.

Erik wanted her to take some time to herself before starting to look for a job, but she didn't want to waste a single moment. She needed to find a job to prove to herself that Kevin had been wrong about her. She was qualified to do something on her own, even without a degree. She never wanted to depend on anyone again, especially not Erik. His friendship was far too important.

A key unlocked the apartment door and Sophie abandoned her attempts at pulling off a proper work hairstyle. She walked into the great room just as an older woman, dressed casually in jeans and tee shirt decorated with brightly colored flowers, stepped inside the apartment. She balanced two shopping bags very expertly while removing a cluster of keys from the door. She turned and saw Sophie for the first time.

"Oh, my goodness—you startled me, child. I didn't see you standing there. You must be Sophie. Erik told me you would be here today, but I never gave it any thought. I should have rang the bell. I'm sorry. I hope I didn't surprise you as much as you did me. I'm Edwina Taylor, Erik's housekeeper. You are Sophie, aren't you?"

Edwina set the bags down on the glass and metal table close to the entrance and took Sophie's hand. Warm brown eyes instantly put Sophie at ease. "I'm pleased to meet you, Sophie."

Sophie liked the woman right from the start. "Thank you. It's nice to meet you as well, Mrs. Taylor. Can I help you put these things away?" Sophie picked up one of the bags while Edwina Taylor grabbed the other and headed for the kitchen.

"Oh now no, it won't take me but a moment. You look like you were on your way out. I don't want to hold you up, dear. I'll be finished with the apartment in a few hours. It doesn't take me long since it's almost as if no one lives here anymore. Erik's so rarely home these

days.”

Edwina’s brown eyes met Sophie in speculation. “But then, maybe that’s all about to change now that you’re here.”

Sophie found herself blushing as she realized Edwina was definitely getting the wrong impression about her relationship with Erik. She turned away and started to unpack the groceries from her bag while older woman continued talking.

“He needs to slow down. The poor man works far too many hours. There’s hardly a day goes by that he’s not at the office until well after midnight, if he doesn’t spend the night there. You know he has the apartment on the top floor of the office. I don’t know why I even bother to buy food anymore. Erik rarely eats anything I bring in here. I’m very fond of Erik you know, but he doesn’t listen to anything I tell him. That doesn’t stop me from worrying about him. He’s so successful with that career of his. Starting that company straight out of college and making it, the success it is today is amazing, but he needs balance in his life. He needs someone to share that success. After all, what good is money and success, if there isn’t anyone to enjoy it with you?”

Sophie turned back to look at the older woman. It was easy to see her fondness for Erik, as well as her concern. She had never thought of Erik as being unhappy before now, but listening as Edwina talked about him, she saw the man she had come to respect and yes, care about, in a different light. Her heart ached for him. The thought of Erik being lonely was hard to accept.

“How long have you worked for Erik, Mrs. Taylor?”

“Oh goodness, it must be almost five years now. He’s been so good to me. When my husband, Jack, died a few years ago, Erik came and stayed with me. He didn’t want me to be lonely. Oh but look at me. I must be keeping you from something prattling on like this. Forgive me, dear. Where are you off to this morning so dressed up?”

Sophie shook her head trying to dispel the sadness that had come at the older woman’s words.

Erik was a true friend to her and to Edwina Taylor. How many others? Was there anyone special there for him? Sophie wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer to that.

“I’m job hunting. My first time, and I haven’t a clue where to begin. I thought I’d start with the paper and check into some employment agencies listed as well. See what turns up.”

“Well that sounds like the best way to get your feet wet. Job-hunting is always so stressful. Don’t you let it get you down, dear. Something will turn up. Have you talked to Erik about working at his company? I know he always needs help in some department or another.”

“No, I don’t want to impose on him anymore than I already am. Erik’s been so kind. I guess I want to try to do this on my own as well. I guess that sounds silly, but I really want to start being more independent.”

Edwina Taylor smiled gently at her before nodding. “No, that doesn’t sound silly at all. I completely understand how you feel. Erik told me about your husband’s death. I’m sorry. That must have been an awful thing for someone so young to go through. You are doing the right thing. Everyone needs to believe they can make their own way in this world. Don’t let anyone stop you, child. You’ll make it just fine.”

## Chapter Five

Eight hours later, as she took the subway back uptown to Erik's apartment, Sophie was beginning to think Edwina Taylor's confidence in her might be misplaced.

She'd been to four agencies and had never been more discouraged in her life. After spending several hours at each one being tested on her skills and after filling out endless forms, she was told that without a degree, it would be all but impossible to place her in her desired field. The remaining available choices were not very promising. She had three interviews scheduled for the following day, two of which were receptionist positions and the third was in sales. None sounded at all interesting, but at least she would be employed.

It was almost eight o'clock when she walked into the apartment. Erik still wasn't home. As she walked through the empty apartment, she understood why he rarely rushed home. The silence of the place was almost deafening. Sophie tossed her bag on the bed and went to the kitchen.

For the first time in a long time, she realized she was hungry. Sophie had passed on the kind offer Edwina's made to make her breakfast. During the day, there really hadn't been time to eat. Now as she looked around the pristine gourmet kitchen, Sophie wondered if she dared to attempt to prepare anything. The place looked magazine perfect.

It was obvious Erik rarely used the kitchen. No doubt, he mostly chose to dine out. Not that she could really blame him. It wasn't much fun eating alone. That was one thing Sophie had found hard to get used to with Kevin rarely home.

She opened the refrigerator door and stood scanning its contents unaware she was no longer alone.

\* \* \* \*

Erik stood silently watching the girl who looked strangely out of place standing in his kitchen. He just couldn't get use to seeing her there, but he liked knowing he was coming home to her.

She was dressed in loose-fitting dress pants, but he could still see the slim curve of her hip and the way they clung to her bottom. The white tee shirt, although slightly dressier, was similar enough to what she'd worn last night in bed to remind him of everything he hadn't been unable to forget most of today. How she felt in his arms as she clung to him in her sleep, how her body relaxed against his accepting his comfort at last, and what lay beneath that innocent white tee shirt.

Her body was perfect. Her slim legs tanned against the white panties and shirt was enough to send his mind back to places he'd been going to in his fantasies since meeting her. Someone had chosen to hurt her. Even though she denied it and he remembered every single one of Kevin's graphic details of what she liked, it was evident she hadn't enjoyed this. It was there in her eyes. The fear and hurt were all too clear, in spite of what Kevin told him.

Erik must have made some small sound because she turned quickly around, startled by his presence. Her hands dropped to her sides, the fridge slammed shut behind her making her jump. Her gaze collided with his for a moment before looking away. She still couldn't look at him, he thought a little bitterly. He wasn't sure if she were embarrassed by their closeness the

night before, or by what he'd discovered about her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you," he said, taking another step closer. "You look nice. What have you been up to today?"

Her fingers automatically went to her hair and he remembered something, some past comment Kevin had made about how much Sophie hated her hair, because in her opinion, it always looked disheveled. Of course, he'd taken advantage of every opportunity to steer the conversation to Sophie whenever he and Kevin were together. The corner of his mouth lifted slightly at that thought. She had no idea how obsessed he'd become by every little detail of her. She looked absolutely stunning to him. A mixture between lost child and very, very seductive woman.

His eyes slipped slowly over her body. From the blond curls that had fallen in her face, past the tee shirt that clung to her small, firm breasts, down past her flat stomach to the legs he knew were very tan beneath those starched, pinstriped pants. The way she looked standing there so innocently before him did things to his libido that he found hard to control. His gaze met hers again and she saw his reaction. He couldn't really hide how much he wanted her. Hell, he really didn't want to. He liked the way she blushed from her head to her toes every time he looked at her as he was at this moment.

"I went job hunting today." She shook her head making a face that told him just how pitiful the outcome had been and he laughed.

"No luck, huh? Well, don't get too discouraged. Job hunting, especially in New York, can be brutal."

"I wasn't expecting you to be home this early," she said nervously. "I was going to make something to eat. Would you like to join me? I could make us dinner," she said in a hopeful rush.

He watched her hold her breath. It was hard not to smile and try to ease away her doubts.

Erik didn't want to have dinner with her. Mostly because he wasn't sure he could simply share the intimacy of a meal together with her and not want more. Much more. How soon would it be before she guessed the truth? Figured out that this whole suggestion of having her live with him was just a ploy to be close to her for a little while.

He realized she was reading his hesitation as rejection. Sophie turned away. She opened the fridge again and pretended to study its contents again.

Erik let go of his own breath in a sharp sigh. If he didn't get control soon, this would never work out. Whatever *it* was he was trying to get worked out. He forced his less than 'friendly' manner aside and steadied his voice.

"I'd like that very much. Can you give me ten minutes? I want to shower and change and then I'm all yours. I'll be back in a second to help you."

She was busy chopping vegetables for a salad when he returned, wearing jeans and a black pullover sweater. He stepped close to her taking the knife from her unresisting hand. She moved away as if she couldn't stand to be too close to him.

"Something smells good." Erik watched her curiously, trying not to let her see how much her retreat hurt. Sophie opened the oven and looked inside. Her hand went uneasily up to tuck a wayward curl behind her ear. He was quickly becoming familiar with that little move. He knew what that gesture meant. She was all nerves around him.

"It's salmon and it's ready. I thought we could eat outside on the balcony, if that's okay with you. It's such a nice evening for October." He smiled at her edginess and took the dish from her, following her outside.

She was right, not that he ever really noticed the world outside of work anymore.

Tonight, the evening was cool, with a slight touch of the winter to come on the breeze that carried the sounds of the city up to where they sat drinking red wine.

They talked about small things throughout the meal. He noticed she was actually relaxing a little.

Erik listened while Sophie told him about her day and the job interviews she had scheduled for the following day. "Sophie, you know if none of those positions work out, I can help you. All you have to do is ask."

"No, Erik—at least not right away. I want to try to find something on my own. I don't want to depend on you for everything. You've done too much as it is. Do you understand what I mean? It's important for me that I learn to stand on my own two feet."

His eyes searched her face wondering if she realized just how small and breakable she appeared to him. Even now, when she was fighting to control her own future, her eyes were begging him to understand. He did. He knew just how important it was to stand alone in a city that could easily destroy a person if they gave an inch.

"I do understand, Sophie. I know how important self-reliance and integrity can be. Sometimes it's all you have. But my offer to help will always be there, no matter what happens and without any attachments." He hesitated for a moment. He had to be so careful not to break the small amount of trust he'd achieved with her. He wanted to ask her about the bruises fading on her body. He needed to know who was responsible for hurting her in such an inhumanly male way, but he dared not knowing she wouldn't answer him. It was too soon.

So instead of pushing, he listened while she told him about her childhood, growing up with her grandmother.

"Kevin mentioned something about your parents dying when you were just a child. That must have been hard. Growing up without them in your life."

Although she still smiled, her expression held a sad wistfulness.

"I was only five when they were both killed in a car accident. I didn't really understand why they never came back to me. Gran said I cried for weeks after, although I don't really remember much about that time. I guess I blocked the hurt out somehow. I was so lucky I had Gran. She was so good to me."

"You have a cousin, right? Living here in the city?" Erik saw her expression change. He'd gathered Sophie and her cousin weren't all that close when Sophie didn't mention her cousin as a possible solution to her homeless state. Not that Erik minded. He hated to admit it, but he'd been thrilled they weren't close.

"Yes, but Marissa and I don't have much in common and we've never really been all that close."

"So you were happy living with your grandmother?"

"Yes, Gran was great. As tragic as it was to lose them both at one time, they wouldn't have wanted it any other way. They were so much in love with each other. I think it would have been impossible for one to go on without the other."

This surprised him. He would have thought a child five years old would never have noticed such a strong emotional love as what her parents clearly had felt for each other.

"Most parents tell their children fairy tales. My mother used to tell me stories of how she and my father met and fell in love. Mom knew it was love from the moment she saw him. They were so happy together."

Erik watched her as she spoke about her parents and their happiness and wondered how

someone who had endured so much tragedy in her own life could still hold onto the belief in fairy tale love stories as she so clearly did. He wondered what she would say if he told her the truth about her husband. Kevin was certainly no prince charming at all. He'd made it a point of boasting about the women he'd slept with after being married for such a short time to Sophie.

It wasn't his right to take her memories away. It wouldn't make her love Kevin any less. The very thought of his friend's cruelty still had the power to anger him.

"You really believe in that fairy tale? Love at first sight? Even in this day and age? Is that what happened with you and Kevin?"

Sophie didn't look at him but she didn't need to for him to see her reaction to those words. Erik hated himself for trying to make her see the truth. She needed to believe in those fairy tales to hold onto Kevin.

"Yes, I do believe that, Erik. I have to." Her answer, spoken so softly, was little more than a whisper. He had to strain to catch the words but he couldn't mistake the appeal in her voice. She still hadn't answered his question about Kevin. She was deliberately avoiding it and he found himself pressing her once more, realizing there was something about her lack of answer right now that wasn't quite right.

"Is that how you felt about Kevin, Sophie? If that's true, then for the rest of your life, are you planning on living in the past? You're twenty-three years old, Sophie. You have your whole life ahead of you. You shouldn't give it up to live in the past. Sometimes, we imagine things we want to believe are true when, in reality, they're just something we've created in our minds. Something that helps us face the truth."

She shook her head not answering the question, her silence sending his imagination out of control. Maybe all those things Kevin had told him about Sophie were true. Maybe she'd been just as unfaithful as Kevin. Maybe she wasn't the sad widow she appeared to be.

"What about you, Erik? It's obvious you've been hurt by someone. What was it that turned you so against love? Who was she?" The moment the words were out, Erik could tell she regretted asking them.

His laugh held a harsh quality that sounded anything but humorous. Erik found himself wondering again just what she would say if he told her, the only woman he would ever love was sitting next to him now, lost in her past.

"There was no woman, Sophie. At least, not in the way you mean. After watching my father drink himself to death because he loved my mother and couldn't get beyond that love, well, it made me realize that nothing lasts forever. What may be love eternal for one person can be a prison for another. You don't own another person or their feelings. You certainly can't stop those feelings from changing."

"Erik, I'm sorry, I'd, forgotten. Kevin mentioned something about your parents divorcing when you were young but I didn't realize how hard that must have been for you. I'm sorry. I...I shouldn't have brought it up."

She put her hand on his arm. She was trying to comfort him. Erik rejected that comfort. He didn't want her pity.

"It's okay. It happened a very long time ago. It made me see the truth clearly. There really isn't any such thing as a fairy tale, Sophie. We're all human. With very human flaws. Sometimes, it's best to live in the human world. You don't get disappointed nearly as much." He looked at her and realized she was crying. He hadn't expected her tears, and they shocked him. His reaction to seeing them shocked him even more.

Erik touched her cheek in wonder, wiping away a tear with his thumb. He couldn't

remember anyone ever crying for him before. His voice shook when he spoke.

“Don’t, Sophie. Don’t cry for me. I didn’t tell you about my parents to make you sad. Who knows? Maybe you’re the right one after all. Maybe there really is someone for everyone. Maybe my someone is closer than I think.”

Sophie pulled away from his touch, then stood and walked over to the balcony, looking down at the busy crowded streets below for a long time before asking, “Which one is yours, Erik? Which building is *Sebastian Advertising*?” She turned back to him, unexpectedly catching him watching her. The look of raw need in his eyes that had been there so many times took her by surprise. Erik tried to push his feelings aside, but she’d seen. She had to know he wanted her. How soon before she guessed the truth?

He came and stood close behind her; he could feel the change in her. Would there ever be a time when she trusted him completely. He pointed to one of the buildings, speaking softly against her ear. His breath disturbing a pale strand of her hair. He felt her shiver.

“It’s that one. The black glass building three blocks to your left. I’d almost forgotten you were never there before. Why is that, Sophie? Why was it that you chose not to visit the place where your husband spent a great deal of his time each day? I know you didn’t because Kevin told me.”

He watched her closely. She was trying to come up with an answer he would believe. She was going to lie.

What was she hiding? He could almost feel her rejecting his questions even before he could voice them. Something was wrong between her and Kevin, beyond Kevin’s affairs.

Erik didn’t want to believe Kevin’s accusations about her sexual experience or the drugs. Nothing about what he believed her to be fit with Kevin’s description of his wife.

“It’s late, Erik, and I’m tired. I think I should go to bed now.” She didn’t look at him again. She all but edged past him, careful not to touch him and he let her go without trying to stop her.

Sophie left him standing alone silently cursing his foolish tongue. Wishing he could take back the words that had taken her away from him, and wondering once again what dark secret she kept securely hidden away from him.



## Chapter Six

It was becoming harder with each passing day for Sophie to remember Erik was just her friend. It was almost frightening how easy she had adjusted to living with him. She actually looked forward to spending each evening alone with Erik. In the past, she'd dreaded Kevin's return on the occasions when he did choose to come home.

Over the past week, since she had moved into Erik's apartment, they had spent every evening together, either making dinner together or ordering in.

She found herself wondering a thousand times why someone so devastatingly attractive, so kind and caring had survived so long unattached.

Erik would be someone's perfect match. Someone's best friend. He was everything any woman would want in a man. Strong and determined, yet tender and so caring.

Sophie sometimes wondered if he were waiting until she was settled into her new life before resuming his normal routine. Of course, she knew it was only a matter of time before he started seeing other women again. Why did the thought of him with another woman, holding her, making love with her always fill Sophie with such despair that she wanted to cry?

Sophie put down the book she had been trying to read and removed the small black-framed glasses she wore for reading. She switched on the TV, trying once again to concentrate on the old movie she had been trying to get through. It was one of those old Alfred Hitchcock thrillers. One of her favorites, but for some reason, she just couldn't concentrate on it.

Erik called earlier in the evening to let her know his meeting was running late and he wouldn't be home until much later. He told her that he would be grabbing some take-out for them on the way home.

Sophie couldn't remember the last time someone had actually considered her feelings enough to call her and let her when he was running late. She found it both comforting and just a little unnerving as well.

She was staring at the TV without really paying attention when she heard his key in the door and felt her heart began the all too familiar frantic beat. She forced herself not to go to him. She didn't want to feel this much happiness simply by his presence.

Absently, Sophie put the glasses back on, somehow feeling as if they gave her a barrier to hide her feelings from him.

"Hi there." She turned to see him standing in the doorway watching her. As always, Erik looked devastatingly handsome, making her wish... Sophie shook her head killing that train of thought before it could take life.

"Hi there." She wondered if he too felt the same awkwardness she did each time they saw each other again. Sophie looked at him fully for the first time. He looked tired. Exhaustion clung to his eyes.

"Erik, you look tired. Are you okay?" Sophie heard her voice, it sounded so breathless. Her heart went out to him.

"I'm fine. Don't worry. Come on, baby, let's eat. I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

Sophie let him take her hand as they walked into the kitchen. She couldn't say a word.

Her mind was trying to understand the sweet endearment he'd used when he spoke to her. It came so easily for him, so naturally, but it sent shivers through her body each time he spoke to her in that tender way. He'd never called her that before.

They ate Chinese food from paper cartons and she listened as he told her about his day.

Apparently, the meeting that had run late tonight, ended without anything being resolved. Later, as they sat drinking coffee in the living room watching Sophie's movie, Erik told her that he had to fly to Florida on Sunday.

"I'm sorry. I really hate to leave you right now, but unless we can get the problems with this contract worked out soon, and to both party's satisfaction, we stand to lose the client. This is a major account for us. I can't allow that to happen. I should only be gone for three, possibly four days at the most. Sophie forced a smile to her lips. She didn't want Erik to see the sadness she felt. The thought of being apart from him for those days hurt. And that frightened her. She didn't want Erik to be this important to her. Someday, she would have to leave. She couldn't let her heart be broken.

Some of her hurt must have been reflected in her eyes since he watched her expression closely.

"Sophie, you know if there were any other way out of this, I would do it. The last thing I want to do right now is leave you, don't you?"

"I know that, Erik, and it's okay. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. I'll just miss watching old movies with you, and..." She stopped when her voice began to tremble. She looked away and tried to think of something to change the subject. She remembered the job offer.

"Oh, Erik, there is something I want to ask you, to get your opinion on, that is. One of the interviews I went on last week made me an offer." She told him the details of the job, including the salary she would be earning. She could tell by his expression that he wasn't impressed.

"I know it isn't very much, but they are willing to work with me as far as my hours go, so I could leave early two days a week, which would allow me to finish my degree. I only need two classes to finish." When he didn't say anything, Sophie rushed on. "And, I've checked with the university and they offer the classes I need in the afternoons, so I could finish my teaching degree in one semester." Sophie looked at Erik sitting close to her. She could see the exhaustion in his eyes and she wished she could take back her words. He didn't need to take on her problems any more than he already had. "Erik, I'm sorry. I really don't have the right to ask you this. I'm sorry, forget I said anything. I'll decide what's best."

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He turned to her, his hand going up to tuck a stray curl behind her ear, effectively killing whatever else she might have considered saying. Erik smiled. He saw the way his touch affected her. She was comfortable with him in the boundaries of friendship, but when he touched her in this tender way, or when he had deliberately used an endearment, she didn't understand him. He had grayed the boundaries on their friendship; he had crossed over those lines into something she wasn't sure how to define.

"No, I'm glad you asked actually, because there's something I've been tossing around in my head for days. You see, I need your help with something, but I wasn't sure just how to ask for it until this moment."

