



Loose Id

THE  
COMPANY  
OF FOOLS

ANNEMARIE  
HARTNETT

# *The Company of Fools*

*Annemarie Hartnett*



## **The Company of Fools**

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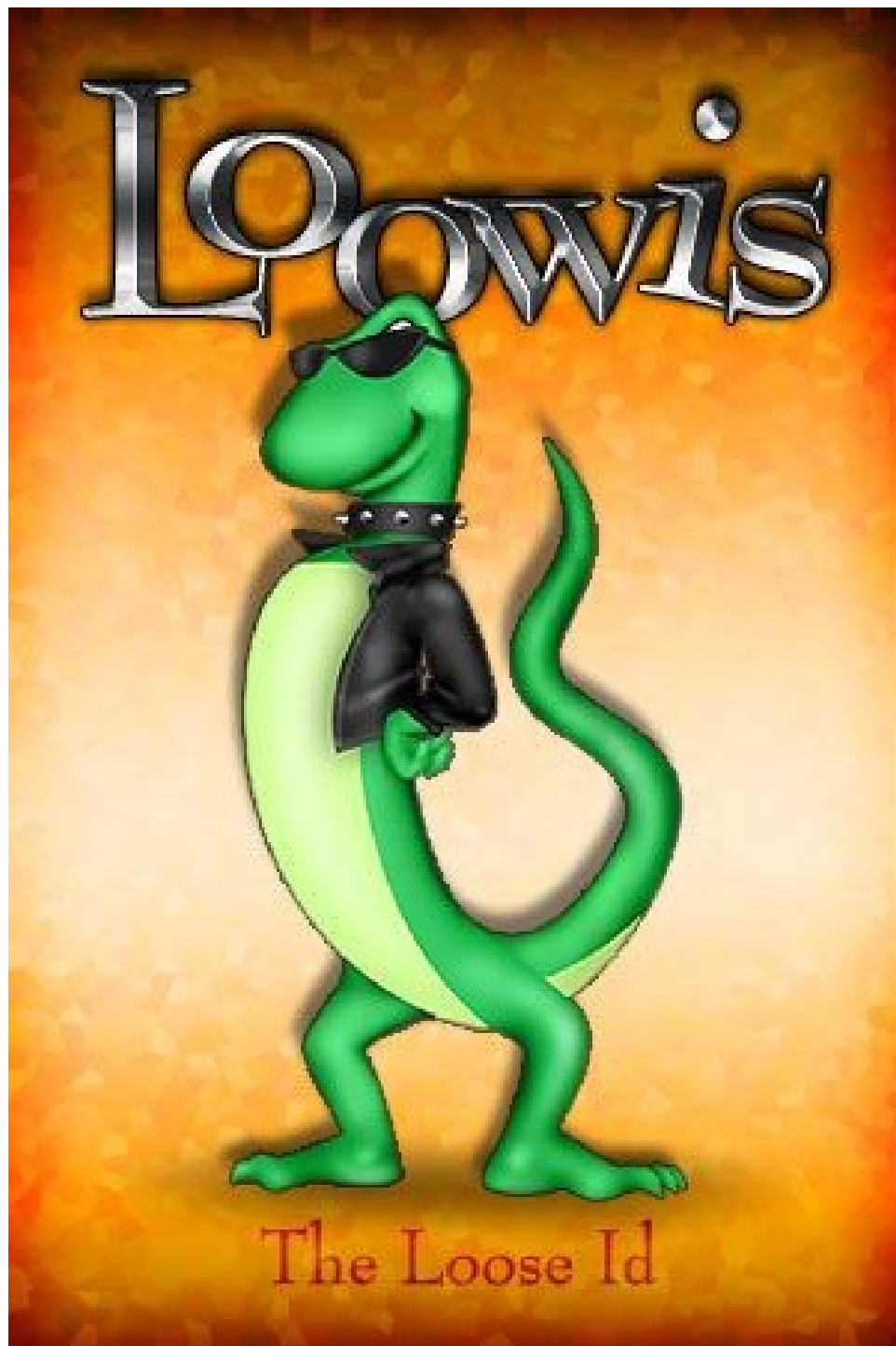
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## Chapter One

The work on the lower level of MacNab's had been going on for two months. No matter where Kate Doucette was in the bar, whether it be setting up her tables or sitting in Mike MacNab's office trying to solve his latest computer dilemma for him, when the hammering or sawing stopped, she would whip out her cell phone, check the time, and then she would bask in the quiet.

Today it was three minutes. Just three beautiful, blessed minutes of silence were all she got. When it started up again, she left the plastic basin she was filling with dirty dishes on the table, threw her hands in the air and marched to the bar.

"I can't take any more. Weren't they supposed to be done three weeks ago?" She ran her hand through her red curls.

"Four, but you know Mike. He's fickle," replied the bartender.

Kate scowled at Chris, her usual reaction at the mention of their boss since these renovations had begun. When the drilling was joined by a series of bangs, she calmly slid onto the nearest stool, lowered her head onto the polished surface of the bar, and whimpered. After a moment she sucked in a deep breath. "Mmmm, lemony."

"I just cleaned it, and if your forehead left a stain, I'll make you lick it clean."

She lifted her head and propped her chin up on the heel of her hand. "How can he stand it?"

"If it makes you feel better, he's been sucking Tylenol down like they were Skittles."

"Good. I hope his eyes cross and he can't get them back to normal again," she said and watched him as he patted himself down and produced his car keys. "Crap, are you leaving already?"

"I gotta pick the kidlets up at three. Why are you still here? Aren't you working until close?"

"I told our fearless leader I would try and figure out the new payroll software so he doesn't accidentally pay us fifty cents an hour. I just finished at two o'clock. I figured I might as well stay instead of going home only to turn around and come back. Besides, I could use the money, and Mike says it's okay."

"It's a good thing Mike is so needy."

"I'll try to remember that it's a good thing after his frozen corpse is found wedged between the hamburgers and the chicken fingers, and I'm looking at life in prison."

She followed Chris's gaze as the double doors leading to the work space downstairs swung open and two carpenters breezed through, leaving a cloud of dust billowing in their wake. They took a table in the farthest corner of the bar.

Kate narrowed her eyes as she watched them. "I thought Mike told them not to come up here."

"Multiple times, and in some very strong language. That's why they're here now. They're going to order some coffee and sit there for fifteen minutes brushing themselves off until the place is filthy, and then dare him to say a word as long as they're paying customers."

"Oh yeah? We'll see about that."

Kate walked Chris to the exit and glared at the men as they craned their necks to make sure they had her attention. "See you on Monday, huh?"

She sauntered back behind the bar and pulled out a full MacNab's menu and a beverage list. She wore her biggest smile as she approached.

"Gosh, you guys must be starved after working so hard all day. Can I tell you about our specials? Today we have a Montreal smoked meat on rye with homemade mustard, served with your choice of—"

"Actually, love, we're on a fifteen. Just coffee, thanks."

"Are you sure? You're missing out on Nova Scotia's finest pub food. The haddock is fresh off the boat."

The older of the two shook his head. "Just coffee."

"Would you like to see our specialty coffee menu?"

"Just black, thanks."

“Sure. Two black coffees to go.”

“Not to go, dear. We'll drink it here.”

“No, you'll take it back downstairs.” She dropped her cheery-waitress routine and placed her hands on her hips. “You've been told countless times that you're not to come into the bar while you're on the job. That smart-assed look you're wearing might work on the newbies, but I've been here for five years, and you're not taking up one of my tables on coffee and leaving me a mess to clean up. You get your coffee for free from now on, and you take it to go. Got it?”

The one who had placed the order raised his overgrown brows and opened his mouth.

She held up her hand. “Don't even start. I've got a mean fucking headache, and I know for a fact that you were supposed to finish working on the bar almost a month ago but have been trying to bullshit my boss. The way I see it, I've got you to thank for my migraine, so I'd think twice before I came smirking through those doors if I were you.”

Mike waited for her at the bar, wearing his widest grin. It had been an elusive sight over the past few weeks. When the work had begun on the bottom floor of the old building, Mike had been like a little kid with a new toy, but with each passing day, his jolly persona soured a little more. He'd been on the verge of losing his temper once or twice, but anyone who knew Mike as well as Kate did knew that it had less to do with the constant noise than the pace with which the crew he had contracted worked. He'd told Kate on a couple of occasions that he thought he was being taken for a ride, but with the construction halfway finished, he was determined to stick it out, even if it did leave him with an ulcer.

“How long have you been there?”

“I was right behind you when you grabbed the menus.”

“Good, now watch me make my point by brewing a fresh pot so they only get a few scalding sips before they have to go back.”

She disappeared long enough to dump the half pot and rinse it. When she came back, Mike was hunched over his BlackBerry with his thumbs flying over the keys.

In her experience, trying to break through the wireless voodoo spell that came over him whenever he touched the glossy red face of his phone required an electric prod designed for poking circus lions into submission. She waited until he put his phone aside before speaking.

“You're not going to make me pay for the coffee I'm giving them, are you?”

His green eyes shone as his lopsided smirk reappeared. He leaned forward on one tanned and toned forearm. It pissed her off a little to know he hadn't gotten it the artificial way but from the two weeks in Mexico he'd just returned from. Of course, it was his first vacation in two years, and he did deserve it, but she was still entitled to her jealousy. It made her week at a local ski lodge look like a shitty vacation, which it kind of had been, even without the comparison to Mexico.

"How much does that coffee cost, a few cents a cup?" he asked, his voice cricking with that Cape Breton lilt: a drawl that centuries after the settlers had first arrived in the province still maintained a bit of a Scottish burr. Even his years of globe-trotting hadn't watered it down. It rolled off Mike's tongue like a tickle. "I'll call it a good investment if it keeps them out of the bar, although I will miss your angry little wiggle when you're wiping down the tables and chairs after they've left."

"Keep it up, Mike. All the more fodder for my lawsuit."

His was the best and most infectious raspy and rumbling laugh she had ever heard, and his entire body showed it. She bit down on her bottom lip to keep back the giggle as his laughter rolled over her.

"Listen, you bullshitter," he said. "You've been talking about this lawsuit since the week I hired you, and nothing has ever come of it. In fact, you seem to be digging yourself in deeper and deeper every month. I'm going to have one hell of a countersuit, honey."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Mike's brows gave a "bitch, please" tilt, and his grin widened.

She didn't know whether it was because on Boss Appreciation Day she had set his screen saver to a video of the entire staff mooning the camera, or because on his fortieth birthday he had opened his office door to find forty jelly dildos in perfectly erect formation around his desk.

It had all started during her job interview. What an abysmal episode that had been. Mike had been less than impressed with her lack of experience in anything that didn't involve changing diapers or mowing lawns. He'd kept one eye on his computer screen while she rambled on through her merits as the best would-be waitress ever to come into MacNab's. While she had suspected that the impression she was leaving on him was less than stellar, she had caught him



discreetly taking a peek at her chest once or twice, and so giving up the attempt to wow him, she just went for it.

*“Look, if you hire me, I’ll wear one of those shirts you’ve got in a size too small, and I won’t sue you for staring at my tits when they jiggle.”*

It was the first time she’d heard someone actually snort when they laughed, and he had hired her on the spot. In the first month he would stare at her breasts with his eyes narrowed, *“because I want to see if I can make them bounce with a Jedi mind trick,”* and she’d shimmy around until he went into hysterics.

She loved working for him. It was only because she liked him that she was putting in so much extra these past few months while he was preoccupied with getting his latest project off the ground: the soon-to-be Wit Cracker, a pub with live music and dancing.

She shrugged. “When I’m driving your nice car around town, you’ll see what a great bullshitter I am. I’ll be sure to wave to you while you’re waiting for the bus.”

He scrunched up his face. “Do you make happy sounds while you’re gnawing on a man’s balls?”

“I would never gnaw on your balls, Mike. I prefer to squish them like cherry tomatoes.”

“Yeesh.” He winced and then winced again as the buzz saw started up. “Ah Christ! I was hoping they’d give it a rest so I could have an hour to myself before the supper crowd comes in and I have to get behind the bar. It’s bad enough this place is dead all afternoon.”

Kate rubbed her temples. “When all this is over, you owe your entire staff a big bonus for having to listen to this all day. I personally deserve something special for sitting down there for four hours with my finger jammed in my ear.”

“It’ll be worth it. The place is going to look great, and you’re going to get rich on tips.”

“Uh-huh.” She placed a polished fingernail at the corner of her eye. “This is the eyeball that has been twitching for three weeks. Behind this eyeball is a tumour that gets a little bigger every day. When it finally pushes my eyeball out of my head, I hope you’re there and you get my brain juice all over you.”

“That hurts, Katie.”

She poured fresh coffee into a tall MacNab's mug and added a splash of cream before filling two paper cups for the workmen. She slid the mug towards Mike. "Trust me. When I finally snap, I'm taking you with me."

She left him chuckling and marched over to the workmen. She stood with a cup in each hand and stared them down until they stood up. "Remember what I said. The coffee is free if you stay out of the bar."

"Fair enough, love."

"And don't call me *love*, you old fart."

"Fair enough, Miss."

She eyed the twin butt-prints of dust left behind. "I hate those guys."

Mike appeared at her side and held out a wet rag. "On days like this, I feel sorry for Joe. It must keep him up all hours of the night knowing that at any moment you could wake up and snap his neck."

She gritted her teeth at the mention of her boyfriend and slapped the rag down on the tabletop. "I'm starting to talk to myself, Mike. All day I'm cleaning up after men, and this voice starts in my head. That voice sounds just like my mother right after my father started to go deaf in one ear and she would walk around muttering to herself. I'm twenty-five years old, and I'm turning into my mother."

She leaned down and began wiping the chairs. A prickle started at the back of her neck and zipped between her toes. She peeked over her shoulder and found him ogling her backside.

She gave a little wiggle.

He grinned, tucked his phone into its holster, grabbed his coffee, and headed for the double doors leading to the basement. "Thanks. That'll get me through the next hour without killing myself."

"It's a shame you can't see my ass-floss in these shorts."

"No offense, Katie, but when you call it *ass-floss*, it becomes the last thing I want to see."

She turned just in time to see his backside disappear and bit down on her smile before it could turn into a leer. Mike wasn't the only one who had been taking a peek here and there over the past few years. He was tall and broad with the build of someone who didn't work at keeping

fit but who simply played hard. He was a fiendish outdoorsman who preferred the uncultivated outskirts to the manicured parks and city streets, and he bore the scars of countless scrapes over rocks and slippery forest floors. After he'd returned from Mexico, he'd gone to Newfoundland to climb the mountain at Gros Morne Park but his pack-a-day habit had made the challenge too much. So he'd quit smoking just so he could go back next year and try again. Every adventure he conjured up in his head became a reality, no matter what it cost him.

MacNab's had been no different. Halifax had been a drinking town since its founding. Mike would have been a flash in the pan without something to make his bar stand out: that something was Mike MacNab himself. He'd used his bartending background to host a segment on the evening news magazine, and from the bar at MacNab's, he would show folks how to mix drinks; he'd sponsored a cable-access show about Halifax's nightlife. People poured into MacNab's, and he took to the bar himself, telling raunchy jokes and performing stupid magic tricks, sharing whoppers with the men and flirting with the women. Kate and the rest of the staff reaped the rewards of the mood he set. Her tips on a busy night made her regular pay seem like a tiny amount.

She stood on her toes and stretched and then took a long look around the bar. There was one old man sitting at a table just beneath the big-screen, perfectly content with his bottle of beer and the curling match on the television, seemingly oblivious to the racket coming from downstairs.

She swung around the bar and collected the remote for the smaller television closest to her, then settled on the preschool channel. She couldn't hear the dialogue but found a tiny bit of comfort in watching a sixty-year-old man dressed like a train conductor instruct two puppets on how to make a paper airplane.

When the next break in the noise came, she whipped out her phone and set it next to her, but didn't have an opportunity to enjoy the silence before Mike flew through the double doors with a wild look.

"They cut through the Internet cable."

"So? Get a new one."

"The Internet cable connected to the wall, which is connected to the pole outside, which is connected via a series of—"

"Mike, I'll call the cable company."

"Thank you." He slouched and hung his head back, blinking at the ceiling as he heaved a sigh. "Can I look at your ass-floss now?"

"Oh, so *now* that you want something from me it's okay to call it *ass-floss*." She picked up the phone and dialed the number she knew by heart, pressed a few buttons until she reached business services, and then leaned on the counter and waited her turn in the queue. "Have you eaten today?"

"I had a coffee and a bagel this morning." He moved away from the wall and looked around. "I'd murder my own mother for a cigarette, though."

"You need to eat. And sleep. And you know, blink occasionally."

"I don't have time to do any of those things."

"You'll make time. As a matter of fact, as soon as John and Donald come in, you're taking me out for Chinese."

He shook his head as he slid onto a stool. "Why do I have to buy?"

"You make more money than I do, and you owe me for Monday. I could have slept in, but instead I was here interviewing for waitstaff—Oh, hello? Hello?" She held the phone in front of her and rolled her eyes. "You know, I don't mind being put on hold, but honestly, do they have to keep breaking into the music to tell me what a great deal I'd get on wireless?"

"Yes, that's tragic. Now, you were saying how I owed you?"

She sighed and tucked the phone back against her ear. "Even Dr. Frankenstein bought Igor a nice meal every once in a while."

"All right, fine." He threw his hands up and bobbed his head in agreement. "Chinese it is. Maybe my fortune cookie will tell me I'll get lucky."

Kate raised her brows in mock horror. "Michael Allan MacNab, are you suggesting that you're having some difficulties in that department?"

"Let's just say blinking isn't the only thing I don't have time to do lately," he said and pouted at her. "I almost bought a Studglove last week."

Kate frowned. "What's a Studglove?"

"It's a—" His gaze slid sideways and he cleared his throat. "It's a sleeve that goes over your dick. You turn it on. It vibrates."

"Oh my God," she managed to say before dissolving into a fit of giggles that doubled her over. "Please, tell me that was a joke."

"I wish it were. I wake up and I go to work and when I'm done working I go to sleep. The next day I do it all over again. I haven't had any kind of fun lately."

She shifted the phone from one ear to the other. "Then take a night off. Stay as far away from this place as possible. Go somewhere and do something to take your mind off of things, preferably with a date that's not battery operated. My mother gave me that advice, you know." She snapped to attention as a voice garbled at the other end of the line. "Hello? Yes, this is Kate Doucette calling from MacNab's. We need an emergency service call. Someone sawed through our Internet cable. Yes, I'll hold."

Mike pulled out his phone and tapped one of the buttons. Immediately Kate grabbed it from him and tucked it behind her back. "Absolutely not. Relaxing doesn't involve e-mail unless there are pictures of bunnies and kittens involved."

"Is that what you look at when you're alone in my office?"

"Don't be silly. I look at bunnies at the library. I look at naked men in your office."

Mike stretched his bare arms in front of him and laced his fingers together. Kate couldn't take her eyes off him. Her mouth watered as she watched muscle shudder and flex beneath his skin.

Her perverted little moment came to an end when he cracked his knuckles, sending a horrible shiver up and down Kate's spine. He slouched over the bar and sighed. "I want mashed potatoes. Let's go to the hotel restaurant across the street."

"You can have mashed potatoes here."

"I want mashed potatoes somewhere else. If you're going to give me crap, you might as well give me back my cell and let me work on my ulcer." He held his hand out and narrowed his eyes at her.

