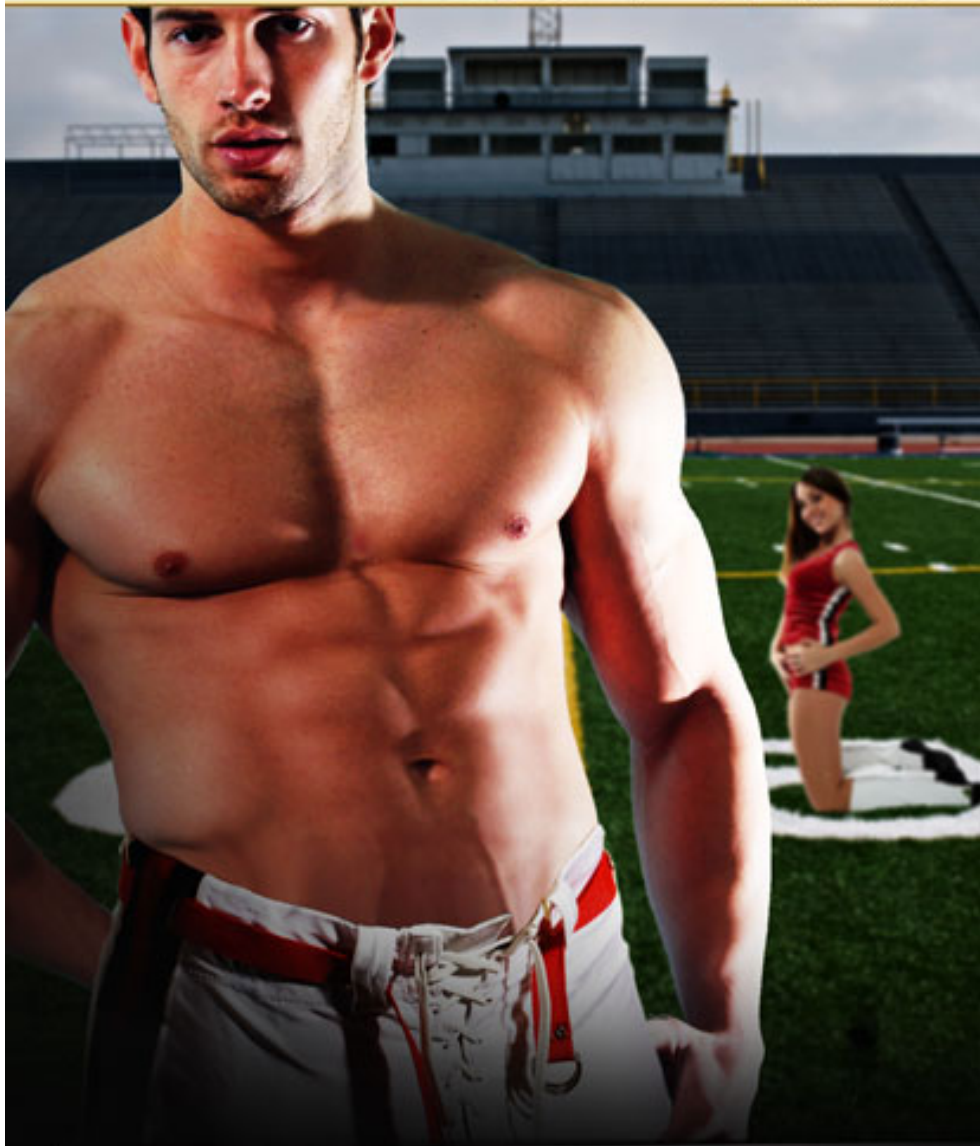


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



ANN JACOBS

GRIDIRON
LOVERS



Naked
Bootleg

Naked Bootleg

Ann Jacobs

Book 1 in the Gridiron Lovers series.

When Bobby Anthony, rookie quarterback, signs a multi-million dollar contract with the Memphis Maulers, hot passes aren't the only thing on his immediate horizon. In a world where money is no object and women – young and old – are looking to score, easy sex fills the air and the lives of the superstar ball players. Bobby's not interested, because for him, one woman stands out from the rest.

Hot cheerleader Marly Ragusa has always been a Maulers fan but never a football groupie until she meets Bobby and falls hard for the hot young signal-caller. Marly fires his blood and captures his heart. Trying to quench the sexual attraction that initially brought them together, they spend long, hot nights in Bobby's bed, learning each other's bodies...each other's hearts.

When an ex-girlfriend comes to town, an old heartache that has left Marly with issues of trust comes to the surface – until Bobby proves he has eyes only for her.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Naked Bootleg

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NAKED BOOTLEG

Ann Jacobs

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Author's Notes and Glossary

I'm a rabid football fan, or rather a rabid fan of several generations of quarterbacks I've watched play on TV and in person. This fandom caused me to come up with an idea for the Gridiron Lovers, a series of erotic romances about four star quarterbacks who just happened to have grown up in the same small west Texas town and who went on to fame and fortune as professionals. All of these guys and their teams are fictional, and any resemblance to an actual NFL player or team past or present is purely coincidental.

The four books' titles apparently need some explanation for readers who haven't been watching games every fall since...well, for quite a few years. Suffice it to say, I've watched every Super Bowl since number three, when Broadway Joe Namath came through on his guarantee of a win for the New York Jets. I was just a baby then (wink-wink).

So here we go. Mind you, these definitions may not all be technically correct, since they're based on my personal observations and comments I've digested from the media personalities who call the games on TV every Sunday from August through December and early January. Take a minute and read these pages first, or as my Aussie editor says, you may become totally confused.

Naked Bootleg. This is a play where the quarterback takes the snap, fakes a handoff to a running back but keeps the ball. He runs the opposite direction from the runner without a lineman protecting him – this makes the bootleg “naked” – and either passes to a receiver downfield or runs downfield himself. I thought it was a great play for Bobby Anthony to make during his first NFL appearance, as well as a sexy-sounding title for the first Gridiron Lovers book.

Forward Pass. The quarterback drops back from the line of scrimmage and throws the ball forward to an eligible receiver downfield. Eligible receivers, I think, are the

backs, tight ends and wide receivers. Keith Connors is a master of the forward pass on the field, but he's pretty hot in the bedroom, as well.

Clutch, as in *Hot in the Clutch*. A player, usually a quarterback, who's especially good at coming through with points when the team needs them most. Dave Delaney's career is almost over, but he can still be counted on for a great play in the clutch, whether it's on the field or in a woman's bed.

Coach, as in *Coach Me*. The masterminds of the game, often former players great or average. Each team has several coaches, with the "head coach" in charge of it all. Colin Zanardi's playing days are over, but he's still in the game, not only with his team but also with the hottest of the local ladies.

Now for the glossary, which I'm putting in alphabetical order so you can refer to it as needed while you read:

Athletic waivers: a certain number of exceptions a college coach can use to recruit top athletes who don't meet minimum academic standards for the institution, which are determined by a combination of high school grades and standardized test scores.

Audible: when the quarterback calls out a change of the play at the line of scrimmage.

Block: what linemen do to keep defensive players away from the quarterback, as in "throw a block" or "miss a block".

Center: the player on the offensive line who snaps the ball to the quarterback when he's "under center" or "in the shotgun".

Clipboard: the object that all backup quarterbacks almost always have in their hands while standing on the sidelines; a backup quarterback's assignment, as in "carry the clipboard".

Depth chart: a chart that shows each player's status at his position—starter, second string, third string, etc.

Double coverage: two defensive players are covering (chasing) one potential receiver for the offense at the same time.

Field position: the spot on the hundred-yard field where the ball is spotted—the closer to the defense's goal, the better the field position is for the offense.

First down: when the offense starts a series or moves ten yards down the field toward the opponent's goal—can be a longer or shorter distance if penalties are involved—and is then given four more tries to make another ten yards or a touchdown, or kick the ball away.

Fumble: when the football gets loose from whatever player had it in his hands and is fair game for any player, either offensive or defensive, to pick up and claim—called a fumble recovery.

Groupie: a woman who's obsessed with professional athletes and wants any athlete, but preferably a star, for a day or night's fun and games.

Handoff: when the quarterback takes the snap from the center and immediately hands it to a running back.

Huddle: a gathering of the entire offense around the quarterback, who gives them the play the coach has sent from the sideline or via a speaker in the quarterback's helmet.

Interception: when an opposing player catches a pass, thereby causing the defense to get the ball.

Linebackers: defensive players who often break through the offensive line and go after the quarterback (there are three of them in some defenses, four in others); they also break up pass plays down field by stopping the receivers who are trying to catch passes and/or get additional yards after catching the ball.

Line of scrimmage: the point on the football field where the ball is placed.

Nose tackle: a defensive player who lines up in front of the center, usually a huge beast of a man who opens up holes in the offense so other defensive players can get to the quarterback (Note: this assumes the defense is what's called a three-four where the nose tackle and two defensive ends line up in front, with four linebackers behind them—the setup is different, although I can't explain how, if the defense is a so-called four-three with two tackles and two defensive ends in front and three linebackers behind them).

Penalty: a misdeed on the part of an offensive or defensive player that causes the team to be penalized from five to fifteen yards, and sometimes—in the case of a penalty on the defense—to create an automatic first down for the offense. Some of the reasons penalties are imposed are for holding, roughing the passer, unnecessary roughness, illegal motion before the ball is snapped, extra man on the field, or illegal formation.

Pick-six: an interception that the defensive player runs back for a touchdown.

Punt: kick on fourth down, so the opposing team will get the ball as far as possible downfield; *punter:* the player who kicks punts.

Receiver, or wide receiver: an offensive player whose main function is to catch passes from the quarterback.

Running back: offensive player who takes handoffs from quarterback and runs the ball, or who catches short passes “out of the backfield” and then runs for yardage.

Sack: when a defensive player gets to the quarterback before he passes the ball and throws him to the ground.

Scout team: a team of non-starting players who study and then try to duplicate the plays of an opposing team while the first team practices against them during the week before the actual game (the backup quarterback usually runs the scout team, although sometimes that job goes to the third string guy).

Shotgun: a formation where the quarterback stands a good distance back from the center to take the snap.

Snap: the movement of the ball from the center to the quarterback.

Taking a knee: when the quarterback takes the snap and goes down on one knee instead of initiating a play as the time is winding down to zero at halftime or at the end of a game.

Three-and-out: an expression that describes an offensive series where the offense goes three snaps without getting a first down.

Tight end: offensive players who generally line up at the ends of the offensive line (if there are two of them in for the play) and who block as well as catch passes.

Turnover: the offense gives the ball to the other team because of a fumble or interception rather than after three-and-out or a touchdown.

I hope you all enjoy this series as much as I've loved putting it together. *Naked Bootleg* starts it all, and it's the only book that takes place during football season—so you won't see a lot of actual playing—at least on the field—in the stories that follow. Kick back now and enjoy the story of the rookie and the hot cheerleader who tames him!

Ann Jacobs

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Prologue

The Rookie

He was a fucking millionaire. Twenty-two-year-old Bobby Anthony stared down at the check, counting the zeroes again to be sure there were still six of them following the significant number nine, before the dot and the pennies he'd never have to pinch again.

Settling onto an old-fashioned wooden porch chair, he looked out over the arid west Texas landscape around tiny Hedgcock, Texas. Dust, oil wells and buildings that had seen better days partly blocked the view of Hedgcock County High School that could now boast it had produced four pro quarterbacks in the last thirty years.

Folks around here said it must have been the water that did it.

Bobby doubted that. After all, there were other positions in the game, but his alma mater had never sent anybody but quarterbacks to the pros, as far as he knew. He imagined it had been a need to escape from this one-horse town that drove the most competitive kids to the high-profile position. The need to become more than just high-school stars kept them working harder than anybody else. At least that was what had motivated Bobby to do what three others had done before him and move on toward a dream of fame and fortune.

That and old Coach Williams, who'd retired this year after nearly forty years. He had a real knack for picking and developing passers.

Bobby could hardly wait to get on with the next stage of his life. Not that he wouldn't always have fond memories of home. He'd always be thankful to his mom for keeping them together after his dad left. Glancing at the check to be sure one or two of those zeroes hadn't suddenly disappeared, he decided he'd use a chunk of his signing bonus to make Mom's life easier.

Opening the refrigerator door, he grabbed a gallon milk jug and some chili Mom had put away for his lunch. The first thing he'd do was get Mom all new appliances, and buy a new air conditioner for her bedroom to replace the one that had conked out a few years back. She wouldn't have to roast alive during another miserably hot west Texas summer. Hell, he'd have the whole damn house rewired and put in central air. That was the very least he could do.

After wolfing down his lunch, he headed to the bank, set up new accounts and deposited the check, taking bank president Caleb Tate's advice and spreading the money among several Texas financial institutions—ones that hadn't needed to take the stimulus money offered by the Feds.

Then he started up his mom's pickup and went to wait for her at the Burger Den across the street from the high school. At least the high-school hangout was air conditioned, which the pickup wasn't. It was damn hot for the first of May.

* * * * *

"Hey, Bobby."

He'd have recognized that voice anywhere. Tina Black. After all, they'd been friends since grade school, occasional lovers their last two years in high school. "Hi, Tina, what have you been up to?" He took a seat across from her in a worn wooden booth. He hated seeing her like this, all ragged out, not at all like the pert blonde he remembered. Even her sky blue eyes looked dull, as if she wasn't getting enough rest.

"Just working in the elementary-school lunchroom and taking care of Mom." She sounded tired, probably was. The stress of living in the same house with her slimeball of a stepfather had to have worn her down. "How about you?"

Somehow it didn't seem right to mention that he'd just become a millionaire. "I signed with the Maulers. I'll be heading to Memphis pretty soon for rookie camp."

Tina smiled, but still her eyes looked sad. "I've missed you. Welcome back for whatever time you'll be here."

Bobby had missed Tina too. Not that he had any interest in resuming their long-ago affair. What he wanted now was a woman who would represent his future, not his past. When he pictured that woman, he saw her as a lush beauty who'd keep his cock at attention. But he also wanted a woman who loved football almost as much as he did and who would capture his heart in a way Tina never had. He knew his college teammates mostly relished the idea of all the groupies who gave out head like candy, and he couldn't say he was immune to a woman throwing herself at him. But what he imagined beyond that was...more. Maybe it was Mom's fault he had the embarrassing romantic streak. He just liked the idea of finding a woman to love and protect, one who'd stand by him through the ins and outs of his career, have his babies and make him as proud of her as she'd be of him.

Still he considered Tina his best female friend. He worried about her, about her sick, narcissistic mother and the pervert she'd married a few years ago. "What's going on at your house?" They'd spoken on the phone after his graduation last December, and her silence about the strange household she lived in had concerned him. When she didn't answer right away, he asked, "Is your mom doing better?"

"Worse." Tina looked away, stared at the menu as if she were starving.

Bobby took her hand. "Worse how?" Since she'd had an accident that left her paralyzed a few months after marrying Edgar Garcia, Tina's mom had been fragile. Not to mention bitter and emotionally needy.

"She doesn't leave her room anymore. Her heart's not right, and she won't let anybody but me take care of her. Not even Edgar. Of course he's not upset about his newly found freedom."

The bastard. If he was still making Tina's life miserable, Bobby intended to have a chat with him. He clenched his fists, anticipating them colliding with Garcia's fat, obnoxious belly. "He's not bothering you, is he? Look at me, Tina, and tell me the truth."

“No. Not the way you mean. Edgar’s got a new girlfriend at that strip club across the county line.”

Better he hit on some hooker than Tina. Still, the creep’s cheating had to be making her mother even whinier and more demanding than usual. “I wish I could help you, hon. Get you away from all this.”

“I’ve got to stay. I can’t leave my mother to die with no one but Edgar to take care of her.” From the look in her eyes, Bobby guessed she’d welcome a white knight to rescue her from the hell her life must have become.

Too bad he wasn’t that white knight, though for a minute there he wondered if he should try to be. “I know. Look, it’s after four, so I have to go drag my mom out of the school office, or she’ll keep working until dark. If you ever need to get away, just call me.”

Tina smiled and squeezed his hand. “I will.”

But he was pretty sure she wouldn’t call. Tina had her pride, and she’d always been as stubborn as any woman could be. “You do that, honey. Remember, friends take care of one another.” He bent and brushed his lips over hers then made his getaway.

Today he wanted to celebrate, not worry about Tina. After all, he told himself, there was nothing he could do to help her out of her situation at home as long as she wasn’t willing to leave.

* * * * *

Walking through the school’s entryway, Bobby spared a glance at the newest batch of football trophies behind locked glass doors of the same case that had been there ever since he could remember. He ran into several teachers he’d had, ones who’d been around since long before his time and would probably still be teaching until they died. After all, this was Hedgecock, and jobs other than working in the oil fields had always been hard to come by. When he opened the door and stepped up to the counter in front

of his mom's desk, he cleared his throat. "May I have a tardy pass?" he asked the way he'd asked four years ago when he'd still been a student.

"Bobby, you scared me half to death. Did you get your business taken care of?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I'm glad you sent me to Mr. Tate. He helped me set up accounts so my signing bonus will be safe and earn a few bucks until I can get an investment manager to take it over. Come on, you've been working long enough. Let's go eat. My treat for once."

"Aw, you should be taking Tina. Or do you have a new girlfriend you're waiting to tell me about?" Bobby loved the way his mother smiled. She was forty-one, but she could have passed for thirty. Somehow the harsh environment hadn't scarred her or made her grow old before her time, the way it had a lot of the local women.

"No girlfriend at the moment. The ones I dated at Tulane were a little too rich for my blood. Besides, they all seemed to like dating the school's star quarterback a lot more than they liked me for me. When I find my dream girl, you'll be the first to know. Meanwhile, grab your purse and come with me. We're going to have steaks and share a pitcher of beer. Maybe we'll even sing some. I hear they've got karaoke down at the café now."