"What is it, Erik? Surely, you know I would do anything in the world for you. Tell me what I can do to help."

"I need you to work for me. As my assistant. I've been without one for months now, and there aren't any prospects I trust enough to hire." He held up his hand stopping her instant refusal. "Just listen for a second. I have some critical accounts I've been working on with my team. Accounts that will help us expand the company more internationally. Needless to say, without a qualified assistant, I'm drowning in paperwork when I should be concentrating on other things. I need someone I can trust, Sophie. So far, I haven't found anyone who can handle the job to my satisfaction." He smiled slowly at her. "You see, I've been told by my personnel guru that I'm hard to work for. Apparently, that's why it's been almost three months since I've had anyone at all sitting outside of my office for more than a few hours a day. According to her, the chances aren't looking very positive that they will be replacing my last assistant anytime soon, which is why I need your help."

\* \* \* \*

Sophie rejected the idea immediately. There was no way she could work close to Erik each day and not go out of her mind with desire.

"Look, I know you don't have any experience as an assistant, but I'm desperate, and in a way, I think that may work out best, since you won't have any preconceived ideas of how to do the job or anything to compare it to. I'm willing to double the salary of the other company, and I'll give you the afternoons off you need to finish your degree. What do you say?"

Still Sophie hesitated. Was he simply trying to help her once more? She didn't believe his story. Erik was never desperate. "What happens in a few months when I have my degree? What will you do then?"

Erik smiled. He knew her too well already. Erik would know that all she needed was just a little push.

"Well, two things could happen. Either you will quit, or you might just decide you like it and end up staying with me for a long time. I don't need to tell you which one I'm hoping for."

She couldn't help but laugh at the expression on his face. He looked like a child who had just gotten his favorite toy. "Oh, there's one more option, Erik. You could decide that I'm not qualified to be your assistant and fire me."

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her, taking her completely by surprise. It was sheer heaven being this close to him, no matter what the reason. Sophie didn't want to leave his arms. She heard him click the movie back on, but he didn't let her go.

"Somehow, I don't think there's anything you could possibly do that would make me let you go. I'll take care of all the arrangements with Margaret in personnel. I'll call her tomorrow and let her know you'll be starting on Monday. She'll have everything ready for you. Margaret can show you what you need to know to get started. Unless, of course, you want to go with me to Florida? It might be a good way to get your feet wet, by seeing the negotiations firsthand. Oh and by the way, I will want you to travel with me at times."

\* \* \* \*

Erik somehow sensed her hesitation. He let her go and smiled at her reassuringly.

"It's okay. There will be plenty of time for that later on. Don't worry about it. Take the weekend and have some fun. Oh and, Sophie, you're going to need to do some shopping, you know. In the advertising world, image is everything. I'll leave you my credit card to use."

"I don't need your money, Erik."

"Sophie, it's part of the job. Consider it part of your salary. I'm sorry, but I insist."

\* \* \* \*

"Erik," she started to refuse. The very thought of him buying her clothes was ridiculous.

Before Sophie could say a word, she was interrupted by the sound of his laughter, making her all the angrier with him. "Erik!"

"Sophie, hush. Most women wouldn't think of complaining when a man offers to buy them clothes."

"In case you haven't figured it out yet, I'm not most women!"

He clicked the volume up on the television and then reached for her, tugging her back into his arms. "No, you most certainly are not."

Sophie hated to admit it, but it felt good being this close to him. She should feel guilty. After all, her husband hadn't been gone all that long. She didn't.

She didn't want to think about why he wanted her so close to him. She wouldn't worry about the consequences tonight. She just wanted to be with him. What could possibly be wrong with that? For this moment, surely that was okay. Everything was right with the world and nothing needed any explanation anymore.

\* \* \* \*

"Sophie, wake up, love. It's late you can't sleep here." Sophie opened her eyes to look into Erik's dark blue ones and saw them soften as he watched her slowly resurface from sleep.

He smiled at her embarrassment when she realized that she was all but lying in his lap. She pushed against his chest in an effort to break free of his embrace, but his arms only tightened around her before he picked her up and carried her to her bedroom.

"Erik, put me down!" Sophie felt her heart slam against her chest. She struggled, frightened by her own reaction to Erik's touch. It was pointless to try to get away. Erik did not intend to let her go. His arms tightened around her body.

"Sophie, for God sake, relax. I'm not going to hurt you." He wasn't smiling anymore. She could hear the strain in his voice as he opened her bedroom door and crossed the room dropping her down onto the bed before kneeling in front of her taking her cold hands in his.

"I would never hurt you, Sophie. Surely, you know that. You do, don't you, love?" Erik watched her far too closely. Sophie forced her gaze away. She couldn't look at him and have him see the truth that she tried so hard to deny, even to herself.

She wasn't sure when it had happened. Maybe she'd been in love with him from the beginning. Maybe it took being with him every day to realize that truth. It made her want to cry, to hide away from her own foolish dreams. She wasn't supposed to love him. Erik didn't want her love. How could she have been so foolish as to fall in love with her husband's friend? Erik, who had shown her nothing but kindness, had offered her his friendship at her most vulnerable moments and she allowed her heart to be lost to him. Sophie wanted to be alone with that painful realization.

Too late, she realized that everything going through her mind at that moment was being reflected on her face for him to see. She heard him say something harsh and unintelligible under his breath and then he was close to her, pulling her back into his arms and holding her tight.

"I'm sorry, Sophie. I'm so sorry. For a moment, I forgot about Kevin. It's still too soon for you, isn't it? Dear God, he really didn't have any idea just how lucky a man he was to have you love him."

Each of his words fell on her tender heart like stones. Erik still believed she was mourning over Kevin. Sophie rejected his words completely, pulling away from him. She didn't want him to see how much those words hurt. It was all there, all of Kevin's sins were right there, closing the door on any future between them.

Erik stood up, looking down at her silently but she refused to meet his gaze. She felt

nothing but despair at realizing she loved Erik. Knowing he would never return her love. He didn't want her to love him.

"You're tired. Try and get some sleep now, okay?" The cold sound of his voice hurt. She heard him walk to the bedroom door turning to look at her once more in concern.

"Sophie? Are you sure you're all right? I don't want to leave you if you're not."

She forced herself to answer him, hating the bitterness in her voice that even to her own ears, sounded sharp as she turned her face away from him.

"I'm fine, Erik. You're right. I'm just tired. Please just leave me alone."

Sophie heard the soft click of the door and waited, holding her breath. When she heard his footsteps receding down the hallway, she curled up into a tight little ball in the center of her bed and cried, burying her face against the pillow to muffle the sound of her tears.

Sophie got out of bed and went into the adjoining bathroom stripping off her clothing. She stood under the shower letting the warm water wash over her for what felt like hours. Once she was dressed in her white tee shirt, she crawled under the covers shivering with reaction to her despair.

She had been so foolish to rush into what she believed was love with Kevin, realizing much too late it wasn't love at all. Just her own foolish imagination. She had married Kevin in haste and she had regretted her actions almost from the very first moment.

It hadn't taken him much longer than a few weeks to shatter all her illusions and make her see the painful truth. But now? Erik was nothing like Kevin, she knew he would never hurt her. He was attractive yes, but his attraction was so much more than just physical. He was strong, but he cared about her feelings, about what she thought. The way he took an interest in what was happening in her life, no matter how insignificant, had been the reason she'd liked him from the start.

When had like turned to love? She couldn't say for sure. It had been such an easy transition for her. To go from liking him as both a person and a man to loving him.

The thought of not having this man as part of her life anymore tore her up inside. Of not being able to see him, to talk to him each day terrified her. She knew she could never tell Erik how she felt about him, for that very reason. She didn't want to lose that friendship with him that was far too important to her.

Sophie pulled the covers up, hugging her legs as she began to shiver again. How could she possibly be near Erik each day both at work and home and not have him discover her true feelings? She should refuse his job offer and move out of the apartment immediately.

How could she do that when he needed her help? How could she refuse him anything when he had been so good to her? She told herself she would take each day as it came, and try to strengthen her heart so Erik never guessed just how much she loved him.

## Chapter Seven

Margaret Anders was a tall, severe looking woman, dressed in a gray business suit that only seemed to accentuate her severity.

She shook Sophie's hand firmly before directing her to a small office that had her name outside.

"Mr. Sebastian wanted me to make sure that everything was ready for you today, Ms. McGraw. He asked me to fill you in on the basics of what the job will entail, but I believe he will give you more detail on what he is expecting from you when he returns from Florida."

Ten minutes and countless forms later, Sophie stood beside the older woman as the elevator took them to the fourteen floor of the building.

"This entire floor is dedicated to Mr. Sebastian's office and conference room. There is also a small apartment, one floor up, that Mr. Sebastian sometimes uses whenever he's working late. Mr. Sebastian has one key to the apartment and I'll leave you the spare, along with the security code for the elevator to get to the floor. As I've said, Mr. Sebastian is the only one who uses it.

"Your office is right in here." Margaret opened the door and ushered Sophie inside to a small, tastefully decorated office. The desk faced a wall of windows, allowing for a breathtaking view of the city skyline. There was a small sitting area consisting of a leather sofa and chairs, as well as a coffee dispenser for visitors. While her desk faced the windows, there was an extension for the laptop computer, and printer to the right, which faced yet another door that Sophie assumed, would be to Erik's office.

"You should find everything you will need in the desk, but if not, there is a small supply area in the copy room to your left and of course, there's always the main supply center for the building, which is on the fourth floor." Margaret smiled briefly before adding, "Of course I don't expect you to remember where everything is. This building can be very confusing until you get used to it."

She opened the door to the right and indicated that Sophie should precede her inside.

"This is Mr. Sebastian's office." Sophie glanced around the room seeing Erik's unique taste in every piece of furniture. Understated yet elegant without being overdone or flashy. Exactly like the man who had started this business from nothing to become the success that it was today; no nonsense.

"There will be only the two of you on this floor, so it may get a little lonely when Mr. Sebastian is traveling for any length of time. The administrative pool has offices on the fourth floor as well should you need any help with anything, or if you just want to get away for a moment to take a break. Why don't I go over the software on the laptop with you? You will have access to all the departments within the building through e-mail. Mr. Sebastian's appointment schedule, travel arrangements, presentations and other pertinent documents are kept on the laptop as well. Of course, you have access to Mr. Sebastian's e-mail. Even when he is in the office, he prefers his assistant to scan through it and then go over anything that requires his attention. It should be current up through this morning. I checked with Eva, the assistant who has been monitoring his e-mail and taking messages for him this past week. There wasn't

anything that required his immediate attention.”

Half an hour later once she was satisfied Sophie wasn't going to crash the computer, Margaret left Sophie on her own to become familiar with Erik's work schedule.

Sophie flipped back through past months of his appointment schedule, seeing the pattern of long days and late evening meetings emerge. She knew from various statements he'd made that he rarely took the time for lunch and she was amazed that over the past months, his work hours had almost doubled. How had he possibly been able to keep up such a hectic pace without feeling some effect?

Sophie was so involved in what she was doing, that the sound of the phone ringing next to her made her jump. It was her direct line instead of Erik's. She reached for it, while wondering why someone would be calling her extension. According to Margaret, there hadn't been anyone sitting at this desk for months now.

“Hi, Sophie, it's Erik. So you made it. I was afraid you might change your mind after all. Can you hear me okay? I'm on my cell phone and it's extremely noisy in here.”

The relief in his voice surprised her, but then Margaret told her that Erik had been without an assistant for way too many months. Of course, he would be relieved to have someone he could trust helping him.

For a moment, she couldn't answer. She hadn't expected to hear from him. The sound of his voice was doing strange things to her concentration.

“Erik—hi. Yes, I made it okay. Margaret was very kind to show me where everything is located. How are the negotiations going?”

The silence that followed told her that he was listening to someone else and then he was with her again.

“Slow. Very slow in fact, but good I think. It's still far too soon to tell, but I believe we can work out most of the major problems.” When he stopped speaking the silence stretched between them uncomfortably. Sophie just couldn't think of a single thing to say to break the silence.

“It's good to hear your voice, Sophie. You have no idea how glad I am that you're there. Don't try to do too much just yet. Once I'm back in the office, we'll start working out our routine. I want us to have a good working relationship. I don't want to lose you. So, you'll have to promise that you'll tell me when I'm pushing you too hard, okay. When do you start your classes?”

Sophie wasn't sure whether she wanted to laugh or to cry at all the concern Erik displayed toward her. In the middle of a very critical business meeting, he remembered that she had registered for her final classes this morning before coming into work.

“Next week. Tuesdays and Thursdays from six until eight.”

Erik laughed at the uncertainty in her voice.

“Good, I'm glad you're going through with getting your degree, Sophie. It's important to you, I know. Look, love, I'll call you back this evening when we can talk. If anything comes up, you do have the number to my cell phone? I have to run now, Sophie. It sounds like the meeting is about to start back up again.”

Sophie hung up feeling happy for the first time since dropping Erik off at the airport on Sunday evening. His flight hadn't even left New York when she returned to the empty apartment, feeling sad and alone. Missing him terribly.

She'd spent most of Saturday shopping for clothes alone. Thankful for once that Erik had been far too busy with preparations for the trip the following day to go with her. The task of

picking out clothing with him somehow felt just a little too intimate.

The day Erik left it was raining and they spent the day reading the paper while listening to CDs and later, watching old movies together. Neither brought up what was happening between them, but something had noticeably changed in Erik's behavior toward her. On more than one occasion, Sophie caught him watching her with something indefinable in those dark blue eyes. Something that awakened a response deep inside her and always, the slow smile that touched his face told her that he knew exactly what he was doing to her.

When she'd returned to the apartment they shared now, it felt cold and empty without him there. She saw him in everything, everywhere she looked in each room, there were memories of the time they had spent together. She wished more than anything that she had gone with him. Just to be near him.

Sophie didn't hear from Erik for the rest of the day. She spent it happily busying herself reading his e-mail and familiarizing herself with the *Sebastian Advertising* computer system, as well as learning her way around the building. She glanced out her office windows, surprised to see the dusk sky turning to evening and the lights of New York systematically bringing the city to life. Sophie didn't taken the car as Erik suggested, choosing instead to use the subway.

She was exhausted when she walked into the apartment and the thought of eating alone had no appeal at all. She showered and went to bed. After tossing for hours in her bed, she found she couldn't sleep. She got out of bed and went to Erik's room.

She sat down on his bed, lifting his pillow to her face. The scent of him filled her lungs. She lay down on his bed. She wondered where he was tonight. What would he be doing? Somehow, Sophie doubted that Erik would be missing her in this same way. Surely, it would be okay to stay here for a few moments longer. Erik would never have to know. She wouldn't let herself fall asleep. She'd just lay here and feel close to him for a few minutes.



## Chapter Eight

Erik unlocked the apartment door, trying not to wake the woman who had haunted him since he'd left her Sunday afternoon looking so sad. The thought of spending just one more night away from Sophie had been impossible for him to bear. He'd left the meeting that afternoon after sending his regrets to the corporate CEO. He'd left the remainder of the negotiations in the capable hands of his right-hand man, Steve Dangerfield. No one had been more surprised by this move than Steve himself. After all, Erik never left the negotiation table. Especially not when so much was riding on ironing out the final details to get the contract signed. Never once had left anyone else to close a deal for him.

The look on Steve's face told him how out of character this was for him. No doubt, Steve thought he'd lost his mind. The truth was Erik was beginning to wonder the same thing himself. He barely recognized himself anymore. Where was the calm, levelheaded guy who had founded the business all those years ago? In his place was a man hopelessly in love with a woman who could only offer him friendship in return. For the moment, even that was enough. Maybe that was crazy, but he would take whatever she had to offer him.

Erik wasn't scheduled to return to New York until late Wednesday but when he heard her voice that morning, he knew there was no way he could stay away from her another night.

He'd caught a cab to the airport and had somehow managed to get the last available seat on a sold out flight leaving Miami to LaGuardia arriving just past midnight.

Erik tossed his carry-on bag, along with the briefcase, on the sofa and started for her room. He had no intention of waking her, but he needed to see her, just to reassure himself that she was real and not just another figment of his overactive imagination. Each time he came home to the apartment she'd shared with him for less than a month and he saw her there, it thrilled him. He reached her door and found it standing slightly open. His heart missed a beat as fear dissipated the exhaustion from his body.

Her bed looked as if someone had slept in it, but it was empty now. Automatically, he reached for her closet door. All of her things were still hanging there untouched. Erik moved quickly through each room of the apartment. When he reached his bedroom, genuine panic made his fingers tremble as he opened the door and stopped cold. Sophie was asleep in his bed.

He stood looking down at her paralyzed before a slow smile spread across his face. So she'd missed him as well. His hand reached down to touch a lock of her hair smoothing it away from her face. He had no intention of waking her or returning her to her bed. She had come willingly to his bed. That's where she would remain, at least for tonight.

He showered and put on boxer shorts he normally would not have bothered with. When he returned to his bed, Erik slid in beside her, slowly pulling the covers up over them both and extinguishing the bedside light plunging the room into darkness. When he reached for her and brought her into the circle of his arms, he felt her struggle against him. She didn't realize where she was at first or who it was that held her close.

"Shh...Sophie, it's okay. It's just me. Go back to sleep, baby." For a moment, she stiffened in his arms, her fingers trembling as they touched his bare chest.

"Erik? What are you doing here? When did you get back? I...I wasn't expecting you

until Wednesday.” Then she remembered where she was and she was embarrassed. “I’m...I’m sorry. I guess I fell asleep. Erik I—”

“Shh...” He pulled her closer. “Relax, Sophie. I can’t think of anything more thrilling than finding you in my bed.” When she tried to push him away, his arms tightened around her. “I was able to catch an earlier flight home. The negotiations were pretty much over and Steve is more than capable of wrapping things up without me there. There really wasn’t any reason for me to stay. So just relax. It’s late, love, and I’m exhausted. Go back to sleep.”

Somehow, his voice remained steady. Sleep was the last thing he wanted, but he didn’t want to frighten her away. If she knew how much he wanted her at that moment, she would never let him near her again.

Eventually, she relaxed in his arms and he realized she was almost halfway back to sleep. She said something he just about didn’t catch, almost to herself.

“I’m so glad you’re back, Erik. I missed you so much.” He pulled her closer, kissing her hair. She felt so good in his arms. He couldn’t imagine having to let her go. That was crazy. He knew she wasn’t his to love this way. For tonight, he didn’t want to think about Kevin. He just wanted to hold her close and pretend he had that right.

When the alarm sounded at five, Erik snapped it off and watched the woman sleeping in his arms. Surprisingly, he had slept in spite of being aware of her every move. He hated to leave her now, but he had a conference call scheduled for six-thirty with a new account coming on board from London. Besides, if he stayed this close to her, sleep would be the last thing on his mind. He moved slowly away from her and got out of bed just as she awakened.

“Erik, what time is it? Where are you going?” she asked in that sleepy voice which sounded too close to an invitation to remain this close to her.

He brought the covers back over her warm body before answering, “Go back to sleep, Sophie. It’s early yet. I have to take an overseas call in the office. I’ll see you a little later. Go back to sleep.” She turned on her side away from him, falling back to sleep. Erik smiled to himself at the way she pulled her legs up against her chest and into a tight ball. Everything about her enchanted him. He wished it had been that easy for him to fall asleep after being near her.

He dressed quickly, took one last torturous look at the woman in his bed before leaving the apartment.

*Sebastian Advertising* was still empty at this hour. Very few employees came in this early, but for Erik, it was one of his favorite times of the day in New York. He took the elevator up to his office, turning on the lights. The street below his offices was slowly coming to life.

He turned on the laptop he carried with him wherever he went and glanced distractedly through the e-mail Sophie had left in his inbox to read.

As he sat waiting for the conference call participants to connect, he wondered again just what it was that Sophie was keeping from him.

Whatever it was, he had to either win her trust, or break down her resistance to confide in him and force the truth out once and for all.

He hoped it would be the first choice, but at this point, his sharp business mind was telling him it was more important to know what she was hiding than whether or not she gave the information to him willingly.

## Chapter Nine

Sophie glanced out her office window only to discover that it was snowing.

The first snowfall of the season. The weather reports had all been promising snow for several days, but they'd been wrong.

She walked to the door that separated her office from Erik's. He was sitting at his desk deep into the presentation he'd been editing for a late afternoon meeting today.

"Erik, it's snowing! Come look out the window." She went over to the window, missing the way he smiled tenderly at her childlike excitement, every inch of him a man in love. Erik abandoned the proposal entirely and joined her at the window, standing close behind her.

She was expecting to feel embarrassed after that night Erik found her sleeping in his bed over a month ago. She should have been embarrassed at having spent the night with him, but the truth was she hadn't wanted to leave, and Erik never once made her feel uneasy about it.

It hadn't happened again but it seemed the most natural thing to happen between them. No doubt, it was commonplace for Erik to find a woman in his bed. Only the outcome would be different. He hadn't made a move to touch her. He'd treated her like...a friend. Somehow, no matter how she tried to convince herself it was the only reaction she could expect from him, it wasn't the one she wanted.

Now he put his arm around her waist pulling her close. It surprised Sophie at how easily she went into his arms, although she wasn't sure why. She loved him after all. Being near him like this made her happy.