Kate shook her head and once again moved the cordless phone from one side of her head to the other. "Fine. I'll buy dessert if you promise to lick the plate when you're done."

“I’ll get it.”

“No, I will. Sometimes Igor wants to do something nice for Dr. Frankenstein.”

“Aww.” Mike smiled as he placed both hands over his heart. “You do have a soul!”

Kate tried to stifle her giggle, but it came out as a snort just as the technician came back on the line. “Yes, I’m still here. One hour? Good.” She replaced the phone in its cradle and blew out a puff of air. “Crisis averted.”

“My hero.”

They both winced as the saw started up again.

## Chapter Two

Four hours later the carpentry crew was gone, and Mike had her by the elbow as he admonished her.

“You could have just thrown a drink in his face. You didn't have to try and stab him.”

“It was just a swizzle stick.”

“When you try to jam it in someone's eyeball, it ceases to be *just a swizzle stick*.”

The incident hadn't been her first, and she doubted it would be her last. She'd had a good meal and even better company at her dinner with Mike, but it didn't take long for her mood to shift once she got back to work. She could have taken a time-out when she felt the bad mood burning at the back of her throat and the I-hate-all-mankind fever start to come on.

MacNab's on Saturday night drew one kind of clientele: sweaty, twentysomething hockey fans so pumped with testosterone and beer, they were filled with a misguided sense of immortality. She should have known that tonight someone would want to play grab-ass. They always did on nights when Toronto took the ice. Mike had been at the bar when the guy had decided that it would be a good idea to saunter on over to her and give her rump a squeeze.

She supposed she should have let Mike handle it. A word and the guy would have been facedown on the pavement, but her body clock was raging against being awake since eight o'clock and demanded an outlet. She'd snapped, throwing herself on the guy with a growl, and yes, trying to stab him in the eye with a plastic swizzle stick...with the cherry still skewered at the end.

The door staff had ejected the man and his entire party, and Mike had led Kate through the double doors leading to the shell of the Wit Cracker. At the moment it looked more like a World War II-era bomb shelter with one wall completely torn out to open up the main space. At the back was Mike's tiny office. From the little thirteen-by-nine room, he ran the bar and a small

company, M&M Security, or the Gorilla Mafia as Kate had taken to calling them, a collection of enormous men who could probably uproot a tree if they really wanted to.

It was to his office that he led her, and with the same sigh she used to expel when she had been sent to the principal's office in junior high school, she sank down in the seat opposite his desk.

"Beer?" He dipped into the bar fridge he kept next to his chair. She shook her head and drooped, elbows on her knees and chin on the heels of her hands. Mike popped the tab on a soda and placed it in front of her.

At the last moment, the corners of his mouth quirked. He tore off the tab and tossed it in the trash can. "Just in case you think about slitting my throat with it."

After taking a loud slurp, she burped into her hand, then managed to conjure up what she hoped passed for a contrite look as he sank into his chair. "Sorry. Again."

He ran his fingers through his thick brown hair, and she held back a smile. He badly needed a haircut, but he wouldn't get one until she made fun of the puffiness that was developing. Like Kate, he was cursed with naturally unruly hair. Unlike Kate, who had to go through an hour of gelling, spritzing, tugging, and flattening to make her red curls manageable, all he needed to do was clip his off.

The extra length suited him, giving him the look of a man who had just rolled out of a warm bed. She, on the other hand, looked deranged when she gave her tresses an ounce of independence.

His mouth twisted up to one side, and he shrugged. "Next time can you try a gentler approach?" He sighed and leaned forward. "What's up? Usually you just scream until the guy pisses himself."

"I'm having a bad day." She took another sip of her soda, and her head fell forward a little more. "I kicked Joe out last week."

He uttered, "Good," under his breath, and she didn't blame him. Joe wasn't exactly level with the rest of humanity on the evolutionary chart.

She couldn't even recall how Joe had managed to worm his way into her life. One day he was just lingering on the outskirts of her social circle, and then the next he was living in her apartment. Bad hair, bad smells, and bad sex had crept into her life, and she hadn't even noticed.



Thirteen months later, she came home to discover her sofa had been broken in half after what Joe insisted was a casualty of *Resident Evil*, and she suddenly realized she was starting to get apathetic about her entire life, starting with love and sex.

She explained all this to Mike, who listened in silence and rubbed the nicotine patch peeking out from beneath the cuff of his grey MacNab's T-shirt. When she'd finished she found herself staring expectantly back at him, waiting for some kind of acknowledgement.

"I have an old futon I can give you," he said.

She buried her face in her hands. "A whole year, Mike! Why?"

"I don't know. I asked myself the same question every time he dragged his fat ass in here."

"So what do I do now?"

"I'm afraid suicide is your only option at this point."

"Ack!"

"What do you want me to say? Are you sorry you got rid of him?"

"God no."

"Then you get a new sofa, a can of Lysol, some new sheets, and maybe some mood enhancers." He chuckled when she shot him a dirty look. "Why don't you head home? It's not so busy that the rest can't handle it. Get a pizza, watch some television, and zonk out until Monday morning."

"I can't. If I go home, I'll do what I always do when I'm bummed. I'll start dragging out everything I own and laying it on the bed, flip through old photos and journals, and then I'll end up on the bedroom floor trying to figure out how my life went down the toilet."

"Katie, your life is not down the toilet," he said quietly.

She rolled her eyes towards a tower of plastic file bins piled in the corner, but his conviction made her feel a little better.

He was right. For the first time in years she had everything in perfect order: a nice apartment close to both work and school, she'd finally dropped those twenty pounds that had dogged her since puberty, and she had cool coworkers and a boss who wasn't disturbed. Crappy ex-boyfriend aside, things were pretty good.

She regarded him from the corner of her eye. Mike leaned back in his chair with his hands folded behind his head, affording her a good look at his thick arms. Even as he watched her with a sympathetic look, there was still the hint of a smile that was never far from appearing.

No matter how hairy the clientele got, Mike was always so laid-back. He never lost his temper, though there had been times when she had seen that smile get a little tighter and his nostrils flare when he was pushed a little too hard by some drunk. Even then he would give a cue to the Gorilla Mafia at the door to take over, and he would maintain that calm that was his trademark.

He was quick to flirt, which was always a bonus when she was bored, and also why any attractive woman who meandered into MacNab's usually became a regular both at the bar and in his bed. True, he was a bit of a man whore, but he wasn't a douche about it. In spite of crinkling her nose in disdain when he was on a roll with some half-naked, titless bitch who'd parked her ass crack at the bar, she genuinely liked Mike. He was one of the good guys.

"I know I'm okay, but don't I deserve a couple of days a year to feel sorry for myself?" She yanked her hair from her ponytail, and as it spilled over her shoulders, she noticed Mike watching her movements carefully, like a man watching a woman undress for him. It wasn't the first time he'd turned that hot look on her, and she felt a little tickle run through her belly and lower. She was reminded again that she wasn't immune to his looks, which were sometimes so scorching, she couldn't help it if her panties got a little damp. Or a lot damp.

"If you could try not to impale any more of my paying customers, I'd appreciate it." He grinned. "Is there anything I can do, Katie? You won't take the futon, but you might have heard that I mix a mean mojito."

"Eew, no. I appreciate it, though. That, and not firing me. Again." She got to her feet and smoothed the tiny black apron over her thighs. Mike's gaze followed the motion so fast, she almost missed the flicker of his attention along the length of her bare legs and back up again. She lifted her chin and gave him a smile.

"Anytime," he said with a wink and stretched out. Muscles flexed, and the hem of his T-shirt pulled up to reveal a strip of flat belly and the waist of his black briefs.

Her toes curled in her sneakers. She hadn't realized until that flash of skin just how good he looked tonight.

Mike frowned when she hesitated at the entrance. “What?”

“Nothing, it's just...” She poked her head into the hall and listened a moment. No one had meandered down to the stockroom.

Don't even think about it, her warning voice chimed in.

She mentally flipped it the bird.

“I might be way out of line here, but there is something you could do for me.”

“Anything.”

Her words did somersaults at the tip of her tongue, and she bit down to force them out. “Would you take me home?”

“Change your mind, eh? Give me a second to call upstairs.”

“No, that's not what I meant,” she said quickly when he reached for the phone. “I mean, will you *take me home*?”

Kate shuffled back into the office, and for a few seconds he just stared at her, and she could see him trying to decipher what she was asking. When he did, only his mouth changed, his lips pulling in and pursing together like any other time he was presented with a puzzle.

“Are you asking me if I want to...?”

“Yup.” She gave a definite bob of her head and slid back into the chair. “The thing is, Mike, I'm not really into that whole casual-sex thing, but it's been a year since I've had a really good screw. I'd have to go through the whole nice-to-meet-ya phase and then keep things cool for a while, and even then there's no guarantee I'd be getting anything too spectacular. I had to pretty much do all the work myself when I was with Joe, and now that he's gone, I could still do the work myself, but it's just not the same. I want someone I know. I want you.”

“Now. Tonight.”

“From what I've heard, you're pretty good at it.” She couldn't believe how she was prattling on, but there seemed to be no stopping it. “Not that I'm asking for pity sex, because asking for pity sex is as sad as getting it.” She squeezed her knees together and kept her gaze at the level of his chin. “We're closed tomorrow because of the holiday, so I'm thinking that between now and Monday morning ought to do it.”

“Katie—”

“I—Well, I'm not just looking to get off. Mike, I want to break a sweat. I want to do things I haven't done in years or at all. I want to come out of seclusion on Monday looking and feeling like I've been fucked for hours, and well, frankly a big guy like you could probably fuck me through a wall. Twice.”

“Katie—”

“I won't get weird about it afterward. I swear. Not like that crazy Lisa bitch who set the men's room on fire. This would be a onetime thing.”

He raised one eyebrow. It was joined by the other in another second.

Kate curled her fingers into her apron.

*Shit.*

He straightened when the door to the basement creaked open. “Mike, you down here?”

“Yeah?”

“I need some change.” One of the waiters appeared behind Kate and gave her a greeting smile.

“Yeah, sure. Kate.”

“Huh?”

“Can you get him what he needs from the safe?”

She looked from Mike to John and back again, and she nodded. “No problem.”

Once John's apron was loaded up with change, she stood in the darkened hall and felt the full impact of her dismissal. She almost fled back upstairs, determined to never speak of it again, when Mike called her back.

He was still behind the desk, now leaning forward with his arms crossed.

“Thanks. I couldn't exactly get up with a hard-on.”

“*Oh. So...*”

“So I think you ought to cash out and meet me at the back door in ten minutes.”

“Okay.” She spun on her heel, biting back a smile the length of her entire face.

“Katie.”

“Mmm?”

“Your place or mine?”

“Oh—Um, mine. I have...things we can play with.”

“So do I.” He got to his feet. He wasn't kidding. His erection tented his black slacks. He stopped directly in front of her, waiting for her eyes to move back up, and he cuffed her chin. His grin was back, and he cocked his head. “And I'll bet mine are better than yours.”

## Chapter Three

She'd never been the type to be dazzled by money, but zipping through town in the front seat of the Blue Rocket, Mike's one-hundred-forty-thousand-dollar Porsche (and fortieth birthday present to himself) amped up Kate's libido to a volcanic state. That, and his arm grazing her leg whenever he shifted gears.

She hadn't seen his new place since he'd moved from his condo on the exclusive waterfront, and she had thought he was crazy to abandon such a sweet slice of real estate. Her opinion didn't change as they veered onto a road that didn't even have streetlights, but after he navigated a long, gated driveway and the house came into view, she gawked.

It still looked like the old Catholic church that had gone up for sale over a year ago: it still had the stained-glass windows above the entrance and flanking either side of the front door, but there were touches of the new, of Mike. Security lights created a showcase and smaller solar lights lit a trail to the back of the house. He led her along the path from the three-car garage adjacent to the house.

Kate drew a deep breath and took in a lungful of salty air. "It's so quiet here."

Mike glanced over his shoulder at her and smiled. "There's a path to a private beach too. I've been thinking about getting a couple of Jet Skis before the summer is over."

Her jaw dropped when she sighted the pool: it was a glowing strip of blue, tipped like an I with a Jacuzzi, and though she couldn't see into the darkness past the lawn and the trees, she could hear nearby water lapping against the shore. The property and the renovations combined had to have cost him a small fortune.

Her awe increased as she followed him inside. What at one time must have been the rectory was now a kitchen that mingled old wood with chrome appliances. After he tossed his keys onto the butcher block, he crooked his finger for her to follow, and she stepped into a huge open space that was living room, office, and multimedia center all in one. At the far end was a

staircase built into the wall that led up to what she assumed had been the choir balcony and she now guessed, from the robe hanging over the railing, was his bedroom.

The floorboards creaked under her feet as she looked around. Exposed rafters had been stained and varnished like new. The old brickwork was the perfect backdrop for the huge abstract canvases that hung in each space. There was even a small relic of a woodstove tucked into the corner and refurbished for use in the winter, if the new stovepipe were any indication.

Dominating the space beneath the balcony were a pool table and a bar, at the end of which was a digital photo frame with photos of Mike over the years fading in and out. She wandered away from him and lifted the frame just as it transformed from Mike on a ski hill to a much-younger version: a skinny, tanned fellow no older than twenty with a terrible bleach job and green eyes that popped the same colour as the stretch of Caribbean behind him.

“Mike, I lied,” she said and turned around in a circle to take everything in for a second time. “I’m going to get weird. I’m going to beg to be your kept woman. This is absolutely—*Wow.*”

“It pays to know how to make a Singapore sling.”

She managed to smile as she stared with an open mouth at the huge flat-screen that hung parallel to the leather sofa.

Seeing all this in terms of actual things and not talk, she was finally reconciling herself with the Mike she knew and the Mike who had done well for himself over the past twenty years. While she was still in braces, he had been carving a niche in bars and casinos, on cruise ships, and then as a bar owner. He had bought and sold a dozen before retiring back home, with MacNab's and M&M Security as his pet projects.

She suddenly felt very small and insignificant. She was a waitress. He was freaking *loaded*. She was lucky to be on friendly terms with him, and she had gone and recruited him like he was a stud for hire.

Mike must have seen her hesitation, because he took her hand and pulled her close. “What’s wrong? Changing your mind after I drove you all the way out here?”

He planted his hands on her hips and closed the gap between them. He was so long legged and lean, he eclipsed her. Kate caught a whiff of bamboo-scented soap lingering on his skin, and she longed to bury her face against his chest, to let him hold her close while she just breathed

him in. Just having his big, hard body against hers was sweet agony, and she wanted to give in, but the butterflies in her stomach made her daring a painful, sickening thing.

“Not really.” She looked everywhere but his eyes. “Mike, I didn't mean to put you on the spot like that.”

“Shut up. You know how I like a challenge. Besides, does it feel like I'm insulted?”

He slid his hands over her backside and squeezed. Kate went on her toes with a small gasp and then moaned at the pressure against her clit. His erection had waned on the drive, but once again he was rock hard and pushing against his slacks.

The amity in his gaze had fizzled out and given way to hunger. It was contagious, building in Kate's belly and spreading outward, like fingers touching her in the most sensitive parts of her body.

He ran his tongue over his lower lip, inviting and captivating, and his fingers scrunched the edge of her T-shirt, grazing the bare skin beneath.

Kate's regret unhitched, and she raised her arms. Mike bunched her MacNab's T-shirt in his fists and peeled it over her head.

“I wouldn't let you change your mind anyway,” he said and skimmed his rough hands over her rib cage. His thighs bumped hers, shoving her back against the pool table, and then he slid his knee between her legs. “Look around. You know all those things you said you wanted? Well, here's my counteroffer. Over the next two days I'm going to fuck you in every inch of this place. Then I'm going to do it all over again.”

“Makes for a long two days,” she said breathlessly and reached between them, closing her hand around the shape of his cock. With a groan, Mike lowered his head and used his teeth to peel back the edge of her satin bra.

She cocked her head and watched the slow sweep of his tongue over her nipple until it puckered, and with a quick and entirely wicked glance at her face, he tugged the hard point between his teeth. The hairs on her arm and at the back of her neck stood up as the hot poison of his sting moved through her body. She tipped her head back and sucked in a breath through her teeth as he bit down again, a little harder this time, before closing his mouth over the peak and sucking her.



“Oh wow. If I weren't already convinced I should stay...” she whispered and rubbed his erection through his slacks. Mike lifted his head with a grin.

“Unzip me,” he murmured, and Kate obliged, tossing his belt to the floor and working the clasp carefully over the metal teeth.

With a satisfied purr, she took hold of his dick and tilted her head for a better look. Catching her curious gaze, Mike treated her to a devilish grin before putting some space between them.

She didn't hide her appreciation of what she held in her hand; she poked her tongue out at the corner of her mouth as she ran her hand along the veined length, up and down, up and down, until he was like stone, slick, and throbbing. His chest rose and fell like a pulse, and his whole body reacted when she flicked her thumbnail over the tip.

Mike leaned in for a kiss, but she placed a hand on his chest and held him at bay, flashing him a devious grin before she slid to the floor between his legs.

Mike raised his brows. “You want to go upstairs?”

“Oh, I think I'm just fine right here where I am.” She brushed her lips across the hard, smooth head. Mike drew a sharp breath when she snaked her tongue around the circumference. Her gaze flicked to his side, where his large hand was clenched into a fist. His long fingers curled into his palm. She licked the underside and back up again, curling her tongue and rubbing the tip inside the head's groove.

His cock twitched in her hand, and his whole body vibrated. She took the entire shaft into her mouth and sucked him while tugging his pants to his knees. She skimmed her nails along the backs of his hairy, muscled thighs and hummed happily as she cupped his ass.

Mike moaned and placed his hand at the back of her head, pushing gently until she had taken the entire length. It was a move that in the past had gotten her defenses up—too many boyfriends had gotten overexcited and just thrust down her throat, but as Mike's fingers threaded through her thick curls, she found herself spurred on. She trusted him.

Kate bobbed her head, and her lips worked the slick, elastic skin over his hard shaft. She moaned from the back of her throat so that the vibration drummed over her tongue.

He pulled back. “God, Katie. I'm going to come before I can be any good to you.”

She held on, tipped her head back, and swirled her tongue around the hard, hot head. “Just another sec.”

“Katie, I mean it.”

“So do I. Don't worry.” She quirked her brows up. “If you come in my mouth, you get to make it up to me.”

She went forward and ran her tongue along the seam of his scrotum. Mike cursed and gripped the edge of the pool table as she licked every inch of his heavy balls. She delighted when she found him most sensitive just beneath the shaft. He hung his head back and moaned when she teased him there. When she closed her lips around the spot, his knees almost buckled.

Kate dropped her hand between her legs and pressed the heel of her palm against her pussy. The metal mouth of her zipper rubbed against her clit. She moaned again, quaking along with him as he garbled over his incoherent response.

“Enough!” he snarled and yanked her to her feet.

She had never felt so...wanted, so ready for him. Yes, *him*. Mike. Good ol' Mike. She never imagined he would be standing before her, bone hard, with sweat dappling his brow and his pleasant face fierce with need. He made her feel voluptuous and wicked. His hot breath streamed over her swollen mouth before he took it for his own in a possessive kiss.

She'd be lying to herself if she swore that she'd never imagined what it would be like to be kissed by Mike. At the New Year's Eve party that year, he had grabbed hold of her for a brief smack on the lips, and she'd spent the rest of the night hating his date, who had gotten the unabridged version on the dance floor. This was much better than those errant fantasies that plagued her more often than she'd care to admit.