"Yes, they do. I'm not sure I'm up to singing but I'll help you celebrate becoming a very rich young man. I'm awfully proud of you, did I ever tell you?"

"All the time, Mom. While we're celebrating, I'm going to lay out what I want to do for you. And what you can do for me." Bobby thought of Tina, figured that if he asked his mother to keep an ear open for any problems that might crop up with her mother or Garcia, she'd do it. After all, she'd done all the right things for him when he was growing up. "Let's go."

* * * * *

The next day he took a bus to Pecos and bought his first car, a shiny red Escalade truck the soon-to-be-defunct GM dealer had special-ordered for some oilman who'd

decided he didn't want it after all when the economy suddenly went belly-up. Bobby also bought his mom a tricked-out Chevy SUV, to be delivered as a birthday gift next month, when he'd be at rookie camp. That ought to surprise her big-time. And she wouldn't turn it down, it being from him for her birthday.

A week later, after watching the installers hook up the new appliances and drag away the old ones, Bobby left home and Hedgecock, Texas, headed for a new, exciting life, new challenges. He also hoped he'd find a woman who cared more about him than the position he played.

Chapter One

After he'd gotten to camp and spent a few minutes thumbing through the biggest playbook he'd ever seen, Bobby decided the women would have to wait. He'd have to spend most of his waking hours studying, not checking out the incredibly hot young women who were on one corner of the second football field, trying out for the Maulers cheerleading squad. He noticed one, though. A gorgeous girl with a hot body, creamy skin, big brown eyes and long black hair that looked so soft he wanted to run his fingers through it. And he couldn't resist making a point of running into her on the training center parking lot.

"Hey there!" he called out, and she turned and shot him a thousand-watt smile.

"Hello to you, too." She stepped over closer, close enough that the sweet smell of her perfume wafted into his nostrils. "Good luck making the team, rookie." Her gaze slid slowly up his body, and it was all he could do to resist pulling her close and seeing if he could rest his chin on top of her head.

"Thanks. I'm Bobby Anthony. And you are?"

"Marly Ragusa. Maulers fan forever." She paused for a minute, her pretty mouth gaping open. "Omigod, you're the new quarterback the Maulers took in the first round."

"Yeah. That's me." Another woman with a love affair for passers, he imagined. But that was okay. He didn't have to find his dream woman right away, and at the moment he sort of liked the idea of latching onto this gorgeous QB groupie. When they talked, he found he liked her sassy smile and big brown eyes. What really turned him on was her frank interest in him, along with the whole package of slender but curvy babe. If only he didn't have to hit this book tonight...

“My dad and brothers have been shaking their heads ever since the Maulers picked you. Surely you don’t think you’ll knock Keith Connors off the top of the depth chart.”

“I’m gonna try.” They’d told him Keith wanted to keep his personal life out of the news, so Bobby couldn’t explain to shocked teammates and fans why he’d been brought in, an elite prospect to back up the league MVP. “I’m also thinking about having some fun, but if I’m going to have a shot at doing more than carrying the clipboard for Keith this season, I’m going to have to get up close and personal with this playbook.” He showed her the fat book then tucked it back under one arm. “Maybe you’d like to help me find a place to live once the preseason is over?”

“Sure. I’ve lived in Memphis all my life. I’d love to show you around.”

Bobby would have liked to show Marly around his bedroom, but now was hardly the time, confined as he was to the practice field and a two-bedroom hotel suite he was sharing with three other rookies. “It’s a date then. After the first home game. Here’s my cell phone number.”

She loaded it into her phone, grinned and gave him her number, too. “Call me when you get a chance. You go on now. Study. I want you sticking around at least for this season.” With that she stood on tiptoe and gave him a hug. “Welcome to Memphis. You’re gonna like it here.”

He had to touch her, hold her, tilt her head back and give her what he’d meant as a casual peck. But it was more. When she traced her tongue along the seam of his lips he gave up, deepened the kiss, held her so close that her heart pounded hard against his chest. “I think I’m gonna like it—and you—a lot,” he told her when he finally came to his senses and let her go.

* * * * *

Although he’d much rather have spent the night getting to know Marly, Bobby managed to shove his fantasies into the nether reaches of his brain and concentrated on memorizing the Maulers’ incredibly complex playbook, breaking only for dinner in his

room—a large pizza with salad that he washed down with a carbo supplement drink. Nobody could accuse him of ignoring the trainers' suggestions that he pack on five or ten more pounds.

It was eleven o'clock. Lights-out time. Bobby picked up a funny card Tina had sent him and tucked it into the playbook to hold his place. Sighing, he stripped to his boxers and crawled into bed. Lying in the dark listening to his roommate snoring on the other side of their hotel room while the air conditioner hummed in the background, Bobby closed his eyes.

And let the hot cheerleader with the big smile and soft, sexy drawl invade his mind. He imagined her silky hair draped across his chest, her legs tangled with his. Her breath would tickle him, turn him on as he explored the velvety smooth expanse of her back and perfectly rounded ass. Pleasantly aroused, he wrapped his arms around the extra pillow and drifted off to sleep.

It wasn't a pillow but a slender, curvy woman whose hard little nipples burrowed into his chest while her legs opened enough to let his cock between them. Her arm felt warm around his midsection, her fingers gentle as they kneaded his butt. Marly.

"Fuck me, please," she murmured against his throat, the arousing feel of her warm, damp breath punctuating the request he wasn't about to deny.

"Like this, Marly baby?" He pulled her close, dragged her over his body, guided his sex to hers and sank inside the hottest, tightest pussy he'd ever had.

"Mmmm. You feel so good. I love it." The way she moved on him was his steamiest fantasy come true. Her long hair fell over them like a silk curtain, creating erotic sensations when strands brushed his chest and throat every time she sank down on him, taking him, squeezing him as if she wanted to keep him inside her cunt forever.

He grabbed her hands, drew them to his chest. "Fuck me harder, sweetheart. Oh yeah, that's right. Keep squeezing my cock like that." God, but he wanted to come so much. Yet he wanted this to go on and on, the dizzying sensations and slapping sounds of sex. The sense of closeness he'd never felt before with Tina or any of his college groupie lovers.

“Oh yes. You feel so good inside me.” She squeezed him harder then leaned down to sip the sweat from his brow. “I love the way you fuck me.”

Because he couldn't take the delicious torture much longer, he rolled her over onto her back, raised her legs over his hips and claimed her. Hard, fast, he pounded into her, barely cognizant now of anything but her hot, wet cunt surrounding him, grasping his cock. And the sounds of wet flesh on flesh, the musky smells of sex, the feel of her firm breasts beneath his chest. Her nails dug into his shoulders as if she was desperate to hold on, enjoy the sensations as long as she could before letting herself come.

“Go ahead, Marly, come for me.” His control was gone, the humanity in him losing out to pure animal lust. Gathering her in his arms, he gave in, coming in hot, short bursts as his climax triggered her own.

Bobby woke suddenly when he heard himself bellowing out his satisfaction. Fuck. He'd forgotten to put on a condom. “Marly, I'm so damn sorry,” he whispered, gathering her close, not realizing for long, terrifying moments that the delectable woman he'd just fucked had morphed into a standard, hotel-issued bed pillow.

Embarrassed, he looked over toward his roommate's bed, relieved to see the guy still snoring away, seemingly unaware of the noisy fantasy Bobby had just enjoyed. Good thing he slept like a rock!

What a dream! As Bobby used a towel to clean the mess he'd made, he shook his head. Damn it, he intended to make this dream come true—and to find out if the real thing was as mind-blowing as his wet dream.

* * * * *

Time flew when you were having fun. By the time the regular season began, Bobby had gotten to where he could almost come just listening to Marly's voice. All summer they'd talked on the phone nearly every night. About football. About things to do in Memphis. About their very different college experiences. About each other and the immediate chemistry that seemed to be mutual. He'd have initiated phone sex but he didn't want to take a ribbing from his new roommate who slept much less soundly than

the first one, who'd gone along with the other players who hadn't made the final team roster.

Although his body ached every day after practice sessions that were twice as hard as he'd been used to at Tulane and ten times what Coach Williams had put him through back in Hedgecock, Bobby always looked forward to calling Marly before lights-out. Every time they spoke, he got more and more certain that she might be the perfect match for him.

Today the first regular season game had been easier than a practice, since all he'd done was stand on the sideline and try to look busy as he held the clipboard for Keith Connors. He arranged the pillows on his bed, waited until his new roommate started snoring, and grabbed his cell phone.

"Marly?"

"You looked good out there today. I watched the game on TV. When are you coming back to Memphis?" She sounded so sexy he had no trouble imagining her stretched out in bed, holding out her arms to him. Blood slammed into his cock so fast he damn near lost his train of thought.

"In the morning. I'll grab the key to this condo the team found for me to rent and go over there after the team meeting. We're off from practice Tuesday, so if you like we could do something." *Like check out my bed for a few hours.*

"Wish I could," Marly said, her tone heavy with disappointment. "I have cheerleader practice in the afternoon and I promised to babysit for my brother and his wife tomorrow morning so they can shop for new living room furniture."

Evenings were out. He had to get full nights' sleep before practice. After all, he had to run the scout team. He also had to hit the weights, watch game film, attend meetings and get ready to play in case something happened to Keith. "Hate to say it, but we'll have to put off our first date until after the game on Sunday. We can go out, eat and get to know each other up close and personal. Don't know about you, but our phone conversations just make me want to be with you."

“Me too.” Her voice sounded husky. Sexy as hell yet sweet too, like the honey his mom used to pour over his pancakes when he was a kid.

“You sound like you’re sleepy,” In his head, he pictured her cuddled up under a comforter, her black hair spread across a snowy pillowcase. If only he were there with her...

She laughed. “I was, sort of. I was lying in bed, waiting for your call.”

“Were you?” The idea that she was home, waiting up to hear from him, made Bobby feel ten feet tall. “Wish you were here, sleeping with me.”

“Bad boy.” She didn’t say anything else for a minute. “Guess I’m bad, too, though, because I wish you were right here with me, too.”

“If I were, what would we be doing?” His cock twitched when he imagined having her in bed, breathing in her scent, touching her soft skin. “Would I be running my fingers through that beautiful long hair of yours? Or tasting your lush red lips?” *And other more interesting body parts?*

“Maybe. Or maybe I’d be running my hands over your hot, muscular body, seeing how hard you are.”

“Oh I’m hard, all right. All over. I can hardly wait to show you.” She blew his mind and had him fully aroused and ready for action. “We’d better stop this talk or I’ll never get to sleep.” He wouldn’t anyhow, not until he jerked off imagining Marly’s hands and mouth on him.

“You’re right. Sweet dreams to you, too. I’ll be counting the days.” With that Marly said good night and ended the call. Was it Bobby’s imagination or had she really said she wanted to get as physical as he did?

Yeah, he wanted her to want him. For the first time since high school, he thought a woman might actually want him for himself and not the position he played. There were some benefits to being a backup. If Marly wanted to score with just any quarterback she’d obviously have set her sights for Keith now that he was widowed and back on the groupie fantasy market.

* * * * *

Time had gone quickly since that day in June when she'd run into Bobby Anthony. The regular season had begun. Marly looked around the stadium, found it looked the same, even though her own excitement was off the charts. It was the prospect of seeing Bobby again, the anticipation of their date following the game.

They'd talked nearly every night since then, sometimes for hours, other times for just a few minutes. She felt like she knew him, deep inside, even though they'd only met in person for a few stolen moments. Tonight...

Tonight would take care of itself. Meanwhile she had some cheering to do.

Already the crowd was making plenty of noise and the players hadn't even come on the field for warm-ups. A brisk wind had pennants dancing around on top of the stadium. Small planes towed ads for various businesses, and a giant helium-filled balloon bounced on its tether on the wall above the south end zone. Larger-than-life images of Maulers players past and present flashed in unison on two jumbotrons.

Marly loved it. The excitement. The beginning of another thrilling season, this one where she could yell not just for the team as a unit but for Bobby. Even if he did nothing but pace the sidelines carrying a clipboard.

The day couldn't have been better. Not a hint of rain on the horizon, and that was good. So was the fact it was a comfortable seventy-three-degree day in mid-September. Coming home after a successful season opener on the road, the team was certain to be fired up for their old nemesis, the Milwaukee Marlins. Bobby had mentioned when they talked last night that the team was out for revenge since the Marlins had blown out the Maulers the last game of the previous season.

Liz Grady, a fellow cheerleader, joined Marly in the formation at the end of the tunnel where the players would emerge. "Who're you trying to catch the attention of today?" she asked.

"You can pick from the rest of them. I want Bobby Anthony." Marly and Liz watched the players come out of the tunnel as they waved pompoms along with the rest

of the Maulers' Molls who had formed a double line for the players to go through. "He's so hot. Tall, dark and sexy. We're going out after the game."

What was Marly saying? What was she thinking? Here she was, drooling about getting involved with a player even though she'd had no intention of becoming a football groupie. She guessed Bobby had changed all that.

Liz kept her pompoms dancing, but she shot Marly an incredulous look. "How'd you manage that?"

"We ran into each other—almost literally—when he was here for rookie camp during cheerleader tryouts. We've been talking on the phone ever since." Liz didn't need to know those calls had been fodder for her fantasies, or that Marly was a lot more involved than she'd planned to be with the rookie signal-caller. "He's..."

"I know, I know, he's got you creaming your panties just thinking about him. Just keep in mind how many other women are doing the same." Liz paused for a minute, watched Keith Connors warming up his arm with one of the receivers. "Did you hear, Keith lost his wife during the offseason, right after their baby was born? His mom's staying with him, taking care of the baby until they find a permanent nanny. I wonder if he's getting lonesome yet. I sure wouldn't mind fucking him until he can't see straight. Bet he's horny by now." Liz glanced toward the stands where a lot of the players' wives and girlfriends were sitting. "I don't see his mother over there."

Was Liz thinking... No, she couldn't be. "She could be in one of the luxury boxes," Marly pointed out.

"Yeah, or she could be home with the kid."

"If I were you I'd stay far away from Connors. I heard one of the cheerleaders went groupie on him last year, and she was tossed off the squad. Management doesn't take well to cheerleaders chasing their married players."

"Yeah, I know. Still, a girl can always dream. Besides, Connors isn't married anymore."

For the next few minutes, while they waited for the National Anthem and coin toss, Marly stared at the number four on Bobby's jersey. The legendary Brett Favre wore that number, too. The Maulers had probably given the number to Bobby because he'd worn it at Tulane and it hadn't already been issued to a Maulers veteran, not because it also happened to belong to one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time. But Marly saw the coincidence as a sign that good things were going to happen for the rookie.

Dark-brown hair, a little on the long side as if he'd been too busy to find a barber shop, made Bobby look adorable, and awfully young. Or maybe he looked young because he *was* young. Straight out of college, he looked the part of the golden rookie, chomping at the bit to get his chance. He could make it with her right now. Let Liz lust after team captain Keith Connors.

Just looking at Bobby made Marly start to salivate. His long, lean, muscular body tempted her to explore...to taste...to drive him so crazy he'd take her like the alpha jock she was sure he'd be when they got between the sheets. Not that his baby face didn't turn her on, because it did. Big time.

She couldn't have lusted after Bobby any more if she'd made up an order for her dream lover and had the Maulers general manager fill it for her on draft day. Smooth, tanned skin with no more than a hint of a dark beard she was sure would thicken as he got older framed deep-set brown eyes—not hazel but clear, coffee-colored eyes that had held her gaze for more than a second as he passed by her on the sideline, clipboard in hand. Damn, but his smile was to die for. She could hardly wait to taste those inviting, firmly chiseled lips that framed gleaming teeth. Again, she amended, recalling that one mind-blowing kiss one sweltering day in June.

Marly sighed when the Milwaukee team went three-and-out and the Maulers took over on their own twenty-yard line. Keith Connors trotted onto the field, his attitude as sure and cocky as befitted a seven-time All-Pro. He always liked to come out passing, and this time was no exception. Lined up in the shotgun, he took the snap, looked out to find his receiver...

Omigod! That hurt, just watching Connors get blindsided and knocked flat on his back. The tackler then came down on top of him and the ball popped loose. Luckily it was recovered by one of the Maulers offensive linemen, probably the same one who had missed the block on the Marlins All-Pro linebacker who leveled Keith. Marly took a deep breath. Like everybody else in the stadium, she hoped Keith wasn't badly hurt.

When he didn't get up right away, the team's medical people swarmed onto the field. The crowd went silent. They knew as well as Marly did that if Connors was out, Bobby was in for a quick and probably terrifying baptism of fire. It looked as if that would probably be the case when one of the EMT people drove a cart out onto the field. She looked along the sideline, trying to find Bobby among the other players.

There he was, talking with the quarterback coach and offensive coordinator. He stood by the stretcher for a minute and shared a few words with Keith. Then, with a resolute look on his face, Bobby put on the helmet he'd been holding. Shoulders squared, he trotted onto the field and into the huddle. Marly stood, her gaze locked on the guy she considered her very own rookie quarterback as he lined up under center and took the snap.

He handed off to wiry running back Dan Morales then ran the opposite direction, or at least that was what it looked like at first. But no, Bobby still had the ball, and no protection from a lineman on the bootleg play. Bobby looked downfield and found his receivers covered before tucking the football and running. Twenty-six yards later, a Marlins player finally shoved him out of bounds.

Less than a minute went by before the Maulers scored. Bobby had completed three of four passes, the last one for a touchdown. That wasn't bad at all for a rookie's first series as a pro.