"It's really coming down, isn't it? Want to blow off the meeting and go play in the snow?" She looked up at him smiling teasingly, her breath catching as she saw the expression in his eyes. It had been there so many times before, an almost tender look that left her breathless. She wished she could understand that look. As always, her response to it was embarrassment. She looked away, nervous again.

She heard him laugh at her response before he kissed her cheek and let her go. "Don't tempt me. You have no idea how much I'm not looking forward to this meeting." He returned to his desk still watching her as she walked over to the fireplace her hands reaching out to the warm flames.

"Are you sure you don't want me there with you tonight, Erik? I know how important this meeting is to you, and I can miss the class tonight, you know?"

The meeting in question was scheduled for six that evening in Erik's conference room. Sophie wanted him to say yes, but she knew he would never ask her to sacrifice her class for work.

"Do I want you there? Yes. I won't let you to miss your class for it. The meeting will be long, boring, and brutal. No doubt, the first of many to come. You go to your class. Just be careful. The streets are getting icy. With any luck, I should be home tonight around the same time as you."

Sophie left him, disappointed by his answer. She was just finishing the last schedule change to Erik's calendar for the following morning, when she heard the door. Distracted, she glanced up to see her cousin Marissa standing in the doorway looking every bit the rich socialite,

dressed impeccably in a white wool coat and matching hat and gloves, snow still clinging to her soft brown perfectly styled hair.

Sophie felt the usual resentful sting of jealousy as she watched her cousin remove her coat. The dark green designer suit must have cost a small fortune, in spite of its simple cut. “Hi there. How are you?” She gave Sophie her usual hug, her eyes moving distractedly to the Erik’s office door making it quite clear the true reason for her visit. Sophie had conveniently forgotten to bring up the subject of her cousin to Erik on the numerous occasions Marissa asked her to. She still remembered her cousin’s angry reaction to hearing that Sophie was living with Erik. Even after Sophie reassured Marissa there wasn’t anything going on between them, her cousin still didn’t believe her. Then, Marissa had decided her cousin’s living arrangements might just work out to her advantage after all. Since that time, Sophie pretty much avoided Marissa’s calls.

Now it seemed her cousin was taking the matter into her own hands. Sophie wanted to scream at Marissa’s selfish behavior. Marissa never called, and certainly never just dropped by without reason. She was hoping to run into Erik.

“I hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time? I was in the neighborhood and thought I would stop by and say hello.” Marissa looked around her office in disgust. “So, how have you been? I haven’t heard from you in such a long time, that I was starting to get worried. How’s the job?”

Sophie closed her eyes and counted to ten. She glanced nervously at Erik’s door, which she had forgotten to close.

“I’m fine, Marissa, really. The job is great, but I’m in kind of in a rush right now, I’m afraid. I have class in less than an hour and I really need to hurry or I’ll be late. Maybe we can have lunch together sometime soon?” She stood, shut down her laptop, and began gathering her things before looking pointedly at Marissa, who seemed to ignore Sophie’s impatience altogether.

“Well, since I’m already here, why don’t you just let your boss know and we can chat for a while? There’s really no need for you to stay.”

Sophie was just ready to tell her Erik wasn’t in the office when he came out looking from her to Marissa in surprise, leaving Sophie little choice but to introduce her cousin to him. “Erik, you remember my cousin, Marissa Jennings. You two met at Kevin’s...” She stopped shook her head. She couldn’t talk about Kevin. “Marissa, my boss, Erik Sebastian.”

Erik took Marissa’s hand as she smiled seductively up at him. Something flickered in Erik’s eyes before he returned her smile and glanced at Sophie.

“I see. Yes, I do remember. It’s good to see you again, Marissa. How have you been? Why don’t you come inside for a moment? We can talk for a while until my meeting starts.” Sophie followed them reluctantly feeling every bit the third wheel as Marissa looked around his office with more enthusiasm than she’d shown up until that moment. Erik turned back to Sophie and smiled, the look in his eyes telling her that he believed she’d set the whole thing up. He blamed her for Marissa’s intrusion. In fact, he looked furious with her.

“That will be all for now, Sophie. You can leave now?”

For a moment, she couldn’t move. She looked past Erik to where Marissa stood smiling back at her. Then Sophie turned and walked silently from the room, closing the door behind her. She wanted to cry and she wasn’t sure if it was because of the way Erik had looked at her just now, or the look he gave her cousin. She hadn’t wanted to believe Erik would be interested in someone like Marissa, but she was wrong. Sophie didn’t really know what kind of woman he was interested in; all she did know was that it wasn’t her.

Sophie grabbed her things and started for the elevator, her vision blinded by tears. She

wiped them away angrily, punching the buttons several times. She only wanted only to escape.

"Just a minute, Sophie." She hadn't heard him follow her out, but as she looked back at him in surprise, she knew he was fighting to control his anger. Sophie looked quickly away, trying to scrub away her foolish tears before Erik caught sight of them, wishing she had been just a few steps faster. She was just about to step into the elevator and leave when he caught her.

"Don't pretend that you didn't hear me calling you, Sophie. Don't pretend that you didn't know I would come after you. What kind of game do you think you're playing? What do you think you're doing?"

He turned her roughly to face him and she saw the way his eyes narrowed at the brightness in hers. She didn't want him to question her. She didn't want him to know that she had been crying. "Erik, I'm late for class."

"To hell with your class, Sophie," he said angrily, holding her firmly in place. "The next time you feel the need to meddle in my life, remember this. I've never had to be fixed up with a woman before, and I'm not about to start now. My private life is none of your business."

He released her and walked away, leaving her standing there shaken, tears falling from her eyes.

Erik could not have made his feelings any clearer if he'd told her outright. She was nothing more than his friend. At this moment, she wondered if she was even that.

The elevator doors slid open and through the blur of tears, she stumbled inside.

Well what had she really thought? That he would proclaim his undying love for her. That they would live happily ever after. Sophie laughed bitterly as she left the building.

There had been so many times when she had wondered what it was that he felt for her. He seemed to grow closer, to need her in a way that gave her hope. Now all that false hope was gone. He had forced her to face the bitter truth. He would never love her the way she wanted him to.

Sophie promised herself as she stepped onto the subway car and found a seat that she would never embarrass him again. She would never let him know that for her, he was more than just a friend. He was the love of her life.

## Chapter Ten

By eleven, Sophie gave up listening for Erik to return to the apartment long enough to shower.

There had been no message waiting for her when she returned to the apartment. No phone call since, to let her know he was running late as normal. Nothing.

Erik was furious with her. That much was for certain. He hadn't even tried to hide that anger from her. She wanted to scream at Marissa for showing up unannounced and forcing her to do what she did not intend to do.

Sophie picked up the phone and dialed her cousin's number only to hear the answering machine pick up. The thought of Marissa being with Erik made Sophie physically ill. She couldn't bring herself to think about the two of them together.

Sophie gave up even thinking of sleep. She picked up her classroom notes instead. She should at least attempt to go over the material covered in tonight's class. Her professor had promised there would be a test on the subject matter the following Tuesday.

After several failed attempts at concentrating, Sophie abandoned the notes entirely and went to the kitchen to make some hot chocolate.

She was just pouring the hot drink into her cup when she heard Erik's key in the door. She didn't want to talk to him right now, but before she could escape, he spotted the kitchen light and found her there.

"What are you doing up? It's late. I expected you would be in bed hours ago."

She turned off the tap and put the saucepan in the dishwasher, not looking at him.

"And I expected you to be home hours ago. I guess we both expected too much of each other."

She turned to Erik. "Where have you been? Didn't you think I might be worried about you? Were you out with Marissa, Erik?" Sophie cursed her foolish tongue to silence. She sounded like some irate wife. That was the last thing on earth that she wanted to know the answer to.

She watched his reaction across the granite island separating them.

"Erik, I'm sorry. That was unforgivable. I had no right to ask you that." At that moment, she wished the floor would just swallow her up. She picked up the cup again, her fingers shaking, spilling the hot liquid onto her hand. She didn't care. She just needed to get away so she could think clearly again.

Erik wasn't prepared to let her off so easily. He stepped in front of her mere inches away.

"Is that what you want to hear, Sophie? That I was out with your cousin?" She could see the controlled anger in every inch of him as he spoke. "Why the hurt look? Isn't that what you wanted? Wasn't that the whole reason you invited her to the office today in the first place? To set her up with me? That's what Marissa told me. She told me you'd been planning this moment for a long time."

He watched her expression closely, seeing every emotion. The fear, the self-hate, the pain. Then he slowly took the cup from her unresisting fingers and sat it down, whispering,

“Isn’t that what you intended to happen? What you wanted? For me to be with your cousin?”

“No!” She made a soft tortured sound, looking at him with all her longing and desire showing in her eyes. She wasn’t sure which of them moved first, but then she was in his arms, his hand threading through her hair turning her face up to his.

Erik’s lips met hers, his kiss still held remnants of his anger. It didn’t stop her from responding to his touch. Sophie felt as if she were drowning against his lips, her legs trembling. She wanted him so much. Erik lifted her up in his arms, his lips never leaving hers as sat her on the kitchen island parting her legs and pulling her up close against his hard body.

His lips moved seductively against hers, forcing them apart. He took his time, exploring her inner softness with his tongue. Touching her. His fingers jerked the knot of her belt loose parting her robe, his hands moving inside, touching her waist before his fingers slid slowly over her ribcage to her breast. She felt them harden and swell within his hands.

He said something, but it sounded little more than a harsh whisper against her lips. She felt cold air replace his touch against her skin, and slowly, she realized he was no longer touching her. He had let her go, turning his back on her. His breathing hard and labored, mirroring her own.

“Erik? What is it?” She heard the corrosive sound of her voice as her fingers went automatically up to touch her swollen mouth.

He turned back to look at her, his gaze traveling slowly over her naked body seeing the havoc his touch had caused before resting on her soft swelling lips almost against his will.

“Sophie, for God’s sake.” His voice had never sounded so hard. “Go. Just leave before it’s too late. Before I change my mind. Before I forget who you are.”

Sophie couldn’t stop the sob that escaped her trembling lips as she pulled the robe together with fingers that shook and ran from him. She closed her bedroom door leaning heavily against it placing her hand against her mouth to stifle her sobs.

She didn’t want Erik to know how crushing his rejection had been.

How could she have been so stupid as to ask him the one question she didn’t want to know the answer to? He had been with Marissa. Maybe he was imagining Marissa’s body in his arms when he’d kissed her.

Just how much of her true feelings had she exposed to him tonight by responding to his kiss, his touch the way she had? She had all but told him she loved him with her every response.

Sophie closed her eyes. She wouldn’t cry. She heard Erik knock quietly on her door as she squeezed her eyes shut not responding. She couldn’t face him now. The last thing she wanted to do right now was look into his beautiful blue eyes and beg him to love her.

Sophie heard the door open slightly and felt the light from the hallway invade the room. He said her name softly but she didn’t answer.

She lay perfectly still and prayed he wouldn’t press the issue enough to call her hand. He knew she wasn’t sleeping, but hopefully, he would have mercy on her and not force her to reveal how vulnerable she was to him tonight.

The door closed once more. He’d left her alone. She wiped away the silent tears burying her face against the pillow until exhaustion overtook her and she fell into a fitful sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie dressed and went reluctantly into the kitchen the following morning. Erik had made coffee already. He was awake. She tried to steel her reaction for the inevitable.

On the days when Sophie didn’t have classes in the evening, she rode into the office with Erik. Which was something that, until this moment, she had always looked forward to because it

gave her time alone with him. It was just the two of them and they talked of unimportant things or simply listened in companionable silence to the radio.

Today would be different. There was something ugly between them now. She dreaded the thought of sitting beside him in the tense silence of the car and not feeling the closeness that seemed to have become part of their relationship.

Sophie didn't hear him enter the room, but when he came to stand close behind her, she sensed his presence. She couldn't look at him.

He said something before he took her by her shoulders pulling her back against his body. His arms went around her waist. Sophie stood perfectly still in his embrace, but she felt the tension of the previous night slowly began to leave her.

"Sophie, I'm sorry about last night. I, I shouldn't have let that happen. I don't want to do anything to hurt you like that. I don't know what to say. Things just got out of hand. It won't happen again, love. I promise. Please don't be afraid of me. I don't ever want you to be frightened of me." He spoke the words softly against her ear, sending shivers through her body and awakening a response deep inside her that shocked her even more. Sophie forced herself to remain rigid in his arms. She couldn't let him see the way being close to him, hearing those words made her want him even more. She loved him. She wanted to share her body with him. He was telling her it had been a mistake.

His next words made her realize he was reading her silence completely wrong. He thought she was rejecting him and she wanted to cry out against the sheer irony of his statement. "Sophie, please. Don't be afraid of me. I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I promise it won't happen again."

She turned and went easily into his arms. She leaned against him, her arms going around his waist. She could hear his heart racing. His own tension matched hers, but he didn't pull away from her. She'd surprised him. She didn't care. She couldn't help it. She wanted to be near him. To let him know she wasn't frightened of him.

"Sophie." She could hear the roughness in his voice. Some womanly intuition told her that he wasn't as immune to her as he would have liked her to believe. His arms tightened around her and he held her close for a moment longer before putting her away from him. Erik looked down at her with pain and something akin to self-hate in his blue eyes.

"Sophie, I'm sorry I hurt you last night. For what I said to you at work before you left as well. It was unforgivable. You have to understand, the last thing I want from you is to have you set me up with someone. That's the very last thing I want from you. Do you understand what I mean?"

She didn't, but she was happy he was still willing to be her friend. She hadn't lost his precious friendship.

"I'm sorry too, Erik. I never meant to interfere with your life like that. Please say you forgive me. I don't want to lose you, Erik. You're far too important to me." She looked up at him, pleading, unaware of the brightness of her eyes. Never realizing she was showing him so much more than she had wanted to reveal by the expression on her troubled face.

He smiled down at her before bending to kiss her gently.

"Baby, when you look at me like that, I would do anything for you. Anything at all." His hands reached up to frame her face pulling her hair away as he brushed a kiss across her forehead then let her go. "Come on—we should leave before traffic gets bad."

He still held her hand as they rode the elevator down to the parking garage in silence.

It had snowed again during the night. A fresh blanket of white powder clung to the



streets and sidewalks making the city seem like a winter wonderland. It muffled the normally noisy morning commute making it seem almost surreal.

Erik switched on the Rover's radio. Music filled the car. She sat next to him thankful she hadn't lost his friendship. Even if friendship was all he could ever offer her.

She couldn't help but feel that something was different about him. It was there in the way he looked at her. He seemed almost cautious now. Why would he feel he needed to be cautious with her?

She glanced at him and saw the tenseness in him. It was all there, in the way he sat stiffly next to her, the way he gripped the car's steering wheel. The way he hadn't spoken to her since leaving the apartment. Sophie tried to tell herself it was just her imagination playing tricks on her. That she had been so worried about losing him, that she was analyzing every little thing about him far too closely. As they walked inside the building together, Sophie couldn't quite shake the sadness that settled over her.

Erik was so close. Close enough to reach out and touch his face and yet he seemed miles away emotionally.

She watched his retreating figure and felt a dark cloud of despair sink in around her as she sat down at her desk and tried to concentrate on work.

## Chapter Eleven

Sophie just finished reading the last e-mail, when she noticed the time. Almost eight o'clock in the evening and she was too sick and exhausted to think clearly anymore.

Throughout the long day as she worked alone in the office, what had started out that morning as just a slight soreness in her throat, had continued to progress into aching muscles, a throbbing pain in her head that made her so nauseous, it was almost impossible to concentrate.

She hadn't been able to get warm, even after turning up the thermostat up as high as she dared and switching on the fireplace in Erik's office, where she spent the afternoon working on her laptop.

The office itself was closed for the entire week in observance of the Thanksgiving holiday, but Erik had been unable to postpone his trip to LA for a meeting with one of his oldest and most loyal clients.

He would be traveling alone this time, meeting and presenting the new advertising campaign to the corporate CEO without the help of his usual team. He'd told Sophie he didn't want to interrupt any of his employees holiday plans and he wouldn't allow her to go with him either as she'd wanted.

Sophie hadn't told him of her plans to go into the office, not that it mattered. Erik wouldn't be checking in with her at home. Over the past few days, the distance politeness in which he treated her had increased so much that she really wasn't expecting to hear from him at all.

The extension to her direct line rang several times during the afternoon, but she couldn't bring herself to answer it. She was afraid it might be her cousin and she didn't want to hear Marissa talk about Erik. From the numerous cleverly implied comments her cousin had made, it was clear that she and Erik had gone out for dinner that night and Marissa was just dying to tell Sophie everything about it.

Sophie ended the conversation as soon as Marissa brought Erik up, making up some excuse to cut it short before Marissa could get into the intimate details of her night with Erik.

When Sophie dropped Erik off at the airport that morning for his flight to LA, she didn't dare mention that she wasn't feeling well. The cautious way in which he treated her lately whenever they were alone together, had left her all the more unsure of what he felt for her. She couldn't open herself up to the pain of being rejected by him again. Sophie no longer felt she could talk to him or confide in him about anything.

So she'd sat alone in the office trying to ignore the pain in her head and throat and the fever that had started almost immediately upon her arrival at her desk.

For weeks now, Erik had promised her that he would be home in time for the Thanksgiving Day parade. They were planning to leave the city soon after to spend the remainder of the weekend at Erik's house in Vermont. Sophie had been looking forward to it for weeks. That was until recently, when this strained silence had come between them.

Lately, when he spoke to her at all, it was almost as if he were afraid she was so fragile emotionally, that she would break right down, or fall apart each time he looked at her. If she were being honest, it was exactly what she felt like doing. The thought of being alone with Erik

was the very last thing on earth Sophie wanted.

She looked out at the heavy New York traffic and dreaded the commute back to the empty apartment. What would be the point after all? The thought of spending three long days and nights there was almost more than she could bear. Feeling the way she did at this moment, she wasn't sure she would even make it safely home.

Sophie had been to the office apartment only once. She knew it to be well stocked and the thought of taking the elevator up one floor and being able to climb into the warmth of the king-size bed was much more appealing to her than fighting the commute home.

She locked the office up and took the extra apartment key from her desk, gathering her coat and purse as the throbbing in her head made the room around her swim. Her stomach did an uneasy flip. She was burning up with fever. It took all the energy she had just to concentrate on unlocking the apartment door.

Sophie dumped her things on the floor next to the door and ran into the bathroom just in time to become ill. She hadn't eaten all day. Her body began to shiver uncontrollably as she leaned back against the cold tile floor of the bathroom, unsure if she even had the strength to move. She needed to rest. If she didn't reach the bedroom soon, she would most likely pass out right here on the bathroom floor.

Sophie forced herself to stand but even the tiniest effort of walking became too much for her. She felt dangerously close to unconsciousness.

She found one of Erik's tee shirts and she slowly undressed then took a blanket and pillow from his bed back to the living room. She couldn't sleep in his bed. She switched on the TV and adjusted the thermostat up before collapsing on the sofa. She drifted in and out of consciousness, her body alternating between shivering and burning up as the fever ran its course.

She should try to search for some medicine to help bring her fever down. It was too high, but every time she tried to sit up, the room began to spin out of focus. She would rest for a moment longer just until the world around her stopped spinning. She drifted back into unconsciousness, unaware those minutes had turned into hours and evening into another cold, lonely New York night.

\* \* \* \*

"Can't you go any faster?" Erik asked the taxi driver urgently.

Somehow, he'd managed to catch the one flight out of LA that hadn't been rerouted from landing in New York, due to an early winter storm that was quickly covering the city with snow and ice and grounding most air traffic.

Now, five hours later, he sat inside a taxi being driven through the slick New York streets at a snail's pace by someone who looked at him as if they didn't understand Erik's urgency. "Can't you go any faster?" he asked again only to see the blank stare the man gave him in the rearview mirror. No doubt, the man had long ago schooled himself against showing any emotion to the countless angry customers who entered his taxi each day.

As Erik looked out the window at the heavy traffic in frustration, he wondered once more, what he was doing running after her like this anyway.

That was simple enough to answer. All rational and reasonable behavior had left him the moment he tried to reach her at the apartment, without luck, no less than twenty times. The second he was able to use his cell phone again upon arriving in LA, he'd called the apartment's office to ask if Martin the doorman had seen Sophie return that morning. He hadn't. He had almost turned around right then and there without ever leaving the airport and caught the next possible available flight back to New York. Would have too had there been any available.

Instead, he'd booked the first flight available to him, one leaving LA late that afternoon, while silently hoping as the agent told him about the storm predictions for New York that he would still be able to land there.

His next call had been to his colleague Steve Dangerfield. Steve immediately volunteered to drive over to the apartment and check if Sophie had somehow returned without the doorman noticing. She hadn't. Steve checked the local hospitals as well as the police station to make sure she had not been in an accident. Erik couldn't bring himself to think about that.

The meeting had been sheer torture. His mind was thousands of miles away in New York. Thankfully, the client was also one of his oldest and most loyal, as well as a good friend. He didn't seem to mind that Erik was constantly having to regroup and recapture his train of thought, all the while listening for his cell phone. He'd left the number with Martin and asked him to call the moment Sophie returned.

Erik took a cab to the airport hours before the flight was scheduled to leave. He dialed Steve's home number only to confirm what he knew in his heart. Sophie wasn't home. Or at least she wasn't answering the door.

It was of little comfort when Steve told Erik Sophie hadn't been involved in an accident, all the while, trying to ignore that nagging feeling that told him something was definitely wrong.