He kissed her with his whole body. One hand moved over her back and warmed her skin; the other cupped the back of her head while his mouth moved over hers. He pressed his hard thigh between her legs, pinning her against the pool table while he twisted his tongue around hers.

The pressure was becoming unbearable. With a whimper, she ground against him, begging with her body for release.

He ran his hands down her back and cupped her ass. “Are you ready for me, Katie?”

Kate erupted in a breathless laugh as he lifted her onto the table. “I love it when you call me *Katie*. No one else calls me that.”

“No one else would dare.” He reached for her fly. “If you didn’t kick their ass, I would.”

She lifted her hips, and Mike peeled her shorts off in one motion. Her bra followed, and she remained perched on the lip of the table while he wriggled out of his pants.

“Here?” she asked, running her hand over the felt surface that surrounded her.

“I told you, you’re mine in every inch of this house.”

Mike stood between her thighs as he sheathed himself, and then he shucked off his shirt, revealing a glorious chest she had only appreciated the breadth of through his clothes and in vacation snapshots.

He caught her hands when she reached for him, and pushed her back, pressing her hands flat on the burgundy surface of the table.

“Tell me what you’ve got in mind tonight, honey,” he said in a growl and dipped his head low to nuzzle his stubbly chin between her breasts as he scooped his hands underneath her knees.

“I want you to make me come.”

He rubbed his dick between her slick folds. The underside of his shaft slid over her clit, and a small gasp coincided with the exquisite contractions deep inside her pussy. “That you will. But more specifically, do you want it soft and slow, rough-and-tumble, or somewhere in between?”

She sank back and watched as he hooked her legs in the crooks of his elbows. “I just want you to fuck me, Mike. If you can’t see that from where you’re standing, we’re going to have a major problem over the next few hours.”

She felt her pussy opening up to him as his gaze travelled from her hot face, over her heavy breasts and their pink-peaked tips, and lower. “Katie, from here I can see everything.”

“Mike, you ever think about this?”

“At least five times a night.”

“Me too. Now fuck me like you’ve been wanting to.”

He stepped closer, and his grip on her strengthened. His hairy thighs bumped her bottom, and his balls, still damp from her tongue, brushed her sticky mound.

Barely keeping herself up, Kate looked down over her torso and held her breath as she watched his ribbed length rubbing over her clit. Through the thin skin of latex, he was hot and hard. When he drew away to tease the throbbing mouth of her cunt with the head, she could see how wet she was just by looking at him: a glossy streak caught the light where her juices had smeared his balls and inner thighs.

She leaned on one elbow and reached down to flick her thumb over her clit while he probed her until he bumped her G-spot, sending little electric waves throughout her entire body. She fell back, flat against the bed of the pool table, crooning a little as he rotated his hips and worked his dick in and out along the length of her pussy.

His pace was killing her. She couldn't recall ever being so hot and so ready to go off. With each firm stroke, Kate's impatience escalated. She rubbed the swollen flesh hood over her clit faster and rocked her hips to meet his deep thrusts.

"Slow down, Katie," he said before he pushed her legs forward and outward so that she was splayed before him on the tabletop. "Let me drive."

"I've made up my mind," she said when he brushed her hand away and tucked it at her side. "I want it hard and fast, Mike."

"You'll get it. Soon."

He reached forward, and Kate's spine curved when he used two fingers on her clit. His touch was electric, slower than her own, lighting every up every nerve in her body. Each thrilling pass of his fingers coincided with his brusque entry.

"Talk to me, Katie," he said with a wicked grin. "You want me to make you come? Give me some incentive."

Kate tried to form the words, but each time a spark formed at the tip of her tongue, it morphed into a low moan. He buried deep, impaling her against the tabletop. She could feel him throbbing against the walls of her cunt, could feel every inch, every vein.

He gave a playful chuckle that buzzed over her. "Come on, sweetheart. I want to hear it."

"Don't stop." Unable to keep her hands to herself a moment longer, she reached out and traced the outline of his hip bones. "Make me come, Mike."

Kate arched her back, tilting her bottom upward with the rhythm of his thrusts. Mike answered her low moan by working his hips once more in the most perfect cadence, pulling out

completely and then thrusting deep. Each time he pulled away, Kate's body tensed, waiting for that delicious glide over her G-spot as his thick head rubbed against it.

He gently pinched her clit. It took just a moment of this, coupled with the firm, steady friction against her inner walls, and she was panting and pushing up against him. The first of several violent and delicious contractions undulated along her pussy.

Restraint was etched all over Mike's face as she clenched around his dick. She dug her nails into his hips and lurched forward. Her abs screamed from the strain, and her toes cramped inside her sneakers from curling them. It was impossible to breathe through the euphoria that took hold of her. She squeezed her eyes shut and saw nothing but white flashes behind her lids.

"Jesus, you're...tight," Mike said, his words broken at the back of his throat with the last rapturous spasm that rocked her. With a groan, he gave her the full length of his cock in a series of powerful thrusts.

Kate expelled the breath that had been burning in her lungs, and opened her eyes. He looked anxious, determined, ready. The muscle bordering the column of his neck bunched, and he labored with each inhalation.

With her own orgasm ebbing away in blissful little waves, Kate was ready for his. She skimmed her hand over her belly and met his slick fingers that still toyed with her.

Her lips curved into a smile, and she giggled when his severe façade was broken. He bent forward and raised her hand to his mouth.

"You tease," he said, rubbing the wet tips of her fingers against his lips. His tongue snaked out, and he licked the moisture away before he released her hand. "Hold on. It's my turn."

Mike leaned forward. He planted his hands on either side of her, with his muscular arms pushing against her thighs, boxing her in. She grabbed his wrists and closed her fingers around them like cuffs.

Ready for him, Kate dug her heels against his shoulder blades.

He shoved balls-deep. Had she not been prepared, she would have been driven back, but she held on. She bit down on her lip as he filled her again and again, faster and harder with each stroke.

Angled the way she was, she could see every powerful thrust as his cock pumped into her. Her orgasm had left her tight, and Kate felt every inch of him along her slick passage as he

buried himself deep. His mountainous shoulders were corded with muscle that rippled along his arms, telling the tale of the rigor with which he pounded into her.

She untangled her legs from around him and drew them close to her chest, hooking her hands behind the backs of her knees and leaving her as spread out for him as she could get. Her pose begged him to get as deep as possible.

He took her challenge with a curse and gripped the lip of the table. Each thrust was more powerful than the one that came before it, until he was slamming against her with the entire weight of his body.

Once more Kate was fighting for air, overwhelmed by the force with which he rode her. The backs of her thighs screamed from the tension of being pulled. Still sensitive from her orgasm, her clit throbbed from the constant scrape of his pubic hair rubbing against it.

As his cock swelled, Kate squeezed the muscles inside her cunt around him. Mike choked back a moan as he took his final severe, wet plunges, and Kate was pinned beneath him. His complexion turned ruddy, and he squeezed his eyelids shut as he emptied against the thin barrier between them.

“Ah, *Katie*.” He hung his head forward and heaved a sigh that echoed the sense of bliss that surrounded Kate. Her body felt like she had spent an hour on the stair-climber, but now that she'd had a taste, she was eager for more.

He ran his hands along her thighs, his fingertips stroking featherlight over her damp skin. She welcomed him with her arms when he sank down and pressed the top of his head between her breasts. With his sigh, warm breath gushed over her.

Lazily, she draped her legs around his waist and scratched her fingers against his scalp. As soon as he caught his breath, he lifted his head. A goofy, lopsided grin was plastered across his face.

“Let's hit the bed. It'll be a while before I'm up again, but that's no reason why I can't have my fun with you in the meantime.”

She giggled as he scooped his hands under her bottom and lifted her. “You'd better be careful. I won't be able to collect disability if I'm incapacitated when my boss got a little too adventurous, and I don't think you want to lose a chunk of change if you have to pay me.”

“My lawyer is better than yours,” he said and smacked a kiss at the corner of her mouth.

“Oh yeah? I bet by the end of this weekend I'll have photographic proof that it's your entirely your fault.”

“On your piddly little phone camera? Pffft. I'll counter with something high-definition that will melt the judge's brain when he sees it.”

“Really?” She'd only been kidding when she said it, but now it seemed like an idea. Nonetheless, she rolled her eyes. “You and your high-tech gadgets.”

She clamped her hands together at the back of his neck and let out a squeak when, at the centre of the living room, he swayed a little. He actually came close to dropping her, but steadied and headed for the little staircase. Feeling contented and safe, Kate dropped her cheek on his shoulder.

Halfway up the spiraling staircase, he pressed her back to the curved wall and hoisted her higher. She was breathless and ready for whatever he had in store when they finished their ascent.

“You're going to love my high-tech gadgets,” he promised and continued up. “I even bought a few of them with you in mind.”

“That's awfully arrogant, Mike.”

He chuckled and loped out of the staircase and into the bedroom. She was able to get only a quick glance around at the neat, masculine space before she bounced against the softest mattress she'd ever been on outside of a showroom and he was tonguing a trail over her belly.

“I knew we'd end up here sooner or later. It was just a matter of when.”

## Chapter Four

If the last fourteen hours were any indication, she was going to be a lifeless pile of jelly by the time Monday rolled around. It had been well past sunrise before they'd collapsed in a heap of tangled sheets and slipped straight into sleep. The only time she'd escaped the blissful void, the bedside clock had read one in the afternoon. Next to her Mike had kept on snoring, even after she'd kicked him out of the centre of the big bed. Then she'd dropped back into sleep like a stone tossed into deep water. The next thing she knew she was being jostled awake once more.

There were no curtains in Mike's bedroom, just a clean pane of glass facing the Atlantic and a skylight overhead. As she came to, she was greeted by a blinding white light that bled through her eyelids.

"Sunday?" Kate sighed and snuggled into the soft pillow beneath her cheek.

"Sunday."

"A whole day off."

"Is that right?" He was close, but he wasn't in the bed.

"Mmm-hmm." She welcomed sleep as it wrapped its arms around her, blocking out the light shaking of the mattress as Mike moved next to her.

She had just started to shut down when something moved against the inside of her thigh and her eyes flew open. "What is that?"

When she lifted the comforter, she found the source of the tickling: a small blue object attached to a tangle of black strips was nestled against her, and it was moving. When she reached down and picked it up, it fluttered to life. She dropped it with a squeak.

Mike was nestled against her side, his elbow poking into his pillow and his fist propping up his head below the temple. He smirked when she reached for the thing again.



“What the...?” Kate held it in front of her and crinkled her nose while the vibrations ran along her arm. “Is this a dolphin?”

“This is your new best friend,” he told her and held up the hand he had hidden between them. “And this is the remote that makes him work so hard.”

The wireless remote was the same aquamarine as the dolphin, save for a silver face, and when he pressed one of the buttons, the vibrator quaked a little more intensely. When he pressed it again, the dolphin went still. She could have sworn that the dolphin was grinning back at her with the same cheeky attitude she found on Mike's face.

“Oh boy,” she said and turned her head to look at him. “Did you give it a name?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Is that name Flipper?”

“No, smart-ass, it's not. It's Roy.”

“Roy?” She pressed the snout with the tip of her finger. “Hello, Roy.”

“Have you ever seen one before?”

“In a catalogue, yes, but I've never used one. Too expensive for my wallet.” She gave him a sly look. “Are you showing off?”

“I told you my toys were better than yours. We didn't have much of a chance to play with them last night, so I figured now would be as good a time as any.” He sat up and took the vibrator from her. “The straps are adjustable, so it should fit.”

“Wait, wait, wait a minute.” She pushed herself up onto her hands. “How many women have worn this?”

“You're the first, I swear,” he said with a laugh. “If you don't believe me, check the wastebasket in the bathroom. The package is still in there. It was going to be your birthday present to get back at you for the forty-dildo salute in my office.”

“Well, now I'm a little disappointed, Mike. I think I would have liked to have worn it for my entire shift—over my shorts, of course. Now you're going to have to come up with something else to avenge your wounded pride.”

“I'll buy you another one.” He let the dolphin dangle in front of his face. “As for Roy, he has a job to do. Come on, get up. I'll help you put it on.”

“Can't I have a cup of coffee first?”

“Baby, this is better than coffee.”

She was full of giggles when he took her hand and pulled her off the bed. A crooked smile remained on his mouth while he fit the nylon straps around her waist and both her thighs.

He pinched the little dolphin's body and watched her while he wiggled it into place. “This okay?”

“I can't tell unless—” she started to say but then gasped when the muzzle began to flutter over the sensitive hood of flesh covering her clit. It wasn't unpleasant, but the sensation made her feel more ticklish than ecstatic, and she clamped her lips together to keep from laughing.

Mike held the remote up in front of her face. “If you laugh, I'm throwing you out wearing nothing but Roy.”

“Can I hold the remote?” she asked and reached for it, but he stretched his arm over his head and out of her reach.

“I don't think so. If I let you have this, you might come to appreciate Roy more than you appreciate me. I'm the boss,” he said with a wink.

“Isn't Roy my plaything?”

“You can have Roy, but I keep the remote.”

When she stood on her toes, he laughed at her ineffectual attempt to capture the remote, then wrapped his arm around her waist and kissed her. Kate gave up her chase, content to enjoy the warmth of his body rubbing against hers and the meandering way his tongue curled around hers.

“A little more?” he whispered, lowering his arm to his side.

Kate shook her head. “I like this.”

The little nub of a snout moved slightly, but the tickle that had first struck her as odd was quickly revealing the perfection in its make. Such delicate stimulation had consequences that were increasingly intense, and she shifted in Mike's arms so that the dolphin was pressed against his leg. With the added pressure, tiny circles of pleasure rippled along her pussy, and she deepened the kiss, inviting his tongue into her mouth.

He could have been trying to say her name or he could have simply been moaning, but a low sound came from the back of his throat and vibrated over his tongue and past her lips. He slid his hand down, the tips of his fingers travelling lightly and drawing gooseflesh to the surface.

Beneath the eager little muzzle, her clit had swelled until the tip touched the vibrator, and she almost buckled against him when the pulsations intensified. Those little ripples cascaded into promising waves, each stronger than the next.

"Is it working?" he murmured, and Kate made a small sound of assent against his mouth. The vibration stopped, and his grip on her loosened. She vocalized her disappointment with a small wail and clamped her hands around his neck when he tried to pull away.

"Don't," was all she could manage through her disappointment when he urged her to sit on the edge of the bed.

"I'm not done yet," he said as he stood over her. "I have something else for you."

"Listen, Mike, Roy doesn't need any help. In fact, I'm sure if you asked him, he'd be outraged by the interruption."

Nonetheless, Kate leaned back on one hand and took a long, inviting look at him, from his kiss-swollen lips, over the tanned span of his chest dappled with just a bit of hair, and lower to where his erection arced up and away from his balls. Her palms itched with the need to run her hands over his body and commit every blessed inch to memory so she'd never forget, but he had that look on his face that she already knew by heart. He was up to something, and the cute little dolphin was just the beginning.

*Selfless* didn't even begin to cover the type of lover Mike had turned out to be. *Insatiable* might have been going a bit too far. *Mischievous* was an attribute he could lay claim to. Right now he had a glint in his eyes that made her impatient to play along with whatever game he had planned.

"Hold out your hand," he said, and when she did, he teased her, holding the remote just over her outstretched palm for a moment before tucking it back into his fist. He didn't break eye contact when he pulled open the drawer of the nightstand next to the bed. Like he had done so many times at the bar when demonstrating a goofy magic trick, he paused, drawing out the moment until she gave his shin a kick with her bare foot.

"I'll let you name this one," he said and produced a ruby red dildo from inside the drawer, holding it in front of her face before he placed it in her hand. She closed her fist over the cool shaft and held it up. It was heavier than any other she'd handled and would have been at home in an art gallery. She examined the wide, flaring head and the ridges that ended at a flat base.

Mike sat down next to her and smacked a kiss on her shoulder. "What do you think?"

"I think Roy has competition. Is this really glass?"

"You bet. What are you going to name it?"

"It reminds me of...a candy apple. Candy? No, that's no good. That sounds like a stripper." She held it up and smiled at how pretty it looked in the light that poured through the window. "Dorothy."

"Dorothy?"

"It reminds me of the ruby slippers from the movie. You don't like?"

Mike lifted a brow. "Isn't it tradition to name these things after men?"

"This is too pretty." She reached down and gave the dolphin's nose a nudge with the tip of her finger. "Besides, *Roy*."

He held out his hand and opened his fingers to reveal the small remote. "Do you want to trade?"

With a shake of her head, she offered him the toy. "I think you can handle both. Then"—she ran her other hand over his thigh, and in its wake she watched the hairs stand on end—"you can put me to the test."

"Deal."

With a wink, Mike leaned in close and kissed her lips lightly as he took the toy from her. He pressed his thumb to the tiny button on the remote and spurred the vibrator back to life.

With just a few flickers of the dolphin's snout, Kate was taken right back to where she had been before he had called an intermission. She slipped her hand between his legs and squeezed down on his cock with every delicious pulse that spiraled along her pussy. She squeezed her legs together, and the effect was instant and extreme: the concentration of pleasure that spread was like a trickle of warm water pouring between her legs.

She fell back on the bed and grinned at Mike. "I really, really like this thing."

“Baby, if you're going to make me fight for your attention, I'm not going to make it easy on you.”

He knelt on the edge of the mattress, and Kate scooted until she was in the centre of the big bed. She parted her legs to accommodate him when he crouched down.

“You might want to hold on,” he said.

She stretched her arms out over her head and curled her fingers underneath the metal headboard, then closed her eyes as he slowly ran the flawless head of the toy along her pussy.

“Cold,” she said of the glass, but he paid her no attention as he kissed the insides of her thighs. She felt so soft and cherished with the prickle of his day-old beard rubbing against her. It was as though he had all the patience in the world. The night she'd spent with him had taught her that he'd draw out her pleasure as long as he could stand it before taking his own.

She pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth when the wide bulb stretched her hot entrance. The glass column had warmed with the heat of her body and glided with perfection until he had given her the entire length.

“Oh...*oh*.” She moaned when he slowly withdrew the length, rotating it for every inch. The ridges bumped over her G-spot, sending licks of pleasure zipping to the tips of her fingers and toes. He withdrew it completely and then pushed it back inside.

Kate bent her legs and pressed her feet against the mattress on either side of Mike. She pushed up to meet his rhythm and whimpered when the vibrator went still.

“Katie, Katie, Katie,” he admonished in a whisper and rubbed his cheek against her thigh. “You're always so impatient. Slow down. Let it build.”

She lifted her head and caught his smile just before his mouth vanished from her sight, but he stole her retort when he licked her around the dildo.

“Please, Mike, faster.” She lifted her hips as the head stretched her again. She released one hand from the headboard and placed it over the vibrator. It fluttered to life against her palm. “Please. Faster. Don't stop. Fuck me, Mike.”

“I can do better than this.” He withdrew the dildo, then rose up and stretched over her to grab hold of one of his thick, stuffed pillows. “Turn over.”

The vibrator stilled, leaving her hand numb and tingling. Kate scrambled onto her hands and knees, and he slipped the pillow beneath her belly. It seemed to take a harrowing amount of time for him to tear a condom from the strip left on the nightstand and roll it on his dick.

He cursed. "Fucking condom."

She bent low, thrusting her ass high, and grasped a fistful of the rumpled bedding beneath her. The flint in his voice was the perfect forerunner to what was coming, to what she wanted more than anything. Deep in her belly, liquid heat rolled and ran in little rivulets throughout the rest of her body.