Marly made sure she was in his line of vision as he trotted off the field before shooting him her sexiest smile along with a thumbs-up. Before the players went to the locker room at halftime she handed Bobby a note. Liz gaped at her, obviously surprised

that Marly would be so blatant. "All it says is that I'll meet him outside the players' exit after the game."

She knew Liz must have thought she was a QB groupie. Her friends had teased her about that since she first told them she was going to try out for the cheerleading squad. Despite the fact their date had been in the works for months, she guessed she must be a groupie, something she'd been vehemently denying to her friends who'd teased her for going out for the Maulers cheerleading squad last spring. But Marly loved the game. She loved the Maulers, and she was proud to be a cheerleader.

She didn't mind the teasing, because she knew why she'd done it. However, she hoped Bobby Anthony didn't think she was a typical groupie. If that was the only reason he was going out with her...

She felt a spear of hurt the thought provoked, but quickly pushed it away. She liked Bobby, and if she was a groupie, it was for one specific guy. She wouldn't care if he was the number one quarterback or the water boy, though she certainly didn't mind looking at his big, toned body. Not that the body was all she was interested in. From the late-night conversations they'd shared, she'd learned she liked his attitude, his sense of humor, his open affection for his mom...just about everything she'd learned about him. And she wasn't about to let Liz's or anybody else's opinion spoil her excitement about their upcoming date.

* * * * *

"What's that, Anthony?" Third-string quarterback Ellis Tripp gestured toward the folded scrap of paper Bobby was looking at.

"A note." Ninety percent of his mind was on what Coach Lyle had just said about what they had to do to hold their lead. The rest focused on Marly, who looked even hotter today than she had the day they first met. "From one of the cheerleaders," he added when Ellis looked confused.

“If all it takes is to play a few downs to get hot babes crawling all over you, then I’d better start working harder in practice so I can get a shot at some of them.” Ellis grinned, his sun-roughened cheeks crinkling like paper when he curved his lips. At thirty-eight, the journeyman quarterback was past the stage of jockeying for position since he’d gone from sometimes-starter to third-string hanger-on pretty smoothly over the sixteen years he’d been in the league with various teams.

Bobby hoped his own star would rise, not hit a downward spiral the way Ellis’ had. “Come on now, you know your wife would kill you if you started fucking around with the groupies.”

“Guess so. You gonna take her out?” He gestured toward the paper in Bobby’s hand.

“Yeah. Where’s a good place to go after the game?” After the last preseason game he’d gone straight home instead of taking his teammates up on what had sounded like it might become a wild celebration of their victory. Ellis scratched his head. “Probably the Fifth Quarter over on the river. That way a lot of her buddies will see her with the hero of the day. That ought to make her happy. Come on, it’s time to go finish this game.”

“Yeah.” He’d managed pretty well so far. Bobby gave himself a pep talk as he trotted back onto the field. Thirty minutes more of playing and his NFL debut would be a success, assuming he didn’t panic and the defense managed to stop the Marlins’ Brand Carendon from tossing any more seventy-yard touchdown passes the way he’d done just before halftime. While the receiving team was on the field, Bobby found Marly near the bench and said, “I’ll meet you outside the players’ exit. It may be a while though, because I’ll have to do a postgame interview.”

Marly grinned, her eyes sparkling. She looked cute in her uniform with its short skirt and boots and bare middle. “You sound like you’re more worried about that interview than you were about playing your first series in the pros,” she said, clearly teasing him.

“Maybe I am. I’ve played football lots of times, a whole lot more than I’ve given interviews in front of a bunch of TV cameras.”

“You’ll do fine. You know, I like you all wound up and glistening with sweat the way you are right now. Now go win this game for us.” With that she stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips across his cheek.

* * * * *

When the game was over, Bobby figured he’d played all right. The Maulers won the game by three, and he’d thrown for two touchdowns and only one interception. But he wasn’t at all sure he’d aced the postgame interview. Hell, he’d never before faced what seemed like hundreds of microphones or gotten spots in front of his eyes from staring into harsh lights that had shone directly at him. Doing interviews wasn’t something he’d practiced, since the only time he’d had to talk with reporters in college had been after his one bowl game appearance.

Back at his locker, he wondered for a minute if he ought to change out of the suit he’d put on to appear in front of the network cameras.

The hell with it. He’d lived through the torture of trying to come up with honest but tactful answers to stupid and leading questions. Answers that didn’t make him sound like an asshole or an idiot. Questions about the game, the likelihood of Keith’s absence for a few games or more, even about how he felt about the Maulers and his teammates. Bobby figured Marly would probably like him to look like the Maulers quarterback, not the green rookie he was. Hanging the T-shirt and jeans he’d just grabbed back in his locker, he loosened his tie and left his shirt open at the collar so it wouldn’t keep choking him. Sooner or later he was going to have to get used to dressing up, he supposed. Besides, he wanted to be with Marly now and it would take time to change.

He’d better get going. It wasn’t in him to make a woman wait longer than he had to. As he made his way out of the dressing room, he had to restrain himself from sprinting.

After all, he told himself, if she was a proper groupie she should be the one panting after him, not the other way around.

Chapter Two

Bobby had looked good enough to eat in his red and black home game uniform. But in the gray pinstriped suit he had on now, he looked every bit the successful young executive. Only his hair, still damp and curling above the collar of a pale-blue shirt, gave a hint he might have recently come off the football field and out of the interview room. "I loved watching you play," she told him when he stopped in front of her and took her gear bag out of her hand. "You're damn good for a rookie."

His grin warmed her heart and her body. "Thanks, baby. I'm counting on playing some more later today, with you. Shall we go over to the Fifth Quarter?"

No shy guy here. Marly liked her men self-confident to the point of egotistical, and she'd never met a quarterback who wasn't, except maybe Ellis. But he didn't count since he was married and about ready to hang up the pads. "Let's." She didn't mind being Bobby's arm candy, not at all. As a matter of fact it pleased her that he wanted to show her off to the big contingent of players and fans the rustic sports bar and restaurant always attracted after a Maulers win. "Where's your car?"

"In the lot over there. What about yours?"

"I came with one of the other cheerleaders. I figured you'd be taking me home."

"Your home or mine?" His dark eyes twinkled, as though he might be teasing her. When she'd asked about taking him apartment shopping after the preseason was over, he'd told her about the place he'd lucked into—a condo on the riverfront that belonged to a former Maulers scout.

She really wanted to see the place he'd described as too big for just him, but she didn't want to sound too eager. "We'll see. You know you look almost as good in a suit as you did in your uniform." Marly crooked her arm through his and noticed how he

slowed his pace to accommodate her shorter legs. “You’re too good to be true—hot as all get-out, and polite, too.”

When they reached his shiny red Escalade pickup truck, Bobby set their bags on the backseat then opened the passenger door. “My mom taught me to treat the ladies right.”

Marly watched him circle in front of the truck to get to the driver’s side. She liked the way he moved, with purpose, comfortable in his body like so many athletes were not when taken out of their work environment. When he slid behind the wheel, he leaned over and took her hand.

“I’d really like to kiss you hello.” His deep drawl poured over her, soaked in like butter melted and sunk into hot buttermilk biscuits.

Her pussy clenched. This was definitely the man of her late-night dreams. “I can hardly wait for you to kiss me.” *For starters.*

“Good.” His breath smelled sweet, like toothpaste and mouthwash. As he lowered his head, she got a glimpse of his long, dark lashes, his strong brow.

And then he kissed her. But it wasn’t just any old peck. It was the real thing, a tongue-tangling, mind-boggling locking of his firm, mobile lips with hers. He framed her face between his big, calloused hands, pressing the back of her head against the cool, beige leather upholstery.

She had to regain her self-control or she’d be taking one of those big hands and drawing it to her breasts, her damp pussy. When he broke the kiss and turned to take the wheel, she still wanted more. Now. She wanted Bobby to take control over her the way he’d overwhelmed the Marlins’ acclaimed defense.

“Hold that thought. Right now I’m hungry for something hot and spicy. Not that you’re not both.” He shot her a sexy smile that got her even hotter.

“I am?” she asked, her tone as innocent as she could make it, wanting him the way she did.

“Yeah. If you weren’t, I wouldn’t be almost ready to pass on food for a long, hot roll in the hay – or rather in the king-size bed at my place. We’ll pass the building on the way to Fifth Quarter.” Bobby backed up and headed for the gate. He frowned at the dark-green Lexus, one of the few cars left in the lot. “Keith’s car’s still here. Guess they must have taken him to the hospital in an ambulance. I hope he’s going to be okay.”

For a minute, Marly doubted that last statement. Most backup players she knew would be thrilled that the guy in front of them was out of commission. But then she figured Bobby might really be concerned for Keith’s well-being. After all, from what he’d told her during one of their long phone conversations, the two men had grown up in the same west Texas town that had produced not only them but also the Rebels’ Dave Delaney and his coach, Colin Zanardi. “Did you know Keith back home?”

He glanced her way as he made the turn onto Riverside. “Not really. I saw him play in high school, but he wasn’t especially interested in messing around with annoying grade school kids. Of course I can’t blame him. I didn’t much like being followed around by the younger boys when I was playing high-school ball either.”

Still, that connection had to have meant something to both men. “How did it make you feel when you saw him go down today?”

Bobby didn’t answer right away. When he did, his tone was sober. “Scared. The guy was my idol for a long time. I never expected the Maulers to draft me, or that I’d be playing behind him. Keith is too young for the front office to think about him retiring, not to mention way too good. I guess the main thought running through my mind was whether or not I was about to go on the field and make a huge fool of myself. But I was hoping there wasn’t anything serious wrong with Keith.”

“Is there?” It wasn’t curiosity, or even wishful thinking. Marly didn’t wish Keith ill. Not at all. He’d brought a lot of good things to Memphis, besides keeping the Maulers in contention almost every year since he’d arrived nine years ago. Too many bad things had happened to him lately.

“They took him to the hospital for an MRI on his throwing shoulder. Could be it’s nothing but a strained muscle and he’ll be back next week. I hope so.”

The way Bobby said it, Marly believed he wished the other quarterback well, even though the longer he was out, the longer Bobby would have to show his stuff. “I hope so, too.” She laid her hand on Bobby’s knee then continued. “Even though I love seeing you play.”

He grinned, guiding her hand up his thigh until it rested on his very impressive package, already hot and throbbing beneath the lightweight fabric of his pants. “You ain’t seen nothing yet. Not until you and I’ve done some playing on a different field. See how you’ve already got me paying attention?” he asked as he pulled in Fifth Quarter’s packed parking lot and skillfully squeezed his truck into a parking space that must have been meant for a compact car.

“Oh yeah. I see.” There was nothing like a quarterback for cool self-confidence to match a healthy, well-fed ego. She loved it, and the more time she spent with him she was learning she liked Bobby beyond his obvious potential as a hot sex partner. Their phone conversations had let her guess, but seeing him in the flesh solidified her first impressions.

“I’m not exactly ready to go inside yet. How’d you get interested in cheerleading?” He turned off the truck and moved her hand from his now-throbbing erection, his grin a little one-sided as if he’d embarrassed himself but didn’t want to say so.

“I like dancing and gymnastics, and I love football. Being a cheerleader for the Maulers lets me indulge all three loves. Besides, after I finished college I didn’t find any jobs here where I could use my education and make money. And I didn’t like the idea of leaving my family and going someplace where I didn’t know a soul.”

“That was hard for me, too, at first, leaving everything familiar for a new, uncertain job even though I’ve wanted to play pro football since high school. Guess I’ve been lucky, because the Maulers front office people made sure I found a place to live and some new friends, so I’m okay now – especially now that I have a beautiful woman like

you to show off to all my teammates.” Still a little red-faced, he shifted on the seat and readjusted his pants. “Sorry, Marly. I don’t like giving you the impression all I’m out for is a piece of ass. I’ll behave—at least for a little while.”

She hoped for more than that, of course, but she’d take all of Bobby that he was willing to give. “You didn’t make me think that. Ready to go inside?” If they didn’t, she didn’t know if she could keep her hands to herself—and for the first time in her adult life of fantasizing about hot young studs, she really didn’t want this very real one to think of her as just another football groupie lusting after the latest tasty acquisition by her hometown team. “I find myself wanting to dance with you. And getting to know a little bit more about you than I’ve read in the *Commercial Appeal* and at ESPN.com.”

“I think I’m okay for now. You probably don’t want to dance with me, though. I’m strictly a Texas two-step kind of guy.”

Oh yeah, Marly wanted to dance with him. Vertically, horizontally and every way from Sunday. The more he talked, the more she thought this one might be a keeper, if only she could successfully fight off all the other groupies who’d kill for a night with the Maulers second-string quarterback. She’d win because she’d be fighting for Bobby, not just his undeniable prowess on a football field—or, if her guess was on target, in bed.

* * * * *

Bobby tried to tell himself as he stretched one large draft beer to wash down barbecued ribs and potato skins that he’d better not get too attached to Marly. She liked him now, but he wasn’t too sure about how she’d feel if he bombed next week in his very first start. But she was making it damn difficult for him to keep his feelings in check. As if she was hot for him, not *any* Marlins player, she stuck at his side, ignoring the other guys who were making thinly veiled passes. He was finding it hard to keep from thinking about her as way more than a one-season distraction.

“Dance?” A slow country ballad had just started, one he thought he might be able to manage without stomping all over Marly’s feet. He hated dancing just like most unusually tall guys he knew, but he wanted to hold her, feel her heart beating against his. Dancing was the only socially acceptable way he could think of doing that in a public place with people all around. When she stood, he got up and led her out on the small dance floor. She stretched to put her arms around his neck, and her firm, ripe breasts rubbed hard against his chest. His pulse raced as he tried to keep his mind on the four-beat box step he thought he’d mastered back in middle school physical ed classes.

No luck. What he wanted to do, he couldn’t, not now when half the team was looking on, most likely laughing their asses off at his feeble attempt to dance. He rested his chin on top of her head, inhaling the sweet smell of the wavy black strands that cascaded down her back, tickling the arms he was holding firmly around her waist. He managed to restrain himself from sliding those hands lower, cupping her rounded butt cheeks and pulling her tight against his raging hard-on.

After talking with her about the game while they were eating, Bobby realized that Marly was a football player’s dream. She obviously loved the sport and knew a good bit about it. Not too many women would have recognized his first professional play as a naked bootleg, but she’d mentioned the term first instead of picking up on it from someone else’s comments.

And she had a knack for making him feel powerful...in control. He’d never felt that way around a woman before. Not Tina and not any of the girls at Tulane who’d wanted to be seen on campus with a football star. Bobby held Marly closer, bent and brushed his lips against her earlobe.

“I should’ve worn high heels.” Marly stood on tiptoe, nuzzled at his throat.

And I should have kept my jockstrap on. Good thing he still had on his suit jacket, because she was getting him so hot that no one could possibly fail to notice the bulge in

his crotch. "If you've had enough socializing, we can take a walk along the river, or go to my place. It's not far."

"I say there's no place like home. Especially when the mosquitoes are still nibbling on people who're brave enough to walk along the riverbank."

Chapter Three

Be it ever so humble..." Bobby opened the door for her then followed Marly into the entry foyer of his sixteenth-floor condo.

"Humble? This is gorgeous." She made a beeline for the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the Mississippi River and sighed. "Hardly humble." To her the soaring ceiling and opulent contemporary furnishings seemed incongruous with her impression of who Bobby was. "I was disappointed that you didn't need me to help you hunt for apartments."

"I was looking forward to that, too. But one of the front office people found this place for me. It came furnished, and comparatively cheap. I'm house-sitting for a former team scout and his wife. They didn't want to try to sell now, with the housing market so depressed." He came up behind her, wrapped his arms around her, blew lightly on her ear then drew her closer. "Sometimes I like to sit by that window and watch the boats go up and down the river. It's different—a lot different—from Hedgecock County, Texas. A lot more soothing to look at from a distance."

"And how about up close?" she asked, imagining the small-town boy might have been a little intimidated by big-city life.

"I like being up close to you." His hard cock probed against her ass cheeks, its message unmistakable.

He picked her up as though she weighed no more than the beer stein he'd nursed while they were at the bar, and carried her to a beige leather lounge chair where he sat and held her on his lap. Having him gather her in his arms and hold her as though she was precious to him made her heart beat double time. He aroused her, certainly, but she felt his affection, too. "I meant, how've you adjusted to the city, up close?"

“Fine. I went to college in New Orleans. Memphis isn’t that much different, just a little quieter and less rowdy. It’s even on the same river.”

“I bet you were a rowdy one.” Marly imagined him in the French Quarter, living it up with teammates and a devoted bunch of hot sorority girls.

He laughed. “Not really. I had to work pretty hard to stay in football shape year-round and handle a full load of academic courses.”

She’d heard he’d won a scholar-athlete award of some sort last year. “I find it hard to believe you never found time to play on Bourbon Street.”

Bending down, Bobby caught her hair and laid it over her shoulder then blew on her neck. The warm, damp burst of air sent shivers all the way to her toes. “I didn’t say I never got to play. I just didn’t do it very often. No time and not a lot of spending money.”

“So they didn’t find you a cushy job where you could study and make money? My college’s basketball team got suspended from postseason play for a long time because most of the starters had jobs working for companies a rabid team supporter owned. Only they didn’t actually work.”

“Nope. I had a full scholarship but no jobs, real or fake. Tulane’s more academic than sports-orientated, although they have made some good runs at football championships over the years. I never heard of any player there getting money without working for it.”

“Oh.” She should have figured that. Unlike the state university she attended, Tulane was well-known for being one of the most prestigious schools in the South. She’d have loved to go to Tulane, but they’d never have let her in with her very average high-school grades.

“I got what I wanted from my four years there—a good education I can use once football runs its course, and a chance to start all four years and get drafted into the pros.” He traced the length of her arm, stopping to stroke the sensitive flesh in the crook of her elbow. “How about you?”