He had been so careful with her lately. He couldn't risk scaring her away by showing her how strong his feelings were for her. Maybe he hadn't been as careful as he thought. Maybe something spooked her after all. Maybe she'd left him.

Erik couldn't think of that now. Not facing five long hours in the air and knowing there was absolutely nothing he could do about it until the plane landed. He couldn't think about her leaving or he would go insane.

He'd tried one last time to reach her at the apartment hearing his own voice on the answering machine before forcing himself to make the call he'd put off as long as possible.

He didn't want to talk to her cousin again. Marissa made it more than clear she was interested in him, and according to her, Sophie had been a part of the little scam to set them up, which was something Erik didn't like imagining Sophie doing.

Erik listened to Marissa flirted with him with growing impatience before cutting her short by asking if she had heard from Sophie at all. She hadn't. He kept the conversation with the woman as short as possible. He certainly had no interest in encouraging her.

Now as the taxi pulled up in front of his apartment building, he handed some bills to the driver and grabbed his bag from beside him, barely returning Martin's greeting before asking him if Sophie had returned.

He knew the answer already from the other man's concerned expression. As he opened the door to the apartment they shared, the emptiness of it closed in around him. He didn't call her name. He went right to her room, glancing at the perfectly made bed before pulling open her closet door. Her things still hung there. She hadn't left permanently but she hadn't returned home either. So where was she?

Erik went to his own room, remembering how she'd gone there once when she missed him, but the room was empty. He picked up the Rover's keys. The Corvette's weren't in their usual place. Had she gotten bored here alone and gone into the office to catch up on some paperwork, simply not bothering to answer the phones?

His suspicions were confirmed when he saw the Corvette parked in the space she always used whenever he forced her to take it. He hated her taking the subway alone at night knowing how unsafe it could be.

Erik punched the elevator button insistently and waited as it ascended the floors, taking what seemed like an eternity before the doors finally opened on the fourteenth floor. He was greeted by darkness, relieved only by the sparse few emergency lights as he flipped a switch that brought the room to startling bright light.

Her desk was empty. No coat, no purse. No Sophie. He knew she had to be in the building somewhere and the only place left to look was the top floor apartment. Maybe she didn't want to risk driving through the icy streets alone in the 'Vette and decided to wait it out there.

His heart raced as he unlocked the door to the apartment stumbling over something as he stepped inside. The apartment was literally scorching hot. When he switched on the overhead light, he could see her coat and purse lying in front of the door. Then he heard a faint sound, almost like a moan, coming from the living area. As he entered the room, he could see her sleeping on the sofa. She looked so pale that for a moment, his heart stopped and he feared the worst.

Erik closed the space between them in a heartbeat, terrified by her stillness. She hadn't moved when he entered. When he touched her forehead, he felt the fever for the first time. She was burning up with it.

He shook her gently trying without any success to wake her. "Sophie! Sophie, wake up." He pulled the blanket away from her heated body. She was wearing one of his old tee shirts. He shook her once more, this time harder and slowly, she opened her eyes, putting a hand up to shield them from the bright overhead light.

"Sophie, how long have you felt like this? You're burning up. How long have you been sick?"

He pulled her weak body up against him, his arms going round her. She was so pale. She was shivering so much, that he had to lean in close to her just to catch her words.

"What are you doing here, Erik? You're supposed to be in LA."

"Sophie, I've been worried to death about you! I tried calling you at home, but I couldn't reach you. Dear God, I was out of my mind with worry. Don't try to talk right now. Just lay back and rest. I'm calling the doctor."

"No, Erik, don't. I'll be fine. Stay with me." She was crying; tears streaming down her face. She was so weak, that she couldn't stop them but he dared not give into her. It tore at his heart the way she pleaded with him to stay but she needed medical attention immediately. More than he could give her. "Don't cry, baby. It's going to be okay. Just lay back down and rest, I'll be right back, I promise. But I need to get Doctor Stephens here as quickly as possible."

He resisted the pleading in her eyes and laid her back against the sofa once more, reaching for the phone.

Erik had become more than a little familiar with his doctor's emergency number. Five minutes later after talking to Doctor Stephens personally and hearing the doctor's assurances he would be there as soon as possible, Erik turned back to Sophie dreading what he must tell her next. She wouldn't be a willing patient.

"Sophie, the doctor will be here very soon, but in the meantime, we have to get your fever down. It's too high and that's dangerous. We have to get it down as quickly as possible."

He picked her up in his arms. She felt so fragile, that he feared he would hurt her. She didn't even have the strength to protest.

"I'm running a cold bath to bring the fever down until the doctor arrives." She still didn't understand what he was telling her. She would soon enough. He sat down on the edge of the tub

with her in his lap.

“Just try and relax, okay? I have to do this. I have to get your fever down.” When he reached to turn the tap off, she tried to struggle against him, but she was far too weak.

“Sophie, it’s okay. Just hold still a second. Try to relax.” He lifted the tee shirt over her head and tossed it on the floor, his eyes never leaving hers. Erik stood with her in his arms and lowered her into the chilly water. He watched her shivering increase as she pulled her legs up against her chest. Obviously embarrassed to have him see her like this, she couldn’t look at him. Instead, she lowered her forehead to touch her knees. His heart ached to tell her just how beautiful she was to him.

Erik touched her cheek, wiping away her tears. He said her name; his voice shook with emotion as he touched her arm. Her skin felt cool once more.

Erik pulled the plug on the tub and the water began to drain. Then he lifted her up out of the cold water and into his arms. He wrapped her in a towel and gently drying her. He tossed the towel on top of her discarded tee shirt, helped her into his robe before carrying her to the bed. He laid her gently down pulling the warm covers up over her shivering body.

“I’m so cold, Erik,” she whispered weakly.

He reached down to touch her cheek, still feeling its warmth. At least the cold water had reduced the fever somewhat.

“I know, baby. I know. Just close your eyes now and try to get some rest, okay? Doctor Stephens will be here soon. I promise he will help you feel better. Just hold on for a little while longer, Sophie.”

He took another blanket out of the closet and tucked it around her looking down at her with concern. Sophie closed her eyes curled up into that familiar little ball and turned away without another word.

\* \* \* \*

Doctor Robert Stephens rang the apartment at exactly half past the hour. He removed his coat and picked up his medical bag as Erik showed him into the bedroom where Sophie was sleeping.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Robert. She’s just fallen asleep but she hasn’t been out that long. Do you want me to wake her?”

The doctor followed him inside the bedroom and stood by her bed watching her sleep.

“No, Erik. If she wakes up on her own, that’s fine but let’s not wake her unless we have to. She’ll need to rest as much as possible to fight this.” He set his bag down next to the bed and removed a digital thermometer placing it against Sophie’s neck and frowning slightly.

“Did she happen to mention to you how long she’s been running this high of a temperature?” The older man looked over at him, seeing the apprehension that Erik couldn’t control before quickly reassuring him.

“She’ll be okay, Erik. It looks like a touch of the flu that’s going round. She probably hasn’t been looking after herself properly. It doesn’t take much before the immune system weakens and the body isn’t capable of fighting off such things. I’ll draw some blood just to make sure. But I don’t think there’s any need to worry too much.”

Erik felt himself relax for the first time since finding Sophie this way.

Until the doctor’s next words.

“Can I ask you what your relationship is with this girl, Erik? She’s obviously someone special.” Erik tried to come up with some explanation. Something the man he’d known most of his adult life would buy. Erik couldn’t tell Robert she was just a friend. He couldn’t form that

lie. For the first time in longer than he remembered, Erik was at a loss for words. He decided on something close to the truth.

"She is special to me, Robert. She's a very good friend and I don't want anything to happen to her."

"Don't worry. I promise I'll take very good care of her. Now you need to leave and let me examine my patient. Why don't you make us some coffee? We'll talk once I'm done here, okay?"

Erik left them reluctantly, closing the door quietly behind him. He did as the doctor ordered and made coffee but he couldn't think of drinking any himself. In spite of the late hour, he was much too wired as it was without the added boost of the coffee. He walked aimlessly about the apartment listening carefully for sounds from the bedroom. He was afraid she would wake up frightened and call out for him.

Fifteen minutes later, Erik turned away from the windows in the living room, as Doctor Stephens emerged from the bedroom closing the door quietly.

The doctor accepted the black coffee from Erik gratefully and he sat down in the chair opposite him.

"It definitely appears to be the flu. There's been a nasty strain of it going round lately. Although I've only treated patients who are older or in ill health, but I suspect Sophie may be just slightly anemic. I'll confirm that later after the blood tests results come back. In the meantime, Erik, I've given her something that should help bring the fever down, as well as help her sleep through the night. She's going to need someone to keep a very close eye on her tonight and over the course of the illness, which could last as long as a week. She needs rest for several days or there's the risk of a relapse. Or worse. Do you have someone in mind to watch her that you trust, or would you like me to have a nurse come over? I should be able to get someone here by tomorrow morning."

Erik shook his head, dismissing the doctor's suggestion.

"No, that's not necessary, Robert. I'll stay with her."

Robert watched him thoughtfully before shaking his head. "Good, but you need to keep a careful eye on her tonight. Watch her temperature closely. If it starts to spike again, you know what to do. If that doesn't work, call me on my cell phone. I'll come right over. I've left some medicine for her to take, which should be enough to get you through the night, and I'll have the pharmacy send over a full prescription tomorrow morning. She needs rest and plenty of fluids. She probably won't be able to keep anything solid down for a while, but try to get her to take some soup. And if you need me, Erik, call me."

He put his coffee cup down and stood, reaching for his coat. The doctor somehow sensed Erik's hesitancy. "What is it?"

"Robert, I need you to do something for me. A favor. I know it will go against everything you think is right, but I need you to do it anyway." Erik told him before hesitating once more. "I want you to run a drug screen on the blood you drew from Sophie tonight."

Doctor Robert Stephens stared back at him in complete surprise.

"Erik, do you have any idea what you're asking? Do you realize just how much trouble both of us could be in if she were to find out I did this? No, there's no way I can. I just examined her, very thoroughly, and there were no signs of any drug abuse. No needle marks. No signs of it physically. Why is it you suspect that she's using? What evidence do you have?"

"I don't and there is no evidence, at least none I'm aware of. That is, I'm not sure. I just need you to rule it out for me, Robert. I don't ever want her to know I asked you to do this. I

know I'm asking a lot. I'm going to ask you just the same because I need to know. Can you do this for me?"

"You realize that without her consent or a court order, we could both be in very serious legal trouble if she challenges it? Are you willing to take responsibility for the consequences if that happens? There's not a court in the world that would uphold the findings, Erik. Even if she were using."

"She won't challenge it, Robert, and yes, of course I'll take complete responsibility. I have to know for certain."

The doctor watched him, saw the apprehension in him, and reluctantly relented.

"Okay, I'll do it. I'll have the results back to you within a few days." As Erik closed the door behind the doctor, he stood, silently praying he hadn't just made the worst mistake of his life.



## Chapter Twelve

Sophie's fever broke sometime in the early morning hours before dawn. She opened her eyes slowly, looking around in surprise. For a moment, she felt completely lost.

The last real thing she could remember was passing out on the sofa. Now she was in the bedroom of Erik's work apartment but she couldn't remember just how or when she'd gotten there. Her eyes slowly drifted around the room as she tried to capture some fleeting memory.

She struggled to sit up in bed. Her body felt so weak. She realized for the first time that she was completely naked beneath the thin sheet covering her. Her head pounded, her throat felt so raw that it hurt to swallow, but at least the fever had gone and her head was starting to clear.

She had been dreaming. It was just remnants of the fever that made her believe Erik had been there with her. That he had held her close all night long. Erik was thousands of miles away in LA.

So how exactly had she gotten into bed? She closed her eyes and tried to remember but couldn't.

Sophie heard a small sound. She turned her pounding head and saw him sitting next to her bed. Erik was real alright. He'd awakened at the sound of her movement.

She blinked trying hard to focus over the pounding in her head. He didn't disappear. He was there with her. She hadn't been dreaming at all.

"Erik? What are you doing here?" Her voice was little more than a whisper torn from her burning throat and she tried to remember what exactly it had been about her dream that had left her feeling so vulnerable.

He sat down close to her, his hand cupping her cheek watching her with so much protectiveness on his face that it took her breath away.

"Hey, you. You're looking much better. You gave me quite a fright last night, Sophie. I nearly went out of my mind when I found you here."

"Your meeting?" was all she could say. She wanted to ask him why he'd come back. She couldn't.

"I'd been trying to reach you all day yesterday but no one seemed to know where you were. I was so worried, that I caught the first flight home and when I found you here, I..." He shook his head but Sophie could see how worried he'd been.

"I never want to feel that way again. You were so pale. I thought, well it doesn't matter now. I'm just so glad you're better now. Doctor Stephens said it was just the flu. Apparently, it's going around. He said you haven't been taking proper care of yourself. I'm not going to let that happen again. You have to rest, Sophie. Don't even think about trying to get out of this bed. If you need anything, tell me and I'll get it for you, okay?"

Sophie saw the fierce protectiveness that was there in the way he looked at her. He cared about her, after all. He wanted to protect her, and she loved him so much at that moment, it hurt.

"Erik, I'm sorry I worried you. I didn't mean to." She pulled her knees up to her chin and lay her head down against them. She was so exhausted and vulnerable and her emotions were everywhere.

She heard him whisper her name and then she was in his arms.

“Don’t, baby. Don’t cry. Don’t worry about the trip. There was no way I could stay away not knowing if you were okay. Michael was very understanding, and we were able to complete our meeting. So you see everything worked out just fine. You are far more important to me than business, Sophie.” He held her close to him whispering softly against her ear. She felt so safe with him, so warm and secure in his arms that she closed her eyes and let the weakness take control once more. “Are you falling asleep?” Erik asked softly.

“Just for a moment. I’m so tired. I’m so glad you’re here, Erik. I missed you so much.”

\* \* \* \*

Her words sounded muffled against his chest. He lay her back down against the bed. The warmth of her body ignited his desires. He’d give anything if she felt even a small part of what he did for her. Never before had he felt such need for a woman. It was torture being near her like this.

She’d said things to him now that she normally would never admit. It was the sickness. It lowered her inhibitions.

How much did she remember about last night? What would she say when she remembered how he’d held her close all night long? That it had been he who undressed her, bathed her fever away. She was so beautiful, and he wanted her more than anything in the world. Being close to her, wanting her so much that he physically ached for her was making it almost impossible for him to remain near her, yet unbearable to think of leaving her, even for a moment, much less longer. His instincts told him that she wanted him, too. She was far too encumbered by the past to admit that to him.

He wondered just what she would say if he told her that he knew every inch of her body by heart. He grinned, knowing the answer already. She would be embarrassed. She would look at him with that painfully embarrassed expression on her face. The way she looked when anything remotely intimate passed between them. She was still clinging to her illusion of a marriage. Her heart was telling her what she felt for Erik was happening too soon.

Like it or not, Kevin stood between them like an impenetrable wall. There was something about their marriage that Sophie still didn’t trust him with.

If Sophie found out he’d requested the drug screen, there was little doubt in his mind that she would hate him for not trusting her. In his heart, Erik knew he didn’t have a choice. He had to know the truth and she wouldn’t tell him.

There had been so many accusations made about her by both Kevin and later on, by Kevin’s father. Erik needed to confirm for himself what he knew with every fiber of his being. He now knew her better than anyone else on earth, including her husband. There was no possible way on earth that Sophie McGraw was involved with drugs. Once he had the answer in his hands, he did not intend to let her know what he had done. He dared not because he couldn’t risk losing her.

Sophie slept fitfully throughout most of the day, waking only for brief moments of time. Each time, she called out for him. She needed him and for the moment, just being near her, close enough to touch her, to reassure himself that she was okay, was enough.

\* \* \* \*

When Sophie woke again, the room around her was dark, but the lights of New York City flickered through the open curtains illuminating the room.

Erik stood next to the window, turning when he heard her move.

“You’ve come back to me. How are you feeling?” He stepped closer, looking down at her. When he smiled, she looked away; uncertain of the emotions he no longer tried to hide from

her.

"I feel so much better. My headache is finally gone. What time is it?" she asked a little shyly. She didn't understand this change in him. They weren't lovers, but they were far more than friends.

"It's late, almost midnight. You've been asleep most of the day. I'm glad you're feeling better." He reached out to touch her face, his fingers tucking a straying lock of hair back behind her ear. She was becoming all too familiar with a gesture. It spoke volumes about the intimate level their relationship had moved to.

"I know, I guess I was tired." Sophie could think of only one thing at that moment and that was escape. She needed to get away from him and those eyes that saw too much to understand this change in him. "I...I think I'll take a bath now." She sat up a little too quickly. The room around her began to sway uneasily forcing her back down, her hand going to her head automatically.

"Take it easy, Sophie. Just sit still for a moment. Why don't you let me run the bath for you while you relax for a moment?" She wanted to protest but she couldn't say a single thing.

When he returned, he quietly picked her up ignoring her futile protest as he carried her into the bathroom.

"Sophie, there's no need to be embarrassed. Let me help you."

All of a sudden, Sophie was remembering all too clearly, what had happened the last time she'd been in this room. Erik had undressed her then and had helped her into the ice-cold water. She couldn't even bear to think of that moment. To remember how she must have looked to him.

"No. No, Erik I can do the rest on my own. Please. I, let me do this on my own." She saw the way his eyes narrowed and knew he didn't trust her but he reluctantly he gave in, leaving the room.

Sophie sank down into the warm water with a cry of sheer satisfaction. She closed her eyes letting the warmth of the water seep into her cold skin and relax her tense muscles. She washed her hair and felt so much better just having done that small task. The effort had left her drained. She leaned her head back against the tub, unable to lift her arms. She looked up and saw him watching her from the doorway. She knew exactly what he intended to do and she was powerless to stop him. Erik came slowly over to her, his eyes never leaving hers. He pulled the plug from the drain before gently wiping away her tears. Then Erik reached for her as the water left the tub and held her in his lap gently drying her, before helping her into one of his tee shirts. He took the towel and dried her hair tossing it onto a growing heap near the tub.

"You should go back to bed, Sophie." She shook her head. She didn't want to leave him. She just wanted to be near him. She didn't want to miss a moment of being with him.

"No, Erik. The last place I want to go is back to bed." She stopped when she saw him smile. "I've spent too much time in bed already."

"Okay. Then come with me. We'll watch a movie together."

Sophie sat leaning against him on the sofa, sipping hot soup from a cup, while wrapped in a blanket and was happier than she had ever thought possible. The movie was an old classic something both of them had seen a dozen or more times. She listened as Erik told her about his trip to LA.

Sophie awoke as the final credits of the movie rolled across the screen. She was lying with her head in Erik's lap and he had just kissed the nape of her neck, before scooping her up in his arms carrying her into the bedroom.

He put her in bed and pulled the covers over her. She didn't want to let him go.

“Stay with me, Erik. I don’t want you to go. Please, will you stay with me tonight?” Sophie held her breath wondering what had possessed her to ask him that. She thought at first, he would refuse, but then he turned out the lights and she heard the soft whisper as he undressed and lay beside her, pulling her into his arms.

She could feel the way his heart raced. She’d never felt closer to him than at this moment. She’d never wanted him more. Her arms moved around his body. She felt his tense reaction to that move.

“Go to sleep, Sophie. I know you’re tired, and I don’t want to do something I’ll spend the rest of the night hating myself for.” He turned her in his arms so he could look into her eyes and she saw the control he was holding onto. “I want you, Sophie, and I know that you want me. Not like this. Not when you’re still sick. I want all of you. Your body, your mind, your emotions. All of you.” He settled her back against him, his hand gently stroking down her arm and she was content just to be near him, knowing he wanted her. Now nothing else on earth mattered much. Not Kevin, not the pain of the past. Not the truth that she would only be a passing fantasy for Erik. Nothing mattered but the man holding her close.

## Chapter Thirteen

“We’re still going to Vermont, aren’t we, Erik?” Sophie watched him across the small dining room table and remembered. She’d awakened that morning feeling almost back to normal, in spite of being incredibly weak. It was late and she was surprised to find Erik still sleeping beside her. She still couldn’t believe he’d left the meeting in LA simply because of her. He had flown through three time zones and spent several sleepless nights watching out for her. He deserved to sleep in.

She turned to watch him while he slept. His handsome face softened in sleep, making him look much younger than his thirty-five years. Sophie reached out to touch his chin. She could feel the rough stubble of his beard. She let her eyes travel over his bare chest trailing her fingers softly across the wide expanse feeling the silkiness of the sparse dark hair there. She wanted to reach out and kiss him, to be back in his arms.

A strong hand wrapped around her wrist stilling her fingers. “What do you think you’re doing?” Her eyes flew to his. He sounded very angry. She tried to pull her hand free of his but he merely lifted it to his lips kissing her palm slowly, his touch sending little shivers of pleasure down her spine, awakening a need buried inside of her. She needed more of him. He watched her closely with nothing remotely akin to anger in his eyes. Erik wanted her almost as much as she wanted him.

There could be no hiding the truth from him now. He could see everything, all the desire reflected in her eyes. He had to know how much she’d waited for this moment.

He moved closer, his hand reaching up to clasp the side of her face. That long slow smile did terrible things to her nerves, sent color rushing over her body. She heard him laugh, it sounded almost as sexy as that smile. His lips touched hers taking possession of them slowly, seductively. She clung to him, responding eagerly to his expert touch. He coaxed her lips apart and she felt the tip of his tongue exploring the softness of her mouth.