With each second that passed, she quaked a little more. "I'm ready. Hurry and turn this damn thing back on."

"Give me one sec—" He grunted, and then the bed sagged beneath her when he assumed his pose. The oscillation of the dolphin's nose started again, and he tossed the remote on the bed in front of her.

Mike gripped her around the waist. The tip of his penis bobbed against her pussy, and his hairy thighs brushed against hers.

"Don't you dare tease me this time, Mike," she warned him, already reeling from the movement over her clit.

He laughed as he nudged his dick inside, ran his hand along her spine, and then he drove deep. As good as the glass dildo had been, as good as the vibrator was, neither was a match for the magnificent way he pumped into her.

She arched her back, inviting him to get deeper. He obliged her with a series of firm, even strokes. The friction against her G-spot matched the power of the vibe perfectly. Her pussy throbbed with such sudden intensity, she felt it with her whole body.

Kate was hot all over. Sweat popped above her upper lip and at the back of her neck. She buried her face into the comforter to keep from screaming when he picked up the pace.

His fingers dimpled into her buttocks while he fucked her, pressing down even more when she squirmed a little too far for his liking, which was often.

The intensity was reaching a level she found almost uncomfortable. The vibrator buzzed against the underside of her swollen clit, and the pleasure surged through her in hot waves.

Mike broke his cadence long enough to yank the cover away from her. “Let me hear it, Katie. I want to hear it all. Take me with you.”

There was nothing else to do but moan as he rode her, his fingers digging into her hips, pushing and pulling her with every thrust. When the first seismic contraction rocked through her pussy, Kate went up onto her hands and grasped a fistful of bedding. She pushed back against him. Every breath she took expelled with a moan that came from deep in her belly.

Mike kept pumping into her, thrusting deep and hard. Pleasure looped in her abdomen and suddenly pulled tight and snapped. Her clit throbbed against the fluttering nose of the vibrator, and her cunt swelled around him. Her climax overflowed, and she breathlessly endured every powerful pulsation that began between her legs and rocketed outwards to fill every part of her body.

“Oh Christ, I can feel that thing—” His words were choked off as she squeezed around him. He locked his arms around her waist and went down with her when she collapsed, crushing her against the mattress.

Unable to withstand another second, Kate flailed her arm out in front of her until she found the remote and jabbed the face until the vibrator went still. She turned her head and sucked in a deep breath, but it did little good. Mike's girth had her captive, and he held tight as he came.

When he went still, she rolled her shoulders, and he grunted.

“Gimme a minute, honey.”

“I need air.”

“Just a minute.” He sucked in a deep breath, pushing her down as he did, and buried his face into the crook of her neck. “Aw, hell.”

When she nudged him again, he rolled away from her and flopped onto the bed. Kate assumed the same pose and blinked at the rafters while she struggled to catch her breath.

“Holy shit,” she said at last.

His deep laugh reverberated around her. “I know. That was a very, very good idea.”

He turned his head, and the jollity returned in his eyes as she worked rubbery limbs in an attempt to roll over, before she succeeded and burrowed against him.

Through her lashes, she admired his tufts of bed head sticking out in all directions and the relaxed slant of his mouth, curled just slightly at the corners.

Absolutely adorable.

She fought off the urge to close her eyes and catch a few minutes of sleep. She worried that if she gave in, she might not come out of it, and she wanted every minute of the rest of her weekend with him.

“Can I ask you something?” she murmured.

“Hmmm.”

“Why do you always let those tiny-titted little bitches at the bar pick you up?”

His brows flew up, and he laughed. “*Excuse me?*”

“It's a valid question. I've seen some of the skanks who have been waiting around for you at closing time. I don't see the attraction. No tits. No ass. No brains. Are they like accessories?” She rose up on her elbow and giggled. “Honestly, if I had a dick, I'd be all over those cougars who come in at happy hour—someone with substance that would ride me through the floor.”

“I don't know—God, go away!” He crammed the pillow over his face and rolled away from her.

“Come on, Mike. Tell me. Do they do something different from the rest of us?”

“*No.*”

“Are they more bendy?”

There was a slight pause. “A little.”

“I knew it—Ack!” The pillow went flying, and he dragged her on top of him. His large hands cupped her ass, and she hummed when she felt his teeth against the sensitive spot under her ear.

“To answer your question, yes, they are kind of like accessories.”

Her happy sounds turned into a groan. “Mike, that's disgusting.”

“I know. As you've pointed out more than once while in a foul mood, I'm a pig, but I think I can get a pass. I spend most of my evenings watching you swishing around, wiggling this nice ass in those little skirts and shorts.”

“I thought you were kidding about my ass.”



“I was pretty sure you'd tell me to kiss it.”

“I probably would have.” She pushed up onto her hands and straddled him. “Or maybe not. A few times I considered marching right up to you as those little bitches were flipping their hair back and *ooohing* over your flair with a cocktail shaker and just plastering myself to you and showing them how it's really done.”

“I think you more than accomplished that, Katie. Here. Let me help you out of that.”

She perched on his hard thighs while he worked the clasps around her waist and thighs, and pouted when he dropped the lifeless dolphin at his side.

“Poor Roy.”

“Poor Roy, my ass. The way that thing was vibrating against my balls at the end, I'm thinking about giving him his own room.” He gave her a stinging slap on the rump and grinned. “Are you hungry?”

“Oh my God, yes! Feed me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“What about you?” he asked later when they were parked on stools in the kitchen waiting for a frozen pizza to heat up. “Joe?”

She made a face. “Are you actually asking me why I broke up with Joe?”

“No, I know why you broke up with Joe. What I want to know is how you got hooked up with such a tool to begin with. One day he was just another customer, and the next day you were dating him.”

“It was one of those random things,” she said with a sigh and dug into the bag of tortilla chips that was between them on the butcher block. She was swimming in a faded Calgary Flames T-shirt he had dug out for her after a much-needed shower, and a pair of his socks were tugged up to her knees. He was in only a pair of grey plaid boxers and looked ridiculously fresh for someone who had gotten no more than a few hours' sleep.

There was something incredibly erotic about wearing his shirt, smelling like his shampoo and soap and even his deodorant; all common drugstore brands, but they combined in a scent that was all Mike and all over her.

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“Piss off. We got to talk about my random things, and now I want to hear about yours.”

“Joe was as much of an accessory as your little girly girls are.” She shrugged at the curious tilt of his eyebrows. “I needed someone regular, and he was likeable enough.”

“That’s a shitty attitude,” he said as she hopped off the high stool and went to check on the pizza.

“That’s reality. No one is perfect.”

“Are you talking about Joe, yourself, or me?” The question earned him a dirty look as she bent over the oven door.

“Like I said, no one is perfect.” She sidled up next to him and walked her fingers along the inside of his hard thigh. “Though some of us are better at it than others.”

Kate slipped her hand inside his baggy shorts and closed it around his dick. He rotated in his stool until his back was to the butcher block and she stood between his outspread legs.

She pressed against him and teased the corner of his mouth with the tip of her tongue. “Honestly, Mike, is it healthy for a guy your age to have so much excitement in one day?”

“Funny girl.” He reached around her to give her ass a squeeze. “It helps when I have a sexy little thing who can’t get enough.”

Soft flesh hardened in her palm, and she mouthed her way downward, nuzzling the patch of fuzz over his collarbone and then dropping low past his belly.

He drew deep, steady breaths as she rubbed her cheek against the bulge and breathed in the clean smell that was so much better on Mike than on her, and when she took him into her mouth, he hung his head back and groaned.

\* \* \* \* \*

One charred pizza later, they had returned to the bedroom and lay crossways across the mattress with a carton of ice cream between them.

Mike shoveled a spoonful of chocolate and truffle into his mouth and stared past her. “I was married once, you know.”

“I know. I Googled you.”

“And?”

She licked the back of her spoon. “And violation of your privacy via the Internet aside, it was none of my business to ask. I also know you had two kids with another woman before you married Georgina.”

“Nothing stays hidden in this day and age”

“Yeah. Did you know that you have a Wikipedia entry? Entrepreneur Michael MacNab, it says. So, now that you've brought it up, tell me about the kids.”

“One's in university now, in the valley. Christopher. He was at the bar about two months ago.”

“Did you speak to him?”

“Uh-huh. It's okay between us. His mom and stepdad did really well.” He dug his spoon into the carton and scraped the sides. “I'm paying for his school. Jane and Bobby thought he should get a student loan, but I don't see why he should have to kill himself for an education. Why does everything have to be a life lesson, you know?”

“What about the other one?”

“Last year of high school. Nancy. I never talked to her on a regular basis until she found me on Facebook.”

“I swear that's going to be the downfall of civilization.”

“Hmph,” he agreed through a mouthful of ice cream. “I get to see the pictures she posts of her horseback-riding competitions. She's outdoorsy, like me.”

“Do the kids look like you?”

“Spit out of my mouth.” He gave a grin that was undeniably proud, and Kate couldn't help but return it, feeling a little tug in her chest.

Mike, the dad. *Yeesh.*

“What about the ex-wife?”

“Unlike the kids, that was a huge mistake. She was a cheat, but she knew how to cry. I'm only just off the hook as far as alimony goes since she got married at the first of the year. The Wit Cracker is my way of celebrating my freedom after fifteen years.”

“God, you were so young when all this happened, not to mention poor. You'd only just finished school, hadn't you?”

“Yup. Speaking of which—”

“No, you don't get to ask me how school is going. You always start offering me more time off or more shifts, depending on which you think I need. That's a boss conversation, and he's not here right now.”

She dropped her spoon into the carton and rolled onto her back. She gave a catlike stretch, rubbed her full belly, and blinked back at Mike. “What?”

“You have some...right here.” He touched the corner of his mouth and then bent down and licked hers. The teasing sweep of his tongue turned serious as she ran her fingers through his hair and gave an impatient tug.

He rose above her, deepening the kiss. He grasped the hem of the shirt she wore with one hand and drew it up to her armpits, and gooseflesh rose where the rough patches on his hands roamed. He cupped one breast and rolled the nipple between his fingers until she felt the delicious pang as the peaks hardened.

She was wet in an instant, parting her legs and begging over his tongue for more.

“Give me your hand,” he said, and when it was his, he dragged it over her head. He took the other and joined the two together, pinning her. His free hand journeyed between her thighs.

He was unmercifully patient, letting her linger in reaching distance of release so many times. It had been almost an hour since the little vibe had been tucked into the drawer next to the bed, but she was still so sensitive. He circled her clit slowly with his thumb, rubbing the puffy skin around the nub. Tiny shock waves fluttered along her belly, each a little more powerful than the one that preceded it.

It became unbearable, and she tried to clamp her legs shut around him, but he simply shoved them apart again. He released his grip on her wrists and scooted between her legs. He rested the heel of his palm against her abdomen, and one finger drew back the flesh hood around her clit. His lips and tongue picked up where his fingers had left off.

Let loose, Kate clawed the bedding over her head with one hand and cupped the back of his head with the other. She worked her hips in tune with the hot, persistent suction of his mouth and closed her fingers around his thick hair. The steady fluttering of his tongue against her clit sent her into an unstoppable frenzy.

She came hard, her head pounding and her clit throbbing as he continued to suck on her. With a shriek, she ground against his mouth and squeezed her eyes shut.

There was only a moment to draw a breath while he slipped on a condom and crawled between her legs. With a grunt, he thrust hard and filled her completely. The tremors of her climax continued to ripple through her cunt as he rode her. She threw her arms around his waist, her hands splayed just above his round ass. He sucked in a hissing breath and rose up over her, pumping hard and fast to rival his previous pace.

She felt full and heavy. Her skin was so hot from the friction of his hairy thighs rubbing against her, coupled with the wet slap of his balls against her bottom.

“Come for me, Mike,” she whispered and drew her legs up against his ribs. She pressed her fingers into his buttocks and dragged her nails across the muscled slope. “Come on, baby.”

“I’m coming.” The words spurted over his lips, followed by a groan that strangled him. He drove deep, pinning her, and his seed jetted against the thin membrane covering his cock. In the aftermath there was sleep, and it was welcome but disappointing.

The weekend was creeping away quickly. Soon she’d be back to a cruddy life that didn’t involve snuggling up to Mike as she slept.

## Chapter Five

“Fuck!”

She careened out of the bed still clutching her phone. According to the clock it was after eleven. She should have been at work twenty minutes ago. The fact that it was her boss she burst upon in the shower made little difference. She still needed the hours and the money.

When she yanked back the door, Mike did a half turn under the spray. His arm was raised as he scrubbed the dark patch of hair underneath. He looked tickled at her panicked expression.

“Hey!”

“It's Monday, right? I'm late. We're late.”

He squinted as the errant spray shot into his eye. “No, we're not. I talked to your boss, and he's giving you the night off.”

“Mike, I'm serious. I can't take the night off. I need the tips.”

“Justine came in for you. You'll give her Thursday night.”

“No, I *can't*. I have other things to do. I have a class at six thirty, and I can't fucking well be there and at the bar at the same time.”

“Then some other time.”

“Oh Christ! Forget it!”

Monday was a reality check indeed. His cheeky attitude no longer seemed endearing but infuriating. Standing naked in his luxury shower in his fancy house where he kept his expensive toys, was it any wonder he could be so nonchalant? The past where he had to worry about things like money and rent was a million years ago, and he'd just gotten laid. Multiple times. It was good to be Mike.

It was a trial to be Kate, and at the moment, Mike was making it worse.

He caught her wrist as she turned to storm out. “Hey, knock it off. It's no big deal. You were sound asleep, and since I'm the one who kept you awake most of the weekend, I figured it was the least I could do.”

“Mike, I have to get to work. I can't lose any hours.”

“You won't. Look, when the Wit Cracker opens for business, I'm going to need you for overtime. I'll pay you in advance for one night, like I did when you had that ugly mid-term, and you can make it up to me. And before you get all snotty about it, this *is* your boss talking.”

She scowled and set her phone on the toilet tank. “My boss has soapsuds running down the crack of his ass.”

“Get in here.”

He dragged her into the shower and cinched her around the waist while she grumbled, holding her in place against him as the pulsing stream hammered her bare back and immediately loosened the tension she had awoken to. She tipped her head back and drenched her hair and then shuddered at the brush of his mouth across her collarbone.

Wrapping her arms around him and heaving a titanic sigh, she melted.

“Better?” he whispered against her mouth.

“Only if you tell me I don't have to get out of here.”

“I was meaning to add more of a wet, naked, redheaded motif to the bathroom anyway.” He reached past her to the small shelf jutting out of the slick wall and gooped her hair with citrus-scented shampoo. She watched him through damp eyelashes, and he returned her languid smile.

“So, are we a thing now?”

She closed her eyes. “And here I was worried I'd get weird on you.”

“You should have known that complications would arise from asking me to be your plaything for the weekend,” he said with a grin and ran his hands down her slick back. She couldn't stop the shudder that followed in the wake of his fingertips. “You should have known that I'm too tenacious to give up something good so easily.”

“It would be a bad idea.”

"I beg to differ." He slipped a hand between her legs and ran his middle finger along her cleft.

"It can only go downhill. Everyone will think I'm only fucking you because you're loaded and I'm getting something out of it."

"Aren't you?" He chuckled, and as his finger delved inside, he gently bit her earlobe.

She bit back a little squeak and rubbed herself against him. The slickness of the water and soap running down their bodies combined with the scrape of his chest hairs against her bare breasts. Her nipples drew into tight, aching points.

She tilted her head back, and Mike lowered his mouth to hers, nibbling and licking, winning her over completely. She locked her hands behind his neck and parted her legs to better accommodate his probing finger.

"Everyone thinks we're fucking anyway."

"Oh *man*."

"Only for the last six months or so. Not exclusively, but on a semiregular basis. They just assumed."

"And did you deny it?"

"Of course not." Kate jabbed him in the ribs, and he grunted. "You wouldn't."

"No, I wouldn't," she said. "Not while it was untrue."

"And now?"

"I'll think about it."

He rubbed two fingers against her G-spot. Decadent little flames of pleasure ran up and down her pussy. She pressed her forehead against his shoulder and made a happy humming sound.

Mike chuckled. "Are you going to answer my question? I didn't get a yes or a no on whether or not I get to keep you."

"Maybe." He brushed her clit with his thumb, stoking the fire he'd created. Kate went on her toes and moaned. "Ask me when you're not trying to bias my opinion with sex and a dual-head shower."



He reached lower to cradle her ass while the other hand worked her. "I ought to fire you, woman. I'll never be able to work thinking of how cute you look when you're naked. Turn around."

"Nooooo. No shower sex. I don't want to die of a concussion."

"Don't you trust me?"

"No, I don't."

Nonetheless, she turned around, so that she stood with the torrent of hot water splashing her chest and streaming between her breasts and over her belly. He pulled her against his slick body, and his erection nestled against her lower back.

"Soap me up," he whispered against her ear and held his hands out in front of her.

Kate collected the bar from the shelf beside her and held it beneath the water. As she squelched it between their hands, the smell of bamboo filled the humid air around her. With his thighs bumping her from behind and his chin resting against her shoulder, it was like being wrapped up completely in Mike.

He led her hands up to her breasts and molded her fingers into the supple skin. His deep laugh skittered along her ear canal. "If you let me keep you, we can be this naughty all the time."

"Is this what you call *naughty*?" She lowered her chin to watch the slippery tango of soap-slicked fingers tugging at her nipples.

"Wouldn't you?"

He placed his thumb and forefingers over hers and squeezed down on the stiff peaks. At the same moment he pinched her earlobe between his teeth. Kate jerked and went up onto the balls of her feet as the prick of pleasure-pain raced to her toes.

He flicked his tongue behind her ear and tittered. "Admit it. This is pretty naughty."

Kate wriggled her bottom against him. "Hrmmm. Shower sex is cliché. You can do better."

"Do you want to know something?" He covered one of her hands and slid it over her belly. "I fantasize about this while I jerk off in the shower."

"You lie," she sang, but she smiled as she watched their fingers disappear between her legs.

"It's true. I'd just close my eyes and imagine I had you in here with me, just like this, and you'd be dying for me to play with your pussy." He pushed down on her finger and crooked it over her clit. "Just like this."

He started off slow, leading the tip of her finger back and forth, over and over. Her eyelids grew heavy as she watched soapy digits roll over the slick bud until it was fully erect and straining from the swollen hood. A fever was building fast, a single point of heat blooming beneath their fingers to curl like smoke rings through her abdomen.

"Help me," he whispered against her ear and began to move behind her, rubbing his thick shaft between their slick bodies. "Show me how you like it."

She turned her head and parted her lips, inviting his kiss. Mike lowered his mouth to hers. The tip of his tongue touched hers. With a low moan, Kate demanded more, and he obliged. The hand over her breast cupped and squeezed, the one between her legs picked up the pace.

"Like that." She sighed against him. "Oh, I like that."

She placed her finger over his, and she drove him faster than before. The pressure increased with the tempo. Pleasure scrolled in little coils along the length of her pussy.

He dragged her back a step, and the spray of the shower pummeled her belly, sending an even stream between her legs that sent her over the edge. Her whole body lit up as the euphoria arced outward from her pussy.

Far from sated, she led his finger to her throbbing cleft, and as he plunged deep, she sucked his tongue into her mouth.

Mike tightened his grip on her. He moaned around her tongue, a garbled sound she was sure was her name. His cock swelled at the small of her back, and then she felt the warm deluge as he spurted against her wet skin.