She snuggled against his muscular chest, enjoyed the heat and the slow, steady beat of his heart. "Daddy footed the bill for my higher education. I wasn't the world's best student, but I got a liberal arts degree a year ago and came back home. Someday I'd love to do work helping disabled people, but nothing has come up so far except for some volunteer fundraising I do for Angels Unaware. I work part-time in the family restaurant, and pretty much full-time at being a Maulers cheerleader, at least during the season."

"Do you still live at home? I don't believe that's ever come up during any of our conversations."

She hoped he didn't mind. "Yes. If you want to keep seeing me, you'll have to meet the parents eventually. They're great, but they have a tendency to push their kids at whoever they happen to be dating. Speaking of which, are we? Dating, that is."

"Yeah. We're dating. Have we been dating long enough for you to join me in my new king-size bed?" He nibbled on her earlobe, and that sent what felt like a lightning bolt coursing through her.

"If I were the nice girl my folks brought me up to be, I'd have to say no. But since I'm not, and since you turn me every way but loose—"

"We could wait, you know. It might kill me, but there's something about you—about us—that's about more than getting naked and fucking like minks."

Marly could hardly believe her ears. Bobby's words proved he was much more than a hot jock, hinted that he might be as emotionally invested as she was. "Really?"

"Yeah, there is." Bobby reached around and laced his long fingers together over her belly, using his thumbs to massage the lower swell of her breasts. His hands stilled, and when he spoke it was little more than a husky, provocative whisper. "Or we could do what we both want and call it getting to know each other better."

That sounded good. Instead of saying yes or no, Marly twisted around and began unbuttoning Bobby's shirt. She couldn't resist running her hand along the muscular

expanse of his lightly furred chest. "Don't you think we both have on too many clothes?"

"Yeah. You're right. What say we check out the bedroom?" Not waiting for a reply, he stood and carried her where he wanted them to be. There was something thrilling about having a lover strong enough to carry her around like he might a small child, something exciting, a little intimidating about knowing he had the physical ability to command her to his will. He set her down in a large room dominated by a massive bed, and she immediately missed the close contact.

Unlike some guys she knew, including her brothers, Bobby kept a tidy bedroom. The bed was even made, its beige and red woven coverlet neatly pulled over what she imagined would be sheets that had a hint of the outdoorsy scent he was wearing. He probably had a housekeeper, but for some reason Marly got the idea he was just naturally neat. Before she had a chance to ask him, he scooped her up again and set her on the side of the bed. Then he took a knee.

"What, are you proposing? Or do you have a foot fetish?" The careful way he untied and removed her cross-trainers, and his sensual touch as he rubbed her feet through the short socks before pulling them off, too, made her think he just might.

"No, I'm not proposing. And you've got a lot of body parts that turn me on more than your pretty feet." He paused, massaging the balls of her feet with his strong fingers for a long, delicious minute before stopping and looking up at her. His expression was taut, his eyes almost black. "Stand up now and unfasten your shorts. I'll take care of the rest."

She had no doubt he would. In his own time. It was obvious he'd grabbed the reins, taken control. She loved it. At that moment she realized she could very easily love him. Right now this burning lust would have to do for both of them. Standing, she lowered the zipper on her shorts then unfastened the belt and snap. The sturdy denim slid down her legs, the abrasion slight but ever so arousing. Maybe that was because Bobby was watching every inch of their slow descent, his breathing ragged.

As if crawling in that bed and getting it on were the least of his concerns, he picked up her shorts, folded them and put them on a club chair that was within arm's reach of where they stood. It was obvious that he was trying to go slow. Doing a damn good job of it, too. Instead of going for her thong panties, he lifted off her knit polo shirt and loosened her bra, all in a continuous, practiced motion. How many other women had he taken in this bed? In other beds in other places? Before she could clamp her mouth shut, she blurted out the question she had no right to ask. "How many women have you brought here? Omigod, I'm sorry. It's not my business."

He cupped her chin, tilted her head back until she could look him in the eye. "It's okay, Marly. You're the first woman I've brought here. The first I've been in a bedroom with since I've been in Memphis, actually. Tell the truth, I've always been pretty selective about my sex partners, and I haven't had that many. You may find I'm not all that unforgettable in the sack. But baby, you're inspiring me."

Ever so gently he bent and stripped off her thong to find her sweet pussy bare except for a thin line of neatly trimmed black curls on her mound. "What?"

"It's a Brazilian. Naked except for that little landing strip. I can't stand black hairs creeping out of the legs of my bikini bottoms." She sounded nervous, as though she thought he might object.

Object, hell. He loved the feel of a naked cunt, had regretted that the coed who'd introduced him to hers had had nothing on her mind—other than fucking him every chance she got—but showing him off to her sorority sisters the way he might show off a trophy. "I like it. A lot." Then, before she could get too nervous, he blew on her bellybutton as he straightened up.

"One of us has too many clothes on." When she looked pointedly at him, he realized he was still fully dressed while she was bare-butt naked. "May I help fix that?"

"Oh yeah." While he toed off his loafers, she slid his shirt off and pulled up his undershirt.

“Bend over please.” She moved around him so she could pull the undershirt off. “I can’t reach up high enough to get this shirt over your head, big guy. What are you, six five or six?” Whatever, he was close to a foot taller than she was.

“Six five and a half.” He bent over so she could pull the offending garment off. “Two hundred forty pounds soaking wet, or at least I was before the game. I probably sweated off a couple of pounds.” He unfastened his pants and let them pool at his feet. “I’ll let you get the rest.”

She draped his pants over a chair then turned back to him. “Omigod, you’re even more gorgeous than I imagined. I can tell you spend a lot of time in the weight room.”

“Nowhere near as much time as linemen do. The last thing quarterbacks need is to be muscle-bound.” When she raked his body with a burning-hot gaze, his cock rose to full attention. Her eyes widened when she noticed it tenting his underwear, before her gaze slid back up his chest.

“You’re hurt.” Her hand went out, and she very gently touched one of a colorful collection of bruises that dotted his left shoulder and rib cage, and the long vertical bandage that started just below his ribs and disappeared inside plain white boxer shorts.

The injuries weren’t serious, just the expected results of a hard-fought game. “I’m okay. The bumps and bruises are side effects of the job. I’m used to getting them. If you think I look bad, you should see some of the other guys. Don’t worry, I won’t break.”

She didn’t look all that reassured. In fact she looked downright disbelieving.

He grasped her chin, making her look him in the eye. “You haven’t messed around with a lot of football players, have you?” She couldn’t have, not and still be shocked over seeing a few dents and dings after games, whether they were high school, college or pro.

“No. But I don’t want you to hurt yourself anymore. You probably should be in a whirlpool or something.” When she laid her hand over the bandage on his side, he grabbed it and brought it to his lips.

It made him feel good, suspecting that his hot, gorgeous groupie hadn't been handing herself out to every player she came across. He was pretty sure now that what he felt for Marly wasn't just a matter of scratching a mutual itch. It was more. He didn't know how much more, but he was eager to find out. "Honest. It's nothing. I've gotten hurt worse in practice." That wasn't exactly true since quarterbacks wore distinctive colored shirts in scrimmages that made them off-limits to potential tacklers, but if it made her feel better...

"Under the bandage there's an ugly-looking cleat cut where I got stepped on during that sack in the fourth quarter. But it's not serious. The trainer said it didn't need stitches and that he expected it to heal in a few days. Come on, baby, you're killing me." Not waiting for her to answer or finish undressing him, he hooked his thumbs inside the waistband of his boxers and slid them down his legs. Her sharply indrawn breath made him smile as he sat on the bed and peeled off his socks. "See something you like?"

"You—you're huge. I'm not sure you'll fit."

Apparently the sight of his erection had cleared her mind of worries about him being hurt. "Trust me. We'll fit together just fine. Come here."

When she did, he pulled her close. She felt good, all silky skin and curves just where a woman should have them. Slowly, as gently as he could manage, he ran his hands along her back, clasped her sweet, rounded ass and brought her so close he could inhale her flowery scent, smell her arousal. When she wrapped her arms around his waist and held him tight, he felt her ragged breathing against his nipples. Her heart beat in synch with his own, strong and fast.

The smells of sex surrounded them, fired his need to fuck her now, with no more preliminaries. "Lie down on the bed, baby. I've got to get some condoms." Why hadn't he thought of putting some in a drawer of one of the nightstands by the bed? Fat lot of good they'd do stuck in the bathroom linen closet, unless...

Maybe they'd have some leisurely sex in the hot tub after they took the edge off this lust. He had the feeling that with Marly, he could go all night and still not get enough.

Bobby tore open the box and grabbed a handful of protection, tossing all but one onto the nightstand closest to him as he looked down at Marly.

She'd turned down the coverlet and top sheet, and she lay in the middle of his bed, gloriously naked, her legs slightly apart. He figured she must like sunning herself, because while the rest of her was deeply tanned, there were triangular patches of pale, creamy skin on her breasts. The outline of relatively modest bikini bottoms drew his eye, but only for a moment before his gaze moved lower, to her pussy.

Her clit poked out between satiny outer lips, and he had to taste her. Bending over her, he lapped at the little button, felt it go hard beneath his tongue.

"Yes, please. Don't stop." She sounded breathless, as hot as she looked. When she caught his hair and pulled him closer, he knew she liked this. A lot. "Turn around and let me taste you, too."

Bobby raised his head, looked up at Marly. "Next time, you hot little bitch. Sixty-nine's damn near impossible when you're such a tiny little thing. If you want, though, you can tease me with your hands." He shifted so she could reach him.

Omigod. The way she gripped his cock, squeezed him, was almost enough to make him come. And when she cupped his sac, rolled his balls against her small, soft hand... "Stop, or it's going to be all over."

"Fuck me then. I'm so hot for you. Don't want to wait." Her words came out harsh, fast. The way she stroked his thighs and belly had nearly the same effect on him as when she'd been playing directly with his balls.

"Not yet, baby. I want you so damn hot and wet that you'll enjoy the main act. And I want to taste you some more, too." Not too much more because he wasn't at all sure he could hold out for very long. He lowered his head again, licked along her wet, swollen slit. He found her cunt, stabbed it over and over with his tongue while he tried to ignore what she was doing with her hands on his throbbing cock and balls.

Maybe he should let her take the edge off. But he wanted inside her almost more than he wanted to take his next breath. She was wet enough now. They'd take it slower next time. Taking one last nibble on her clit, he sat and reached for a condom.

He handed it to her, trying to keep his hand from shaking. "Put it on me. I want you so damn much." Even her touch as she rolled the condom over his cock had him practically jumping out of his skin. Never before—

God but she was everything he'd ever dreamed of in a woman—gorgeous, smart and sexy as hell. And she seemed to want him, not just the jock image but all of him. "Hurry, baby. I can't wait much longer."

"There. All done." Marly lay back, every nerve in her body humming as she spread her legs and raised her knees to give Bobby room. He was so fucking hot, so everything she'd dreamed of in lonely late-night fantasies. When he came over her, his expression taut as though he was barely in control, she held out her arms, welcomed his heat and hardness, the feel of his weight on her, his soft chest hair tickling her. Arousing her more than she'd thought possible.

"Put your legs around my waist," he whispered in her ear, his breath hot and sweet, reminding her that his huge, rigid sex stood poised to impale her. "I'll be careful. Don't want to hurt you."

That was the least of her worries now, when she was beneath him, loving the way his hard, perfectly sculpted body controlled her, the pulsating heat of his cock outside the opening to her pussy. She wanted him. Longed for him to take her, stretch her. She wanted him to claim her as his own.

She raked his back with her nails, softly, the tips of her fingers exploring the smooth, warm skin, the taut muscles beneath. Then she felt it. The bandage. And she imagined how much pain he'd endured to finish the game after being stomped on with a cleat attached to a lineman's beefy foot and leg. "Are you really okay?"

“I will be as soon as you let me inside your sweet, wet pussy.” When she spread her legs farther apart and draped them over his tight ass, he pressed the blunt head of his cock inside her, slowly, gently as if he was afraid he might hurt her. “Omigod. You’re tight. So hot and wet I don’t know how long I can last.”

It hurt. But it also felt delicious, him stretching her almost beyond what she could take. “Yes, honey. Fuck me. I love having you inside me this way.”

When he propped his upper body up on his extended arms, his whole body trembled. Sweat beaded on his brow. From his clenched teeth and bulging biceps she guessed he was having trouble going slowly, imagined he longed to sink all the way inside and fuck her hard. “It’s okay. I won’t break.”

“No it’s not. I want you to enjoy this as much as I am.” His breath was hot and incredibly arousing against her throat when he lowered his head and licked the upper curve of her breast. “You’re so wet. So fuckin’ tight. Relax, baby, let me in.”

She framed his face between her hands, looked into his lust-glazed eyes. “Just do it. Please.” She didn’t think she could stand another minute in sexual limbo, wanting him to claim her fully as she hovered on the cusp of an orgasm she somehow knew would be the best she’d ever experienced. “Really, I won’t break.”

On his knees now, he grasped her hips, withdrawing a little then coming back, deeper with every careful stroke. The delicious fullness expanded as he fucked her, still slowly but deeper, their bodies making the erotic slapping sounds of sex. She turned her head and closed her eyes, concentrating on the wetness, the heat, the heady smells of him and her mingling around them, joining them as close as a man and woman could get.

His balls were tight, pressing against her slit when he finally pushed inside her all the way. She felt the pressure of his cock head deep inside her, the throbbing of his hot shaft against her vaginal walls. Omigod, she was going to come and there was nothing she could do to hold back.

“Oh yes. Please don’t stop.”

“I won’t, baby.” He moved faster now, his balls slapping noisily against her wet, hot flesh. He grew harder, bigger with every stroke. She wanted him to drive her higher, higher than she’d ever been. And he obliged her. Every cell in her body felt as though it would explode, and waves of fulfillment poured over her, shattered her control. Nothing mattered but Bobby. And how he was making her feel.

His big body trembled then tightened. His muscles bulged. Impossibly, he grew even bigger inside her. His teeth clenched, he held back his own climax as she flew higher with each hard, fast thrust. “God, baby, I’m coming,” he said, gasping. He was buried inside her all the way, so deep the force of his climax set off another wave of pleasure that flowed through her like molten fire.

She trembled in his arms, panting, gasping out words that sounded a lot like “I love you” and “Oh God yes”, words she’d never have uttered if she’d had control of her mind. She heard her own ragged breathing as she clasped him with her legs and dug her nails in his shoulders.

“Oh yeah, baby, you make me feel like you can’t get enough. Fuck, you make me want to be everything my beautiful lover ever wanted.”

“God yes. I’m coming again.” She clutched his shoulders, hung onto him like a lifeline.

“It’s okay, baby. I’ve got you. Won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I know.” As if the last bubble of her climax finally had burst, leaving her limp and satiated, she loosened her grip on his flesh, stroked where her nails had bitten in. “That was good. So, so good.”

“Oh yeah. And that was just the beginning.”

He rolled to his side and took her with him, holding her as if he’d never let her go. Sweat mingled on their bodies, slick and warm as they explored each other not with fevered passion like before, but in the rosy aftermath of the best sex she’d ever had. From the possessive way he ran his hands along the curves of her neck and back, she thought he’d liked it, too.

She hoped he liked her and wanted, as he'd said, to explore feelings that had erupted like wildfire even before —

“Marly?”

His breath was warm, sweet. It ruffled her hair, had her heart fluttering again. Certainly he couldn't want more. Not so soon. “Bobby?”

“I'd like to meet your folks. And I'd like to see where this goes. This may have been our first time together, but I feel like I've known you forever. Guess those long late-night calls meant a lot more than just helping me pass the lonely nights.”

“To me, too.” They might not have learned so many of the really important things about each other if they'd started dating right away, because she figured the chemistry would have overwhelmed them both and they'd have been between the sheets while still being virtual strangers.

He ran his hand down her spine, parked it casually on her bottom. “It's not just the sex, it's a feeling I have that we're gonna click in other ways, too.” He stretched out, his long body taking up a big chunk of the bed as he lifted her and set her on his belly. “I'm hoping you feel the same.”

“I do.” She'd never felt so complete, and though she'd never before believed in love at first sight, she thought, just maybe, it could happen. That it had happened that afternoon in the training center parking lot. “I'd love to take you home to Mom and Dad. Do you like Italian food?”

He cupped both breasts, brushed her nipples with his thumbs. “Spaghetti and meatballs. They've been favorites since I was a kid. I even learned to like some real Italian food at a little neighborhood restaurant not far from the Tulane campus. Chicken cacciatore and lasagna and such. I can't imagine liking anything more than increasing my knowledge of Italian cookery with you. Along with other things. I've got the feeling I'm going to enjoy doing many things with you.”

Could he possibly have meant that he wanted this to be more than a brief fuckfest? It certainly sounded like he did. His words echoed in Marly's ears, so full of promise yet so frightening.

But were they, really? He hadn't sworn his love or declared any forever intentions. If he had at this point, he'd have set off warning bells in her head and triggered memories of the college boyfriend who'd told her he loved her flat-out then dumped her. No, Bobby's words seemed honest, trustworthy, devoid of empty promises to be broken. *I can't imagine liking anything more* echoed in her ears.

She could accept those words, cherish them, even hope a little bit that the day would come that he'd say he loved her...and she'd dare to believe him and love him back.

Meanwhile she'd try not to think of all the other women who'd be chasing Bobby, and to concentrate on him.

Chapter Four

But Marly wasn't very successful at keeping the competition out of sight or out of mind. With every Maulers victory, Bobby's star was rising. Number four jerseys were showing up at home games in larger numbers each week he started in place of Keith Connors. Gorgeous women stalked him even when they were out together. Why not? The man was the ultimate groupie magnet. It didn't matter that he was only twenty-two and on the second rung of the Maulers depth chart. He was playing every week while Keith's stretched biceps tendon healed, and the groupies were zeroing in.