Erik gathered her close, his hands running over her body. Even through the thin tee shirt, she could feel the slight tremor in them. He slipped his hand under her shirt stroking her thigh. Then slowly, maddeningly his fingers stroked upward, touching every part of her. His thumb stroked across her belly upward to her ribcage before caressing her breasts. She felt them harden beneath his touch. She cried out softly against his lips. She’d never felt this way before. Not even with Kevin.

Erik whispered something to her, but she couldn’t understand over the racing beat of both their hearts. His lips left hers, trailing kisses along the pounding pulse in her throat before touching her ear.

“Open your eyes, love. I want to see your eyes when I make love to you.”

She did as he asked. The desire in Erik’s eyes turned them to a midnight blue. It took her breath away. Slowly, he lifted the shirt as a treacherous thought raced through her mind. How could she keep from betraying how much she loved him if she went through with this? This might be commonplace for Erik, but she’d only been with one other man in her life and that had turned out disastrous. With Erik, she’d been waiting for this moment for so long. Even before Kevin’s death. Would he guess how she felt about him once he’d made love to her?

Would he hate her for it?

That thought washed over her like a cold breeze. Her voice was unrecognizable when she reached out to stop him. "No! Erik, please. I...I can't do this. I can't!" She felt tears fill her eyes spilling over. Through the blur, Sophie saw his regret and turned away from him burying her face against her pillow as her body shook with sobs. "I'm sorry, Erik. I just can't do this."

She heard him say something she couldn't catch over the sobs she couldn't control. Then she felt him move. Sophie couldn't stop the shivering that took control of her body knowing he was leaving her. She'd hurt him. He no longer wanted her. Then she felt him close to her pulling her back against his body, his arms going round her.

"It's okay, Sophie. Don't cry. I should have realized it's too soon. I'm rushing you. I'm sorry, I don't want to rush you, I just want you so badly. It's hard to be close to you and not... It's okay. I'll wait for you until you are ready. We have all the time in the world."

He turned her in his arms looking down at her, his thumbs brushing away her tears.

"I don't want to rush you, Sophie. I don't want you to have any doubts. When we make love, I want all of you. You understand?"

She did. He didn't want her to have any regrets. He didn't want any either. She accepted him as her friend, even though she couldn't trust herself not to reveal the truth to him. She wanted him to be her lover. One day, as they both knew, nothing on earth would stop that from coming true.

"Now, unless you can think of a way to eat with an empty refrigerator, one of us is going to have to leave this bed, and I think that someone should be me, don't you? Why don't you just relax for a while? I'm going to take a shower." He kissed her on her cheek before getting out of bed.

Too late, Sophie remembered he was naked. She'd begged him to stay with her. She watched him walk across the room every bit the confident male, not at all embarrassed. Erik had many lovers in the past. He knew one day, they would be lovers as well. It was there in everything about his relaxed, assured manner.

One day soon, the decision would be taken from her. Erik was patient, but he was also used to getting what he wanted. He wanted her. Erik would take her and they both knew that nothing, no barrier she might put in his way, would stop that moment from happening.

He turned and caught her eyes on his body and he smiled that slow, maddening smile. Sophie looked away as embarrassed color she couldn't control touched her body. He laughed confidently.

"Want to join me?" Startled, her gaze went back to his face and he laughed again. "Forget I said that. That's much too tempting and far too dangerous to think about right now."

He closed the door. She heard the sound of the shower running. She could breathe again.

Sophie got out of bed. She needed to put as much space as possible between herself and the man in the next room before she gave into her love for him and went after him.

Now, sitting across from him at the tiny dining room table, she was even more aware of him, of everything about him than ever before. The fresh smell of his skin. The sound of his breath. The way his smile made her weak all over.

"Is that what you want? To go to Vermont?" She did. She had from the moment he'd told her about the house.

Erik bought the house six months earlier on an impulse. That intrigued her all the more. Erik wasn't an impulsive person for the most part. In business, he weighed every decision very

carefully before committing to anything. The very fact he had been driving home from spending a long weekend in Vermont, had simply stumbled across the house, and put a deposit on it the very same day amazed her. When Erik had first told her the story, Sophie couldn't resist asking him what it had been about the house that made him fall in love with it just like that.

"I don't know. I guess it was just the potential I saw there. It's nothing special, just an old farmhouse that's been restored, but when I look at it, I see families gathering around a huge Christmas tree in the great room. I see turkey dinners, Santa Claus, babies, the whole nine yards. I guess that doesn't make much sense, does it? I see the house as it should be. Full of love and family."

Sophie did understand. Only too well, in fact. That was one of the things they had in common. Neither had come from a traditional family environment. It made them both wonder what they'd missed. Erik rarely talked about his dreams for the future. She'd never heard him mention kids before. He would be a wonderful father. Picturing him with the unknown woman who would someday be his wife was more painful than Sophie could bear to think about.

She smiled across at him, nodding. She could see his resistance give way.

"I'll talk to Doctor Stephens. We'll go if he gives you the okay. Otherwise, he'll never forgive me if I take you against his orders."

The drive to the small Vermont town closest to Erik's house took most of the day. They left the city Thanksgiving morning soon after the parade ended taking the Rover. The storm that struck New York hadn't lasted long. The roads were almost cleared, but traffic was nonexistent.

It was a cold, clear, fall day when they arrived at the house just outside of town. They hadn't planned to have a Thanksgiving dinner, but they'd picked up something bordering on traditional Thanksgiving at a restaurant along the way.

From the moment she walked in the door, Sophie knew the house was going to be everything she'd expected it to be. She could definitely see Erik in each room of the house.

The house was a two-story, Cape Cod that had been restored back to its original beauty, right down to the gray shaker siding. In each of its ten plus rooms, there were replicas of the original colonial furnishings of the time.

After they carried in the makeshift dinner and their bags, Erik gave her a quick tour of the house, ending up back in the huge kitchen dominated by the gray stone fireplace. "It's beautiful, Erik. I love it!"

She was aware of him watching her as he showed her through the room. He was looking for her reaction. When she turned to him, her eyes shining with happiness, something came and went in his expression so quickly that it left her uncertain.

They spent the afternoon sitting by the fire in the great room, playing cards. Outside, a light powdery snow fell. The restaurant had one lonely fruit pie left. They made that their dinner eating pie and drinking coffee while listening to CDs.

On several different occasions, Sophie caught Erik watching her closely. She was almost certain something was bothering him. She finally found the courage to ask him what it was. She held her breath, dreading his answer more than anything else at that moment.

What would she do if he told her it was time for him to move on with his life? If he no longer wanted her to be a part of it? She felt fear tighten deep in the pit of her stomach. How could she ever be able to survive without him?

He stood and walked nervously away from her, over to the window before running an unconscious hand through his hair. Erik was nervous? She'd never seen him nervous before.

"Sophie, I need to ask you something very personal. It's something I need to hear from

you now, while I'm still thinking clearly. Before we...before we make love. There's no easy way to ask you this that won't embarrass you, so I'll just ask it. Are you using birth control? I know since Kevin's death there hasn't been anyone in your life so..." He stopped and looked cautiously at her. "I think we should discuss this now, while I'm still thinking somewhat reasonably."

Sophie released the breath she had been holding inside, her shocked eyes meeting his only briefly before looking anywhere but at him. How could she possibly tell him the truth that she had never used birth control. Kevin hadn't like using a condom. She'd considered birth control but after a few weeks of marriage, there hadn't been the need anymore. Kevin had lost interest in her.

"Please, don't be embarrassed. Just tell me." At the gentle pleading in his voice, she shook her head unable to say the words aloud. He closed the space between them touching her cheek gently.

"I thought not, but I needed to know for certain." He sounded strangely relieved. As if a weight had been lifted. She didn't understand.

Sophie was beginning to feel the effects of being so ill. By early evening, she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. Erik stood taking her hand in his pulling her up with him. "Bedtime for you I think. Come on, I'll walk you up to your room." He was being so careful with her again. Not mentioning the hunger they both couldn't deny; he was waiting for her to come to him when she was ready.

Outside her bedroom door, Erik kissed her gently before pulling her into his arms and holding her close. When he slowly released her, he smiled down at her. "Good night, Sophie. I'll see you in the morning, okay? If you need me, just call out for me. Sleep well."

\* \* \*

Erik watched as she closed the door softly before returning to the great room. It felt empty without her. He cleared away the remains of the pie and poured more coffee. Outside, tiny flakes of snow were still falling. There hadn't been enough to make the roads hazardous but it had made the day seem even more special.

Sophie had been both surprised as well as delighted when he'd told her about the house. How he had found it and bought it the same day. He hadn't been able to tell her everything about his motives that day.

From the beginning, the house struck him as the place to settle down to raise a family. Not with just anyone, he admitted to himself. To start a family with her. He wanted everything with her, the whole picture; marriage, kids, forever. Six months ago, it had been nothing more than a fantasy. A very crazy expensive dream. In fact, he had started to doubt his own sanity at the time, but now, well now, he believed in miracles again. He loved her. The thought of spending the rest of his life with her was the one thing, the only thing that mattered to him.

Sophie was still in love with her husband even though Erik knew something hadn't been right between them. Had Sophie discovered the truth about Kevin's numerous affairs? He almost hoped she had at times, even if it meant she'd be hurt. At least she would finally see Kevin for what he was, not the man she'd only imagined him to be.

He couldn't keep from wondering what secret she still kept from him. He was convinced now, more than ever before, that it was something of great significance. She wasn't ready to share it with him.

She wanted him physically. He had little doubt about that. It was there in the way she responded to him and in her eyes whenever he came near her. He knew she was close to loving



him—he felt it in her. At least that was a start.

Whatever her secret was and for whatever reason she still held onto it, eventually, no matter how much it might hurt her, he was going to have to force her hand to make her reveal it. Because whatever that secret was, he had a feeling it was far too important to the both of them, to their future to keep hidden any longer.

## Chapter Fourteen

They left for New York the following morning to threatening skies that promised more snow.

As they packed the Range Rover, Sophie found herself wishing they didn't have to return to New York. She wished they could stay here forever. She'd never felt more at home before.

The traffic going into the city was heavy and congested as holiday travelers returned home making the commute longer than ever. By the time they parked the Rover in the apartment's parking garage, it was late afternoon.

Sophie picked up the mail being held at the office and followed Erik into the apartment. She watched him toss her bag in her room, before disappearing into his office.

The mail contained the usual assortment of bills and advertisements. She started toward Erik's office to drop them off when she spotted the large brown envelope with her name on it. The return address was a medical laboratory in midtown. Sophie opened it slowly, her eyes scanning the text in confusion. At first, she thought there must be some mistake—this couldn't be for her. She hadn't had any lab tests run in years. Then the date on the report caught her attention. It was recent. Very recent, in fact. The day she had become ill. She read through the tests results again. They had absolutely nothing to do with the flu. All the tests authorized by Doctor Stephens were drug tests. He'd ordered every type of drug test possible; heroin, cocaine, amphetamines.

Suddenly, it dawned on her that the only person who would have any knowledge, or even suspect her of using drugs enough to ask for such tests was Erik.

Erik, the one person who believed her when she told him that she was not involved in Kevin's drug addiction. Erik, the one person on earth whom she trusted with everything, had in fact, doubted everything she had ever told him about herself.

She started to cry. She hated herself for such weakness. Sophie brushed an angry hand across her eyes to stop the tears. He didn't trust her at all. Erik never believed one word of what she had told him. All of that trust and caring had been nothing more than a lie.

She walked into his office. He was sitting at his desk scanning the computer screen. Even through the blur of tears, Sophie could see the expression on his face at the sight of her tears. He was taken aback. He stood and came toward her, but she stepped back, holding up a hand to keep him away from her.

"You had me tested for drugs behind my back? How could you do that, Erik? How could you do that to me? I thought you were my friend. I thought you trusted me. I thought you believed me when I told you that I've never used drugs before. That was just a lie, wasn't it? You never believed a word of what I told you, did you, Erik?"

Sophie held the tests results out to him to see, her anger giving way to heartbreaking sobs.

She saw him close his eyes before running an agitated hand through his hair. He took a tentative step closer, his body stiffening as she stepped back again.

"Sophie...please, just listen to me. Let me explain."

His voice was so soothing. So reassuring. She didn't believe any of it. She stepped

further away, tossing the papers up in the air at him. They fell silently between them.

“How could you do that, Erik? I believed you when you said you trusted me. I actually believed you! It was all just a lie, wasn’t it? You never ever trusted me at all. I’m such an idiot!” She turned to leave and she heard him call out her name, begging her to stay. She ignored him. Sophie had to get away. She felt physically ill by Erik’s betrayal. She ran from the room leaving him standing there alone with the evidence of his betrayal lying scattered across the floor.

\* \* \* \*

Erik picked up the papers from the floor and crumpled them, tossing them into the fireplace to burn then he slumped back into the chair he’d just left placing his hands over his eyes.

Dear God, what had he done? He knew the answer already. He had lost her. The most important thing in the world to him.

He wanted to go after her. Force her to listen. Make her understand why he’d needed to do what he did. How could he make her understand what he knew had been wrong all along? What could he possibly say to her that would excuse what he had just done to her by violating both her trust and her privacy? Dear God, what had he done?

Erik sat frozen in his chair, looking unseeingly out the window as the afternoon faded into dusk, defeat in every inch of him. He was afraid to move, dreading the walk to her room. Afraid he would find it empty.

He saw her enter the room through the glare of the window. At least he could be thankful she hadn’t left without telling him where she was going. He turned slowly to look at her. She had been crying—was still crying. He wanted more than anything to go to her. Comfort her. At that moment, he had no right to her at all and she would not want his comfort.

She took only a few steps into the room, looking down at the floor. She couldn’t even look at him, he thought bitterly. “I think I need to leave, Erik. I...it’s time I found a place of my own. Some other place to...to live.” Her voice broke, her eyes desperately seeking his, looking for comfort, before returning to the floor.

“No, Sophie. I won’t let you do that. I won’t let you go. We need to talk about this. Come here.” He shook his head denying her words. Her eyes came back to his once more. She was sobbing. Her body trembled with reaction.

“I have to go, Erik. I can’t stay here anymore! Not like this. I can’t.” She took another step closer. At that moment, he knew he had her. She didn’t want to leave. He had no intention of letting her go.

“Come here, Sophie. Come to me, baby.” He held out his hand, she came closer. Close enough to touch, but she didn’t attempt to take his hand.

Erik leaned forward took her hand in his and gently tugged her onto his lap. She didn’t resist, but he felt the stiffness of her body through all her trembling. “Don’t cry. I’m so sorry, Sophie. I’m so sorry. I had no right to do that to you.”

She was sobbing so much, that he could barely make out her words at all. “How could you, Erik? How could you not trust me enough to go behind my back like that? Do you have any idea how that makes me feel? I told you the truth. Why couldn’t you believe me?” She still held herself rigid in his arms, but he knew there was no way she would leave him now.

“Sophie, I do trust you, in spite of how this appears. It’s just that I had to...to put it behind us once and for all. I guess I needed proof positive that all of Raymond McGraw’s accusation were just angry words. That was wrong—so wrong of me. It’s gone now. I tossed it

in the fire, it's over. I'm so sorry I hurt you, Sophie. I never want to hurt you like that again." Erik knew it was now or never. He had to find out what she wasn't telling him.

"I know there's still something standing between us. Something you haven't been able to tell me yet. I want you to trust me, Sophie. I hope that someday, you will trust me enough to tell me the truth about what's hurting you." He didn't tell her that he'd never even bothered to look at the results of the tests. He hadn't really needed to.

She shook her head. She wasn't going to answer him. Tonight would not be when she confided that secret to him. She wasn't trying to deny its existence any longer, and he couldn't blame her now for not trusting him now.

Erik held her close, letting her cry until there were no more tears left inside of her.

Something changed in her. She moved closer to him. Her arms reached out to touch him, her fingers running lightly across his chest. Slowly she lifted her eyes to his. She couldn't hide the hunger, the need that clouded hers.

She wanted him. She was ready to accept him as more than just her friend. She wanted him to be her lover.

He didn't know just what brought her to him now, of all times, when he'd hurt her so badly. He didn't care. He wasn't going to let her change her mind now. He was taking the decision out of her hands completely.

His eyes slid over her taking in the indisputable desire in her eyes, her body. Already responding to him. She snuggled closer.

His arms tightened around her, pulling her closer. His hands roamed restless over her body. She closed her eyes, her breath catching in her throat.

"Erik." She wasn't aware of saying his name, or that she repeated it over and over, but the seductive sound of it sent a primitive response through him.

His fingers reach out to tangle through her blond curls painfully, forcing her to look at him. She said his name once more. It was lost when his lips took hers. The force in which he took possession of her drove the words from her. Her lips clung to his. When he pulled away slightly, she opened her eyes and his lips took possession of hers again. His gaze never left hers. God he wanted her. He'd wanted her for so many long nights. He took a deep breath and tried to hold onto that need just a little while longer. He wanted to do so many things to her. Wanted her to scream his name, forget about Kevin. Beg him never to stop.

His fingers stroked her breast through the thin material of her shirt. She couldn't control the moan that escaped. Erik coaxed her lips apart, exploring the soft recesses of her mouth, meeting hers, touching hers.

His lips left hers, caressing her throat. She arched closer, crying out in pleasure.

"Erik, please." She had no idea the invitation her words gave him. He lifted his head to look at her watching the way her body responded to his touch. The hunger in every tortured cry that escaped her lips when his hand slipped upward again to stroke her breast, her throat, then running gently over her swollen lips.

"Please what, Sophie? Tell me what you want and I'll give it to you. Tell me you're ready for me, love. Are you ready for me to love you, baby?"

\* \* \* \*

She couldn't speak. Couldn't answer. Sophie was consumed by him. The searing heat from his body made it easy to feel his need, even through the barrier of their clothes. She wanted nothing more than to touch him. To feel him against her. Inside her. The way his fingers slid caressingly over her body was almost as agonizing as his lips had been.

She was beyond caring what he might discover about her anymore. Even if it meant proving Kevin right. That she wasn't desirable. She wanted Erik more than she'd ever wanted her husband.

Sophie shook her head and looked at him with so much passion, that it made words unnecessary but she said them just the same. She wanted Erik to hear how much she needed him. She didn't want there to be any doubts. "Yes! Yes, I want you, Erik. Please, I need you so badly."

He picked her up and carried her into his room. Erik set her on her feet and stood silently looking down at her. His expression took her breath away.

"Are you sure, Sophie?" His own voice was far from steady. "Stop me now if this isn't what you want. Stop me now if you don't want this, because a moment longer will too late. And there won't be any stopping it."

He knew the answer before she found the words. It was there in her eyes. "Yes, Erik, yes—I want this. Please, I want this more than anything else."

His gaze never left her face as slowly, he undressed her, his fingers brushing over her heated skin sending tremors throughout her, awakening a primitive need for him deep inside her.

"Let me look at you, Sophie. I want to see you, all of you, every inch of you." His voice shivered through her mind. He stepped away from her, his eyes traveling slowly over her body taking in every inch of her. When she met his gaze, that slow, maddening smile was back, driving her mad with need.

His gaze held hers, not letting her look away as he undressed before taking her back into his arms, his lips possessing hers once more. Erik lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed, laying her gently down, his body lowering against hers. His lips never leaving hers.

She heard him whisper words as seductive as a caress against her lips and instinctively, she moved closer to him.

"I've wanted you for so long, Sophie. So long. That doesn't matter, because you're mine now."

Sophie's body moved closer to him. She touched him slowly, her hands running over his taut thighs. Feeling the firmness of his buttocks, then trailing upward to stroke his bare chest. She could feel the tremor of his body as her fingers stroked his tiny nipple feeling it harden against her fingers.

She heard him cry out her name and she wanted more than anything to taste his body. She touched her lips to the hardened nipple breathing in the scent of his skin hearing his harsh gasp of pleasure before he reached for her hands pinning them together with one of his before gently pushing her back against the pillows. "No, Sophie!" She looked at him startled by the sharpness of his tone mistaking it for anger or disappointment.

"You don't want me to touch you like that, Erik? You didn't like it when..." She was immediately embarrassed. She had touched him relying completely on her instincts but she was too inexperienced to understand his reaction.

He closed his eyes taking a deep shuddering, breath before looking at her once more. "Oh, I like it, love. I like it too much, love. I'm sure not just how long I can hold out when you're touching me that way."

"This is our first time together, Sophie, and I want to make it special. Lie back down and let me love you."

He took her lips once more and she clung to him gasping as his hands teased her body, caressing her breasts to arousal before they slid downward. Then his lips left hers, trailing kisses

down her throat, then capturing her hardened nipple between his teeth teasing her, exciting her, driving her out of control. He still held her hands together above her with one of his. His other hand was slowly stroking across her belly downward to touch her inner thigh, then parting them before stroking between her legs upward. He could feel her body tense briefly as his fingers entered the soft, warm moistness of her and then he felt her relax, accepting him as he began to gently move his fingers within her.

He raised his head to look at her wanting to see just what his touch was doing to her. She had closed her eyes arching her body closer to him, to his maddening touch. She was warm and excited and he wanted her more than anything else in his life at that moment.