Kate broke the kiss long enough to turn in his arms and pull him under the spray. Still trembling from his release, he cinched her in his embrace and held her close.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was at the foot of the bed, drying her hair with a big, fluffy towel when he brought her coffee in a huge mug and then stretched out behind her. Clad only in his boxers, he looked so damned good, she smiled and flipped her head so that her hair hid her smile, but it was no use.

He trailed a finger down her spine. “What is it?”

“Nothing. I'm just happy I have the day off.”

“Do I sense another opportunity to thank me?”

“If I thank you any more, you're going to have what looks like a pencil eraser between your legs.” He pinched her hip, and she jerked and then threw the damp towel over him. “Am I a prisoner, or can I do stuff today?”

“You want to 'do stuff' that doesn't involve me?” He went flat on his back with a grunt and mimed an arrow going through his heart. “Owww.”

“Seriously, I have to go to the library downtown,” she said. “I have a big paper coming up, and I've gotten nothing done. Do you have any idea what it's like to have to compile a bibliography consisting entirely of articles on child rearing in medieval England?”

“The bigger question would be why you're doing this at all.”

“It's required.”

“No, I mean getting this degree.”

Kate paused to take a sip of her coffee and digest the dismissive tone. “What do you mean?”

“Well, what do you get at the end of it other than debt?” He pushed up against the mattress and scooted next to her. He seemed oblivious to the way she stiffened when he pulled her against him. “I mean, think about it. You've been at this for three years, and you've got one left. What next?”

“I told you, I'm going to work on my honours certificate while I apply to grad schools.”

“More debt.”

“Which I will be able to pay for once I'm finished.”

“How?”

Her mouth popped open and then closed again.

“See? You're busting your ass to end up in the same place you started.”

“What happened to 'Good for you, Katie' whenever I told you I got an A?”

“And I meant it. You worked really hard to get those grades, but—”

“*But?*”

“But it seems to be like you're working hard for a lot of nothing.”

“It's not nothing!”

His big arms clamped around her when she tried to pull away, and his laughter was infuriating. “I'm just thinking you should probably think ahead a little more. Next year when you have some free time, you should take some business classes as a backup. No sense in having all those brains unless you use them.”

“I am using my brain, thank you—and let go of me. I'm pissed.”

“Don't get your ass up.”

“Why shouldn't I? You're telling me I'm wasting my time in school.” She wrenched out of his grasp and snatched up the wet towel before stomping back towards the bathroom. “And stop staring at my ass.”

Kate turned her back on him when he appeared in the doorway. She seethed as she squirted a dollop of his hair gel into the palm of her hand.

His condescending expression jabbed her like a pin, even as the sight of all that breadth taking up the entrance zinged right to her toes.

“I'm sorry,” he said quietly.

“No, you're not.”

“All right, I'm not. Look—”

“No, you look. I don't know at which point getting into my pants opened the door for you to stomp on my pride, but I'm not putting up with it. I'm not taking advice from someone whose entire career has consisted of *dicking around* from bar to bar for twenty years.”

“I beg your pardon? *Dicking around?*”

“That's right. But I guess that qualifies you to tell your poor little waitress how to live her life.” She twisted the tap and held her hands under the scalding water. “Never mind that you'd be in a rubber room right now if you hadn't had me around in the last few months.”

“And that's the point I was trying to make before you decided this was some kind of pissing contest. I wasn't trying to tell you how to live your life. I was *suggesting* that you ought to give some thought to what comes next.”

"I finish school. I get a job that doesn't involve being on my feet for eight or more hours a day and leave me smelling like stale beer."

Mike narrowed his eyes. "Well, Jesus, Katie, I had no idea you hated working for me so much. This has been a very enlightening conversation."

"What business is it of yours, anyway? The work on the new bar is going to shit, and you need a new project?"

"Kiss my ass, Kate." He turned his back on her and charged into the bedroom.

She turned to the mirror, and her reflection scowled back at her as she scrunched her hair into damp ringlets. Like a bird that displayed its colours when threatened, Kate's face had turned into a canvas of pink and red splotches.

"If you want to go to the goddamn library, I'll take you to the goddamn library," he called from the bedroom. "While you're there, I'll go back to the bar and do some fucking around."

She slammed the door and sat on the toilet seat. She felt like a fool, bare-assed naked in Mike's luxurious bathroom.

Fuming, she was giving serious thought to using his toothbrush to clean the shower drain when the little voice of reason popped up and told her that he meant well.

*Yeah, that's a nice way of saying he thinks he's always right.*

She could hear him stomping around in the bedroom, and it gave her a tiny bit of pleasure to think that he was as pissed off as she was. She sulked until she got cold, and then she slipped into the black fleece robe that hung behind the door. As she was tying the second loop on the belt, he spoke up from the other side.

"Katie, I didn't mean it the way you took it."

She hung her head back with a sigh. "Never mind. I'm done fighting."

"Can I come in?"

She pulled the door open and looked up at him with all the indignation she could muster. "You know what? You can think I'm wasting my time all you want, but do me a favour and keep your mouth shut about it, okay? What are you staring at?"

He took one long look at her from head to toe, and his Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed. "You just look so fuckable in my robe."

“Mike.” She brushed past him and headed for the stairs. “I mean it. I’m not like you. I just want to get enough of an education to get myself a government job so that one day I can stop living hand to mouth. I know that’s difficult for you to comprehend, as you’re driving around in the Blue Rocket and planning to take over the world with some Absolut and a gimmick, but this is my dream—a pension and a dental plan.”

“I worry about you. I couldn’t say it until now.”

There was a little prick at the back of her throat as she trotted towards the kitchen. She went to the ridiculously complicated coffeemaker and threw open the lid. “Sleeping with me doesn’t give you the green light to start that shit.”

“I said I was sorry.” He groaned and scrubbed his hands over his unshaven face. “I still think you’re shortchanging yourself. I know I could never have kept MacNab’s going and at the same time gotten the Wit Cracker past the planning stage without you. Do you want me to do that?”

“No, I can figure it out,” she lied and stared at the buttons on the face of the coffeemaker. They might as well have been cave drawings.

“I didn’t think you’d get so pissed. I’ve twitted you about stuff before, and you never went off on me like that. Button with the squiggly line.”

“I know that,” she mumbled and jabbed the button. It didn’t light up; there was no beep. Nothing happened. Her temper was climbing to the boiling point again.

“So what’s up, Katie? We can’t be friends anymore because we had sex?”

Taking a deep breath, she turned and leaned against the counter. “I don’t know. It seemed like it was doable on Saturday night.”

There was a wary drawl to his reply. “Not now?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t break up with Joe the Amazing Do-nothing to get hooked up with someone who insists on tweaking the parts of my life he thinks needs fixing.”

“Katie—”

“I don’t want this to be one big mess. This weekend was unbelievable, and I probably won’t say no if the opportunity to do it again arose, but if it means getting into a row like that, I’d rather we just forget this ever happened.”

Kate watched his mouth tighten into a white line as he bit back whatever it was that came to mind and his fingers curled into a fists in front of him. His round shoulders sagged, and he sighed. Suddenly he looked at a loss.

“You know, I can't just forget,” he said. “Like I said upstairs, I think you're wrong about you and me, and I'm not going to just roll over and give up on it. But if you need some space, I'll give it to you. And I am sorry.”

The small smile he gave her did nothing to alleviate the queer dread at the pit of her stomach, but she smiled back and turned back to the coffeemaker.

Not a gurgle, not a drop, not a whiff of java.

“What the hell?”

“Did you plug it in?”

She eyed the cord that snaked behind the machine. “Shut up, Mike.”

## Chapter Six

“Three bottles of Moosehead and a”—Kate suppressed a gag—“pineapple rum cooler.”

“Ew,” Chris agreed and ducked into the cooler, squeezing to the side as Mike came out with a case of Corona over his head.

“*Ew*, what?”

“Fruity drink. Almost as bad as those orange-cream abominations.” She stuck her tongue out. “I *hate* ladies' night. I feel like puking with every order I take. The worst is when they order those milky things.”

“Better get used to it, Katie. Once things get shaking downstairs, you'll be up to your eyeballs in girly drinks.”

“For the millionth time, Mike, I resent your referring to them as *girly drinks*. I would never put one of those to my lips, and I'm a girl.”

He laughed as he loaded the fridge under the bar and winked.

“No, you're a hard-drinking, hard-loving woman. There's quite the difference.”

It was such a harmless thing to say, but since she'd been to bed with him everything seemed to take on a different meaning. Every look, every gesture, every meaningless flirtation was loaded with something more, and she was having a hard time telling the difference between business as usual and a new dynamic that had sprung from her weekend with him.

He'd driven her home the previous evening, and while she had tried to maneuver onto neutral ground, he'd had his way, sending her into her apartment looking as rumpled as anyone who had spent fifteen minutes engaged in some heavy petting in the vestibule. It had physically hurt to push him away, and he'd backed out of the security door with a grimace and a hard-on that could have shattered a brick wall had he bumped into one.



Kate stood on her toes and watched the top of his head bob as he worked. “Hey, I was going to ask you earlier. Can I have next Wednesday or Friday off? I have some stuff to do.”

“More stuff?” He laughed and straightened up, a golden bottle in hand. “Have you got anyone to take your place?”

“You haven't even made the schedule.”

“Doesn't matter. We have dollar-drink night on Wednesday, and then on Friday we're hosting that private party for the radio station. I'd rather have my best waitress on both days.” He popped the cap on his bottle and took a long swing.

“I'll be back in a second.” Kate lifted her full tray. She made a quick round, taking orders from two tables and collecting empties, and returned to the bar more determined than ever. “All right, so I'll do Friday but not Wednesday.”

Mike turned his bottle of beer in his hand and eyed her. “So you're telling me you're not coming in on Wednesday.”

“No, I'm *recommending* that I don't come in on Wednesday because I've trained such a capable staff of waiters that you can count on them to do a stellar job in my absence. Can I get my order? Five green lizards and a fuzzy martini; three hard lemonades and a *Diet* Coke with Malibu.”

“I'll get it,” Mike said, and Chris moved down the bar to greet a group of newcomers.

Mike had stated in the past that getting behind the bar relaxed him, and at the moment she could see how much he loved it. He wore a little smile as he worked two glasses at once, and there was a funny little spring in every move he made.

He looked so at ease, so damned sexy.

She'd been working hard at keeping those dirty little thoughts about him from invading her headspace, but so far it had been an abysmal failure.

Did she usually brush up against him that much?

Did she always work so hard to catch his eye?

Was it always so damned hot in the bar, or was it the memory of him moving inside her?

“So if I give you the time off, what do I get in return?”

“Do I need to remind you how much I've done for you lately?” she said and immediately caught her unintentional double entendre with a wince. Never one to let an opportunity go to waste, Mike mocked her with a shocked expression as he lined up five shot glasses on the bar.

“Are you kidding me? I do believe that I have more than made up for all those things you've done for me.”

“Mike,” she said with a meaningful glance down the bar to where Chris was mixing. “Not here.”

He looked genuinely remorseful as he scrunched his nose at her. “Sorry. And I'm sorry, Kate, but I can't let you go those two nights.”

“What difference would it make compared to my calling in sick? How many times have you told me that you'd rather work a little harder than have me running around here with a snotty nose?” She slid her tray forward and placed the shots in a neat circle. “I'll tell you what the difference is: if I call in sick, you just lose me for a day. If you give me the night off, I have to make it up.”

“Then you shouldn't have said anything to me. You could have called in sick, and I would have been the one scrambling while you basked in all your free time.”

“What if I wiggle for you?”

He shot her a dubious look and placed three bottles of lemonade in front of her, then leaned forward and lowered his voice. “I've seen the full-body wiggle. The wiggle has lost its power over me. You've gained other powers, but since you seem to be so determined to keep what happened this weekend separate from what happens when you put that uniform on, you're screwed.”

“Then I quit. I can't work under these conditions,” she countered and fluttered her lashes at him. She went silent as she watched him work.

Every atom of common sense in her body told her that she was up against a volatile arrangement, and it still stung to think of what he had said to her about the direction she was leading her life, but she was willing to let it lie as long as he did. It was like their friendship had been a limp, lifeless balloon, and now that they'd jumped headfirst into *something more*, the relationship was bobbing up in the air with no real direction. It terrified and elated her with every

breath she had taken since he had left her the night before. The promise of every weekend spent like the one that had just passed was too much temptation.

“Wednesday, no. Friday, yes,” he said as he placed the last of the drinks on her tray. “You’re not doing another summer semester, so you’ve got seven days a week free. I don’t want any flack if I put you on the list for weekends. Forget about making up the time. You can take it as a personal day.”

“Thank you, Mike.” She beamed at him as she balanced her tray. “And I don’t care what you said. My wiggle is just as good today as it was last week.”

“You’re wrong; it’s better. Hey, before you go, let me ask you something—can I take you home again?”

This was what she’d been waiting for, what had been implied with every look that had passed between them. She hesitated long enough to look down the bar to make sure Chris was still out of earshot, and then she nodded.

“My place?”

He nodded and relaxed his shoulders a little, as though he had actually worried she’d say no.

Kate narrowed her eyes but couldn’t disguise her smile. “The power of the wiggle.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of the evening passed with a steady flow of customers but spiked for an hour after the movie theatre on the next block finished its last show. Kate was counting down the last hour, when she noticed one of her tables had been occupied by a bleary-eyed man in a blue tracksuit. He listed to one side and wore an expression of puzzlement as she approached him.

“Can I get you something?” she asked and stood over him. “Water? Coffee? Tea?”

“Beer.”

“How many have you had tonight?”

“None of your fucking business.”

“Sir, I can’t serve you if I think you’ve had too much to drink.” She glanced over her shoulder to where Mike chatted with Chris at the bar. On Wednesdays and on weekends there were bouncers, but it had been decided that any other time the staff could handle things. She

couldn't recall a single instance in which intervention was needed beyond a menacing look from Mike, but there was a first time for everything, and she preferred to know exactly where he was.

The man narrowed his eyes at her, and his mouth hung open. "I'm not drunk. I'm just tired. Get me a beer. Now."

"All right, then." She spun around and marched back to the bar. "Give me a bottle of water, please."

"Everything all right?" Chris asked and followed Mike's line of sight to the man.

"He's just a little cranky."

"He looks more than a little cranky," Mike said. "I'll take it to him."

Kate shook her head. "It's all right. Once he gets that he's not getting a drop out of me, I'll call him a cab, and he'll leave. I've seen bigger drunks over lunch. It'll be fine." She took the bottle from Chris and unscrewed the top. "Give me a glass too, with a straw."

When she returned to the table, she placed the glass in front of him and started to pour. "Here. This is on me."

"Where's my beer?"

"I told you, I can't serve you if I think you've had too much. I could get fined."

"I don't give a goddamn! I said I wanted a beer. I've been to every bar on this street, and they've all served me. Why are you being such a tight-assed bitch?"

She stuck the straw in the water and straightened. "I don't care where you've been, sir. I'm not serving you now. If you don't want the water, I can bring you soda, tea, coffee, juice, or I can have the bartender make you something virgin."

"Lady, don't talk to me like I'm a goddamned child!"

He picked up the glass and threw the contents in her face. In the shock of having ice-cold water hitting her, Kate lost her footing and fell back. She landed hard on her ass with a yelp.

Mike flew past her and had the guy pinned to the table before she even realized what she was seeing—or hearing. His words shredded through his furious tone.

"How about I take you outside and kick the shit out of you?" Kate scrambled to her feet with the help of Chris and one of the other waiters. "Mike, stop it. It was just water."

"I saw him push you."

"I didn't lay a hand on her!"

"He didn't!" she said. "I tripped. Mike, let him go. Chris, go out and make sure there's a cab waiting at the stand, please."

"Naw, call the police." Mike hauled the guy to his feet. "I want this asshole charged with assault."

*"He didn't push me.* He threw the water at me, and I fell. Come on, he's just drunk. Put him in a cab and send him home." She stepped forward and tried to extract Mike's fingers from the man's collar. "Let go."

"Let me take care of this, Kate."

She dug her nails into his fingers. He winced and eased up. Kate quickly grabbed hold of the man and hauled him away from Mike. "Are you all right?"

"My back hurts," he said feebly and shuffled along at her side. She patted his arm as she led him to the door, and he looked at her with heartbreak in his eyes. "Sorry."

"It's okay. Maybe after this you'll think twice before you're such a mean drunk. Where do you live?"

"I'm staying at the Marriott."

"Wow, you had quite a walk from the waterfront to this place. All uphill." Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Mike trailing behind them. "It's fine, Mike. Go get me a dry shirt, please."

He ignored her request and followed in her wake as she shoved the man ahead of her onto the street. Chris waited by the cab and yanked open the door as they appeared.

"I'm really sorry," the man said after he had been helped into the backseat. "I'm having a bad day."

"So am I," she told him.

Mike shoved in front of her and stuck his finger in the man's face. "If I see you in my bar again, I'm going to call the cops on you, you hear me?"

The cab pulled away, and the trio filed back into the club. Chris returned to the bar while Mike and Kate made their way down the stairs to his office. She went directly behind his desk and dug into the bottom drawer, where he kept a stash of T-shirts to give to visiting guests.

Mike stood with his back to the closed door, his arms crossed over his chest and a scowl on his face.

"I'm not going to say anything," she said, "save to remind you of the speeches you've given me when I get a little hot under the collar about the way someone rubs me out there."

"I thought he pushed you."

"I know, but he didn't, which means that if you had given him a belt in the mouth, *he* could have charged *you* with assault." She yanked her wet shirt over her head and unhooked her bra. "He probably still could, but lucky for you he probably won't remember the six-foot-something Sasquatch who pushed him around."

"I'm sorry if I scared you."

"What's up? Is this the moment you finally crack under the pressure of it all?"

"I guess that's part of it." He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "We're really behind. I don't think I'm going to make the opening I set. That's not what set me off, though, you know."

It was her turn to sigh. "It's not like this is the first time someone got a little pissy with me, and it's not going to be the last time. Are you just going to lose it whenever someone is mean to me now?"

Mike moved from the door to the desk and sat on the edge. Exhaustion was carved in the fine lines around his mouth. "What do you want me to say?"

"For one, I don't want you to ask me what you should say." She slipped a dry T-shirt over her head and held her arms out. The shirt almost reached her knees. "This is huge."

"I like the little one better."

She giggled and came around the desk to join him. "It's almost two o'clock. Buy me a slice of pizza down at the corner. We can forget about this just like we forgot about the swizzle-stick thing."

"That's not fair. You got four days to forget about the swizzle stick, and you get a slice of pizza. I get no food and only one night?"

"To start."

He raised his brows and circled his arms around her waist when she pressed up against him. Her damp skin warmed with the heat from his body reaching out for her. “I think I'm winning you over. I might have a cute date for the opening.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “I wouldn't go that far just yet, but that pizza is a start. Come on, let's—wait, did you just say I could have the night of the opening off?”

“You wish,” he said and gave her ass a light tap.

## Chapter Seven

“What are you looking at?” she asked through a yawn almost three and a half hours later.

Mike had gotten out of bed to go the washroom and was now parked at the window on the far side of her bedroom.

“I'm making sure my car is still there. Your neighbourhood is terrifying.”

“It's not that bad. There's a little park just up the road that's nice and quiet. Besides, your old neighbourhood wasn't the best. You had hookers two blocks away.”

“There are always hookers two blocks away, no matter where you go.” He let the curtain drop and crawled back under the covers with her. “Do you think it's ever going to warm up?”