She couldn't help noticing the way they looked at him. Every time she saw a woman staring at him, practically salivating, her own insecurities would rear their ugly heads. She'd think about the college boy who'd sworn he loved her days before going home for a weekend and bringing back a brand-new bride. He'd been a hot one, but Bobby was so much hotter, not to mention he'd just been named on Memphis' most-eligible-bachelor list. Even with Marly's long-time friends and family, he drew hot looks and subtle flirting from women from eight to eighty.

When she'd taken Bobby to her dad's restaurant after the third game, even the waitresses there who'd been her friends since she was a kid fawned over him. And total strangers came up to them and asked for his autograph when they went to the mall. Marly would have been flattered if only she'd been positive she wasn't just the rookie passer's flavor of the month.

But she wasn't at all sure. The self-confidence she'd reconstructed piece by piece after her college boyfriend dumped her for his high-school sweetheart started to flag under the weight of the adulation Bobby was getting. She'd convinced herself she was strong enough to reach for the moon if it struck her fancy, that she could fight off anyone who might want Bobby for herself. But now she was staying up nights,

wondering when the bubble of her fantasies was going to burst. She imagined how she'd hurt if he dumped her for somebody hotter, smarter or with family connections that could further his career. She pictured the willowy blonde who'd practically attacked Bobby after the Monday night game. The shameless hussy just happened to be a niece of one of the team owners.

Stop it, Marly. Bobby treats you great. He doesn't pay much attention to the other women who want a piece of him. She listened to her inner voice and got out of the chair by her bedroom window, where she'd been indulging in a pity party for one and watching leaves swirl around the backyard the way they been doing every fall that she could remember.

* * * * *

"What's the matter, baby?" Bobby asked when he picked her up after practice the next day.

So it showed? Marly tried to put on a happy face. "Nothing, I was just missing you." No need to feed his ego by letting him know how insecure she was feeling.

"How about going over to my place?" He helped her with her jacket then draped his arm around her as they walked out to his truck.

"Mmmm. What do you have in mind?" A hot roll in the hay would do a bunch toward bolstering her shaky ego, but another voice—her evil twin—whispered in her head that he might have had another woman there last night, when he'd begged off coming over, saying he was too tired to move.

"That, too, honey, but I want to talk with you first."

Talk. Good talk or bad talk? Marly tensed. It couldn't be too bad if he was planning on some bedroom action afterward. She simply had to get over this nagging anxiety or she would lose Bobby for sure. "Okay. Want to give me a hint about what we need to talk about?"

"Living arrangements. Yours, mine and ours."

* * * * *

His twice-a-week housekeeper had done it up right. Bobby glanced around the living area, saw the catered dinner set out on the glass-topped dining table he'd never used before. She'd even dragged out his landlord's good dishes and put some candles in the middle of the table. "Want to eat?"

"Sure." Marly looked a little puzzled when she looked at the table. "How'd you manage this?"

"My housekeeper. I'll have to slip her a few extra bucks. I'd never have thought about doing all this—I just asked her to stay and arrange the stuff I ordered from the caterer. Sit down."

He could bark out orders to ten guys, most of whom outweighed him by sixty pounds or more. He had no trouble calling audibles at the line of scrimmage. Why was it, Bobby wondered as he buttered a roll, that he was having trouble deciding how to ask Marly to come live with him?

Maybe it was his upbringing. People in Hedgecock didn't generally move their girlfriends in unless they married them, and when they did, the people in question became the major subjects for local gossip. *Why don't you just ask her to marry you?* Bobby heard his mom's voice in his head, even though he hadn't discussed the subject with her.

Hell. This wasn't Hedgecock and Marly wasn't a semi-innocent former virgin he'd deflowered then banged every time he got a chance until the worst had happened and they'd gotten caught. He had no reason to hesitate.

He looked across the table, loved the way the candlelight flickered over her face, put highlights in her hair. She ate quietly, as if she was in her own world wondering what was going on. Sort of like he was. "Marly?"

Her smile warmed his insides. "Yes?"

"I've never done this before, so bear with me." He hoped he didn't sound too fucking stupid. "I want you to come live with me."

“Why?” She looked even more confused than she had when she first saw the table all gussied up.

Why, indeed? He wanted to sleep with her, have her there so he could wake up and make love whenever the need arose, but somehow that didn’t sound like a reason a woman would want to hear. He wanted to let her know she was his only woman, and that the women who chased after him meant nothing to him. He also wanted to be with her whenever he could, just because he needed her, wanted her nearby. And he didn’t want to sneak around her house like a horny teenager, waiting until her folks left before fucking her in that frilly bedroom of hers.

Before speaking, he chose his words carefully. “Because I want you with me. Because I want to wake up looking at your beautiful face. Damn it, Marly, I want you to live with me because I love you.”

She dropped her fork onto her plate, as if it had suddenly gotten too heavy to handle. “You love me?”

“I just said I do.” He’d done everything short of saying the words pretty damn regularly over the past weeks. So why did his coming out and saying it now have her all flustered? “Well, will you move in?”

“My parents...”

“Your parents know you’re a grown woman. I’m fairly sure they’ve guessed that we don’t spend all our time together watching DVDs or playing cards.”

She frowned. “They still won’t like it. They’re pretty old-fashioned. But I’ll do it. It’s not like I’m an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old innocent. If you want me around 24/7, then I’ll be here.”

“I do, baby. And I’ll take good care of you.”

Her eyes glistened with tears. “I know. And Bobby, I love you, too.”

But she should have looked happier. It bothered Bobby that Marly still had that half-scared look in her eyes. “Let’s go tell your folks now.” Maybe if they got that over

with, she'd revert to the Marly he'd fallen in love with, and they could do the physical celebrating without the nagging doubts she'd exhibited the past couple of weeks.

* * * * *

Their lovemaking had been hot, almost desperate, after Marly's parents had both expressed stern disapproval of their plans to live together. Now Bobby was gone, off for a road game in Los Angeles. His condo seemed cold without him, too big and too contemporary, like a furniture showroom at a fancy decorator's salon.

Funny, she'd never gotten this uneasy feeling when he was here with her. Her mind drifted back to his bed, where he'd made her feel completely at home, as though they belonged together. He'd explored her body all over, made her feel content as well as tingly with anticipation, taken his time before letting go the reins on his passion and fucking her like there was no tomorrow. His hard thrusts, the slap of his balls against her wet slit, the squeezing of his hands on her breasts stayed in her mind now, even though he'd rolled out of bed at five a.m. to catch the team plane to LA.

Why couldn't she quite believe him when he said he loved her? He'd given her no reason to doubt. She didn't feel like this when he was with her, but now she didn't feel like she belonged here when he was gone.

She still was moving in with him, just as soon as he got home. She loved him, damn it. She'd rather have what time she could with him, even if it meant hurting her mom and dad. Even though she knew she'd be risking hurt that would be much worse if he dumped her than it had been when her college romance had ground to a heartbreaking end.

She'd go home and pack up some of her clothes. She'd stay there and watch the game with Dad on TV. And she'd count the hours until Bobby got back on Monday morning.

* * * * *

Today's practice at the Rangers' complex following a red-eye flight from Memphis had been a bitch, with Coach Lyle snapping at everybody and swearing under his breath because the team's two bad boys hadn't shown up. Every muscle in Bobby's body ached as he bent to grab his dirty workout clothes and stuff them in a laundry bag. But that was the least of his worries. The talk he'd had last night with Marly's dad hadn't gone well. Not that he'd expected it would. He'd realized even before bringing up the idea of Marly moving in with him how conventional and old-fashioned Marly's parents were.

His own mom hadn't been too happy, either, when he'd told her he was thinking about asking Marly to move in with him, although she'd wished him well. Like Dom Ragusa, Mom had pointed out that in her day most couples waited to live together until after they got married. She'd also mentioned Tina, whom she loved like a daughter now that Bobby's former girlfriend had come to stay in his old room after her mom's death.

Damn it, he should have known his mom was hoping Tina and he would get together. And he hated disappointing her. After all, she'd sacrificed a lot to see him get as far as he'd come. But Tina wasn't happening for him. Not now or ever. Yeah, he loved her, but as a good friend. He had no desire to fuck her again, couldn't imagine enjoying the staid life she'd insist upon. He doubted Tina was still remembering those few nights under the Hedgecock County High bleachers with anything resembling longing, either. He'd been damn green—a virgin, even—when they'd laid a blanket under the bleachers and had their first sexual experience. When he looked back on it, he wondered why Tina had agreed to keep on doing it. Amazing what a guy could learn about sex in six years.

Bobby liked living the life of a successful jock with Marly beside him. He loved the way she set his libido on fire, and that she enthusiastically embraced everything about him, bruises and unruly testosterone and all. He especially liked the way they clicked, not only in bed but whenever they spent time together.

He'd never felt that way about anybody else he'd ever dated, especially Tina. If they hadn't been curious kids, Bobby was pretty sure she wouldn't have let him fuck her at all. And he was almost as sure the hots he'd had for her were purely the result of teenage boy hormones. He sure as hell had never wanted her the way he wanted Marly now.

If he were certain Marly loved him, and would even if he weren't a successful pro athlete, he'd marry her tomorrow. But he wasn't, and he sensed she wasn't quite sure of his commitment, either. Still he wanted to go to sleep feeling her soft, warm skin against him and wake up every morning sharing sleepy sex and the great companionship they'd shared from their first date.

He wished he'd had time to move Marly into his apartment before coming out here, so she'd be waiting in his bed when he got back. The last thing Bobby wanted was for her to slip through his fingers. She was everything he wanted in a woman, and not just because she was the best fuck he'd ever had. Yeah, she'd agreed to move in with him, but she was fretting about her parents' disapproval and he worried she might change her mind.

"I don't blame her dad for not wanting her to move in with me," he told Ellis, who had the visitors' locker next to his.

"Times have changed," Ellis responded. "But I don't blame you either, wanting to go slow on the marriage thing. Maybe it would smooth things out with her folks if you got engaged."

To Bobby, that meant as much of a commitment as standing in front of a preacher and saying the words. Still... "Maybe I will." He loved Marly all right, he just wasn't sure she'd love him as much when Keith came back to practice next week and he was standing on the sidelines again. More important, he wasn't at all certain she'd be willing to leave her close-knit family and go with him when he was traded away from Memphis. His agent was positive a trade would happen, maybe almost as soon as

Connors took over the reins again. That shouldn't be long now. Maybe in the next week or two, certainly before Thanksgiving.

Bobby wasn't used to being indecisive about anything. But then he'd never wanted anything the way he wanted Marly with him day and night. He even wanted her more than he'd wanted to play pro football before last spring's draft. Damn it, he'd follow Ellis' suggestion. It wouldn't be deceiving Marly or her folks to put a ring on her finger, because he did want to marry her someday if things worked out.

He turned to Ellis. "You know, I think you're right. Want to go help me pick a ring out before we have to go back to the hotel for dinner?"

"Sure. Where shall we go?"

Bobby grinned. "How about Beverly Hills? I've always wanted to go shopping on Rodeo Drive."

"It's your money, bonus baby." Ellis sat on a bench and tied his cross-trainers.

Though Bobby wasn't into wasting money needlessly, he wanted to get something Marly would always treasure, the way his mom still occasionally teared up when she glanced down at the narrow gold band she'd still been wearing last time he was home. Recalling her mentioning that she was spending time with Mr. Tate when they'd talked on the phone this morning, Bobby wondered if she'd finally taken off that ring. He hoped so, because it was about time for her to get a life of her own.

"I'm not gonna go crazy, but I want Marly to know how much she means to me. Thanks to the media, everybody knows I got that signing bonus."

"That makes sense. Come on, we only have a couple of hours until we've got a team meeting at the hotel."

* * * * *

Tiffany's on Rodeo Drive was a hell of a lot fancier than the only other jewelry store Bobby had ever been inside. Dazzling diamonds practically blinded him as he let the saleswoman point out details on an array of pre-made rings. He finally chose a two-

and-a-half carat round stone set in the jeweler's signature platinum setting, and escaped without being talked into adding an obscenely expensive tennis bracelet to go with the ring. The distinctive-looking ring box now rested inside his jeans pocket. He figured he'd stash it inside his equipment bag once they got back to the hotel for the team meeting.

* * * * *

When he and Ellis walked into Coach Lyle's suite five minutes late, Bobby thought everybody was awfully quiet. Even Coach seemed subdued as he preached about how the Maulers defense would have to play their best to get a win against the Rangers. "You can never count Casey Weldon out. He may be old, but he's still got an arm and the kind of football smarts you don't often see." Next to Dave Delaney, another of the Hedgecock, Texas, quarterbacks, Casey had been one of Bobby's childhood heroes. Getting the chance to see Weldon play was almost as exciting as it was going to be to go up against him. Bobby told himself he'd just have to see that he made no mistakes, that his throws would be on target whenever he got on the field.

Coach Lyle moved away from the bar, paced among the players. Bobby watched his hands clench into fists, as if he wanted to lay into somebody. Bobby hoped it wasn't him and Ellis for having arrived five minutes into the meeting.

It seemed the coach's ire was meant for the entire team, which was a relief. "Okay. You guys keep your noses clean. No partying tonight. It's going to be bad enough answering questions about what got Mort and Willis locked up last night without having anybody else run afoul of the law." Coach scowled, and the collective silence could have deafened them all. "No doubt about it, no matter what it does to our chances of winning, I'll suspend anybody who breaks curfew. And curfew is now."

"What's that all about?" Bobby asked Dan Morales as they waited for an elevator in the hotel lobby.

“Your head must be up your ass, rookie, if you didn’t know our two resident idiots sneaked out of the hotel and went out to a club right after we arrived. They got drunk and roughed up a couple of strippers bad enough that they had to get admitted to the hospital. Both of our teammates are locked up, at least until court opens on Monday.”

“No shit?” Bobby didn’t know either of the so-called idiots well, but it did register in his mind that one of them, Willis, was his number two wide receiver. Mort was a second-string defensive player who’d roughed his receivers up unnecessarily a couple of times during practice. “So we play without them tomorrow.” He let out a sigh. “Willis is pretty damn good.”

“On the field. Off it he’s downright poison. So is Mort. It wouldn’t surprise me if Coach cut one or both of them this time. Those boys need a good whomping by their mamas. Or a few months’ free stay courtesy of the penal system. Maybe both.”

Bobby nodded. “You’re right about that.” Just because somebody came from a dirt-poor background didn’t excuse him for being a thug, but too damn many players kept proving you could take the boy out of the ‘hood, but no amount of money was guaranteed to take the ‘hood out of the boy. “See you in the morning,” he said as he got out of the elevator on the eighteenth floor and stepped into the suite he and Ellis were sharing.

Not for the first time, Bobby felt small-town. He guessed he’d been sheltered, not only as a kid but at Tulane, where the athletic director hadn’t put up with players doing stupid things and ending up on the wrong side of the law. He hadn’t gotten many bad apples either, because he’d insisted that every player they recruited met the school’s rigorous academic standards. He hadn’t ever used athletic waivers, a policy Bobby thought every college coach would have been wise to follow.

Sighing, Bobby opened a bottle of Gatorade and took it over to the couch. When he was just about to take the first sip, his cell phone rang. “Hey, Mom,” he said after

glancing at the caller ID. Taking the ring box out of his pocket and setting it on the table, he sat and stretched his legs out beside the box.

“Son, I heard about your teammates getting in trouble. It was on the six o’clock news. I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. It’s not good for the sport. But you don’t need to worry about me hanging out with the two clowns who got arrested.”

“I know. That’s not why I called. Tina’s stepdad has been stalking her, even since she moved over here. The other day he attacked her when she went back to the house to get some clothes, and she’s been getting more terrified of him every day. She hasn’t said so, but I’m afraid he’s raped her, or that he’s come close enough to make her afraid of even going to work. She has to get away, out of the man’s reach, so Cal Tate and I decided the best thing would be for us to send her to you so she’ll be safe.”

Shit. What was Bobby going to do with Tina while he was moving Marly into his place? Still, Tina was his friend and he wanted to help keep her safe. “I’m in Los Angeles, Mom. Won’t be home until Monday morning. Besides, weren’t you the one who told me just a few days ago that you didn’t think it was a good idea for me to move Marly in?”

“Well, this is different. Getting Tina away from here could be a life-or-death matter. Having your girlfriend move in when she has a perfectly good place to live with her parents doesn’t seem anywhere near as urgent.” Mom had the good grace to sound a little apologetic.

“You’re not trying to get Tina and me together, are you? It’s not going to do any good if you are, because I just bought Marly an engagement ring and I plan to propose to her as soon as I get home.” Bobby tried to sound stern, strong – not like the little boy who usually tried to keep his mom’s approval.

“Oh no. I’m so sorry, Bobby. Not about Marly, I’m sure she’s a wonderful girl and that you’ve made a good choice. It’s Tina I’m sorry about sending to you now, when you’re getting engaged and all.”

“Can’t you send her someplace else?” A guy could always hope.

“I wish I could. Cal and I dropped her off in San Antonio earlier today, and she’ll be flying to Memphis tomorrow morning. I gave her the extra key to your apartment, the one you sent to me, so she can settle in a bit while you’re away. Maybe you could get Marly to come over and make her feel at home. Tina’s a basket case, between burying her mama and dealing with that pervert, Edgar Garcia. The man belongs in jail as much as any of the drunk roughnecks who’re already there.”

“Okay, Mom.” Bobby couldn’t say no. After all, he was the one who’d asked his mother to take care of Tina, only he’d never imagined her doing it this way. He should have. “But...”