He moved over her parting her legs. He took her lips once more as he entered her body thrusting deep inside. Sophie cried out his name once more. Something in her voice must have alerted caught his attention. His gaze captured hers. He thought her a woman of experience. The pain was so fleeting, that it was gone before he could understand he'd hurt her.

His body moved slowly within her and she was lost within the overwhelming force of feelings she had never known before until that very moment. Sophie felt as if she were being swept away by the sheer power of the raw, emotions washing over her in waves. There were just the two of them; nothing else mattered. She felt the flames of her desire began to grow, to build within her, burning so fiercely, consuming her with the heat of her desire. She wasn't aware of it but was crying out his name over and over again as the world around them exploded with the sweet intensity of feelings that left her body trembling, weak and fluid and she felt his own reaction meet and surpass her as he collapsed against her body as shaken as she.

She clung to him holding her breath, not wanting to return to reality but it was there, straying into her muddled thoughts and reminded her of just what she might have revealed about herself tonight. He shifted his weight gently off her taking her with him so she lay on top of his body and then he wrapped her in his arms gathering her close to him as his fingers stroked lightly through her hair and down the length of her body whispering tenderly against her ear.

Sophie let go of the shaky breath she had been holding painfully inside realizing that for now he hadn't guessed her dark secret.

Erik pulled the covers up over their bodies his lips brushing across her forehead. "Are you okay, Sophie? I...I didn't hurt you, did I? I thought, well, I don't ever want to hurt you."

Sophie shuddered finding her shaking voice at last. "No, Erik, no, I'm fine; you could never hurt me." Her voice caught as the tears of her physical awakening by him could no longer be denied. "Just hold me, Erik, please. Just hold me tonight."

\* \* \* \*

Erik listened as at last her tears ended and her breathing slowed knowing that at last she slept. He held her tightly, thankful at least one of them could find peace in sleep. His body as well as his mind cried out for it. Making love to her had been like no other sexual experience he had ever felt with a woman before. She had touched him deeply, far more than just their physical joining. It was as if their souls had connected tonight as well as their bodies and it was a feeling that terrified him beyond belief.

He had known when they at last made love it would be earth-shattering, but nothing had prepared him for this much erotic intensity, so much fierce, passionate emotion. Erik looked down at the sleeping woman in his arms; touching his lips to hers; hearing her moan softly; responding to his touch even in her sleep and he smiled. Dear God, she was sensual, seductive, heartbreakingly beautiful in every way and everything he could ever want in a woman and he had wanted her for nine long months now. There was no way he would have expected his

anticipation of loving her to be out shadowed by the actual act of possessing her. The way she slept in his arms; the way she unconsciously moved against his body made him go up in flames once again from wanting her.

He'd almost convinced himself she had been inexperienced in his arms tonight. Almost but not quiet, he smiled wryly to himself at the absolute insanity of that thought. She was married for nine months to his best friend, so, of course, she wasn't inexperienced. Kevin was constantly bragging how Sophie couldn't get enough of it.

She moved closer to him in her sleep. He felt his body grow hard again. His hands already touching her; stroking her body; awakening her to his desire; pulling her back against his chest, his arms went around her belly stroking it lightly. Then he heard her gasp with the pleasure of his touch, his fingers playing against her breast and feeling their immediate taut response to him. He took her then; his lips caressing her throat and urgently seeking her lips as she turned her head to him letting him take her uncaring that he was not gentle with her as tender love battled uncontrollable hunger and lost.

She cried out hoarsely; her body arching away from him as his fingers slid up to stroke her breasts causing her to cry out in pleasure against his lips and he felt his body lose control once more crying out her name as he tensed and then relaxed inside her. He was in no hurry to pull free of her and felt so close to her, he pulled her back against him and held her there. Drifting away into sleep, he heard her say his name sleepily as exhaustion took control of her body and she floated into sleep.

## Chapter Fifteen

Sophie awakened to the smell of coffee drifting into the bedroom through the open door. She sat up slowly her body still weighted down by exhaustion pulling the sheet up over her nakedness and remembering everything that had happened the night before. She and Erik had made love repeatedly during the night exhausted she had lost count of the times. She glanced down at the pillow where he had lay so close to her a heartbeat away holding her all night long as an unsettling thought drifted through her mind one that had briefly disturbed her bliss the previous evening. Erik hadn't used any protection at all and once before she had lost control she had tried to speak her fears out loud to him but just one touch of his hand and all rational thought eluded her completely.

She had been so certain that he would know her secret that once he had made love to her he would know without a doubt that she had been a virgin in his arms and it seemed for a moment that he had but when he didn't question her further about it she was uncertain. She let out a shaky breath not sure, if she was at all happy that the most exciting night of her life had to remain a secret. She knew that she must never share the truth with anyone more especially the man who had held her excited her and made her a woman. The man she loved.

She looked up meeting his blue eyes across the room her heart slamming against her chest at the sight of him remembering how it had felt to be in his arms, his touch his kiss his possession. He watched her, he wasn't smiling his expression dark with emotion the remnants of the night before, and Sophie was the first to look away breaking free of his unsettling gaze.

He came to her then she felt the weight of his body as he joined her on the bed sitting close to her his hands reaching automatically out to pull her close to him, his lips claiming hers. Sophie couldn't control the way her body responded to his touch she craved it. He looked down at her with that same sobering look in his eyes holding so many questions in them but she wasn't sure what he wanted from her.

He picked her up and carried her to the bathroom, his lips claiming hers once more, as he sat her on her feet in front of the tiled shower. Erik switched on the water and undressed taking her back into his arms his lips taking hers more urgently now his hands roamed over her heated skin. He took her hand and led her into the shower and she felt the warm spray of water touch her skin soaking her hair.

He stepped away from her looking at her with eyes dark as midnight. "You are so beautiful, love. So very beautiful. I'm afraid to touch you, I'm afraid that you might just disappear from me. That last night might have been just another dream and you're not real and that you're not really here with me now."

Sophie looked at him with surprise and uncertainty as his words washed over her like the warm water, sending her body into shivers responding to the mere seductiveness of his voice. She moved to him wrapping her arms around him reaching up to touch her lips to his. "Erik, I'm here, I'm real. I'm not going anywhere." A hoarse cry escaped deep inside of him and his lips opened hers his tongue reaching out to taste her, stroke her. He pushed her back against the tile wall with a forced that drove her breath into him as he lifted her up her legs going round his hips



as he took possession of her body once more with a forcefulness that left her as spellbound as his words. His want mirroring hers.

The warmth of the water lapped over their joined only adding to the sensuality of their lovemaking bringing them each to the peak of desire in at once as they cried out and he felt the woman in his arms go weak against him drained as he slowly lowered her to her feet holding her fragile body close to him.

"Are you okay love? I didn't hurt you did I, I, wasn't gentle, I," Sophie smiled up at him her heart lifting at the look of uncertainty in his eyes. She was sitting in his lap wrapped in his robe. They had showered after making love drying each other off and he had put her on his lap and held her close to him.

She saw him smile at the way she eagerly shook her head in response to him. "It's just that you've been through so much lately Sophie over the past few days," He shook his head looking agonizingly down at her. "I just don't want you getting sick again. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"I'm fine Erik. Don't worry, I'm all right." His fingers touched her chin turning her face up, his eyes searching hers closely. There was something in his eyes, the way he looked at her so full of unspoken questions as if he searched her face for something that he didn't find and deep inside of her, some unknown, unnamed fear began to breathe.

Sophie held her breath once more uncertain of him as his thumb stroked across her lips gently his eyes ever watchful not missing anything from the tension in her eyes or the way her body was already responding to his touch. "This has gone beyond friendship, love. There can be no going back to just friendship now you understand?"

Fear clutched her heart for the first time. She hadn't even given it a second thought when she had given herself to him so freely last night. Now, in the morning light he was making her realize of just what she had given to him. Just how important their lovemaking had been. It had marked the end of friendship, but the beginning of what?

He had never once told her that he loved her and a silent aching cry came readily to her lips but she killed it instantly not wanting him to ask the question that she didn't want to face. He had called her love so many times before but he had never once called out to her in love. Panic filled her then with the dawning that she couldn't let him know just how much that realization hurt her. He didn't want her love at least not permanently and one day the hunger that he had for her would end as well leaving what?

She stood shakily moving away from him realizing that everything she was feeling was there on her face for him to see. She couldn't hide anything from him. "Sophie?" he repeated her name again. "You do realize that this has gone way beyond friendship don't you?"

Sophie closed her eyes trying to control her fear forcing a smile on her face as she faced him once more. The expression on his face took her breath away he was watching her as if he were waiting for something, some declaration from her some acknowledgement and she shook her head. "I know that Erik and it's okay. Don't worry about me, it's okay." She was trying so carefully to say the right thing to him. She watched as something came and went in his eyes so quickly that she couldn't capture and then he stood and walked over to the bedroom window. Sophie saw him look out at the city below his back to her. There was a certain tension about him that she had never understood before making her wonder what secrets he too kept hidden away. When he turned back to her, again he was Erik once more smiling back at her. Erik her friend, lover, the Erik she loved. The one she knew so very well in every way not the man who had watched her so somberly moments ago.

"Come on love, why don't you get dressed while I make us breakfast. I was thinking that maybe later today we could drive out to the country and see if we can pick out the perfect Christmas tree ever. What do you think?"

Twenty minutes later, when Sophie walked into the kitchen she had her emotions very firmly under control. She had taken longer than normal to dress but she couldn't stop the tears. She couldn't dispel the sense that her time together with him was ending. It was there in a certain look in his eyes that warned her not to become attached to him and she wasn't sure just how long she could keep her love a secret from him. She was with him now and that should be enough no one was guaranteed the future but she couldn't control the sadness that took control of her.

Sophie smiled at him brightly feeling as if her smile were frozen in place on her face and she saw the way his eyes narrowed as he watched her but he didn't press her. They sat quietly talking over insignificant things as if neither of them wanted to put to words the indescribable strain that was there between them.

## Chapter Sixteen

Long after Sophie hung up the phone, her cousin's words were still ringing agonizingly in her ear. She's heard Marissa's words that she never wanted to hear but had known that they would come she had prepared herself to hear them some day and yet now it felt as if each of them struck her like a cold slap in the face none the less. Marissa had practically exuded pleasure when she told her that she and Erik had not only had dinner that night but that he had come back with her to her apartment and she had all but told her every step of their sexual encounter. It was all Sophie could do not to slam the phone receiver down and break right down and cry.

She was finishing the presentation that Erik along with two other team members would be going over tonight in preparation for their trip to Paris the following week marking her first trip abroad with Erik as his assistant. Sophie would just have time to save the document before the meeting that would be beginning in the conference room any moment now.

She glanced up now Steve Dangerfield and Tom Marcus walked passed her smiling before she quickly averted her eyes down to her laptop screen faking concentration. "The boss got you hard at work Sophie?" Tom Marcus smiled at her admiringly. At twenty-five Tom was one of the youngest executives on staff at Sebastian Advertising. He was young blond and ruggedly handsome and he made it clear to Sophie in everything that he did that he was very much attracted to her. So far, it hadn't gone beyond stopping by her desk to chat or a passing word to her in the hallways and there was the one time at a particular busy meeting when he had brought her coffee. She didn't want to encourage him in any way but there was no way she could tell him about her relationship with his boss. She wasn't sure that she herself knew what their relationship was enough to put into words.

Sophie had told Erik that she didn't think it would be wise of them to let anyone know of their involvement beyond work. Now, she wondered how exactly she was going to have to deal with this problem of Tom's growing attraction to her and although she appreciated his kindness, she hoped that she would never have to hurt him.

Sophie closed her eyes steeling her emotions firmly behind the mask of her smile. "Just finishing up the charts for today's meeting that's all. Are you ready for the trip to Paris?"

She ignored the way his eyes slid over her appreciatively as she began the task of disconnecting the laptop to take it with her into the conference room. "I can't wait! It should definitely be fun. I hope we have time to do some sightseeing outside of the business." He didn't come right out and ask her but she knew that it was only a matter of time before he invited her out on a date possibly during the upcoming trip and she resisted the urge to close her eyes in frustration.

Sophie was trying to think of some plausible excuse as to why she wouldn't be able to go out with him seeing that he was watching her smiling waiting for her response.

Neither of them heard the connecting door open until the sharp sound of Erik's voice startled them both into turning surprisingly guilty eyes to him. "Tom, if you're done flirting with my secretary I would like a word with you before the meeting. I'm sure Sophie has something

she should be doing at this time as well." There was no denying the biting tone in his voice or the sarcasm as he slammed the connecting door.

Sophie looked at the young man who stood near her a flush of embarrassment running up his face. "You'd better go Tom, it sounds important, and I need to get the presentation set up anyway." She hurried away from him her limbs feeling numb from shock at Erik's harsh words. She didn't understand his anger or what had prompted it.

Sophie pushed aside her feelings of sadness that seem to follow her each day and bit down hard into her bottom lip killing the tears that were so close to spilling over. She couldn't cry now, not in front of Steve who had seated himself in the conference room ignoring the angry way his boss had no doubt surprised him by addressing his assistant. Erik never lost his temper for any reason but lately the least little thing was setting him off.

Sophie didn't even look at Erik as he entered the room fifteen minutes later with a sullen looking Tom close beside him. The Paris client execs were joining them later for a conference call after the presentation was reviewed in detail where they would finalize the meeting's time and place as well as attendees. It had been arranged for days now and Sophie found herself dreading having to make the call to the team to tell them they would be running late.

She threw an angry look at Erik when he all but ordered her to bring him coffee but if he noticed her anger at all he didn't acknowledge it as he began to take the team through each of the slide presentation in detail.

She poured the coffee with fingers that trembling with rage and rejection shaking so that she spilled half of the cup on her hand burning it, a bright angry red mark spreading rapidly across her fingers. Sophie threw the coffee into the sink swearing softly to her as she wiped away a stray tear. She set the cup down slowly rubbing her hands across her eyes trying to regain control of her chaotic emotions before taking a deep steadying breath before pouring another cup of the hot liquid more slowly.

"Sophie, damn it where are you? I need you in here now to take notes. I only asked for one cup of coffee, for God sake?" He took the cup from her angrily turning her to face him immediately seeing her pain. "Why are you crying? What is it, love?" When she couldn't look at him couldn't speak he took her by her arms shaking her. "Tell me Sophie! Surely, it's not because of what I said to you just now. Sophie, you know the importance of this meeting. I'm sorry that I snapped at you just now but you know we've been under a lot of pressure with this client,"

She pulled free of him turning away she didn't want him to look too closely to see too much. "I'm fine. It's nothing that's all."

She heard him swear softly under his breath as he sat the cup down taking hold of her and turning her once more to face him. "That's a lie Sophie. I know you better than that. What is it? Has something happened to upset you?"

She struggled to free herself of his touch and he released her reluctantly. "I told you Erik it's nothing. I, I just spilt some coffee on my hand. I'm fine."

"Let me see." He reached for the hand she was holding close to her body but she moved away from him not seeing the hurt in his eyes at her denial.

"It's fine, really Erik. I'll be right there I just want to call the Paris team and let them know we are running a little late." She walked away from him leaving him standing staring after her and she couldn't bring herself to look up as he walked past her to return to the meeting.

When Sophie slipped silently, back into the room she could feel the tension of the meeting and knew that it had little to do with the presentation they were poring over. The angry

demeanor of the man in charge had put everyone in the room at odds. Tom Marcus didn't even acknowledge her when she entered the room his silent sullen face turned toward the screen.

Sophie glanced nervously at her watch as the meeting drug on the issue was with one of the final charts' wording something was not quite right about it. She looked up from where she had been contemplating her watch to see three set of eyes focused on her. "Sophie," She took one look at Erik's face and could tell that he had been trying to get her attention for quite some time and it was obvious that he was controlling his anger with difficulty repeating slowly for God only knew how many times his question to her. "Sophie, where is the original documents that you created these charts from? I need to see exactly how this piece of information was worded from Steve's notes of the previous meeting with the client."

Sophie froze, desperately trying to remember. She had put it with the rest of the papers that lay in front of him surely. Wasn't that what she always did before these meetings? "It's ... it's right there Erik." She slipped up and addressed him informally. She never referred to him as anything but Mr. Sebastian at work. "It should be there with the other papers that I gave you." She felt her body already start to tremble from the strain of trying to hold her emotions intact. Her nerves were on edge and she knew that she was far too close to losing control to think clearly.

She saw the way his eyes narrowed with anger and speculation as they ran over her he knew exactly how close she was to losing control as well. "Sophie, if it were here than I wouldn't be asking you for it. I need the chart so that we can finish up here."

At the hardness in his tone, she lost it. Her eyes filled with tears and she stood letting out a ragged breath her chair scraping back against the carpet as she stumbled over it backing away from him. Her voice little more than a whisper. "I don't know where it is, I"

She heard him let out a sound that sounded half-angry half tortured his eyes never leaving hers as they pinned her there against the wall and then he stood facing her across the conference room table. "Gentlemen, this meeting is over. Will you excuse us please? Steve why don't you call the client now, apologize for our running late, and get the details of the meeting. We'll go over the charts in the morning at nine. I'll see you both then." She heard the sharp sound of two sets of chairs scraping back against the floor the sound of two sets of footsteps quickly retreating and she could tell that they were as anxious to leave the tension in the conference room as she was.

His eyes never left hers as he closed the conference room door and walked around the table to her. She could see as he came close to her that the anger was gone from his brilliant blue eyes replaced by an emotion that was far more dangerous than his anger had been. "Erik." His name was torn from her sounding every bit the desperate invitation that she didn't want it too. She closed her eyes when he reached her standing inches away and she could hear his own ragged breathing matching hers. "Erik, you shouldn't have sent them away like that?"

"Really? Why is that Sophie? What's going on between you and Tom Marcus? Whatever it is he's off the team as of right now."

"No! Erik, there's nothing going on between us. How can you even ask me that?" She stepped back from him frightened of his coldness

"Really?" he said again not bothering to hide his sarcasm or doubt of her at her answer. "Well it's not because he's not trying is it. Don't bother denying it I've seen the way he's always hanging around you the way he looks at you. He's off the team Sophie, I've told him so and that means he's off the Paris trip as well. Robert Jenkins will be taking his place from now on."

"Erik that's crazy he's harmless! He's just got an innocent crush on me that's all."

He made a sound that condemned her defense of Tom Marcus. "He's off the team Sophie and that's final."

"Erik, he'll know, he'll think that were involved with each other."

He reached for her then pulling her up hard against his taut body. "Do you think that I give a damn about that? Do you think for one moment that it matters to me who knows we are involved?" He searched her face urgency in his blue eyes.

"But Erik if Tom knows then everyone in the office will know as well that, that we're involved."

"Sophie," His voice caught shifting from anger to an exasperated laughter. "We share an apartment, we share a bed, we share our bodies what do you think we're doing here? What's wrong baby? Tell me what it is that's hurting you?" The laughter left him as quickly as it had come. He watched her far too closely willing her to tell him the truth and she wanted more than anything else on earth at that moment to tell him about Marissa's accusations to hear him deny every word but she couldn't find the strength to put the words to voice, she didn't know if she truly wanted to know the truth.

Sophie leaned weakly against him letting her head rest against his chest her arms going round his waist and she felt his strong arms gather her close to him holding her so close that it was difficult to breathe.

"Nothing, Erik. It's nothing. I'm just tired I guess. I'm sorry I know that I embarrassed you in front of Tom and Steve and that was unforgivable. I'm so sorry."

His hands threaded through her hair turning her face up to his and there was so much tenderness that it astounded her. "You could never embarrass me Sophie. Nothing you would ever do would embarrass me."

He kissed her then slow and lingering wiping away all her doubts and fears and then he picked her up in his arms and carried her into his office placing her down on the leather sofa standing there looking down with so much need her body responding to him as if he had touched her.

He walked over to the connecting door and slid the lock home. When he took her back into his arms, he kissed her with so much desperate hunger that she could think of nothing but his body next to hers his hungry lips and the unquenchable need that they both felt for each other that would allow for no denial. It didn't matter who knew nothing mattered accept each other. She felt his hands on her jacket sliding the buttons loose. "Erik, this is crazy! Someone might come in."

He removed her jacket his hands sliding up her arms unbuttoning her shirt. "No one is here love there's no one to interrupt us." Still Sophie hesitated on the verge of giving in to this wild maddening passion and uncertain for just a moment longer until his hands slipped inside her blouse stroking her touching her driving her mad with desire and then she was lost completely consumed by her need of him.

He removed the remainder of her clothing quickly urgently before dimming the lights so that the room was bathed only in fire glow. She heard him undress and then he was there beside her holding her his kisses driving her wild with need. He took possession of her moving slowly sensually inside of her his body teasing her until she cried out for him.

Sophie awoke some time later to find that he had covered her with a warm blanket. Her body felt slow and lethargic. "Erik?" She looked around the room her eyes adjusting to the firelight. He was standing near the window but at the sound of her voice, he went to her

kneeling in front of her his fingers brushing back the curls from her face. "Erik, I'm sorry, I guess I fell asleep. How long have I been sleeping?"

She broke away from the tender way he smiled at her feeling her body once more stirring in response to his closeness and she heard him laugh softly at her shyness. "Don't apologize, love. I love the way you lose yourself when we make love. You hold nothing back it's as intoxicating, as it is exhausting. I don't think I'll ever look at my office in the same way again."