“I hadn't noticed. I was too busy working up a sweat.” She flipped onto her side and draped an arm over his stomach. “Why don't you complain about how hard my bed is again? Or perhaps you'd like to go back into the kitchen and point out the sound my fridge is making. I'll give you some paper, and you can make one of your lists.”

“I've got a list for you, and everything on it involves my ass and your lips.” He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, crushing her with his squeeze. “I've been thinking.”

“Hrm?”

“It's going to be a little crowded downstairs once the Wit Cracker opens. I can't run the security company out of there anymore. I'm going to clear out one of the storage rooms on the third floor and set up an office.”

“That makes sense. You're looking at that contract with Feener Entertainment since they booked all those big concerts.” She yawned again, louder than ever, and buried her face into his chest. The sun was making a milky appearance, and the time was creeping up on five thirty. “You know, if you cleaned all the junk out of the entire third floor, you'd have another office you could rent.”



“That's what I'm talking about, Katie. You and your big brain,” he said with a low chuckle. “Yeah, I'm going to have to hire a few more guys if I get the contract. Actually more like ten guys.”

“That's a lot of gorillas.”

“So I was thinking I needed an operations manager.”

“A head gorilla.” Beneath the covers, Kate scratched her nails over his flat belly. “I can make the calls if you want.”

“If you keep touching me like this, I'm going to keep you up for a few more hours.” He grunted and pushed up onto his shoulders for a stretch, then flipped onto his side. “Yeah, so what do you think?”

“Like I said, it makes sense.”

He ran his large hand over her hip. “No, I mean about the manager's job. It's yours.”

Kate said nothing for a moment and then, “What?”

“Like I said, you have a big brain. I want to use it to keep things moving. A big part of my job is selling myself and the bars, and if the Wit Cracker takes off, I want to look at maybe opening something on the waterfront. I need someone to keep it all together.”

Dread, the same dread she had felt Monday afternoon after he had made his quip about her studies, seeped to the bone. “I'm not exactly qualified. You could probably call an agency and find someone with a good background.”

“Why would I want to do that when I have you?”

“Because I'm a waitress who knows how to use a computer. A manager that does not make.”

Mike propped his head up onto his fist and smiled. His hair stuck up at the top of his head, and even in the dim morning light Kate could see the beginnings of a beard sprouting on his chin. In spite of the sour feeling forming in her stomach, Kate couldn't help but reach out and rub his prickly cheek.

He caught her hand and kissed the palm. “Do you want me to give you this in point form? You know MacNab's inside and out. You've been with me on the Wit Cracker since its

conception. You handled the bookings for M&M when I was on vacation. Again, why would I want to hire someone else when I have you?”

She chewed on her words carefully before letting them go. “Does this have anything to do with what happened tonight?”

“No, I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

“Why didn’t you say anything before?”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t sure I wanted to go forward with it. Why would I want to get your hopes up?”

“Wait, what is that supposed to mean?” She pulled her hand out of his and sat up. “How would that get my hopes up?”

Mike’s sigh was long and fraught as he rolled onto his back. “I don’t want to argue with you.”

“I don’t want to argue with you either, but I’m detecting the unpleasant stench of bullshit wafting around this proposal. Now how would that get my hopes up?”

“Aren’t you looking for some extra cash? You took my head off yesterday when I suggested you give up one of your shifts. This job pays a lot more.”

His expression was so benign, that had they been having any other conversation, she would have rolled her eyes and waved off his suggestion, but this time it only incited the worst feeling in her stomach, like she had swallowed a glassful of lava.

“I don’t believe you, you cocky son of a bitch.” She threw the covers off and leapt out of the bed.

When she hit the overhead light switch, Mike threw his arm over his eyes and groaned. “What did I say now?”

“I—” Her anger made it impossible to form a sentence. She grabbed her oversized shirt from the floor and yanked it over her head, then picked up his jeans and flung them at him. “I honestly don’t believe you, Mike MacNab. You didn’t convince me how right you are on the first try, so you come up with this?”

He threw his jeans right back at her. “Kate, *what did I say?*”

She stopped at the foot of the bed and glared at him. "I wasn't having money problems until a couple of weeks ago when I kicked out my roommate, and you didn't know about that until Saturday."

"I'm not stupid. You put in a lot of hours before you kicked Joe out on his arse."

"Because you asked me to, not because I needed the money. *You* asked *me* to come in all those times, not the other way around."

"You could have said no," he said.

"It's like I said yesterday, I'm just another project for you. It wasn't enough for us to have a good time, was it?"

She left him gawping at her from the centre of the bed and moved through her apartment to the narrow kitchen with pure hellfire running through her veins. She was reeling from the shock of having gone from the spectacular high of being in his arms to this dismal low. She paused in front of the fridge with her fingers curled around the edge.

A muffled cough preceded his appearance. He'd put his jeans and socks on but carried his sneakers at his side. "I'm sorry."

"No, you're not," she snapped and yanked open the fridge door. "You've been working this out in your head all day. I know what you're like, Mike. I've been watching the way you work for five years. I just got the same pitch you gave to that radio exec when you tried to get that live broadcast from the bar up and running. If one tactic doesn't work, try another one."

He moved in close, bumping her against the open mouth of the fridge. "Is that what you think?"

"That's what I know." She grabbed the milk from the inside of the door and gave him a shove. "I know how you work. You get an idea in your head, and right away you want to start putting pieces together. It was the same thing with the Wit Cracker. One day you went down into the basement and decided you were going to clean it up and rent it out. The next day you came in and said you were going to open a second bar, and it was just go, go, go. That's what this is. 'Katie is broke. Katie is alone. Katie needs her entire life fixed, and I'm the only one who can do it.'"

"Christ, I might as well have been talking to a wall when I offered you the job," he said and started pacing the narrow strip of linoleum. "I don't want to fix you. I want to hire you."

She yanked the coffee carafe from the burner and held it under the faucet. "Tell you what. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt if you'll answer one question: when exactly did you decide that M&M needed to move upstairs?"

"I told you, I've been thinking about it for a while."

"Define *a while*."

"When the work started downstairs."

"That's a lie." She cut the water and flipped the top of the coffeemaker. "You were at that hospitality retreat in Whistler when they started work."

"When I got back. I was only gone for a week. What difference does it make?" He dropped his sneakers onto the floor and shoved his foot into one. "I don't need this crap."

"Then tell me the truth. Did you offer me that job because you want me off the floor, where I won't get drinks thrown in my face or groped by rabid hockey fans, or is it because you think I'm wasting my time in school? Or is it both?"

Mike went on one knee and jerkily tied his laces. "Fine. You want the truth? It's both. I don't like seeing you struggle, and I sure as hell don't like standing at the bar waiting for the next drunk to put his hands on you."

She pushed the button on the coffeemaker and glared down at him. "It didn't bother you before."

"Christ almighty, Kate! Do you just want to drive me into the loony bin?" He stood to full height in a menacing display like none she'd ever seen on him. "It always bothered me, but like I said yesterday, I couldn't do a thing about it. Now that you're my girlfriend, I'll be damned if I'm just going to sit on my hands and let you try and keep your head above water for the rest of your life."

She planted her hands on her hips. "I'm not your girlfriend, Mike. I'm not even sure I'm still your friend right now, but I'm damn sure not like the other women you've hooked up with. I always wondered what the appeal was, but now it's clear."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"They were all eager, willing, and ready to become whatever it is you wanted them to be. This is no different, no matter how big you think my brain is."

He used his whole body to bully her back against the counter, and some of her bravado waned. “You know something? I’m done being insulted, so let’s take a moment to discuss your flaws for a while, shall we? Let me tell you a story: one day my good friend Katie was having a bad day and wanted to get laid, so she went to the one person she knew she could get to eat out of the palm of her hand.”

“That’s not true,” she said and swallowed the hard ball that swelled at the back of her throat.

Mike went on. “So like a good little dog, I gave her everything she wanted, but the second I stopped playing her game and started showing an interest in something other than a good hard fuck, she got her ass up.”

“You call trying to put my life in order showing an interest?” She shook her head and fought to keep back the tears that itched behind her eyes. “This whole thing was a mistake.”

“Why? Because this head game you’re trying to play with me isn’t working?” He sneered in her face. It was the ugliest thing she’d ever seen, hitting her like a punch to the gut. “You go right ahead. I’ve been playing at this bullshit a hell of a lot longer than you have.”

“I’m not playing head games with you, but you are right about one thing. The only reason I asked you to take me home this weekend was because I knew you were a sure thing, just like you said.”

He stiffened, his expression darkening around the edges. “Oh yeah?”

“I knew you’d fuck me until I couldn’t see straight. That’s all I wanted. I wanted the Mike MacNab all those women are always panting over.”

She gripped the edge of the counter as he pushed against her. “That’s a pretty fucking cold thing to say to a friend, Kate, like I’m some fuck toy you decided to play with one night.”

“That’s not it at all, Mike. We had fun. I like you, but this has disaster written all over it.”

“*Bullshit*. You’re trying to tell me that there’s nothing more to this? We’re friends who fuck?” His upper lip curled a little more over his teeth. “Nothing more?”

“Thanks to you and your big ideas, I don’t think we can even be that anymore.”

She wished she had chosen that moment to look away. His expression was virtually unchanged, but she could see the fire behind his eyes diminish. He lifted his chin an inch and gave his head a short shake.

“Maybe this was a mistake. I'm too much of a prick, and you're too much of a bitch.”

“Get out.”

“What happened, Kate? Did you get tired of mind fucking Joe and need a break?”

She shoved hard against his chest, and the bubble burst: tears squeezed from the corners of her eyes, and her voice cracked when she opened her mouth. “Get out!”

Mike stood in front of her like a carbon copy of the man she knew. She saw none of the cheer that was his trademark. His eyes were without their usual kindness. His chest pulsed in quick bursts, and his nostrils flared with every breath he drew and expelled. His cheeks were ruddy with uneven splotches that met and formed a stain along his neck and over his chest.

He looked like his entire world was coming down around him, and he couldn't do anything but watch it crumble while he simmered in his helplessness. He looked exactly how she felt at that moment.

Kate parted her lips and sucked in a deep breath, but before she could even conjure a single word, Mike threw his hands up and slowly walked out of the kitchen. She curled her toes against the vinyl tile beneath her feet and fought the urge to follow him, but she was too exhausted from the fight and her resolve not to fall apart in front of him.

Covered in his T-shirt, he returned and stood in the doorway. “What I said yesterday was wrong. I should have kept my mouth shut, but I'm so used to just telling you what I think that it never occurred to me that I'd sound like such an asshole.”

Kate could find nothing to say. Her tongue had lost its spark and was now just a useless, dry thing filling her mouth. She didn't have the guts to look directly at him, and so she stared at a nick on his chin.

He went on. “What I said today in there, though, I'm not sorry for. I'd been throwing the idea around in my head for months now. After you had your little conniption fit over missing a shift, I figured I might as well get on with it and get you out of your fix at the same time. You had a line, and maybe I stepped over it, but that doesn't give you the right to make me feel like this. I'm not your stud, and I'm not your bitch.”

His words stuck her like a pin and gave her back her voice. She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head. “I might have believed that if you hadn't tried this shit on me twice. You know what, Mike? You want someone to suck your dick and bow to your every whim? Go back to the bar and put on one of your shows. There's no shortage of women dying to get in your pants *and* in your wallet, and they'll be lining up like they always do.”

The moment stretched on, long and barren, and when Kate found the mettle to meet his stare, her stomach rolled at the disappointment she found.

“Go to hell, Katie.”

After the door slammed behind him, she couldn't move. She was afraid that if she let go of the counter, her knees would buckle or she'd throw up. There was nothing for her to do but let the tears burn as his dismissal cut deep and marked the death of their friendship.

The roar of the Blue Rocket's engine turning over in the parking lot went through her with a jolt, and she held her breath until it whined out of earshot. She could scarcely believe how quickly her anger had bled out of her, and she couldn't remember the moment it happened.

Testing her legs, she turned and switched the coffeemaker off. She left the full pot on the burner as she went back to the bedroom. Through the blur of her misery, she saw his jacket, half hanging over the edge of the bed, and suddenly she was angry again—at herself, at Mike, and at every living thing on earth.

She struck out at it, banished it to the floor, and kicked it under her bed, and then threw herself onto the heap of bedding just as the bubble burst again and the tears scalded.

## Chapter Eight

The bedroom door flew open, and before Kate could object, Joe charged in. “Kate, you seen my keys?”

With a growl, she slammed the ballpoint onto the surface of her textbook and glared as Joe loped across the room and immediately began overturning everything on the dresser, before tossing a neat pile of laundry onto the floor.

“No, I haven't, and I told you that when the door is shut not to bother me. I'm trying to cram, and I can't bloody well do it with you coming in here every five minutes.”

“Jeez, sorry. Calm the fuck down.” He dropped to his knees and threw the bed skirt up over the side, disrupting the papers she had strewn across the bed. “I'm late, you know.”

*To go drinking, you dick.*

She swept her papers out of his destructive reach.

“Hey, whose is this?” He straightened and held up Mike's jacket. She hadn't forgotten about it, but she hadn't had it in her to move it, let alone return it. She was terrified that one day he'd come looking for it.

She raised her brows at Joe. “It's not yours.”

“I can see that. Whose is it?”

“It's been there for a few weeks.”

She watched his dull brown eyes move from the jacket and back to her. “You saying you were sleeping with someone else before we got back together?”

“That's exactly what I'm saying.” She slammed her textbook over her notepad and snatched the jacket from him. “Like you didn't go out and get laid after we broke up.”

“Who the hell was he?”



“None of your business. That's who.” She jumped from the bed, threw open the closet door, and stuffed it inside. “Go find your keys, Joe.”

After a moment's pause, she turned. He had his wide mouth twisted up at the corner, like he was completely stumped as to whether he should be pissed off or just let it go. With a shrug, he chose the latter and resumed his search.

“You sure you don't want to come with me?”

“Positive. I'd rather shoot myself.”

He grunted and brushed past her to dig into his coat pockets. “We can go to that pizza place instead. They're licensed, and they have a big-screen.”

“I told you, I have an exam tomorrow morning. Do you ever listen when I talk?”

He wasn't listening now. She returned to sag back down on the bed and prayed to develop instant psychic powers that would get him the location of his keys and therefore out of her apartment as quickly as possible.

“You got any more of those two-for-one coupons left? I feel like wings.”

“They don't take them anymore. They stopped taking them last month.”

“Yeah, but they know me. Mike knows me.”

*Yeah, and Mike's going to be really happy to see you tonight.*

She'd quit. She hadn't even given two weeks' notice. She'd called the office at the crack of dawn and left a voice message on his private line. He didn't call back, and in three days her paycheck arrived. By then she had signed up with every employment agency in the city and had found a series of dismal banquet jobs that required her to smile constantly and wear the most depressing tartan vest to charm the daylights out of visiting dignitaries.

Joe was a fluke. He'd drunk dialed and caught her while she was neck-deep in self-pity, and she'd been miserable since she'd let him back into her life. She hadn't let him move back in, but she tolerated him, thinking that having him around would make her feel better.

She'd been wrong. She felt worse than ever.

“Did you check the kitchen counter?”

He turned and blank stared at her and then walked out of the room. He let out a whoop, and she heard him jangle his found keys victoriously.

“You sure you don't want to come with me?”

“Yes! Go!”

“You want me to come back?”

“No. Exam at eight o'clock. Try to remember that when you're stumbling out of MacNab's in about four hours, please.”

He was shuffling at the door when she called him back. “Do me a favour and text me to let me know you didn't fall in the harbor, would you?”

With a grin, he tipped his Leafs cap and made his exit.

Kate sighed and shook her head. He'd be back, hammering at her door at two in the morning and yakking her ear off until four. She'd arrive at her exam shaking from too much coffee and too little sleep, and after she bombed her exam, she'd snarl at him for the rest of the day.

And then she'd feel terrible, just like she felt now that he was gone, and she could still taste the acid on her tongue.

It had never bothered her before, but since Mike's caustic words that night she'd been more aware of how she treated Joe and reflective of how she had treated her previous lovers.

Is that how she came across? It rankled her to think so. It hurt even more when she considered that was how Mike saw her.

She firmly believed that she was right. Mike had stepped over a line, twice, and he didn't see where he had erred, but Kate desperately wished she had reacted differently. They had been friends. They had sat at the bar at closing time and told dirty jokes, had sung bad karaoke duets at every Christmas party thrown at MacNab's, and he'd hugged her and said, “*Poor Katie*,” after her cat had gotten loose and was hit by a car.

*He told me about his kids. He never talked to anyone about his kids before.*

She gave up on her textbook and shambled into the living room to try zoning out with some sci-fi TV. After a half an hour she was back in the bedroom, rereading the same paragraph and seeing none of the words as anything meaningful.

She missed him.

At first she thought it had been the bar and the atmosphere that she missed, especially when her cheeks were sore from fake smiling all day, but the truth was that she missed Mike. She felt like shit without seeing him every day. She just wanted to sidle up next to him and goad him until he teased her so mercilessly, she felt a tickle at the back of her throat and between her toes.

If she just gave in and called him, what would happen? They would forgive one another, but then what? One of two scenarios would play out: the things that had caused the rift would hang in the air like a bad smell, and to keep the peace she'd go along with it until it fizzled; or he would nod and agree that becoming a couple was stupid, and they'd pretend everything was all right, but the friendship they'd had would be gone, and in its place would be a façade that would get so strained it would be unbearable.

"Go to hell, Katie," he'd said, and he'd meant it. Just thinking about it made the contents of her stomach curdle. No one else called her *Katie*, and he'd used it like it was a profanity.

She drew her legs up against her chest and rested her cheek on the tops of her knees. She felt absolutely hollow. "I really fucked things up."

\* \* \* \* \*

After her exam that she could confidently say she passed but little more, Kate trudged four blocks from the university to the ritzy shopping district nearby. She avoided all the small shops and went directly to the coffee bar at the end of the street. She missed having a steady job and being able to bend her budget a little to treat herself: a manicure, a tin of that white chocolate body scrub she liked, one of those seven-dollar candy apples they sold at the mall.

The last thing she needed was to spend her money on an expensive iced coffee, but she desperately needed a pick-me-up. Counting out her change as she walked through the door, she figured she had enough to get a brownie with her coffee and felt a little better.

"Frozen mocha and an espresso brownie, please," she ordered. The barista grabbed a cup, and Kate's attention turned to a sign taped to the wall behind him: WE'RE HIRING.

*I could make coffee. No goofy tartan vest. A discount on expensive coffee. Plus it's nice and quiet in here.*

She moved along the counter to where the clerk was dumping ice into her cup. "Hey, what kind of shifts are you guys looking to fill?"

He shrugged. "You'd have to ask the manager, but I think early morning to midday. If you want to leave an application, I can give it to her."

"What do you get for tips?"

"Not a lot. Nickels and dimes in the tip cup, but it pays above the minimum wage."

That didn't sound very promising. She glanced at the tip cup by the cash register and saw that it was pitifully empty. What little interest she had fizzled out, and she sagged. She'd be better off applying at one of the dozens of restaurants downtown. It was a thought she'd been chewing on since quitting MacNab's, but overall she had been hoping to avoid working downtown. Eventually she'd run into someone she used to work with, or worse...

Like fate had been trailing her all morning, waiting for her to turn her thoughts to him so it could deliver a kick to the gut, when Kate turned to check out the street outside, she saw Mike at a table in the far corner of the dining area.