“No buts. Tina’s practically family, and she’s hurting. You need to take care of her, help her settle down and find a job that will pay her a little something and keep her mind off Edgar and her poor mom. Folks are saying Edgar may have done something to hurry along Linda Ray’s death, rest her soul.”

Okay. Bobby’s mind spun. He hated surprises like this, almost as much as he hated opposing linebackers who got through his offensive line and blindsided him. He rewound his mother’s conversation. What the fuck? “You and Mr. Tate took her all the way to San Antonio?”

“We were going here anyhow, for a weekend getaway. I told you we’ve been seeing each other.” Mom sounded a little embarrassed, as if she thought she didn’t have the right to have a life other than taking care of him and going to work. “It’s getting pretty serious between us. Do you mind?”

“Mind? No, you need somebody, now that I’m all grown up. I’m glad you’ve finally accepted that Dad is never coming back.”

She sighed. “It’s taken a long time, but I think I’m there. Now, tell me I haven’t messed up your plans by sending Tina to you.”

Mom had always been able to read between the lines, at least when it came to Bobby. "Some. I'd been hoping to do something private and romantic with Marly, and then give her the ring."

"Why not fly her out to see you play? You could take her out afterward and give it to her."

"No, I couldn't. I've got to stay with the team." Especially since Willis and Mort fucked up so royally. The situation had Coach breathing fire.

"You couldn't get special permission, bring her back with you on the team plane? Seems to me that if there's a will, there's got to be a way."

Bobby sighed. "If I were Brett Favre or maybe Keith Connors, there would be a way. But I'm not. I'm just a rookie backup, close to low man on the totem pole." He wouldn't dare ask Coach Lyle now, considering the mood the man was in. And no matter how he explained to Marly why they'd be having his old girlfriend staying in his spare bedroom, he had a sneaking feeling it wasn't going to go over well. Not at all.

"You could always ask." When Mom got an idea in her head, she hated to let go.

"Thanks anyway, Mom, but I'll have to do this my way. I just hope I don't lose Marly in the process."

"If she loves you, you won't lose her. Maybe she'll even think better of you for not turning your back on an old friend."

If she loves me. She said she did, but he hadn't tested her yet, and it seemed that test was coming a lot quicker than he'd thought. "I'd better call her now and let her know. Love you, Mom." With that he ended the call and started to dial Marly's number.

No, he'd call Coach first. It was no crime to ask, and all he could do was get his ass chewed out six ways from Sunday. "It's Bobby Anthony," he said when Coach Lyle picked up the phone. "Would you mind if I flew my girlfriend out and proposed to her after the game?"

“You can propose to the whole cheerleading squad if you win this game for us without Willis, that fucking moron. Mort’s no big loss on the field. We can even fly Marly back on the team plane if you think she’d like that, since we’ll have two extra, empty seats.”

Bobby couldn’t have been more shocked if he’d been casually given permission to skip two days of practice next week. Coach must have been more worried about the defense being able to stop Weldon and his two all-pro receivers than he’d let on in the meeting earlier. “Thanks, Coach. The whole cheerleading squad sounds interesting, but just Marly will do.”

“Then get her out here if you can. You may be filling in for Keith the rest of the season if he can’t find a reliable live-in nanny for his kid. His mother had to go home this week, and he can’t keep on bringing the baby to work for the office women to take care of.”

“Okay. I’ll get Marly a ticket out here and arrange for a limo to bring her to the stadium. Then I’ll call and let her know.” Bobby thought he might have an answer for Connors’ babysitter problem as well as a solution for his own dilemma, but he’d wait to mention it until after he ran the idea by Tina.

* * * * *

Marly didn’t know quite what to think, other than that Bobby had to have lost his mind. Significant others didn’t join players on road trips very often, and when they did, the women were usually wives and the reason for their presence was compelling. Still, she was glad to be going, even if it meant being here at Memphis International Airport at six a.m. waiting for the first nonstop flight to LAX. Glancing at her boarding pass as the flight was called, she noticed Bobby had sprung for a first-class seat.

He’d been uncharacteristically quiet when they talked last night. After telling her he had a surprise for her, he’d mentioned something about an old friend from his

hometown coming to Memphis for a visit, and hung up rather abruptly. She thought he hadn't sounded any too pleased about this upcoming visit.

Oh well, she'd find out soon enough about his surprise and his guest. Meanwhile she didn't know how she was going to last through the four-hour flight, a cab ride to the Rangers' stadium and two hours of football game without curiosity killing her. Flipping open a copy of *Forbidden Fantasies* that she'd found on a rack in the front of the airport bookstore, she tried to decide which of the erotic stories she wanted to read first.

I can always use some ideas to try out on Bobby. She grinned at the thought of driving him crazy as she settled in to read the first story, written by one of her favorite authors. When she put the book away before getting out of a sleek silver limousine and heading into the stadium, she'd just finished the last titillating, steamy story.

She could barely wait to blow Bobby's mind. Would he like the idea of a ménage? Or would fucking where they might be seen turn him on? Marly's favorite fantasy scenario was one where the lovers were into light bondage and discipline. Maybe that was why she loved the sense of helplessness that came over her when her big, powerful man gripped her wrists, held her steady as he claimed her.

Would the sex be even better if he sometimes tied or cuffed her while they fucked? Her pussy contracted and her panties felt damp when she pictured Bobby claiming her every possible way, the way the two heroes took their woman in that vampire ménage. She imagined Bobby would like that sort of a scene, minus the bloodletting.

That thought made her laugh, even as she felt her pussy contract. Bobby was pretty damn possessive, and as far as she could tell in the short time they'd been together, his tastes ran to one woman at a time. Right now she was that woman, and she was glad. Finding her seat, she settled down and watched the Rangers cheerleaders go through their routine.

Chapter Five

"She's up there, kid." Ellis used the clipboard to point up to the second row of seats along the fifty-yard line. "Show her what you've got."

Bobby waved and grinned at Marly then trotted onto the field for the coin toss. The Rangers called heads and won, so Bobby had to stand on the sideline and watch Weldon throw the ball almost the full length of the field for a quick touchdown. The Maulers had some catching up to do. The return team at least gave them decent field position at the thirty-yard line.

On the first play the left guard lost out to a Rangers defensive end, and Bobby got sacked by a linebacker who burst through the resulting hole. Marly finally let her breath out when the pile of players broke up and Bobby got up, seemingly unharmed. He got a drive going with a thirty-yard pass down the left sideline then stalled again until he handed off to Morales on third down and the running back broke loose and took the ball to the Rangers' three. First and goal. Marly stood, a lonely Maulers fan in a sea of Rangers jerseys.

Wish I'd worn Bobby's jersey. No, she didn't. If she had, the Rangers fans surrounding her probably would have devoured her for lunch.

She clenched her fists so hard her knuckles turned white when she saw Bobby line up in the shotgun. He took the snap then handed off to Morales, the tailback. No, he still had the ball and was rolling left, looking downfield for his wide receiver in the end zone. Was he going to throw into double coverage? No. Tucking the ball, he ran, a play just like his first one for the Maulers. A naked bootleg. He straight-armed a defender then turned in and scored as another Ranger laid a vicious hit on him. She shuddered when she pictured the array of bumps and bruises he was going to have tonight.

She was bad luck for him. Marly sensed it as she watched Bobby limp off the field, accepting congratulations from his teammates. Unlike the first Rangers drive, this one was unfolding slowly, with incomplete passes and short runs into coverage, several measurements to see if they'd managed first downs. Marly hoped it would give Bobby time to recover as she watched a trainer tape his left knee. But his expression was pained, and she couldn't help worrying.

The rest of the first half went uneventfully, with both sides moving by inches and kicking field goals or having to punt the ball away. When the Maulers went into the locker room, the Rangers were up by three. Bobby had looked a little off since taking that hit. Marly prayed he'd be all right.

The Maulers fan in her hoped Bobby would be back. The lover prayed they'd pull him and play Ellis instead. But she knew that wasn't likely to happen as long as Bobby was conscious, upright and moving. Apparently admitting weakness wasn't something any quarterback ever wanted to do—at least the best of them. Favre had once played almost a whole season with a broken thumb on his throwing hand. The Rangers' certain future Hall of Famer quarterback, Casey Weldon, was playing now with his left forearm in a cast. The best of them just wouldn't give in to anything short of a torn-up knee or a messed-up shoulder like the one that had Keith sidelined.

Marly was confident Bobby would be one of the best, like Keith Connors and the other great ones who'd come before him. But he was her man, and she hated to think about him playing hurt. She distracted herself for a few minutes, watching the Rangers cheerleaders do their thing, until the second half was starting with the Maulers getting the ball.

Bobby was moving better, she thought as he went onto the field and into the huddle. He led the Maulers on a determined drive that ended with a field goal, but when they kicked off, the Rangers return man raced down the sideline for a touchdown. The Rangers were ahead by seven.

Marly said a prayer as the Maulers got the ball. Bobby was under center just a foot or so away from a three-hundred-fifty-pound nose tackle with only his center to keep the monster out of his face. It seemed like hours before the handoff, centuries as Bobby dodged a tackle and threw downfield to his tight end who'd run a pattern up the middle.

She cheered as the receiver leaped, wrestled the ball out of the hands of a Ranger defender and cut downfield. Touchdown! Bobby had just thrown a seventy-yard touchdown pass, his longest as a pro. Marly stood and screamed, oblivious to the incredulous looks of the Rangers fans around her. Her man had come through in the clutch, but now he lay on the ground holding his knee. Not for long, but long enough to make Marly's heart practically stop beating until he got back up and limped to the huddle.

"Thank God!"

They went for a two-point conversion, made it on a pass from Bobby to the same man who'd caught the touchdown pass. The Maulers were ahead by one, but there were still nearly nine minutes left in the third quarter, plus the whole fourth quarter to go. The next Rangers possession ate nearly seven minutes, mostly with short ground gains. Weldon wasn't passing as much now, and Marly wondered if he was getting tired. After all, he was thirty-eight or thirty-nine years old.

He was also one of the all-time best. He showed that on the next play by throwing a perfect pass for another touchdown. Now the Rangers were up by six points and there was a minute left in the quarter.

When the Maulers took the field again, Marly held her breath. But nothing happened. The Maulers went three and out as the third quarter ended. Both teams seemed to be off a little as they ate up the clock for twelve more minutes without scoring.

When there were just three minutes to go, Bobby came out throwing. In only three plays, the Maulers had a one-point lead again. But the Rangers still had thirty seconds.

The game wasn't won yet. Marly's heart nearly stopped when Weldon took them to the ten-yard line with three seconds to play when he called the last time-out.

She couldn't bear to look. The Rangers kicker was deadly accurate from this close, and the Maulers hadn't blocked a field goal all year. Eyes closed, she prayed for the guy to miss, or for the Maulers to get a hand on the ball. When moans and curses surrounded her, she opened her eyes. The Maulers had blocked what would have been a sure three-pointer, and they'd held on and won against an incredibly tough foe.

Standing, tears running down her cheeks, Marly hurried to the gate, flashed the press pass he'd sent along with her ticket and moved onto the field, just in time to catch Bobby and give him a huge, wet-mouthed kiss.

"Great game, honey." She stroked his sweaty face. "Is your knee okay?"

"It is, now that you're here. Thanks for coming."

"Love you, big guy," she murmured as he turned to go to the locker room.

* * * * *

"Wish I didn't have to send you out there." Coach Lyle's usual booming voice was at about half-strength, and he looked pale when he came out of the interview room and stopped in front of Bobby. "Those reporters are out for blood. Apparently one of the women the idiots mauled has started bleeding internally and may end up dying. Just keep your cool. I don't want the entire damn world thinking all the Maulers literally live up to the name."

Now Bobby's head ached to match his sore, taped knee. "I'll try." These interviews hadn't gotten to be fun, but Bobby had managed to control his nerves a little better with each trip before the press corps. At least he thought he had. He doubted his dripping forehead had much to do with his damp hair, and he tugged nervously at the knot in his tie. "What the hell do I say when they ask me about Willis and Mort?"

"As little as possible. Platitudes about innocent until proven guilty, maybe a comment about how much you missed Willis on the field today. You can even say

you've been told not to comment further when they start going for your throat. Good luck."

Good luck indeed. Bobby would not only be facing a hostile bunch of reporters, he'd be looking at Marly while he sweated blood, because he'd already glanced inside and spotted her in the second row of reporters. Why the fuck had he sent her a press pass along with her game ticket?

He recalled her teasing him about being nervous before his first interview. Well, he was more nervous now.

Damn it, doing interviews was part of his job. Most folks would say it was less dangerous than staring over his center's back at nose tackles big enough to kill him without putting forth much effort. Bobby doubted the reporters would literally knock him down and stomp on him the way defenses wanted to do so badly, but they had the power to make being trampled seem to be a better option. "I'll be okay, Coach." *If I don't lose my voice or say something I'll regret.* He squared his shoulders, stepped into the interview room and strode to the microphone, making an effort not to limp and bring on more questions.

This wouldn't take long, he hoped, because he wanted to get Marly alone. He tightened a fist around the ring box in his pants pocket. Hers was the only smiling face in the room. Glad she was there for him, he shot her a heartfelt grin.

"So what do you think of your teammates now, Rookie?"

"What does it feel like to throw passes to a thug who assaults women?"

Marly wanted to turn around and whack the reporter behind her who'd just bellowed the question. She hoped Bobby didn't feel he had to answer. It had been bad enough, watching Coach's face turn red then deathly pale as he fielded questions. Now she focused on Bobby's face, tried to lend him the support he wasn't likely to get from the LA reporters.

Bobby cleared his throat, took the mike off its stand. "Okay. I know and believe that professional athletes should set good examples. From what I've heard, two of our players exercised poor judgment yesterday, and I apologize for that. But I'm just a player. I'm not a team spokesman, so I won't be talking about what happened or what I may think about it. If you want to ask me about the game, I'll be happy to answer your questions."

Then he smiled straight at Marly. "Marly, come up here. Guys, Marly's one of the Maulers cheerleaders. She flew out today to see the game. She's also the woman I love. You want a piece of news, try this on for size..."

He wasn't, was he? She was going to kill him as soon as she got him to herself. As Marly made her way onto the platform, inwardly seething, she hoped she wasn't shaking so much that everybody would notice. Did her hair look okay after getting whipped around in the wind? She'd kill Bobby. The big lug should have asked her first if it was okay for him to call her up there in front of all these people.

But he'd just told the world he loved her, at least those few million folks who were tuned in to ESPN or the NFL Network postgame interview. Oh God, that would include her dad and brothers, wouldn't it? Taking a calming breath, she told herself this would be okay. After all, she was no shrinking violet. She loved performing in front of a crowd and Bobby knew it.

She gave the assembled reporters her brightest smile, and when she got to Bobby, she dragged his head down and gave him an enthusiastic kiss and hug. "Show-off," he whispered before wrapping one arm around her and turning her so they both were facing the reporters. Then he looked straight into her eyes.

"Marly Ragusa, will you marry me?" There was no mistaking the words, recorded as they were for everybody to replay.

Her eyes blurred from tears that had started rolling down her cheeks. She really was going to kill him now. No, she was going to hug him tighter than the Rangers linebackers had been doing most of the afternoon. "What? Omigod, Bobby."

“Will you marry me?” This time his words were soft, husky, meant for her alone. His hand tightened at her waist and he pulled her even closer. “Please?”

There’d be no mistaking her reply. She spoke out, so even the vultures in the back of the room could hear. “Yes, I’ll marry you, Bobby Anthony.” Her heart pounded when he set a small box on the dais, opened it, and held a ring up to catch the light from the strobes. And the reporters stared, apparently distracted for the moment from their line of vicious questioning.

Marly gulped. She could hardly believe Bobby had actually gone out and bought this gorgeous engagement ring, so his proposal must not have been just a spur-of-the-moment impulse intended to take the reporters’ attention away from what had happened. Unless...

Apparently he guessed what she’d been thinking. “I bought this for you yesterday after practice. I’m hoping you’ll wear it.” The look he gave her held a little apology, but she couldn’t be too mad when he slipped the sparkling diamond solitaire onto her ring finger then brought her hand to his lips. “I’d intended to take you out for dinner and give this to you over dessert, but then I thought why not do it here, so your folks and my mom can watch us on TV.”

Marly felt tears sliding down her cheeks. She couldn’t help it. And she could barely wait to show Bobby just how much she loved him...wanted him. Anytime, any place. She could hardly wait to be in the quiet intimacy of their bed, wrapped around each other, him buried deep inside her, a physical reflection of the promise he’d just made to be connected to her forever. “Better let your guests ask you a few questions, hadn’t you?” she asked instead, and the reporters cheered. “I’ve got something for you, too, but later when we’re alone.”

For the life of her, Marly couldn’t remember a word Bobby said after he turned back to the microphones and tackled the reporters’ shouted questions. She was glad when he cut off the questions quickly and herded her off the platform and out the door.

“I’ll take that kiss now, for real.” Stopping in a hallway, Bobby lifted her off the floor, backed her against the wall and took her mouth. “Welcome to LA, Ms. Marly. How about we go find the nearest horizontal surface and celebrate our win.”

She’d drink to that.

* * * * *

“Nice room. Nice view, too.” When they finally got to his room after dinner for two at one of the hotel’s four-star restaurants, Marly looked out the window at a tropical courtyard. A lagoon-shaped pool glowed with reflected light from torches set around a tiki bar and in each of the lush plantings. Yesterday she wouldn’t have believed she’d be here with Bobby. She still was having a hard time digesting the fact he’d asked her to marry him on national TV.