Sophie blushed, sitting up clutching the blanket against her body. "It's late, I, I should get dressed." Her clothing was lying on the floor and he reached to gather it up handing them to her. His hand going around her throat to stroke the racing pulse at its base before reaching down to touch his lips to it feeling her pulse beat quicker as he trailed kisses upward gently rubbing his lips back and forth against hers a slow seduction stirring deep inside of her and she whispered almost desperately against his lips. "Erik, please, you don't know what you're doing to me."

She heard him laugh once more softly against her lips looking into her eyes. "Oh I know love. Yes, I know because you do the very same thing to me. "

## Chapter Seventeen

Sophie stared out the window of her office at the cold December day, her heart felt as heavy as the dark threatening New York sky above. It was the week before the Christmas holiday the team was scheduled to leave for Paris in two days everything was ready. They were finishing up last minute details before leaving the office and she couldn't control this feeling deep inside of her that something bad was about to happen.

Each night she lay exhausted in Erik's arms and even as they grew closer both emotionally and physically, there was a wall between them that only seemed to grow with each time that they made love. She knew that it was partly due to her the truth that they both knew she kept so hidden away that stood between them now but it was more than just her secret that stood between them it seemed almost as if Erik were deliberately keeping a part of himself hidden from her. As if he didn't trust her with his, everything or perhaps he didn't trust himself.

At least a thousand times a day Sophie wanted to ask him about Marissa's comments but at least a thousand times a day she found she couldn't find the words to bring her fears to light. What was afraid of? She knew the answer to that question she couldn't even bear to even think of Erik with any other woman but picturing him with Marissa made her almost physically ill.

Sophie couldn't meet his eyes anymore she just couldn't look at him without revealing her fears, her doubts her love. Everything that she was trying so desperately to keep from him was there in her eyes. She found herself constantly tied in knots trying to concentrate on anything to take away the painful feeling deep inside of her that something bad was about to happen that it was only a matter of time before he left her physically as well as emotionally. In everything about him lately she felt it was there, every time they were together, certain withholding a certain pulling away. She wasn't so sure why she was surprised hadn't she been expecting it for a while? Since in fact she had moved in with him. She hadn't been expecting to feel so sad, so alone or so desperate.

Sophie didn't hear him come in but as she looked up to see his reflection watching, her across the room, and she held her breath. He looked almost as unhappy as she felt. Dear God what had she done to him to make him feel this way? This was the last thing on earth that she wanted. Was it sadness or was he just trying to find the words to let say goodbye.

She told herself that she had to be strong for him that she wouldn't hold him to her under any misplaced feeling of obligation he might feel towards her because of Kevin. She would smile and let him go with as much dignity as she could with a heart that was shattering into a million pieces. There would be time for falling apart later, once she was gone.

He came and stood close behind her watching her sadly through the glass before pulling her back against him his hands moving almost against their will over her body feeling her respond to his touch. Sophie didn't care if it was just physical on his part she loved him and needed him far too desperately to distinguish between those feelings.

His fingers touched her face turning her head to him his lips found hers at last and there was a hunger deep inside of him as he took possession of hers uncaring that he was not gentle. Sophie wanted nothing more than to feel his lips against her, his arms around her and know that for this moment at least he was hers. She couldn't stop the bitter tears that welled up inside of



her from spilling over and she knew that he had felt them too for he lifted his head looking down at her with so much pain that it ripped at her heart. "Sophie, don't cry love. Please don't cry. Did I hurt you love? Please tell me that I didn't hurt you. Tell me what's wrong and I'll fix it, I don't want to see you cry."

She shook her head unable to answer him, how could she possibly tell him the truth? She wrapped her arms around him and held him close to her resting her cheek against his chest. "It's nothing Erik I'm just tired that's all. Just hold me. Hold me close."

He held her next to him their bodies touching close enough to hear his heart beat as it raced to match her own. He lifted her face to him once more, kissed her tenderly careful not to hurt her, and for an instant time seemed to stand still. Nothing mattered but the man kissing her touching her holding her so tenderly. Nothing, not even the future had its place in this moment.

It was Erik who reluctantly pulled away from her still holding her in his arms and he watched as she opened her eyes slowly looking up at him. A slow gentle smile touching his lips. "Come on love let's go home."

Now two days later as he watched the woman sleeping close to him wondering what dreams haunted her sleeping hours. She looked so peaceful now, not at all sad as she had that evening in the office. She was almost like a little girl sleeping curled up beside him and he wanted her more than ever before. He closed his eyes trying once more for sleep but it was no use his heart ached for her, all of her and there was no way he was going to be able to stay here beside her and not love her once more. He pushed aside his need and decided to let her sleep slipping quietly from their bed.

The apartment was quiet as he walked to his office closing the door not wishing to wake her. He looked out the window at New York before dawn one of his favorite times of the day. It was so quiet at this time the party goers had at last retired or moved on to another part of the city and the working world still lay sleeping. It was four in the morning on Sunday and his heart was heavy. Dear God he didn't know what to do surely, what he was thinking was at best risky. If he lost her now because of it he didn't think, he could go on at all but he had to know the truth he argued with himself for the hundredth time in the space of twenty-four hours. He had to know for his own sanity what it was that she held from him it couldn't remain the way it was any longer. He couldn't go on that way it was driving him mad not knowing how she felt, what she felt.

Now it had become almost impossible for him to concentrate on work at all. The upcoming Paris trip was in jeopardy he knew just as he knew what he had to do to salvage the account but she wasn't going to be happy with him over that. She had been looking forward to Paris for weeks now it was going to hurt her not going but he had to be firm with her on this otherwise the client was walking and the account was no doubt history. He would take her back to Paris show her everything that the city had to offer once they'd sorted through the mess they'd make of their relationship. That was if she was still with him he told himself anxiously. There was certainly no guarantee of that only his gut feeling.

Whenever he touched her, loved her he could almost feel her return those feelings. Erik was almost certain that she cared about him but he had to know if he were just fooling himself in believing that she was letting go of her feelings for Kevin enough to love him. There was still that one dark hidden secret that she was keeping locked securely away inside of her that was becoming more and more important to him as it stood between them. He knew that he had to find out just what it was with each passing moment.

He left the emptiness of his office going into the living room. The Christmas tree that they had picked out together and had taken such care to decorate twinkled colorfully as it was reflected in the window. He didn't want to leave her here alone for a moment let alone the days that he would be required to be away in Paris but he would be back in time for Christmas he promised himself. He didn't want to be away from her on Christmas he couldn't he had something very important that he wanted to ask her that was if she were still willing to talk to him after he broke his news to her.

They had spent Saturday together doing some last minute shopping before their trip and Erik had taken her to one of her favorite restaurants in the city. He had wanted their last night together before he told her about Paris to be very special, something that he could hold onto and remember during those long endless meetings that he knew were going to require so much of his concentration.

He walked slowly back to their bedroom realizing for the first time that he had long ago stopped referring to it as his and watched her sleep once more. She was so beautiful and he was so much in love with her that he ached being away from her just for a moment. What would she say to him if she knew just how he felt for her? He wished at that moment for the answer to that question. That he had the courage to ask that question.

He heard her make that soft sweet sound of hers that she made sometimes when she slept or when they made love and he forgot about his promise to let her sleep. He wanted her so desperately, he needed her, and when he lay back down beside her he kissed her awake, making love to her with a hunger that both surprised and frightened him. Long after he lay, spent and exhausted next to her, he knew that no matter how many times he took possession of her he would never quench this fire inside of him for her that only seemed to grow with his love.

## Chapter Eighteen

Sophie woke and looked over at the alarm clock. It was well past mid morning and she was exhausted. She glanced down at the bed seeing its disarray and knew that she had not been dreaming when she imagined being awakened by Erik nor had she imagined the fierce possessiveness in which he had made love to her repeatedly throughout the early hours before dawn.

She dressed quickly thankful for once that he was not around for she was truly so exhausted that the slightest of efforts such as getting out of bed took all her energy. They would be leaving for Paris in a few short hours and although she was almost completely packed, there were a few things still to be done.

Sophie went into the kitchen expecting to see him there but it was empty. Coffee was had been made for quite some time and it was then that she felt the first stirring of apprehension grip her as she hurried down the hallway to his office. He was there and he was dressed already and putting papers in his briefcase. He held his laptop case on his shoulder as he closed the briefcase her fear only growing. He was dressed to leave for the airport.

Erik looked up as she entered the room his eyes capturing hers and holding them and she felt her heart slam painfully against her chest as she held her breath, waiting. "Sophie, I'm glad you're awake. I've been waiting for you. There's something that I need to tell you, love." He came close to her reaching for her hand. "Come sit down by the fire, you're freezing."

Sophie ignored his hand, ignored the soothing way he spoke to her. "What is it Erik? Is something wrong? Are you going into the office before we leave? Please, tell me what's wrong?"

He took her hand feeling its coldness and led her to the fire. "Sit down Sophie this is hard enough to say." He watched as her legs seemed to give way beneath her and she sank quickly down her eyes reaching up to his pleading. He ran a rough hand through his thick black hair trying to calm his voice. "Sophie I'm going to Paris without you. I, I have to do it this, love the account is far too important to the firm and in jeopardy right now to take you with me. You would only be a distraction for me at this point. Please try to understand that. I'm sorry, I know how much you were looking forward to going but it has to be this way love, there's no other choice. I promise you love, that I'll be back before Christmas Eve."

"Erik, no! No, don't do this, not like this. Please don't do this. I'm, I'm afraid,"

"Sophie" She heard the pain in his voice as he said her name. "There's nothing to be frightened of. It has to be this way love, that's all. There's nothing to be afraid of, I promise you. I'll be back before you know it and then there are some things that we have to talk about. Things that need to be said between us." He looked at her and wanted to take her in his arms. She was crying and her tears tore at his heart far more than anything else in the world but he knew that he couldn't give in to her.

"Erik, please. Please don't do this! Please I'll be so lost here without you. I don't want you to leave me here. Please don't do this like this."

He knew that if he stayed a moment longer he would give in to her. He pulled her to her feet and forced her with him into the entryway. His suitcases and coat were there waiting. He

had to leave her now before it was too late and he changed his mind before he told her everything. "It will be okay, love. Don't worry. I'll be back before you know it. I'm going into the office for a while and then I'll leave for the airport from there." He reached for her again pulling her into his arms gently and kissed her cold lips. "I'll be back before you know it love, please don't worry. I'll call you when we land in Paris okay?"

He looked at her at the tears falling down her face and left the apartment hating himself. Hating that the sight of her tears would be the last thing he would remember about her until he returned. Her tears broke him.

He tried to put out of his mind her sorrowful image as he reached his office resisting the urge to pick up the phone for one moment and then he was dialing the apartment desperate to hear her voice more frightened than ever before as the answering machine picked up. He stood and paced the office floor nervously debating with himself angrily before picking up the phone once more and calling Steve Dangerfield.

Sophie listened as the door to the apartment closed quietly behind him and then slowly her legs deserted her once more and she collapsed there onto the entryway unable to stop the sobs that tore at her body. He was gone. That was it. It hadn't been anything like she expected but it hurt every bit as much as she knew it would. Sophie cried for what seemed hours her body becoming stiff from the tremors that shook her. When there were, no more tears left inside of her she stood and walked into the bedroom that she had just left reaching for his pillow. She held it against her tightly and his scent clung to it bringing new tears to her eyes. She had expected this moment for days, imagined what it must feel like but nothing had prepared her for the reality of being over.

They were over and she didn't know how to move on, where to go who to turn to for comfort when the only person she ever really reached for was gone. She wiped away her tears wondering in amazement how she had anything left inside of her she felt so empty, drained. Her glance fell to the corner where her suitcases sat packed ready for Paris and she knew then what she must do. It was time to leave for good, made a clean break. Wasn't that what he intended by leaving her here alone after all he had said that they that things to discuss when he returned. She had to leave now because she wasn't sure that she could bear to hear the words from him that it was over.

Sophie quickly picked up the phone before she lost her nerve and called her cousin hearing Marissa's voice as she recognized Sophie and then hearing surprise being replaced by concern the words came tumbling out of her in a rush before she could stop herself she was telling Marissa everything. Things that she hadn't realized about her feelings things that she had never intended another person to know.

She had surprised her she could tell but Marissa hadn't hesitated for a moment when Sophie had asked her if she could use the apartment she still kept in Stamford that had belonged to her mothers. Marissa had talked about renting it out at one point but to date she hadn't found the right tenant.

"Sophie of course you can use it, it's just standing there vacant anyway but are you sure? You've been so happy lately there with Erik that I thought that you and he, well, it doesn't matter. Look, Sophie there's something that I need to tell you about what I said to you the other day about Erik and I,"

Sophie closed her eyes in pain. She didn't want to talk about Erik with her cousin. "Marissa it doesn't matter anymore and I really don't want to hear it. Look, I can't thank you enough for letting me use the apartment. I'll give you a call later in the week and we'll talk,

okay? It's just that I can't, not now." She stopped speaking her voice catching over the new tears that fell so easily.

Half an hour later with everything she was taking with her sitting next to the door there was only one more thing left to do. Inside his office, she sat down in his chair and wrote a note for him trying to put in simple words how much she appreciated him and then she left it lying on his desk. Once she had left, she would call the apartment and leave a voice message in case he called from Paris and became worried. She knew that he would check the answering machine. For now, she had to put as much distance between herself and the place where they had spend so many days and nights together before she could force herself to call his machine without falling apart.

Sophie was thankful that the doorman was not on duty when she hauled her bags down to the waiting taxi. Marissa's apartment was in Stamford, Connecticut was a little over an hour's drive from Manhattan on the best of traffic days and she closed her eyes against the painful memory of her last time with Erik. She couldn't cry in front of a stranger she wouldn't allow herself to do that she had to be strong now.

Sophie paid the taxi driver who had helped her carry her bags up the two flights of stairs to the apartment before leaving her with a curiously pitying look in his eyes.

She opened the apartment door looking around her at the expensively furnished living room that her aunt Delores had lived in. It was a beautiful apartment, one that she would have been thrilled to be staying in, at any other time. Now under the circumstances now she could feel nothing but misery. She dropped her suitcases in the master bedroom not bothering to unpack, feeling the cold that seemed to penetrate every muscle and every bone in her body taking hold of her and causing her to shiver so that her teeth were literally chattering. She was so bitterly cold both inside and out, she felt as dark and dismal as the sky outside and just as tempestuous.

Sophie adjusted the apartment's thermostat up as far as it would go before turning on the gas fireplace rubbing her hands over her arms trying to control the shaking that seem to come from deep within her but nothing not even the heavy jacket that she wore seemed to warm her.

She walked aimlessly throughout each room of the apartment without seeing anything at all. She was bracing herself to find the strength to make the call to him she was dreading. She glanced at the clock on the wall and knew that by now he would be at the airport waiting the boarding call. Sophie picked up the phone and forced the words from lips that felt cold and dry. She made it through most of the call without betraying her splintered emotions but her voice broke away painfully when she told him good-bye. Putting it to words hurt so bad but hearing herself say the word good-bye only drove the pain home with all the finality that the word itself represented.

She sank down onto the floor in front of the fireplace at last letting go, losing control that she had held onto for the past hour after leaving his apartment for good and wept as if her world was ending. Surely it had for from this moment on nothing would ever feel the same again.

## Chapter Nineteen

Erik tried the apartment number once more praying that Sophie would pick up when the answering machine clicked on he turned to his friend and colleague Steve Dangerfield and shook his head. "I've got to go Steve something's wrong. Something's wrong I can feel it. You've got everything you need from me before I leave?"

Steve shook his head and glanced toward the door. "Go, you're no good to us the way you are Erik you'll only hinder the negotiations. Don't worry, with Tom's help we will do fine. You know Tom's the best negotiator around. I'm glad you came to your senses and called him back to the team. Go! What are you waiting for? I've got your files and all the charts there's nothing else for you to do but go after her."

Erik smiled back at his colleague hoping that it was going to be that simple but doubting it completely. "Thank you for doing this for me Steve. I trust you to do whatever is best for the account. If we lose it so be it. I have only myself to blame but at this point I really don't care." He released a long shuddering breath running his trembling fingers nervously through his hair. "I'll be unreachable except through my cell phone and if you need to you can always leave a message. I'll check the machine periodically as well. Have a safe trip Steve. I'll see you when you return."

As he maneuvered the Land Cruiser through Sunday, traffic that for some reason seemed unbearable congested, he prayed that he was not too late. That she was there waiting for him but when he reached the apartment door and opened it he stopped in the entryway frozen where he stood staring down the hallway dreading every step of the walk to their room knowing she was gone. When he opened the door, the scent of her filled his mind. The perfume that she wore clung faintly to the air around him and he breathed deep trying to capture its sweet smell hoping to hold onto just a small part of her with the fragrance. He didn't need to open the closet or look into the dresser to know the truth, she was gone. Gone the word sounded so final. Dear God she was gone and he didn't know what to do to bring her back.

Bitter galling tears stung his eyes, she was gone. He sank weakly down onto the bed and buried his face in his hands and the first time in years he sobbed. The most important thing in life was gone and he didn't think he could make it through another second of life without her. The hurt was unbearable, unbelievably terrifying as it was over.

It was over but how could it be over when he still loved her this strongly? This all consuming, this passionately, this unending. The answer echoed bitterly through his mind reaching his shattered heart. It was over because he had been afraid to tell her that she was everything to him the most important thing in the world that's why. She didn't know how much he loved her or just how desperately he needed her and if he were to survive he had to find her and tell her just how important she was to him. He had to tell her with the words what he had showed her with his body so many times before.

He stood unable to bear another moment in the room where the image of loving her was there everywhere. He had to get away from that image of the many times that they had made love in that very bed he needed somewhere less vivid to think to try and bring his fractured thoughts to order.

He had to push aside this aching pain that was almost numbing growing with each moment he knew she was gone out there alone somewhere he had to bring his thoughts into focus enough to find her and bring her back to him.

In his office, he saw the white piece of paper lying on his desk and knew it was from her. She had left him a note telling him she was leaving him. He wanted to laugh as he read it for the third time. It told him nothing. Nothing except her pretty, polite words of thanks. She was thanking him for all that he had done for her. He tore the paper in bites and tossed it into the fire feeling hopelessness again seep inside his heart as a terrifying thought crossed his fevered mind. Maybe she didn't want to be found. Maybe she was indeed truly gone. Maybe it was over.

He saw the answering machine message light blinking and he switched it on listening to her speak the words of good-bye to him. Listened to the controlled toneless way in which she said the words and he felt his heart shatter once more at the sound of them. And then he heard the way her voice caught she couldn't quite say the words of good-bye without crying as he replayed it again and again smiling faintly he knew that he had her. Good-bye was the last thing on earth that Sophie wanted from him.

He had been right about her she did care.

Erik knew that she would never even think of using either his apartment at work or the house in Vermont to leave him. She was making a clean break from him and wouldn't impose herself on him by asking his help in any further way. There was only one other person left who she could possibly go to for help as he picked up the phone and called her cousin's number he prayed that Marissa would not feel any family loyalty to her younger cousin that until this moment she had never shown. He had to get the truth from her and he was prepared to do whatever it took to find Sophie.

In the end, it hadn't been very difficult. Marissa told him everything from the call from she had earlier from Sophie to the apartment where she was staying and finally to the lie that she had led Sophie to believe that was surly part of the wall standing between them now. He hadn't really been surprised by it although he wasn't sure which of them he wanted to strangle the most. Marissa for making up such an elaborate story or Sophie for actually believing him capable of doing such a thing. At this point, he didn't care. His only concern was for Sophie and finding her.

He knew she had a two-hour advantage on him as he hurriedly wrote the directions Marissa gave him down and he feared that once he got there she might not be willing to let him in. Marissa told him that there was a spare key hidden to the apartment close by that was used in case her mother accidentally locked herself out of the apartment and he thanked her briefly before hanging up the phone.

The drive to Connecticut through New York's returning Sunday afternoon traffic was slow and tedious taking more than two more long frustrating hours before he at last parked the car and went in search of the spare key. The sun had all but disappeared from the sky turning the world around him to dusk.

Erik braced himself for what he knew would be a battle. She wasn't going to give up her secrets willingly but he wasn't leaving without her and certainly not without knowing exactly what it was that she had been keeping from him for so long now.

As he unlocked the door, the first thing to hit him was the warmth of the apartment. He could feel the heat from the thermostat as he walked in. There were no lights on at all, as he closed the door behind him. The only light at all was from the fireplace burning in the living

room. He let his eyes become accustomed to the dimness around him before looking around the room for her.

As he moved slowly from the entryway to the living room he saw her small figure curled up almost defensively in front of the fire and he walked slowly over to her but she didn't move, she hadn't heard him enter the apartment at all. He crouched down next to her seeing the traces of her tears still clinging to her face and pulling at his heart. "Sophie." He said her name softly brushing back a straying curl from her face watching as she opened her eyes sitting up slowly first not truly remembering under what circumstances that they had both come to be here at this moment.

"Erik? You're here, you really here?" She went easily into his arms and he held her tightly knowing that she still hadn't grasped what was happening but her reaction to him spoke volumes about what her true feelings were. "Erik, oh dear God I missed you. I've been so lost without you." She was crying again and he spoke to her gently whispering soft words of comfort to her waiting for the reality of the situation to sink in. It didn't take long as he felt her stiffen in his arms pulling free of him and reluctantly he let her go. She stumbled to her feet quickly backing away from him and he stood with her following her step by jerky step. "Erik, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be in Paris. You're supposed to be on the plane for Paris. I don't understand. What are you doing here?"