He hadn't seen her. His attention was on the woman sitting at his side.

Kate spun around and lowered her head. The lethargy she had been suffering all morning vanished and was replaced by raw panic that sent her heart racing and a hard lump into her throat. On her best day she wouldn't have been ready for this. She knew that it was inevitable that she'd cross his path, but not today, not while she had black circles under her eyes and felt like she had been scraped off the sidewalk. She just wanted to get the hell out of there before he saw her and she'd have to suffer that hellish moment of not knowing what to do if he approached her or, worse, rebuked her.

She took a quick peek in his direction, and the lump in her throat swelled. The woman he was with was incredibly pretty and very young.

Very, *very* young, she thought and tried to connect the familiarity she found in the narrow face. Mike laughed, and the girl laughed with him; her nose crinkled the same way as his, and when she laughed it was like hearing an echo.

*Jesus Christ, it's his daughter.*

For just a moment longer Kate watched as the Mike and the girl held their phones out in front of them to compare the glossy faces. She remembered that he had said that his son had been into the bar, but she drew a blank when it came to the girl. Something about Facebook and

horseback riding. She was pretty sure he'd said they had never met, or that they were just starting out when it came to reconnecting as father and daughter.

His smile lingered as he pointed something out on the girl's phone, and Kate felt a tug at the back of her throat. No matter what the girl said in return, his eyes shone with delight. He looked so contented and happy just to be there.

She remembered the look on his face when he had left her apartment, the look she put there, and she felt like throwing up.

"Mocha and a brownie," the clerk said as he placed her order on the counter. "And you wanted an application?"

"No, never mind," she mumbled and grabbed her purchase. Her heart hammered a little faster as she made her way to the door and kept her head down.

As she shouldered open the door, she couldn't resist one last look. She paid for it. Mike looked up, and his smiling eyes met hers.

Kate's feet stopped working, and she stumbled into the alcove like a puppet with its strings abruptly cut. His smile waned, but before he could react, the girl caught his attention with something she said, and his gaze snapped back to her.

Kate bolted onto the street. Through the window she saw him get up from his seat with an impatient gesture at his daughter. She kept moving, hustling through the crosswalk at the last minute. She didn't look back even when the sound of her name carried over the whirr and grind of traffic.

Her legs didn't stop moving until she realized that she was heading in the wrong direction. Her body worked on autopilot and led her north towards MacNab's. She halted at the base of the massive hill in the centre of the city and caught her breath.

Her brownie was squashed from where she held it against her, and her hand was sticky from the coffee that had spilled through the straw hole and over the edge of the cup. If she could have curled up on the sidewalk and died, she would have. By the time she reached home, she'd rubbed her nerves raw by replaying the scene she'd fled from. She felt pathetic and couldn't stand it any longer. She had to face him.

Not an hour went by that didn't begin and end with thoughts of Mike. She lived in fear that she'd run into him again. She'd run from him once, and the misery she had felt in the aftermath

had made living a misery. She didn't want to get out of bed in the morning, but she couldn't bear to sit still and let him intrude on her thoughts. Her whole life had turned into a labyrinth, and either she twisted and turned or she came up against a wall.

Worst yet was the idea that he might actually move and she wouldn't get her chance to talk to him. He'd travelled around so much that his contention that he had settled meant nothing. He said he was happy where he was, but there was always a new idea lurking in the back of his mind. For all she knew he'd hit on something big that he couldn't get out of his blood and he'd leave this place to follow his latest whim.

She'd be damned before she lost her chance because she was too gutless.

## Chapter Nine

*"You're listening to 101.6 CHBR, and we are broadcasting live from the brand-new Wit Cracker on the corner of Sackville and Brunswick streets. My name's Jamie Salter, otherwise known as King James, and you're going to want to get down here before midnight if you want a chance to win an all-inclusive trip for two to Barbados, courtesy of Central Air and this man right here, Mike MacNab. Mike, how you doing?"*

*"I'm doing great, tonight. My brain is rattling in my skull a little, though."*

*"You're getting too old for this crap, aren't you?"*

*"Ptttthh!"*

Kate could almost see the look on Mike's face as the disgusted sound chucked across the airwaves. She'd invoked it herself enough times to have it committed to memory. His forehead would wrinkle, and his left brow would twist while the other rose up. He'd purse his lips for just a moment, and then his mouth would split into a grin.

Picturing it now as she sat on the bed with the clock radio on, Kate smiled and shook her head.

*He must be in his element.*

She tipped the lid off the shoe box next to her and picked up one of the satin Mary Jane pumps she had bought earlier that day.

*"So let's get this straight, Mike. In addition to a trip to Barbados, there are also a few consolation prizes as well?"*

*"That's right. Everyone who walks through the door gets a drink ticket to get them started and a chance to fill out a ballot for the trip. We've also got two weekend getaway packages to..."*

Miles away from her one-bedroom apartment, Mike prattled on while Kate put the finishing touches on her outfit. It wasn't something she could afford, but Kate had made a special

trip to the mall and charged the cost to her credit card. It would take her a few months to pay it off, but at least she'd look like a million dollars when she walked into MacNab's.

A private opening for the Wit Cracker had occurred on the past Wednesday night by invitation only. Kate knew this because hers had arrived in the mail a week ago, postmarked the day at the coffee shop.

She'd read nothing into it: she was still in Mike's database only because he couldn't figure out how to get her out. She was just one name on a sheet of labels. She hadn't gone, and she'd regretted it. As she sat at home alone watching TV, she had mowed over the same depressing ground she had been weeding all summer long, and came to the conclusion that she just had to get it over and done with.

She couldn't put it off another night. She needed to talk to him. She wanted her friend back.

Her Mike.

If she hadn't blown it already.

*"Make sure you stick around until ten o'clock for Cavendish Sound. They'll be giving away copies of their debut CD,"* Mike went on. *"Not to mention they're a hell of a band. I'll be lucky if I still have a roof by the end of the night."*

*"All right, thanks, Mike. Anything else you think folks should know?"*

*"If you'll let me, I'd like to give a big thanks to my staff. Anybody who's a regular at MacNab's knows them all by name, and they've been through a lot in the last few months. There are a few who are no longer with us, but if they're listening, I'd still like to see them come through those doors for a drink and a bit of dancing. They've earned this party as much as the rest of us."*

Kate took a deep breath and placed her hand over her stomach, where his words seemed to have found a home. Her heart picked up its pace, and a flash of heat bloomed from the inside out. At the same time she felt disappointment tugging at her.

She wished she were there with him. She wished she had been there in the last few weeks, complaining about the racket and the mess and listening to his assurances that all would be well, watching his excitement whenever something went right. She wished she hadn't chickened out a dozen times since meeting him in that coffee shop and had been able to follow through on her



scheme to bring him a bottle of cheap champagne to christen the entrance to the Wit Cracker with.

She wished she had just picked up the damned phone and told him she missed him.

The DJ thanked Mike and started the intro to a new song. In nothing but her bra, panties, and sexy new shoes, she stood in front of the full-length mirror with her hands on her hips.

It would be the shoes that would do it; she was sure of that. Mike had never, ever seen her in anything but sneakers or flats. The truth was, she didn't think how she was dressed was going to make a difference to him, but it wouldn't hurt if she looked like a total cupcake.

She'd even used a coupon she had gotten in the mail for a salon downtown to have her hair straightened so that it was a silky curtain that fell to the middle of her back. It was going to drive her crazy, and she'd thought about putting it up, but it was too slick, not to mention expensive, to hide in a knot at the back of her head. She rarely wore makeup, and so she'd gone easy on her face, dusting a little powder over her cheeks and tapping on some lipstick.

Kate moved to her bedroom door, where her dress was hanging. Just as it had done all evening, her courage failed her, and she drew back from the closet.

*Maybe this is a bad idea. After the way I ran off like that...*

*Damn it, Kate. Knock it off.*

She shook her head and tugged the dress off its hanger. Before she could change her mind again, she pulled it on, checked her hair one last time, and then headed into the living room to call a taxi.

An hour later when the cab pulled up across the street from the Wit Cracker, Kate paid the driver a ten-dollar bill and took a deep breath as she stepped into the fray.

The Wit Cracker was hopping. The street outside was lined with cars on both sides, and outside the pub's separate entrance there were clusters of people standing around, shouting directions into their phones.

As she approached the entrance, one of the Gorilla Mafia manning the door did a double take. "Oh *get out*."

“Nice jacket.” She sidled up to him and ran her finger over the outline of the crest on his sleeve: a cartoon gorilla bursting in a Charles Atlas pose and *M&M Security* scrawled underneath. “How long have you had those?”

“Mike went on a spending spree a few weeks ago. The newspaper is here tonight to do a feature, so we've got to look good. You heading in?”

“I'm going upstairs first.” She narrowed her eyes. “Do I need to pay a cover?”

“I'd like to meet the poor bastard who tries to make you pay.”

Laughing, she headed up the stout hill to where the entrance to MacNab's was located. As soon as she passed through the second set of doors, she heard a squeal.

“Holy shit, Kate! What the hell?”

Kate unsuccessfully tried to evade the hug her former coworker threw at her and held her breath. Justine always reeked of drugstore perfume that managed to stick to the skin of anyone she touched. The harder she squeezed, the bigger the stink, and she had Kate in one hell of a clinch.

“Oh my God! Your hair! You flattened it all out!”

Kate ran her hand down the silky swath of red hair and grinned. “Just for tonight.”

“What the hell have you been up to? Why did you leave?” Justine wound her arm around Kate's waist and dragged her to the bar. “Did Mike fire you after you grabbed that guy? He wouldn't say. I was going to call, but I didn't know if you hated us all.”

“Actually I quit. It was just my time, you know. I told Mike all about it. I had some stuff to deal with.”

Chris rolled his eyes in Justine's direction before placing a beer in front of Kate. She returned the gesture and slid him a healthy tip.

Justine nodded, her brown eyes wide. “Are you coming back? It's going to be super busy now that it's open downstairs. I spent all week training the new peeps, and some of them are hopeless!”

“I'm taking a break from work. I'm going to do a full course load next year and ride the student-loan wave.”

Kate glanced towards the double doors as a giggling couple pushed through. In the five seconds the door gaped open, the muffled skirl of bagpipes could be heard, accompanied by the mad beat of a drum.

"Listen, I'm going to head down," she told Justine with a pat on the arm and wormed her way through the crowd that had gathered in MacNab's for a little bit of quiet. At the end of the wide staircase was the second set of double doors, now flanked by two carved jesters.

She shuddered at their demented smiles and ochre eyes, which seemed to follow her as she approached. With a deep breath to muster all her courage, she yanked open the door. The surroundings overloaded her senses, and she had to take a step back.

Mike had certainly given a good push in the last few weeks. What had once been the cellar of an old brewery was now a work of art. Everything had been scavenged from bars and halls across the province. Old wood had been given a coat of varnish that maintained the aged look. What wasn't recycled, like the bar, had been deliberately stressed. On the walls were wooden statuary hand carved from driftwood by an old woodworker in Newfoundland, some folksy and some terrifying. The crown jewel was the marquee that hung over the bar, the Wit Cracker himself, a lanky fool in his tripointed cap and striped leggings standing in place of the *i*.

"*Lame. This is lame. The whole idea is lame,*" she'd said when he'd first pitched the idea to the staff. The cheese potential was high, but Mike had pulled it off. It was a unique setting and quite a contrast to MacNab's. Not a hint of neon or a flat-screen to be found. No DJ booth, just a stage and a fiery, stomping band whooping an old tune. The only hint of cheese was the display of Wit Cracker merchandise pinned behind the bar—T-shirts, vanity plates, and the like—and even then she had to admit they looked cool and vintage.

And at the end of the bar, in faded denims with his thick arms displayed beneath the cuffs of his forest green polo and wearing a Wit Cracker ball cap, leaned Mike MacNab. Flanking him was his usual entourage of skinny women in short skirts with tiny purses. He was glowing from the attention, and his green eyes followed the French-tipped fingernails that traced the curve of his bicep. He leaned forward, and the blonde fluttered her lashes as he whispered close to her ear.

Kate glanced towards the entrance. Even if she left now, he would know she was there. Someone would say to him, *Hey, did you talk to Kate?* and he'd know she'd run again. Instead, she made her way to the opposite end of the bar and squeezed onto a vacant stool.

She didn't as much as glance in his direction again, but she could see him out of the corner of her eye. It took about five minutes for him to turn to order a fresh beer and spot her.

Kate lowered her gaze to the puddle of condensation around the base of her bottle and rubbed the back of her neck, remembering how his mouth felt tickling the downy fluff at her hairline. She tried to suppress a shiver and failed. Her cheeks were so hot, she could see the blush under her eyes.

She looked up. He was leaning forward, his expression a mixture of surprise and something she couldn't quite put her finger on. He muttered to the woman who clung to him, and when she squeezed closer, he spoke to her again, his brows pulling together sharply. Her smile stiffened, and she oozed away with her posse, leaving Mike to nurse his beer with both hands squeezing the bottle.

The music suddenly seemed an intrusive clang in her ears. The voices shouting over the skirl and pulse an irritant, both mingling together in an offensive concoction. She wondered if she made her way to the stairwell to MacNab's whether he would follow or be stubborn, but she just didn't want to risk it. She glanced his way again. His gaze was pulled low as he peeled the label from his beer bottle and his tongue poking at the corner of his mouth.

Shyly, he looked to her, and she smiled.

It was like he had been given a booster shot. His hunched shoulders straightened, and he grasped his drink, and when he slid from her line of sight, she let out the deep breath that had been burning a hole in her chest and swiveled in her seat. In another second the top of his head appeared, bobbing above all others as he made his way through the throng, and then he was sliding next to her.

He leaned close, one arm stretched across the bar and the other hanging low to grasp the edge of the stool and swivel her to face him. She was enveloped, and it took all her control to keep from splaying her hand across his chest and pressing down on its hard expanse. Instead she tilted her head forward and, with her mouth hovering just below his ear, said, "Hey."

Mike turned his head so that his mouth was at the most perfect angle before hers that if he closed the gap he would be kissing her. He was holding his breath, and so was she until he spoke.

"Hey, Katie."

And then he drew back and raised the bottle to his lips. The cluster of sounds crashed around her as the bar was given back its voice, and she drew a deep breath. His eyes never left hers and never stopped studying her as the fever in her cheeks deepened. Flipping her hair over her shoulder, she searched for something else to say. She just hadn't thought any further than breaking the ice.

"Congratulations," she said with a croak, and he nodded. She wished he would snarl at her, so she could conjure something of substance to say to him, to shake off the nerves and release some of the tension trapped and burning at the back of her throat. "It looks better than you planned it, I think."

He was silent for a moment as he took another swig and then bobbed his head. "Almost didn't make it. The lights went out this morning and didn't come back until about five minutes before opening. I almost thumped the electrician in the head." He raised his brows, and the corners of his mouth twitched. "I could have used my muscle."

"Is he here tonight? Point him out to me. This place is loaded with sharp things I can play with."

He tilted his head back and laughed, that full-belly laugh that immediately infected her. She giggled and then found that she couldn't stop smiling back at him, even as his smile faded.

"So what happened to Joe? He was in here a few times saying you were back together."

"Ah, that was...a huge mistake."

"You didn't come on Wednesday night."

"I didn't think I was supposed to."

"Yeah, you were." His hand slid from the seat to her thigh, and he cradled her fist in his palm. "Come on, Katie. Let's go upstairs and talk."

"Do we have to?"

"You think there's nothing to talk about?" His shoulders started to hunch as his defenses flew up. Instinctively so did Kate's.

"Look—"

"No, you look. I've spent the best part of the summer simmering over the shitty way you played me—"

“I did not play you!”

“Well, what would you call it? 'Mike, I just wanted a good time. Why can't it just be a good time?' First you run from me, and now you come here to see me—and don't tell me that's not why you're here. You walk in and sit right in front of me, waiting for me to come to you like a little dog you've got on a leash.”

“That's bullshit.”

“That's right. This is bullshit. What is it, Katie? Are you just horny again? Like I told you, I'm not your fucking stud.”

She leapt from the stool and jerked away, when he caught her just above the elbow. She leaned in close, nose to nose, and through gritted teeth hissed at him. “I came here because I missed you. Not because I wanted another screw. Not because I felt guilty. Because *I missed you*, but right now, Mike, you can go fuck yourself.”

She bolted past him before he could get another grab and had almost made it as far as the door marked PRIVATE leading to the staff area before he caught up to her and cinched down on her wrist.

“I will not hesitate to kick you in the nuts, Mike.” She wriggled when he captured her other wrist and dragged her arms around him, refusing to let go.

“You need to cool off before we can be civil to one another.” He tilted his hips so she could feel his growing erection against her belly. “*I need to cool off.*”

“You're such a hypocrite,” she said and meant it, even as she was welcoming the heat of his hard body against hers. “First you tell me the problem is I just want to be fucked, and then you tell me the cure is to fuck me?”

He dragged her to his office and twisted the doorknob. She stumbled backwards in the darkness, but he held on to her and hit the switch. The room filled with fluorescent light and revealed not the familiar, but clutter. The desk, the chairs, the computer—all of it was gone, and in its place were stacks of boxes overflowing with Wit Cracker merchandise.

Before she had a chance to express her surprise, Mike bumped the door closed and pressed her against the hard surface.

“I'm ready.” He swept her arms above her head and nudged his knee between her thighs. “It's time I got a little something in return for services rendered.”

“Oh *please*.” She squirmed as he increased the pressure between her legs. His eyes were like emerald fire burning her. Her clit throbbed, and the flush of heat spread throughout her body. When her cheeks grew hot, she knew there was no hiding her arousal from him. She boldly met his gaze and pressed against him.

She swept her tongue over his bottom lip and began a slow, burning exploration of his mouth. He tasted of beer and a bit of rum. He indulged her for just a moment, covering her mouth with his and curling his tongue around hers. She purred as he sucked on the tip, and could have wept with disappointment when he lifted his head.

“Let's go home, Katie. I've had enough of this bullshit.”

Even as she reveled in the welcome heat of his solid body holding her in place, she remembered the outcome of their last coupling.

Yes, she had sought him out, and yes, and she had missed him, but she still felt that strife looming overhead. It stifled the air in the cluttered little room and turned the moment repugnant. She wanted nothing more than to go home with him, to hold him down and straddle his hips, to run her hands over his broad chest and watch his cheeks stain with need, but she needed to kill the animal that would be growling at them from the sidelines.

Turning her head when he mouthed a wicked trail along the slope of her neck, she relaxed in his grip. “I'm ready. Believe me; I'm ready, but...”

He lifted his head. “But nothing. Katie, just stop. I need you right now.”

“We do need to talk.”

He sagged, and after a deep breath he released her, stepped back, and leaned against the tower of boxes behind him. He yanked off his cap and held it in front of him in a lousy attempt to hide his erection.

“You know you've got me wrapped around your little finger, don't you?”

She sighed. “Mike, be serious.”

“I am serious. I thought it was bad before, but now... Whew, boy.”

Her heart swelled when he smiled at her. It was such a wonderful feeling, but at the same time it was excruciating, because after she had her say, she might never feel it again. She glanced around the room. “What happened in here, anyway?”

"It's like I told you. I moved everything up to the third floor."

"Can we go there now?"

He shook his head. "It's a death trap right now. Wires hanging all over the place, floorboards pried up. I've got the computer at home. We can go up to MacNab's, but it'll take an hour to get to the door. Everyone wants to take a picture with me."