She barely managed to avoid pinching herself. Bobby loved her and she adored him, too. The nagging doubts wouldn’t quite go away—she knew he’d be tempted and wasn’t a hundred percent positive he wouldn’t succumb—but she shoved those fears firmly to the back of her mind.

He came up behind her and nibbled at her earlobe. “One thing I’ve learned this season is that all hotel rooms are pretty much alike. The view from this one is pretty spectacular though, but nowhere near as gorgeous as you. Come here, my brand-new fiancée.”

When she turned and settled in his arms, she started to kiss him then pulled away just a little. Enough, though, that he felt her withdrawal. It stunned him until she asked, “Where’s Ellis?”

Was that what had her suddenly reluctant to get up close and personal? “He moved over to the room Willis and Mort vacated when they got slapped into jail cells. Coach thought you and I might like some privacy, but if you want Ellis to join us, I’ll give him a call.” Unlike some of Bobby’s teammates who occasionally bragged about their nights

of debauchery with groupies in the plural, Ellis wasn't likely to accept an invitation to join a *ménage à trois*. The man was squeaky clean and still wild about his wife after more than ten years together.

He wished he were as certain Marly wouldn't take him up on the offer. The idea of sharing her made him want to hit something, which surprised him because he'd never before felt so possessive of a lover. As a matter of fact he and one of his college roommates had once gotten it on with one very kinky coed and he'd thoroughly enjoyed the action. But now he found he wanted to keep Marly strictly for himself. "Well, baby, do you want to take on two of us?"

She reached up and stroked his cheek, and when she did her smile lit up the whole room and made him feel warm inside, too. "Not really. I know from experience that you don't need any help. You've never failed to satisfy me and you know it. Now, before your head swells so big it won't fit through doors, where's that horizontal surface you were telling me about before we left the stadium?"

"Right through that door, the one next to the mini-bar. Are you ready?"

"Sure. I'm fine, but the plane ride left me a little stiff."

Bobby laughed. "Just being around you keeps me stiff."

"You're so bad." Marly stood on tiptoe and placed a wet kiss on his neck just below his earlobe. The warm, smooth caress of her tongue sent shivers all the way to his toes. Not to mention that it coaxed his cock to full attention.

Feeling her warm body flush against him had him determined to ignore the knee throbbing behind a tight elastic wrap. There was nothing wrong with the rest of him, and he figured the knee would forgive him. Saying nothing, he scooped her up in his arms and strode through the bedroom door, determined not to limp. He was intent not to do anything that would slow down the progress toward getting them naked and letting him warm his cock in her sweet cunt.

"Bet I can get undressed before you can." He shed his jacket, shirt and tie before she managed to get off her loose-fitting sweater. "Slowpoke."

She shot him a sexy smile as she unfastened her jeans and toed off her shoes. "No fair, you got a head start."

"I did, didn't I? How about if I watch while you catch up?" He stared at her body now clad only in a lacy red bra and thong. His ring sparkled in the lamplight, reminding him that he'd staked his claim. God but she was beautiful, not just outside but inside, too. "You're so fucking hot. And you belong to me now."

"That's right, I do. Does this mean you belong to me, too?" She wiggled her finger, looked down at the ring before sliding that sexy thong down and off. "Like what you see?"

"Oh yeah. I'm yours to do with however you want. But then you already know that. Get rid of that bra and come here, I can't wait to taste you."

And he did. Tossing away the blanket and coverlet, Bobby laid her down on the bed and knelt beside her. More like, he took a knee the way he sometimes did on the field the final play of a game the team had already won, because he balanced on his right knee while keeping the left one bent but off the bed. As if she were the most precious thing in the world, he stroked her. His warm breath tickled her belly. Apparently he felt that putting a ring on her finger had settled all the questions about their relationship, and now he seemed satisfied to go slow, pay homage to every inch of her.

She loved it, loved her man who could laugh one minute, become deadly serious the next. But in the sensually charged space that surrounded them, her own hormones kicked into gear, made her restless under his seeking hands. When she shifted and brought her knees up, he reached down and massaged her feet. "You've got pretty feet. Pretty everything."

"Glad you think so, honey." Marly had never thought having her feet rubbed could be such a turn-on, but it was. The firm brush of Bobby's thumb across her instep sent staccato jolts of electricity up her leg, straight to her wet, swollen pussy. She wanted to

grab his massive shoulders, drag him up her body, feel the weight and heat of him all over.

But he seemed content to touch her, almost innocently, as if they were youngsters just discovering all the sensual ways they could give each other pleasure. She'd never felt so cherished or so in love as well as in lust with anybody. Ever. "That feels so good," she murmured when he slid huge hands up her lower legs then stopped to tickle behind her knees. "Don't stop."

"I won't, baby. Not ever." Bending, he took her lips, a slow, sweet claiming that made her want to scream for more. She didn't though. Instead she raised a hand to his cheek, traced the high cheekbones, felt the slight rasp of his light evening stubble against her palm. When he ran the tip of his tongue against her lips, she opened to let him in.

His rigid cock throbbed against her side, its heat a reminder that he was as ready as she, yet apparently determined to hold out until she screamed for release. She felt her pussy weeping, squirmed when the hot liquid made its way to her butt. Her nipples ached for his hands, his wet mouth. "You're torturing me," she said, gasping for breath when he broke the kiss.

"All you have to do is tell me what you want." When he met her gaze, she saw barely masked lust in his expression.

She dragged his hands to her breasts, gasped when he rolled the swollen nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. "Oh yes, that hurts so good." It was as though by pinching that rigid nub of flesh, he shocked her into full, screaming need. "Don't make me wait any longer. Just fuck me. Fuck me hard."

"Thought you'd never ask, baby." Rising onto both knees, he swung a leg over hers, flinching just enough for her to notice as he settled between her legs.

His knee. He'd favored it before. It had to be hurting him now to bend and rest his weight on it. But she was too needy to stop now, and she could tell from the heat in his

expression that he was, too. Trembling, she took the condom he handed her and smoothed it over his shaft.

When he shifted and took her in one hard thrust, she moaned. Wet, arousing sounds of sex filled her ears. Her climax was coming fast. The heat. The sense of surrender...the feeling of acceptance, of sharing. Pressure built as he fucked her deeper, harder. Her clit throbbed at the contact he made with every inward thrust, each grinding motion of his hips.

Pressure built inside her, demanding release. She dug her fingers into his muscular upper arms. Needing. Wanting. Loving. Sensations bombarded her. The mingled smells of sex with his cologne and hers. The lusty look in his eyes that reflected her own. The heat of his pulsing cock pressing against her vaginal wall, the sounds of their labored breathing.

“Come for me, baby. I can’t hold out much longer.”

The bubble inside her shattered at his command. Suddenly all the sensations inside her came together, made her pussy contract and spasm as Bobby thrust deep one more time and bellowed with his own release. Then he rolled over, taking her with him and cradling her in his arms. “Love you, baby. Gotta rest the knee, though. The doc says it’s just a stretched ligament but it hurts like hell.”

“I’m sorry.”

He held her a little tighter. “Not half as sorry as I am. I’d planned to make love with you all night long then sleep on the plane ride back to Memphis. Didn’t count on banging up my knee during the game.”

Snuggling closer, Marly laid one hand over his side. “Rest now. You should have told me you were hurting. There are ways to make love that wouldn’t have put stress on your knee. We’ll have plenty of time to play when we get home.”

But they wouldn't, at least not right away. How the fuck was he going to tell her the guest he was expecting would be staying at his condo? He was pretty damn sure Marly was going to throw a fit because Tina was a girl.

Bobby swore softly. There was no way to do this graciously, so he might as well get it over with now.

No, he'd get rid of the condom first. "Be right back."

As he rinsed himself and watched water bubbling over the washcloth, he told himself what a fucking coward he was. Determined not to be a wimp any longer, he limped back to bed and stretched out beside Marly.

He propped his head up on one hand, looked down at the silky cascade of her hair on the white pillow. "I told you about us having company, didn't I?"

"Uh-huh." Marly stretched and yawned. "When's he coming?"

He? Bobby only wished it were a guy. It took a lot of effort but he managed to look her in the eye. "*She* may be there before we get home."

Her look reminded him of thunderclouds gathering before a gullywasher back home. "Don't tell me you've got a girlfriend coming for a visit. Not right after you asked me to marry you." As though she wanted to be anywhere but close to him, she sat up and scooted up to the head of the bed, dragging the coverlet over her.

"Not a girlfriend, babe. An old friend who happens to be a girl. She's been staying with Mom since her mother died. Her stepfather's a real asshole. The bastard has been stalking her ever since her mom died, and she's afraid of him."

Marly looked him in the eye. "Did you sleep with this girl?"

"If you mean did I fuck her, yes, a few times back when we were both in high school. I'll never lie to you, baby." He moved closer, laid a hand on her cheek. "But I never slept with her. Or asked her to marry me. Don't you know you're the only woman I want?"

When Marly finally met his gaze, he thought she really wanted to believe him—but that she still had her doubts. “I want to believe that, but it’s damn hard. Why haven’t you told me about this old girlfriend before? Especially since you say she’s been staying with your mom?”

“Because what Tina’s doing and where she’s living isn’t that important to me. Besides, you’ve never asked about the other women I’ve laid, not since our first night together.” Fuck it. Marly hadn’t been a virgin, either. Why did she seem to believe he should have been? “I haven’t asked about your old lovers, either. I assumed they didn’t matter anymore.”

“Well, I thought that too, until you come telling me, out of the blue, that this Tina’s coming to live with you. With us. Well, put that out of your head, because it’s not happening. I’m staying at home as long as she’s living with you.”

Oh hell. Why had Mom dumped Tina on him? Why hadn’t the sheriff locked up her pervert stepfather a long time ago and thrown away the key? “Please, Marly. I know this is a little awkward—well, a lot awkward—but it doesn’t have to be. You’re my fiancée, you belong in my bed. Together we can find Tina a job and a place to stay.”

“You’re insane if you think I’m going to share you with her, even for a little while. I may have to share you with the fantasies of a lot of lascivious groupies, but I sure as hell don’t have to step aside and make a place for your down-and-out ex-girlfriend. You make enough money. If you feel you owe her, rent her an apartment of her own. I...am...not, repeat not, sharing space with her, and if you want me, you won’t be having her live in your place, either.” With that, Marly got up and wrapped the sheet around her. “I’m sleeping on the couch.”

Bobby wasn’t surprised at her reaction. He was all too aware of her insecurities. But at least she didn’t throw her ring back in his face. For a long time he lay there, his head throbbing almost enough to make him forget about his sore knee, trying to decide if he should let her cool down or follow her and fuck her until she saw reason. Women!

He balled up a pillow and buried his head in it. He'd get no sleep tonight, no rest on the trip home. But it would all work out. Marly would see Tina and realize right away that she had no competition.

Meanwhile he wanted Marly in his arms. Getting up and moving gingerly on his aching leg, Bobby went to the couch. "You belong with me," he growled, scooping her up and taking her back to bed. "Get it in your head, I don't want Tina or any other woman, I want you. Not just now but always."

"Beast. You've got no business walking on that knee, much less carrying me around like I'm a stuffed toy or something." She still sounded pissed, but not as much as she had when he first told her about Tina. "Come over here, warm my back. You need to rest that knee."

He figured they'd work this out, just as they'd work out a lot of disagreements over the coming years. Rolling onto his side, he lay down, tucked her tush against his groin and enjoyed the closeness he wasn't about to give up on.

Chapter Six

Tina set her luggage down in what she figured was the guest bedroom, sighed. What she really would have liked to do was rest, but she imagined Bobby would be home in a few hours, and the least she could do was feed him. After all, he'd opened up his place to her.

She felt awkward, here in this elegant condo that outshone any house she'd ever seen yet didn't remind her at all of Bobby. Maybe if she kept busy...

Not even the beef stew and peach cobbler she put together from the sparse supply of comfort food in the sparkling kitchen took Tina's mind off why she'd left Hedgecock and come to live for a little while on Bobby's charity. Her skin still crawled when she remembered her last encounter with Edgar Garcia. The stench of cheap beer and even cheaper perfume had almost choked her as he held her down and raped her in the back room of the school cafeteria where she'd been tidying up after the lunch crowd left.

She'd scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed, but still she felt the humiliation, the filth...the terrible fear that had driven her here, to safety. No matter what, she'd never go back, never risk encountering her bastard of a stepfather again—unless she had the protection of a strong man.

That man wouldn't be Bobby. She'd known for years that he thought of her as a good pal, not a potential bride. Besides, she heard on the evening news yesterday that he'd asked one of the Maulers cheerleaders to marry him. Marly Ragusa. A dark-haired beauty with a brilliant smile, she'd seemed fully comfortable up on that podium when Bobby had introduced her to a crowd of reporters.

Tina would have sunk into the floor if she were ever put in that position. But then she wouldn't be. Men didn't flaunt girls like her, and she was glad. She'd find a job, a little apartment she could afford and maybe, someday, a man who'd love her the way

she'd dreamed of all her life. A simple man with simple needs, not a superstar athlete like her first teenage lover.

* * * * *

"You'll like Tina. Everybody does." Bobby spoke over the low purr of the engine as he drove himself and Marly out of the Maulers practice field parking lot where the team bus had dropped them off. "Let's go by your folks' place first, though, and pick up a few of your things."

"No." Who did Bobby think he was, to expect her to merrily accept the presence of his old—probably his first—girlfriend? "I said I'd meet her. I didn't say I'd live with you when she's staying there."

"Looks to me like you'd want to be there to make sure I'm not fucking her, which I won't be." He ground out the words, as though he'd taken just about all her petulance he was going to endure. "Tina is my friend. I'm going to help her get settled here, and if you love me like you say you do, you're going to help."

Marly wished she could shake the feeling that there had to be more than friendship that made him so damned determined to help this Tina out. But she couldn't imagine any of her brothers having gone out of their way to help old girlfriends. "Are you sure you want me to?"

"Yes. I want you and Tina to be friends. How many times do I have to tell you it's you I love? You I want to sleep with every night, and someday to have my kids?" Bobby was gripping the steering wheel so hard that his knuckles were turning white.

She twisted her new ring around, stared at the beautiful diamond, recalled the college boyfriend who'd dumped her their sophomore year for a high-school lover he'd gotten pregnant over Christmas break. Maybe she should tell Bobby about Wes. But no. Even four years later, the humiliation still stung her deep inside, and the last thing she wanted was Bobby's pity. "I'll try. It's just that every woman on Earth seems to want what's in your pants."

Bobby's laugh sounded forced. "I doubt that, and you're the only one I want to want me that way. Come on, smile for me."

Marly tried, but she still wasn't convinced. After all, he was a rising star, and according to the gossip columns, a lot of the studs on the football field scored more often in groupies' beds than in the games. Even some of the married ones weren't averse to playing around. A few of them were even wide-open about their cheating. Longtime star Dave Delaney was almost as famous for his bedroom heroics as he was for having tossed some huge number of touchdown passes in his many years in the league. "Do you know Dave Delaney?" she blurted, recalling that the aging quarterback hailed from Bobby's hometown. Bobby seemed different, but...

"No. He graduated from high school when I was maybe a year old. As far as I know, Dave never came back to Hedgecock once he left for college. I guess we'll meet later on this year though, since his team's scheduled to play the Maulers. What does Dave have to do with us?"

"He's supposedly one of the biggest womanizers around the league."

Bobby reached over and pinched her thigh. "So you think there might be something in the Hedgecock water that turns guys into satyrs? Think about Keith, baby. He didn't play around while his wife was alive. Doesn't now, so far as I know. He kind of shoots that theory down."

"I guess you're right." Marly figured she'd give in. After all, at least part of her worry stemmed from a putdown that was ancient history. It had nothing to do with Bobby. When he pulled into his parking spot at the condo, she leaned across the console and gave him a kiss. "It's just that I love you so much, big guy."

"Love you, too. Remember that." He slid out of the truck and strode around to her side. "Let's go meet Tina."

* * * * *

Even before they stepped off the elevator and opened the door to Bobby's condo, Marly smelled something savory. Something delicious that she bet Tina had spent all morning cooking to draw Bobby in.

The bitch. Sure, the woman was just Bobby's friend. Well, as far as Marly was concerned, it was clear she wanted to be much more. Trying to keep a pleasant expression on her face, Marly stepped inside ahead of Bobby and looked around for signs of the other woman in the entry foyer.

Nothing. No suitcases. Just that damn enticing smell of home-cooked food.

"Tina?" Bobby sounded a little bit too pleased at the prospect of seeing his guest, at least it sounded that way to Marly.

"Bobby? I was hoping you'd be home in time for lunch." Tina stepped out from the guest bedroom and ran toward the sound of Bobby's voice.

"It sure smells good." Bobby stepped forward to hug a slender—almost skinny, Marly thought uncharitably—dishwater blonde who looked like Texas cowgirls she'd seen on TV in her tight jeans and a leather vest over a nondescript long-sleeved shirt.

Cowboy boots? Yeah, Tina had those on, too. Marly tried to hold onto her temper when the hug went on much longer than she thought it should. Damn it, Tina was nuzzling at his neck. Friend, hell.

Focusing on Bobby's declaration of love a few minutes earlier, and the warm feel of his ring on her left ring finger, Marly managed to stay quiet, let the disturbing scene play out.

"Tina, this is Marly Ragusa. My fiancée." Bobby finally stepped away and pulled Marly to his side. "Marly, Tina Black."

Tina gave Marly the once-over, at least that's the way Marly considered the long, hard look. "Hello. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be impolite. It just surprises me that you're..."

“Marly’s Italian-American, not Mexican like your stepfather,” Bobby interjected, drawing her closer. “Not that it would make any difference to me. You two are gonna get along just fine. Is whatever you’ve been cooking ready to eat, Tina?”