She was weeping so that she could barely speak the words aloud and he reached for her wanting to end her pain then and there but seeing her move out of his reach retreating still further away from him. "Sophie, please."

Sophie ignored the plea in both his voice and eyes shaking her head her hands rubbing furiously at the tears. "No Erik, please don't touch me. Please I can't think clearly, when you touch me. I'm okay, but please don't touch me."

He resisted the urge to once more take her by her arms and shake some sense into her. Everything she was betraying to him now was making a lie out of her words. "Like hell you are Sophie, you're anything but okay. Let me hold you love. Please don't cry baby you'll make yourself sick if you continue like this. Please don't cry." He extinguished his anger with difficulty trying to control the shudders of fear that kept reminding him just how important everything he said to her was, reminding him of all that he had to lose. "We have to talk Sophie. Surely, you see that we have to talk. Things can't go on like this anymore, love. Too many things have been left unsaid. Surely you see that we have to straighten this out." He took a deep breath trying to gather his scattered thoughts before beginning again. "I couldn't go to Paris and leave you here alone not the way things were. I couldn't bear the thought of being away from you knowing that things were the way they were. I couldn't bear remembering how sad you looked when I left you. We have to talk Sophie and I'm not leaving here until we do. I want to know why you left me like that Sophie. Why? "

He watched her closely not missing the way her eyes unknowingly appealed to him but he couldn't give in to her just yet. "No, Erik. I can't talk about it. Please I can't do this now because I, I just can't talk about it. I can't. I explained it all in the note that I left you at the apartment,"

He stepped closer to her wincing at the way she backed away from as if she were frightened by his closeness. She didn't have far to run before she hit the living room wall and there was nowhere else for her to run to. "Oh, I read the note. I listened to your message as well and they told me nothing! Nothing but pretty words."



"Do you honestly think for a moment it's your gratitude that I want? After everything that has happened between us," He broke off taking a deep steadying breath. "Your, gratitude is the very last thing on earth that I want from you Sophie, the very last. I want the truth. I need you to tell me the truth about what's been hurting you for so long now. I have to know, Sophie. The time for secrets is over between us, I want the truth and I'm not going anywhere until I have it however long it takes I'm not going anywhere and neither are you."

She was trembling so hard that he was afraid her body would no longer support her, and he reached out his hand to steady her careful not to touch her the way he desperately needed to. "You'll hate me Erik. If I tell you the truth you'll hate me." She looked at him unaware that there was so much imploring there in her eyes that it broke his heart. How did she dare tell him what he wanted to know how could she trust him not to despise her when he knew the ugly truth?

He observed her face seeing the pain and frustration in every fleeting emotions that passed there and spoke to her with tender exasperation. "Sophie, I would never ever hate you not matter what you said to me surely you know that by now? Tell me what it is baby, please. Just tell me the truth." Still he sensed her hesitation she was so close to revealing the truth but she needed that final painful push from him. "Sophie just tell me. I know that it has something to do with Kevin, I've guessed as much. Is it guilt, love? Do you feel guilty over being with me? Kevin's dead and no matter how much he loved you or how much you loved him, he wouldn't want you to remain alone. Kevin's dead love you're not."

She couldn't stop the bitterness from being reflected in her laughter when finally at last the truth was ripped from her. "You're wrong Erik. You're so wrong. Kevin didn't love me, he never loved me. He despised me, hated me, loathed me but him never, ever loved me." The words that she had held secret for so long now slipped over each other in a rush. She regretted the moment they were out, wishing that she could bring them back. It was much too late for that. She looked at him watched his expression change from pity to anger in a split second before he reached for her bringing her up hard against his taunt body.

"What are you talking about, of course he loved you. He married you didn't he. Why else would he marry you if not love? Maybe he had an odd way of showing it I admit Kevin was reckless but,"

She couldn't look at him, her voice a toneless whisper when she spoke again. "No, Erik, it's true, he hated me. There was no doubt about it I know he hated me because he told me so." She stopped speaking feeling his fingers tighten around her upper arms and she knew that she had shocked him by her admission. "He told me he hated me on our wedding night right before he told me that the only reason he had married me was because he knew that by doing so he would humiliate his father. I'm not sure which of us he despised the most his father or me. You see I was the only way he could truly show his father just how much he detested him. Kevin knew that in Raymond's eyes I would be the worst possible choice of women for his son to marry. I had nothing, no family pedigree, no money, no aristocratic upbringing, nothing. I was an embarrassment to the McGraw name and that was the only reason Kevin married me. It's true. I meant nothing to Kevin." She laughed at the doubt she saw in Erik's eyes. "It's true, Erik, he never touched me at all on our wedding night or any other night and he left me on our wedding night to be with his friends and to be with another woman this he told me in cold clear precise detail." She shook her head looking away from the shocked sympathy in his eyes. "I was nothing but an embarrassing way for him to humiliate his father. I knew that he had affairs while we were married that there were other women but after that night it didn't matter because I didn't care." She saw disbelief cross his face realizing that he still didn't believe what she was telling

him and she laughed once more bitterly. "It's true Erik, trust me, it's true. Kevin made it crystal clear to me in so many terrifying ways each and every day of our marriage that there was no doubt about it at all." Sophie spoke the words without emotion now forcing her eyes up bravely to his waiting for the final blow to fall, waiting for his total rejection.

He let her go and moved away from her not looking at her at all and she felt instantly cold, and so very alone. When he turned back to her, again more there was a guarded expression in his eyes and his voice was quiet, deliberately emotionless. "Why Sophie? Why didn't you tell me Sophie? Why didn't you trust me enough to tell me any of this from the beginning? I could have helped you. I would have done, anything, everything for you." He stopped turning away from her shaking his head and it was then that she knew that she had lost him. Sophie wanted to run from him once more to put as much distance between herself and the coldness that she was sure to find there in his blue eyes.

"How could I possibly have told you? You were his friend, he trusted you how could I tell you the truth?" She wiped away a straying tear her voice dead of emotion turning her back on him. She didn't want him to see just how much his rejection was devastation her. "I'm sorry Erik, I have no right to burden you with all of this after all what does any of it matter now, Kevin's dead. I want you to know that you owe me nothing. Whatever obligation you felt for me because of Kevin is finished. It's over, you owe me nothing." She walked over to the door opening it trying desperately to hold tightly to her control. She couldn't fall apart in front of him now she owed him that much. "It's okay to go now Erik, it's okay you don't owe me anything at all. I don't expect you to stay I never expected you to be with me forever that is far too much to ever hope for. "

She had said it without breaking down and begging him not to leave her. She had freed him of his misguided loyalty to her and as she waited for him to leave her, she prayed that the end would be soon.

He walked angrily past her slamming the apartment door behind her so hard that the walls shook and then he reached for her once more pulling her close to him. She looked at him with startled eyes seeing the cold dark fury in his blue eyes. "Obligation? Is that what you think I feel for you?" His hand went up to thread through her hair, forcing her face up to him. His lips took possession of hers kissing her with so much angry need so much frustration that he left her breathless, drowning in the emotion. She leaned against his heated body for support his dark blue eyes cloudy with desire sending hers into shivers as she felt the fine tremors in his fingers as they ran over her ribcage to touch her breast possessively feeling ashamed at the way her body responded so easily to his touch. She closed her eyes against the slow smile that touched his face, the look of triumph in his darkening blue eyes as his fingers glided slowly maddeningly down to her hips pulling her closer to him making her more than aware of his need of her. Whispering against her ear. "Obligation be damned. Obligation is the last thing on earth that I want from you."

He released her very slowly then as if trying to regain some control over his emotions by putting distance between their heated bodies. He ran an agitated hand through his dark hair as he watched the fire that blazed in the fireplace taking a deep steadying breath before turning back to her. "You still love him? How can you love someone so much that treated you as Kevin did? How can you possibly love him? He doesn't deserve your love."

Sophie watched him then hesitating wondering what he would think of her when he knew the truth, all the sordid details of her marriage to Kevin. She sank slowly down on the sofa,

pulling her knees against her chest and wrapping her arms around them unaware of how much like a little girl she looked at that moment to him how watching her this way melted his heart.

"Erik, I met Kevin just a little while after my grandmother passed away. She was so important to me such a major part of my life for so long that I felt lost without her, alone. The only other family member that I had left was Marissa and we've never been close so when I ran into Kevin by accident or so it seemed outside of the university library one day well, I thought it was fate. You see I knew how much in love my parents were, I remembered and Grand had filled my head with their love stories for years." She glanced up at him her eyes pleading for his understanding. "I thought I was in love with Kevin, I thought it was love at first sight and that we would live happily ever after. I thought I could have that fairy tale as well but it didn't work out like that at all,"

He cut across her words, the frustration clear in his voice. "Sophie what is it that you are telling me?"

"I was never in love with Kevin. I thought that I was, but now I know that I never really loved him. I guess I was in love with the idea of being in love." She looked up at him tears filling her eyes wanting him to.

Erik cleared his throat trying to bring his thoughts back to what he wanted to ask her more than anything. "Was that why you were so afraid to tell me the truth? Did you think that I wouldn't understand? You were so young. You didn't know what love was all about. How could you love him under the circumstances?"

"No, Erik I didn't even really try to understand him. Don't you see I didn't even try to see that he was sick and needed my help and that makes me every bit as bad as he was? Maybe, if I truly had been in love with him or at least tried he would have, I don't know changed somehow stopped using drugs, not gone out that night. If I had truly been the person that I should have been that he needed me to be and not someone blinded by fairy tales then maybe he would still be alive today. Kevin's dead and I'm to blame as much for that as he." She was crying so hard that she barely got the words out but for the first time in a long time, her heart felt light. She had told the most important person in the world to her the truth. She had shared her dark secret with him and he was still there with her. He hadn't left her.

Sophie heard him say something but she couldn't understand because her heart was beating hard against her heart. She tried to understand his expression but through the blur of tears, she couldn't see anything at all, as he came slowly over to her. When she tried to speak the tears choked away her words as he reached for her and gently picked her up sitting down on the sofa with her in his lap his arms going around her holding her close to him she knew at least she hadn't lost him as a friend.

"I'm sorry, Erik. I'm so sorry that I couldn't tell you but was so frightened I'd lose you. I love you far too much to lose you. Even if it's just your friendship I don't ever want to lose you."

She felt him stiffen at her words and pull away from her so that he could see her face and she silently prayed that she was wrong that he had not resented her using words of love to him.

He looked at her with guarded eyes that told her nothing of what he was feeling. "The night that he died when he came home I hadn't seen him in days. I was so frightened I didn't know where to look for him, I thought that maybe he had taken an overdose or been killed by one of the people who sold him the drugs. He was using more and more hard drugs by then Erik. He would go on binges for days at a time disappearing without any word. I was afraid that one day he wouldn't come home. I never knew what to tell his father you see Raymond refused to see the trouble Kevin was in and the only time that I ever attempted to confront him with it he

accused me of being the one on drugs. I think now that maybe that's what Kevin wanted him to believe I just don't know anymore."

"You see Kevin had started mixing the drugs he was taking with alcohol and the mixture was; well his anger was terrifying there were times that I really thought he would kill me. I truly believe he wanted me dead." She shuddered visibly remembering the night of his death. "I was afraid that he would kill me one day and he almost did."

"The night that he died when Kevin came home, oh God Erik he was out of his mind! He was stoned out of his mind. He was acting crazy he barely even recognized me. He started drinking almost from the moment he reached the apartment and he was wildly insane imagining all sorts of crazy things. I tried to stop him from leaving I tried to take the keys away from him because I knew that there was no way he was sober enough to drive but he went mad when I tried to reason with him and he became so violent. I don't think I will ever forget that night." She took a shuddering breath remembering, "We were in the kitchen and he picked me up and threw me against the kitchen cabinets as if I were a doll. I hit my head; I don't remember anything else beyond that point. That was how I got the bruise, but I don't remember much about that night except the pain in my side was almost paralyzing. I kept losing consciousness. The next thing I remember was the phone call from the police telling me that Kevin had been involved in an accident. That he was dead."

She looked up surprised to see that he was sitting next to her watching her but she had no idea what he must be thinking and she couldn't force herself to meet his gaze. "Don't you see, in some way, Kevin's death is my fault as well. I should have been stronger I should have stood up to him the first time he hit me, I should have found the strength to leave him long before his death. If I had done so he might still be alive, he might have gotten help, might have found someone who he could have loved instead,"

"No, Sophie. You can't believe that you're to blame in any way for Kevin's death surely. You didn't put the needle in his arm, he did. The only person to blame for Kevin's death is Kevin. I was his friend I knew he used casual drugs in college I saw the way his behavior changed over the past few years, I should have figured it out as well hell for that matter Raymond should have come to terms long ago, with just how dangerous Kevin's addictive behavior was. At this moment, none of that matters anymore. I'm glad Kevin is dead right now because if he were here today I think I would kill him myself. I could kill him with my bare hands and never have any regret after what he did to you." He spoke quietly his voice almost devoid of all emotion and Sophie looked at him startled by his words seeing the controlled anger in his tense body knowing that he meant every word. "Dear God Sophie do you have any idea how it wounds me to know what he did to you. How alone you must have felt. I would give anything right now if I could take your pain away. Tell me what I can do to help you, baby. I want to help you."

She closed her eyes rejecting the sympathy that she heard in his voice. She didn't want his pity she wanted only for him to love her to need her with the same passion that she loved him. Sophie stood up stumbling back away from him and he got to his feet with her once more following her and she realized that all her feelings for him, her desperation, everything was right there in her eyes for him to see. She closed her eyes shaking her head helplessly before she could bring her scattered emotions under control forcing. She forced a smile across her cold lips unaware of the way her eyes appealed to him as she spoke. "Oh Erik there's nothing that you can do. Don't you see you've done so much for me? Your friendship has meant everything to me. You have no further obligation to me. You have your own life to live and I've disrupted it far too

much already. You owe me nothing!" She turned away hoping that when he left her it would be quickly.

For a split second time seemed to have ceased standing still and then she heard the angry explosion in his voice the very same moment he reached for her turning her roughly around to face him. "That's the second time you've said that to me Sophie. Is that what you think? Do you honestly think that all I feel for you is something bordering on obligation? I can't believe I'm hearing this after everything that we've shared together. I can't believe you would credit me with so little character. Do you think that I made love to you out of obligation?" He broke off shaking his head and she could feel the anger in every tense muscle that he was fighting hard to control. "Obligation? Obligation is the last thing on earth that I feel for you Sophie, the very last thing!"

"You tell me you love me, you throw that word out to me, and you don't know what it does to me to hear you say that. You tell me you love me, but how? In what way? As a friend? Are you asking for my friendship? Is that what you want from me Sophie because I don't think I can be just your friend?" She looked at him heard the bitterness in his voice and was more frightened than ever before of losing him. She wanted to throw her arms around him and to beg him not to leave her. Life seemed almost impossible to think about without him. For so long now it had been the two of them how did she get beyond that moment. She felt the fingers that gripped her arms tighten and he was fighting the urge to shake her. "You tell me that you believe in love at first sight that you believe in falling in love with one special person forever and then you tell me that you were never in love with Kevin. That he wasn't the one. That you could still believe in such a thing as everlasting love at all is a small miracle in itself after what you've been through. I know now that Kevin wasn't your forever Sophie. Who is? Who holds the key to your heart? Answer me Sophie! I need to know! What it is that want from me? Where do I fit into your life Sophie?"

Sophie looked into his eyes seeing all the uncertainty the cautiousness, the desperateness and knew that the time had come for her to tell him everything. Everything that she felt for him. "Oh Erik, how can you even ask me that? Don't you know? I love you Erik, I love you more than anything else in the world. I think I've loved you from the beginning but it took our friendship to make me realize that. I want you to love me, Erik. I want your love, I want only your love. Please, I don't think that I can go on without you I don't really think that I want to. I love you Erik, but I can't be just your friend. I want you to give me your heart, Erik. I want your everything."

She watched as each word she whispered shocked him their meaning slowly registering and the expression on his face said it all. He had waited a long time for her to say those words and suddenly it all became so very clear to her. He had been waiting on her to say it first to tell him how she felt. He hadn't wanted to push her into admitting feelings that might come from the heat of passion and that she might later regret. He pulled her into his arms, holding her so tight that she could barely breath his lips claiming hers again and again kissing her with so much hungry that it left her breathless, shattered and weak from the very force of his feelings and she leaned against him weakly for support. "Sophie, do you have any idea how long I've wanted to hear you say those words to me. How long that I prayed for you to say those words. I love you Sophie, more than anything else in this world I love you.

"Dear God, I thought I had lost you today when I came back to the apartment and saw that you were gone and then when I read your note I thought you were truly gone. For the first time in longer than I can ever remember, I actually cried. I was so afraid that I would never see you again." His hands framed her face and she felt the fine tremors that ran through them. "I

love you Sophie. I've never ever said that to another woman before only you. I love you and I don't ever want to lose you. You are the most important thing in the world to me you are everything to me. You already have my everything. You've had it from the very first day that we met. I've loved you since the very moment I saw you. That first night that Kevin introduced you to me, I knew that I loved you and I hated Kevin for finding you first for taking your heart away from me. God help me but after he died, well, I thought maybe this was my second chance for love with you.

"There was no way I was going to let you get away from me again. I wasn't going to take the chance that someone else would come along and steal you away. I knew that I could never get lucky enough to get another chance with you if I blew this one. I would have done anything, everything to keep you with me. I couldn't believe that you didn't see right through me from the very beginning. When you were forced to leave your old apartment, I jumped at the chance to get you closer to me. I told myself that I was only looking out for you, as Kevin would have wanted me to do. That it was only friendship that I wanted from you and later well and then I tried convincing myself that I would take whatever you had to offer even if it was only your friendship that would be enough but it didn't take long to see that nothing short of loving you forever would ever, ever be enough.

"When we made love that night for the first time, you have no idea how much it frightened me to want you that much and have you in my arms at last. I was terrified that I would hurt you. When I found out that you weren't using any form of birth control well I didn't, that is I didn't even think of using any myself I hate to admit this to you love but I had hoped that maybe you would become pregnant with my child and I would have a reason to keep you close to me forever. I know that sounds terrible. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm saying this the wrong way, I know. I shouldn't be telling you this at all when what I really want to say is that I love you and I never ever want to lose you. I can't live without you love, I can't ever live without you."

He picked her up in his arms feeling the way her body trembled with emotion as he carried her over to the fireplace hooking one of the armchairs with his foot moving it closer to the flames before sitting down with her in his arms. He smoothed away a straying strand of her hair looking into her eyes with so much love so much passion that she felt her heart slam hard against her chest in response. "Sophie, I spoke to Marissa today and she told me where you were she also told me what she said to you about being with me. You know of course that was a lie don't you baby? How could you think I would want to be with any other woman except you? You're the only woman that I want. I don't think you realize just how jealous Marissa is of you. I only wish that you had told me what she said we could have put all that behind us a long time ago. I love you, Sophie, and I want you more than anything else in the world. I never want to be away from you again I never ever want to go through what I went through today again. I can't lose you. I won't ever do anything to hurt you. Don't cry baby, I don't ever want to make you cry again. I love you. I love you with all my heart. My life is meaningless without you."

He brushed away her tears and when she could speak through all the love that was rushing through her she told him that her tears were tears of happiness.

His lips took gentle possession of her body igniting flames of desire deep inside of her that matched his own. She let her hands slip under his sweater to touch him feeling the way his body shuddered in response to her touch and then they were undressing each other recklessly their fingers fumbling over the buttons in a need to be as close to each other with nothing in between them but flesh.

Erik stood and pushed back the chair laying her gently down on the rug in front of the fire and they made love there amongst the flames their bodies touching kindling each other with each kiss each caress until they were physically and emotionally exhausted laying in each other's arms.

\* \* \* \*

Somehow, Sophie slept. When she awoke, she was lying on the sofa covered by a warm blanket and for a moment, she thought it had all been just a beautiful dream that he hadn't really been there with her at all and she cried out for him and instantly he was by her side, kneeling in front of her. His hand touched her cheek tenderly. She could feel the tremors that shook his hand knowing the emotions that took control of them as he smoothed away her hair from her face. "I'm here love, I'm here." He kissed her gently touching his lips to hers. "You were sleeping so peacefully that I didn't want to wake you. Are you cold, love?" She shook her head and looked at the uncertainty in his eyes watching as he hesitated for a moment almost shy with her before reaching inside his pocket to take out a small box and at that moment she felt shy once more. "Sophie I have something that I want to ask you. I'd planned on giving this to you on Christmas Eve but I don't think I can wait that long for your answer." He looked into her eyes and she could see the insecurity there in his as if he were uncertain of her once more. "I should warn you though love that I don't ever plan on taking no for an answer. I want you to marry me. I've wanted this from the very moment we met. I can't live without you. I want you to be my wife."

She looked into his eyes and saw tears shimmering in the blue depths taking her breath away. He reached for her hand and placed the ring on her finger with a hand that still shook. As she looked from the three diamonds that glittered in the firelight, and then to the man who had become her soul's mate, Sophie knew that from their friendship a very special love had developed. Theirs was a passion so strong that nothing would ever come between it ever again.

THE END