Kate giggled. "You love it."

"Yeah, I do. I'm glad you're here. Kate, I'm sorry for what I said."

She folded her hands behind her back and twisted her fingers together. Her stomach churned, and she was afraid that if she moved her tongue from the roof of her mouth, she'd throw up.

"You got something to say, sweetheart?" he asked in a voice that was soft and reassuring. She'd heard it a hundred times, but never had it felt so intimate, as though she could say anything to him.

"Mike, I meant it. You can't just try and fix my life like it's a dusty, old basement. I appreciate it—"

He snorted. "Appreciate it? You damn near took my head off."

"All right, so I didn't appreciate it at first," she said with a roll of her eyes. "And I won't think twice about taking your head off again if I have to. Yes, my life sucks most of the time. I live in a crappy building in a crappy neighbourhood. I'm practically on welfare. I don't have a car, and I keep losing my bus tickets. My hair is deranged, and I don't know how to put on eyeliner. You know what, though? That's fine. That's life. I have a lot of good things going for me too."

"That was one hell of a list. Unless you tell me you can change water into rum, I'm just going to feel sad for you."

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She'd been so proud of her speech, and now her mind was blank. Behind her back, her fingers ached from knotting together.

"My point is that if my life goes down the toilet, it's my problem, not yours. I don't need the kind of help you want to give me, Mike. You want to know why I like you so much? I can



tell you anything, and you do and say all the right things, like making me laugh or talking my ear off.”

Kate paused to draw a breath. She ran her sweaty hands over her backside and pushed away from the door. “That's what I want from you, not advice for a career I don't have and I don't want.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “I felt like such a fool after I left your place, but it took me weeks to get through my thick skull what you were saying. I wanted to call, but after what you said to me, I couldn't do it.”

She chewed on her bottom lip while she weighed out what she had to say next. Her stomach gave another heave, and she concentrated on the same pockmark in the hardwood that he was so intent upon.

“I was telling you the truth. I only wanted that weekend. I only wanted what I knew you'd give me. I just figured that if one of us was going to get burned, it would be me.”

He stared at her for a long time and then ran his hands through his thick hair. “Guess I was a disappointment.”

“You were like a shock. I never in a million years imagined that you'd want more than just what was between my legs.” She shook her head, wondering. “I don't get it, Mike. What gives? Why me?”

“Why you?” A dismal laugh reached across the gap and touched her deep down. “Why you? God, I don't know. I just want you. I've wanted you for a long time, Katie.”

His gaze flowed over her in a hot wave. Heat flared in her cheeks, and she swallowed hard. “Maybe you're just lonely.”

“Yeah, I'm lonely. I've been lonely since you quit. I'm bored to death.” He slapped his cap back on his head and tugged the rim. Combined with his sheepish smile, the effect was adorable, and Kate's knees went to jelly. “I don't know how you got it in your head that you and I would only be a good time, or that that's all I would have taken from you. Probably the same delusion that made you think that Joe Brackley was a suitable substitute for a human being.”

“He wasn't that bad.”

“Kate, the last time he was in here, he got a corn nut stuck up his nose, and his buddies had to take him to the ER.”

“What? Oh my God, is that why he was at the hospital? He told me he had an allergic reaction. He was crying on the phone and everything.”

“Of course he was crying. It was a jalapeño corn nut. You stick one of those up your nose and see what happens.”

She clapped her hands over her mouth, but the action did nothing to hold back the giggles. “I’m genuinely disappointed that I missed that.”

“Trust me. You did not want to see him carried out of here with snot running down his face.” He shuddered and then looked to her with a crooked smile. “You deserve better.”

She pressed her lips together and swallowed the prickly ball that suddenly burst in her throat.

“Thank you.” She shoved away from the door and stood before him for a moment saying nothing, then held out her hand to him. “Why don’t you get me another drink and then give me the tour? Last time I saw this place, it was all dust and tarps.”

Mike stood in front of her and squeezed down on her hand.

“By the way,” she said as they stepped into the hall. “You have a beautiful daughter. I hope I didn’t ruin your afternoon with her.”

“Naw. I was getting ready to take her home anyway. It’s too bad you ran. We could have gotten this over and done with right there on the sidewalk, and you could have met her.”

“Yeah, that’s what a girl wants to do when she’s out for a day with her father—have a coffee with his neurotic lover.”

He stopped her at the door at the end of the hall. From behind, his arm swept around her waist, pulling her against his long, lean form.

“Still gonna let me take you home tonight?” he grumbled close to her ear in a timbre so low and indescribably sinful, she found it hard to draw a breath.

She ran her thumb along the metal mouth of his fly and gave the zipper a tug. “I think this is going to be a short tour.”

*Short* didn’t even begin to cover it. With her hand unquestionably in his possession, Mike didn’t so much conduct a tour as parade her around the room, introducing and reintroducing her to everyone to step in their path.

“Katie works for me,” he told them, and she held her tongue to keep from correcting him. Not that it would have made any difference, if the looks they were generating were any indication. It was obvious she did more than work for him. He might as well have said, *Katie's mine*.

“I fucking knew it,” one of the waiters leaned in and teased as he passed them, earning a scowl from Kate even as she leaned into Mike, whose face lit up as he draped his arm over her shoulder.

This is weird, she thought and giddily nested against him. She still wasn't 100 percent sure this was a wise idea, but whenever the coarse hairs dappling his forearm brushed her bare arms, her breath caught in her throat, and she ached to turn in his embrace and rub herself against him.

“Want to dance?” she called to him as they moved across the floor. His answer was a laugh and a look that questioned her sanity.

“Seriously? To this?”

“Dude, you opened a bar that specializes in live Celtic rock, and you make that face? Besides, Irish people have been doing it for centuries. You just gotta drink a lot and then jump around to shake it up. Come on!”

They left their drinks on a nearby table, and she hauled him onto the floor. He refused to relinquish his hold on her, dragging her against him and growling into her ear, “If I get a hard-on while everyone is watching, I plan to make you very sorry.”

In minutes both were drenched in sweat as they bounced to the frenzied rhythm that pounded under her feet. She heard whoops and hollers, hands clapping and feet stomping in tune with the medley. She shrieked when he scooped her under the arms and hauled her off the ground. By the time her aching feet touched the ground, his mouth was upon hers and she was molded against him, hot and aching and ready to get the hell out of there.

She yanked off his cap, and with her fingers mussing his hair, she gave a little tug and whispered against the shell of his ear, “Take me home. I'm ready *now*.”

Mike ran his hands down her back, and he nibbled the corner of her mouth. “Meet me at the side door. I'm parked in the hotel lot across the street.”

“Wait.”

She drew him back in when he pulled away, and locked her hips against his as she kissed him. His hands slid lower, and she went on her toes when he squeezed her ass. She felt inundated by the heat where he was hard and pressing against her mound.

His growl went through her from head to toe and everywhere in between before he pulled away. The tips of his fingers lingered, scrunching the soft fabric of her dress; his hungry gaze flowed down her body and back up again. A smile played on his mouth like he knew exactly what he was doing to her with such a look.

When he turned his back on her, she couldn't help but do a quick scan of the room and find the collective of women who had been trying their damndest to get where she was at that moment. The looks she got were pure venom, and she grinned and waggled her fingers at them, resisting the urge to flip the middle finger at the last moment. She coasted from the dance floor to the ladies' room.

## Chapter Ten

She peered around the doorjamb and lifted a brow at the sight of Mike standing on the far side of her bed, where she had left him moments ago. His ball cap hung from the bedpost, and his sneakers were tucked beneath the rocker in the far corner. He yanked his shirt over his head, and she bit down at the reveal of his flat stomach and broad chest and then bit down harder when he reached for his belt buckle.

The sight of those large tanned hands working the leather strap was so erotic, her toes curled, and her tongue poked at the corner of her mouth as need warmed her blood.

“Don't throw that belt too far,” she said and leaned against the doorjamb. She was swimming in the jacket he'd left behind. Her nipples were peaked where the satin lining rubbed against her skin. She cocked her head, letting her hair fall over one side of her face.

“You want to keep the belt handy?”

“I've developed a penchant for leather in the last little while.” She fingered the lapels. “This thing is better than Roy.”

The edge of the bed sagged as he knelt on it. “Tell me more.”

“Right after my last exam, right after I sent Joe packing for the second time, I had some stress to burn off.” She drew the jacket together and slowly sashayed into the room. “So I started thinking about having you right there where you're kneeling. To be more specific, you kneeling in front of me.”

“More,” he said and slid his hand over the erection that pushed against his fly. “Tell me more, Katie.”

She perched at the foot of the bed and let the jacket fall open as she went on her back. His eyes drank in every inch of exposed skin. Beneath the triangle of violet lace between her thighs, Kate's clit ached, longing for attention.

She scraped her fingernails between her breasts, partially concealed by the lapels of the jacket, and with his attention rapt on the movement of her fingers, she revealed one taut nipple and began to tease it.

“It wasn't cutting it, Mike. I tried all my favourite toys. If I'd had the dolphin, it might have done it, but even using the very tip of my finger really softly around my clit like you do and imagining it was your tongue didn't do it. And then I remembered that I still had your jacket.”

She sucked in a deep breath as she tugged her nipple between thumb and forefinger. Mike's low, aroused growl wrapped around her. Tipping her head back, she watched while he flicked the button on his jeans and pulled the denims off. His big hand cupped the bulge between his thighs, and he sucked in a deep breath as he stroked himself.

“What else?”

“What do you think? I just wrapped myself in this jacket that still smelled like you, and all I had to do was close my eyes and—”

“Touch yourself.”

He wasn't finishing the sentence. This was an order.

Her heart fluttered in quick, breathtaking beats as her fingers trailed over her belly and, after hesitating at the waist of her panties, slid over the fabric. Mike's breathing faltered as she slid the pad of her middle finger along the stitching over the seam. Her panties were soaked through, and at the apex her clit was swollen and throbbing. She circled the hard nub, applying the slightest pressure to the sensitive flesh surrounding it.

All the while she watched his hand moving beneath the elastic expanse of spandex, the outline of his thumb circling the head. Kate eased back and strummed her thumb over her clit.

“Show me how wet you are.” He sank back against her headboard, one leg stretched out before him and the other bent at the knee. Her mouth watered for him as she worked her panties over her thighs and left them in a soggy heap on the floor. She let her legs fall apart and slid her fingers along her slippery cleft, sliding inside and then back up again to circle her flesh hood. She crooked her finger and so lightly stroked the very tip of her clit.

With a moan, she lifted her hips and turned her eyes upon him. “Show me how hard you are, Mike.”

He quickly shucked off his jockeys and sprawled out on the bed. His cock thrust upwards, thick and veined, with the crested head glistening. He grasped and pumped the length with one hand and held the other out to her. "Come here."

Kate sat upright, slipping out of his jacket as she did so, and rolled onto her hands and knees to crawl over him. Her ascent was slow and feline. She nuzzled along the slope of his calf before her tongue crept out and made a trail along his inner thigh.

She placed her hand on his and guided it over the smooth head of his cock, turning her fist slowly while she tongued the underside to his balls.

He expelled a strangled "ah!" as she sloped her tongue beneath the hot, heavy sac. Kate closed her lips around him and directed his big hand along the length. In the weeks since they'd been apart, she'd never forgotten how he tasted, how it felt to have him in her mouth. She took her time, enjoying every minute of it.

All the while he ran his fingers down her back and up again. The heel of his palm kneaded muscle with every inch before he buried his fingers in her hair. She heard him chuckle, and she lifted her head.

"I hate how you did your hair," he said.

"If you don't mind, insulting me in this position isn't the wisest course of action."

He shook his head and rubbed the tips of his fingers at the back of her scalp. "The sight of you on top of me with those red curls bouncing all around your face is burned into my brain. You've got the sexiest bed head I've ever seen."

She loosed his fingers from around his cock and worked the length of his shaft into her mouth. He went silent, but her attempt to crouch between his outstretched thighs met with resistance. Mike grabbed hold of her and hauled her body over his. He buried his face between her thighs with a muffled sound of pleasure that Kate echoed when the tip of his tongue penetrated her.

There was no teasing left for either of them. Kate grasped his cock at the root and bobbed her head over the rigid shaft, lips tight around him. The urgent liquid sound of her mouth sucking him mingled with the rush of blood in her ears.

He licked around her engorged clit as fingers pulled back the surrounding flesh hood, easing the ache that had built under her fingers when she had been performing for him. His

tongue created a vortex as it orbited her clit, churning the heat of his mouth around and around until she was caught up in the spiral. As his mouth closed around her, Kate reared up and balanced her weight on one hand, putting her entire body into the act. Mike did the same, bending his legs and pressing his feet into the mattress to thrust into her mouth, his arms tightening around her lower body as he tilted his head back into her pillow and devoured her.

Together, they burned hot and fast. When she was sure she couldn't possibly feel more ready to combust, he thrust three fingers into her pussy and expertly rubbed her G-spot. Kate was overcome by the dual pleasure. Her body shook with the desperation to take with the same insatiable zeal that he gave her.

She sucked him more voraciously than ever and felt his cock throb between the roof of her mouth and her tongue, signaling just how close he was to coming. She cupped and kneaded his balls as she milked the shaft until he rose up with a violent thrust and flooded her mouth. His climax was cataclysmic. Beneath her, his entire body was rigid, and he pressed his face against her inner thigh, his hot breath gushing over her damp skin.

Though she was trembling, eager to reach her finish, she brought him down slowly with languid strokes, tongue lazy and fingers firm but gentle as he shuddered back to reality. With a pleased hum, Kate nosed the soft hair around his wilting cock and then tipped her tongue into his belly button.

With a snuffle against her thigh, he jostled her. "That tickles."

"A weakness revealed." She pushed herself upright and peered between their bodies at him. "I hope you don't think you're finished."

"Not by a long shot." He growled and mouthed her clit. The heavy throb that had settled between her legs swelled. Kate rose up, hands flat on the bed between his outspread legs. She watched his pink tongue darting in and out over his bottom lip. She panted, keeping time with each stroke that electrified, mesmerized by the scene before her eyes.

"Mike," she said in a strangled voice, her plea and her outcry as the first exquisite contraction surged through her pussy, followed by another and another, each more powerful than the last. She sucked in a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut. Mike held on and continued lapping at her until she was coming so hard, she felt like she was being dragged down and thrown high at the same time. He moaned, the vibration skittering over his tongue and against



her clit, and Kate saw nothing but a multicoloured flash before her eyes as her orgasm took hold of her.

In the aftermath she flopped away from him and giggled her way through a high that wouldn't let her down. Equally afflicted, Mike crawled over her and rested his head next to hers.

"You know, when I used to think about what you would be like in bed, I always imagined you were a screamer."

"Hmmm. Is that so?"

"Turns out I was wrong. You make all kinds of girly sounds."

"Define *girly sounds*."

"You get soft and throaty, and you try to hold your breath, but you can't." He slid his hand along her thigh, and when she rolled to him, he gave her ass a squeeze. His smile suddenly turned to a scowl. "We forgot the belt."

"No, *we* didn't. I still have plans."

"I have to admit, Katie, I'm a pretty adventurous guy, but that look you've got has me a little nervous."

Kate threw her arm over him and mirrored his pose by digging her nails into his buttocks. "No need. I'm good at compromising, even if you are a big bully."

"That's a pretty strong statement coming from someone who has made men twice her size cry." He rolled her onto her back and nestled between her thighs. He seemed just as afflicted as she was: there was no wiping the smile from his mouth. "I think that's why I never fired you. You were always more effective than the door staff."

"I should join the Gorilla Mafia," she said. "Plus, you're kind of scared of me. Imagine what I'd do if you fired me."

"You're damn right. You'd walk out with my eyelids sticking to the bottom of your shoes. By the way, those ones you were wearing tonight were pretty cute. You think I might be able to convince you to put them back on for a bit?"

"Why, Mike, do you have a shoe fetish?"

"Shoe, and the woman attached to shoe. To be honest, I've had this fantasy about fucking you at the bar in nothing but your sneakers."

“Do tell,” she whispered, and his lids flitted as she scratched her nails over his ass and along the sloping plane of his back.

“Always on a Monday morning, to be exact. You’d come in with your grumpy face, growling at me about how I should go to the university and take a computer course so you wouldn’t have to get out of bed early. You’re so damned cute holding your extra-large cup of coffee away from you like it weighed a ton and with your eyes all puffy from sleep.” His gaze swept over her, followed by his hand, adoring, and he brushed his mouth over hers. “I just wanted to pick you up and put you on the end of the bar and just fuck the living daylights out of you.”

“I’m shocked,” she whispered and grazed his bottom lip with her teeth. “And a little disappointed. If you had tried, I could have sued the pants off of you, or at the very least gotten your pants off in the deal.”

“You have no idea how quickly you could have gotten me out of my pants.”

“Actually I do. My attempts so far deserve a round of applause.”

“Katie, do you really mean to tell me that you never once wanted to start up something before that night? You mentioned something that first time, but I just figured it was because you were all wound up. Come on now. My ego is on the line here.”

She rolled her eyes and was silenced by his kiss. She cupped his face and held him a moment longer to enjoy the kiss. The lingering taste of her gratification on his tongue reminded her just how talented he was with it, and she moaned softly against his mouth. Her body was keenly aware of the abrasive quality of his chest rubbing against hers. Her temperature rose, heat filling her from her cheeks and downward, where there was still a dull pulse between her legs.

He lifted his head, and she burned with the admission she was about to make. “My fantasy involved your office. Your desk. You know the drill—everything is thrown on the floor, and you just *take me*.”

He groaned and burrowed into the warmth of her neck. “Katie, Katie, Katie, how long?”

“I’ve always had kind of a crush on you, but one night not long after I started working for you, we were both behind the bar together and had to do a little dance to pass. You brushed up against me, and *zing!* There it was.” She turned her head and licked his ear, delighted when his beefy body quaked. “That was unbelievable, Mike. Every time has been unbelievable.”

With a sigh, he rested his forehead against hers. “So how much do I have to give you to come back and work for me?”

“An extra two dollars an hour and you have to pay for a new pair of walking shoes every six months. And I want lots of foot rubs.”

“Wow. That's pretty specific and well thought-out.”

“I know. I've had a lot of time to think about it. When most women are estranged from their lovers, they tend to think long and hard about all the things they want him to say to her, and it usually involves grovelling. I prefer money and comfortable shoes.” She paused to pay homage to his lips. “Um, the problem is that I scheduled myself to death next semester, and most of them are evening classes. Most senior-year classes are.”

“We'll work it out. And before you get your ass-floss in a knot, this is the boss talking and not your extremely satisfied...lover, did you say?”

“Actually you're more boyfriend material,” she admitted, and the heat seeped into her cheeks.

Mike's green eyes glinted. “I'm sorry. Can you repeat that?”

“Mike—”

“Come on, Katie. Say it again.”

“Ugh. Fine. You're boyfriend material.”

He turned his head so that his ear was close to her mouth. “What? I'm *what* material?”

“*Boyfriend* material.” She grasped a fistful of hair and gave it a yank. Mike yelped, but he was grinning when he faced her again. “Between you and me, I prefer *exclusive man whore*.”

“I can live with that.”

 THE END 

## Annemarie Hartnett

Annemarie Hartnett lives in Eastern Canada, has a degree in English literature, and it is universally acknowledged that she is slightly deranged. For more information about her publications or to contact her, please visit <http://www.amhartnett.com>.