Tina’s face brightened. Marly conceded that she was pretty when she smiled. “Yes, it’s ready. I thought we’d just eat at the kitchen table.”

Cozy. Real cozy. It pissed Marly off that this woman had cooked a meal in Bobby’s kitchen before she’d had a chance to show off her own cooking. The only eating she’d done here was carry-out from her dad’s restaurant—and they’d nibbled it at the bar while looking down at the river and counting the boats. “Whatever you’re cooking smells awfully good,” she said, remembering her manners even as she watched Tina set an extra plate and silverware on the table.

She hadn’t planned on me coming with Bobby. Marly bit her tongue to keep from laying into the cowgirl. She just hoped the woman hadn’t dared to stash her belongings in Bobby’s bedroom.

By the time they finished off dessert, Bobby felt like a bone being fought over by two pit bulls. Marly was barely being civil, and Tina? Tina seemed determined in her quiet way to repeatedly point out their shared past to Marly. “This was good,” he told Tina. “I’m tired, though. Make yourself at home. Marly and I are going to go over to her parents’ and get some of her things. Tomorrow we’ll try to figure out what kind of work you’d like to do.” *And get you set up somewhere else before the tension here drives me crazy.*

Why had his mom done this to him? Hell, he knew. He’d have to have been an ogre to resent Tina being here when he knew some of what had been going on with her stepdad back in Hedgecock. “Come on, baby, let’s grab your things.”

* * * * *

Tension reverberated through the truck cab. This wasn't the way a girl should feel when taking her brand-new fiancé home to show her ring off to her parents. Marly took in the tight set of Bobby's jaw, the way his knuckles turned white when he gripped the steering wheel. Even the usually seductive purr of the Escalade's powerful engine took on an eerie tone.

Why wouldn't he say something?

Why wouldn't she say something? Anything, even getting his ass chewed out, would have been better than the heavy silence that had set in the minute they got in the truck. Bobby's knee throbbed, but it was the pregnant silence ringing in his ears that really bothered him. "Marly?"

"Yes."

"What's wrong, baby?"

"Nothing." He watched Marly toss an unruly curl behind her left ear. "Oh fuck it. Everything's wrong. Maybe I'm dead wrong, but I feel like Tina's out to get you. Not like an old high-school-girlfriend-turned-buddy, but like a woman who wants to get back with a guy she never got over."

Bobby swore as he got in the left turn lane and pulled in at a scenic overlook above the river. "You hit it on the head, baby. You are dead wrong." He got out of the car and limped around to her side. "We're going to have a nice, long talk, and we're not going anywhere until you believe I meant it when I said 'I love you'. Come on, there's a bench over by the river."

He thought she moved too slowly, as if she were less than anxious to sit with him and watch leaves fall from the big water oak next to the bench where they were headed. Maybe it wasn't the leaves, but him that she didn't want coming so close. "Slowpoke." He made sure his tone was light, hoping she'd respond to the gentle tease.

"Don't patronize me. I'm coming with you. I'm probably going to let you persuade me my instincts are off-base." Marly paused then let Bobby take her hand and bring her

close enough that he couldn't help smelling her cologne. She settled her gaze on the dark shadow of a beard on his chin. "Why don't you shave every day like most guys do?"

"Scruff makes me look a little older. And a little meaner, for the benefit of the defenses we play against. I would have shaved after lunch, though, if you hadn't dragged me out as soon as we polished off that peach cobbler Tina made... 'Cause I don't want to tear apart your pretty skin."

"I don't mind. It feels pretty good. I just wondered. Thought maybe you were imitating another number four." Brushing off leaves from the bench, she sat down.

"Nope. I'm not trying to be a Brett Favre clone, even though I idolize him for the way he plays, like he thoroughly loves what he's doing on the field." Bobby figured Marly was trying to avoid talking about what had made her draw a curtain of silence around her.

That wasn't going to work. But what could he say? He'd already told her he loved her, wanted to marry her and for her to have his kids someday. Bobby had trouble understanding that his gorgeous Marly might be jealous of a woman he hadn't fucked for more than five years. "Got a mirror in your purse?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because I want you to take it out and look at yourself. Tell me honestly, why in hell would you think I want Tina when I can wake up looking at you?" What he felt for Marly wasn't just because of her looks, but that was a start.

"Looks aren't everything." Marly put the mirror back in her purse and zipped it up. "Is that the only reason you noticed me?"

Oh shit. What had he done now? "Of course not. Not that I mind that you're the most beautiful woman I ever saw, or that you're fun to be with, in bed and out of it."

"Tell me about you and Tina. And don't leave out anything." She stared down at the river, at a paddlewheeler that was making its way from St. Louis to New Orleans.

Bobby was getting madder by the minute. "I already told you, baby, Tina and I fucked under the high school bleachers after some of the football games my junior year. We went to the local movies together maybe half a dozen times, and we occasionally had a hamburger and fries at the restaurant across from the school." He took in a deep breath. "I had more intimate relationships with a dozen or so girls at college, but they don't mean anything to me now either, at least not in a sexual way."

"That's what Wes said, before he went home on spring break and married his pregnant high-school girlfriend."

A green monster he just realized he had bubbled up inside him, made him want to kill someone. "Who the fuck is Wes?"

Marly had her head bowed, and Bobby suspected she was hiding tears. "Someone I dated in college. Ancient history."

"Ancient history be damned. This bastard had to have hurt you bad to have made you feel you can't trust me now. Have I given you reason to believe I'd cheat on you with anybody, old high-school girlfriend or not?"

When she looked up at him, tears floated in her eyes, as if they were insisting on escape. "No. You haven't given me reason to think you would go out of your way to..."

"Fuck everything in skirts that sends out signals she's available?" Bobby was furious. Unlike a lot of athletes he knew, he'd always been pretty careful. Sure, he'd had sex for sex's sake. Who hadn't? But he'd had no desire to touch anybody but Marly since they'd started dating—even since they first met in the parking lot during rookie camp. "But you apparently believe I'll stray first time my eyes start to wander. I won't." He took her hand, held it on his thigh.

"How do you know that?"

Marly didn't protest when Bobby slid her hand higher, close enough that her fingers came in contact with his half-hard sex. "Because I've never been in love with a woman before. Never cared about anybody the way I care for you. And I've never

before lived with a pretty constant hard-on because I was constantly thinking about getting into anybody else's pussy."

"I know. I just—"

"Put a little faith in me, baby. I won't let you down. Ever. Not even if there is a prettier woman on this earth and someday I find her, which I don't believe will ever happen. We're gonna be good together. Really good. I'm gonna be there when our babies are born and when they need a dad to cheer for them in high school and college. I know what it's like to grow up without my father, even though Mom did her best to make up for him not being there."

Marly sniffed. "I'll try. Shall we go to my house now so I can grab some things? Mom's dying to see this." She held up her left hand then reached around to give Bobby a quick kiss. "You know, I do love you. Really. I'm just so afraid of losing you."

Bobby knew that. He didn't care much for the unexpected lack of self-confidence he'd discovered in Marly, but he figured he could be careful, protect her from the mere idea that he might be on the prowl, even when he wasn't. "You won't, baby. I love you. Now let's go show off this rock to your folks, pick up your clothes and hurry back to our bedroom. It's been too damn long since I've been able to make love with you."

Chapter Seven

Except for the shadow of her insecurity, it was the announcement Marly had always dreamed of making to her delighted parents. They'd loved Bobby from the first day they met him, anyhow. Her mom's eyes widened when she first saw the ring. "Oh my."

"You got her ring at Tiffany's, right?" Her dad lifted her hand so he could examine it more closely. "You've got good taste, son. Welcome to the family."

Bobby grinned. "Yes sir. I bought it Saturday at the store on Rodeo Drive. Thanks for the welcome."

Marly hadn't realized Dad knew so much about jewelry. All she knew was that the ring Bobby gave her was magnificent, much more than she'd ever imagined the man she loved would choose.

Yes, Bobby fit in with her family. In some ways he reminded Marly of her dad, who hadn't let success go to his head, either. They still lived in this old-fashioned brick house in a neighborhood that had gone way down before new owners started buying and fixing up the run-down properties. While Bobby lived in a posh condo, she sensed he'd pick comfort over chic when they bought a place of their own.

"That big old brownstone on the corner is up for sale. You might want to take a look. It should be a steal right now, the economy being as it is. Needs some renovation, but you might get a tax break because it probably qualifies as a historic preservation project. The man who built it back in the 1890s later became a congressman."

Oh no, Mom. "Bobby will probably be traded soon after Keith gets over his shoulder injury. Besides, we're not getting married right away."

"Of course not! It will take a year to plan your wedding." Mom turned to Bobby. "Are you Catholic?"

“Yes.” Marly could tell Bobby was uncomfortable. As he’d told her after the first time he’d picked her up here, *there are Catholics...and then there are Catholics. I’m more of the Christmas and Easter sort of a Catholic.*

That was just one good reason she didn’t think it would have been a good idea for them to buy a place within walking distance of her childhood home. Not that there weren’t others. “Mom, we just got engaged. There’s no reason to start planning our wedding. If you want the truth, we may just take a notion and do it one weekend, with you and Dad and Bobby’s mom as witnesses.”

“Dad and I will give you the kind of wedding you’ll always remember,” Mom said, apparently not willing to give up the idea of a huge blowout with half of Memphis in attendance.

“We’ll see. Honestly, we haven’t thought about weddings yet. We just got engaged yesterday.” Bobby held Marly’s hand, and its warmth snaked through her veins. “We’d better grab some of her stuff and get on back to my place. After all, we have a guest to entertain.”

Obviously, he wanted to go as much as she did, but he was being diplomatic about it. Marly guessed it was better to use Tina as an excuse than to tell the parents to back off or that what they’re looking for right now was a bed – any bed – as long as they both were in it.

“It’s okay, kids. I’ve got to get to the restaurant before the chef decides to try another new entrée like the one that bombed last week.” Dom stood, held out his hand to Bobby. “Congratulations. And welcome to the family.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Mama, why don’t you come on down to work with me? I’m sure the kids can handle packing without our help. Marly, be sure to lock the door when you leave.” With that, Dad got up and smiled at her and Bobby. “You know, I’ve never trusted anybody else my daughter was dating with the keys to our house. But I like you, Bobby. And I trust you to take care of Marly.”

"I'll take good care of her. We won't be here long, just enough to get Marly some clothes. We really do need to head on home."

* * * * *

The first thing Bobby noticed when they went into Marly's bedroom was the four-poster bed with sheer curtains and a ruffled floral canopy that matched the coverlet. Curtains that hung over the sheers over wide windows that overlooked a huge pine tree in the backyard. They'd made love here before, one afternoon when her parents had both been out.

It was definitely a girly room, yet irresistible. Bobby wanted to stake his claim, realize another of the midnight fantasies he enjoyed while on the road. "Come here, baby. The clothes can wait. I want to make love to you."

She turned away from the closet and shot him a knowing grin. "Here? Mom will have a fit." Then she laughed. "You know, besides my dad and brothers, you're the only man who has ever set foot in here."

"I'm glad. Now take off your clothes and crawl in bed." His heart pounded in his chest as he watched her peel off her sweater, and his hands trembled when he worked the buckle loose on his belt. "God, but you're hot." *And mine. All mine.* When his jeans hit the floor, he stepped out of them. His cock throbbed when she started to shimmy out of those tight jeans.

"So are you." The hungry look on her face sent blood rushing to his sex, made his pulse race. "We'd better turn back the covers or you'll be in a heap of trouble."

"Honey, it's you that Daddy would skin alive. But that's okay. I have the feeling he gave his blessing by leaving us all alone today." After Marly laid back the covers, she stretched out across the bed Bobby imagined she'd slept in ever since she graduated from her crib. "Come on, you talk a good act. Now it's time to deliver."

Bobby's cock told him it was past time. Retrieving a condom from his wallet, he let his jeans slide back to the floor. "I'm ready, baby," he told her, tossing the prophylactic

next to her on the bed. Being careful not to put pressure on his sore knee, he crawled into her cozy cocoon and gathered her in his arms. "You're gonna have to help me here. The knee feels even worse today than it did last night."

"Oh. Maybe we should pretend we're kids, experimenting with sex for the first time. Worried that my folks are going to barge in, or worse, one of my brothers. They put the fear of God into some of my boyfriends when I was in high school."

"Did they?" The prospect made Bobby hornier than ever. Taking risks did that to him, had since he was a high-school stud gettin' it on under the bleachers after the lights went off. "I'm pretty sure I can handle an irate brother or two."

Marly leaned back, shot him a questioning look. "You don't know my brothers, honey. You haven't seen them mad."

"I have seen them, though, and I'm pretty sure I outweigh either of them by at least seventy-five pounds. Don't worry about my hide, it's tough. Remember I play football for a living."

"Braggart. Come on, show me how you're going to take care of me."

She ran a finger down his chest, circled his navel then closed a fist around his raging hard-on. He imitated her motion, ending up with two fingers in her wet, warm pussy and his thumb moving in circles around her swollen clit. "Like this?"

"God, yes."

Bobby liked the way she purred when he touched her, felt more a hero when they made love than he did after a perfect touchdown pass. Hating that she wasn't quite sure of him, he stroked every inch of her soft, smooth skin, inhaled her special aura of hot woman and some sort of heady cologne. Damn if it didn't smell a lot like the Confederate jasmine that grew up the sides of the Tulane dorm where he'd stayed until this spring. Tempted by her hardened pink nipples, he propped himself on an elbow and flailed first one and then the other with his tongue.

"I wonder what it would feel like to play with these if you had pierced nipples."

Marly drew his head down to her other breast, ran her fingers through his hair. "I imagine it would hurt, at least until they healed. Do you have a thing for body piercings?"

"Not really. I just wondered." Teasing now, he drew a nipple into his mouth and suckled until she squirmed and tried to pull him on top of her.

"Let's fuck now." She grabbed the condom, unwrapped it and rolled it over his cock.

This place, where she'd grown up among her loving family members, seemed more a sanctuary than Bobby would have liked, a place where fucking wasn't appropriate but gentle lovemaking was. "We're not fucking, baby, we're making love." He straddled her, cradling her head between his hands before swooping down and claiming her full, pink lips.

She tasted like the apple pie they'd eaten with her folks, as if being home had made her shelve the sassy cheerleader who had a thing for jocks. He imagined it was the room and all the memories she must have of it that lent an air of innocence, as if she were a teenage virgin eager to taste the pleasures a man could offer. Slowly, he slid his legs between hers, balancing himself as their kiss went on forever.

His cock ached. Her lubrication made it easy for him to find and fill her swollen pussy. He broke the kiss, met her heated gaze. "You're my woman. My only woman. Know that. Know I never felt about any woman the way I feel about you."

Tears came to her eyes, and she lifted her hands to his shoulders. "You're just so damn hot, I'm afraid I'll have to fight off a slew of panting women. If you weren't so irresistible I'd be looking for a guy who doesn't attract women the way picnics attract flies."

Slowly, he pulled almost out of her tight, hot cunt and slid back in, loving the heat and wetness and the way she wrapped her legs around his hips to take him deeper. "I'll help you beat the groupies away, I promise."

“We’ll see. Meanwhile make love to me, fulfill the fantasies I spun alone in this bed before I met you.”

“I will. I do.” The tacit admission that he was the only man she’d brought to her bedroom pleased Bobby immeasurably. He didn’t know why, but he knew it made him want to cherish her, protect her...love her even more than he had before. He started to move, slow and deep, holding back the urge to let himself go until he’d felt her contract around his cock and heard her little scream. “God, baby, I’m coming.” Pressure built in his balls. His cock stiffened painfully then exploded, the bursts of his seed taking his breath away. He choked back his cry of release, as if it might be heard by anybody who happened to be downstairs.

They snuggled for a few minutes before Bobby got up. Usually he liked to cuddle after they made love, but not today. He felt a need to put on his clothes, grab whatever Marly wanted to take with her and leave. He was washing up at the vanity sink when Marly joined him, wrapping her arms around his waist. “You’re awfully quiet.”

He laughed. “I don’t really feel comfortable being naked in your parents’ place. I know they’re not here, but...”

“Shy, are you?”

He’d never thought so. He’d fucked Tina and a couple of other high-school girls under the bleachers at the football field, had a few encounters in strange places when he was at Tulane. Like most athletes, he wasn’t shy about wandering around locker rooms buck-naked, even if there were female reporters trying to get interviews. But now –

Now he didn’t want his future in-laws to become aware he was in Marly’s bedroom, making love instead of grabbing an armload of her clothes. Because she wasn’t just any woman. He wished to hell he could drive away her doubts about that, make her believe she was all he’d ever wanted.

“I’m not exactly shy. Just careful. The picture of your dad pointing a shotgun at me isn’t something I’d like to see in real time. And I’d hate for us to shock your mom. Come on, let’s get the clothes you want for the next few days and get out of here.”

“Okay.” She followed him back to her room and began laying clothes out on the bed. “These ought to be enough for now, unless you see something else you particularly like,” she told him as he was slipping his T-shirt over his head.

“I’ve never not liked anything you put on your hot little body. Do you have something to put this stuff in?”

“A suitcase. There are two or three in the closet.” She shimmied into her jeans while he brought the suitcases in and opened them up on the bed.

They packed quickly and took the luggage to his car. As he opened the door for her, he thought about that sex toy store a few blocks away and wondered how she’d feel about experimenting a little. “You know that toy store we drive by on the way here?”

“Uh-huh. Mom had a fit when it moved in where her favorite bakery used to be. Have you tried any of the stuff they sell?”

“Nope. But I’ve always thought it might be fun to play.”

She grinned. “It might be fun, at that. Are you offering to take me there?”

“I guess I am. Maybe we can kick our sex lives up a notch or two. We’ll stop by there, then head on to Keith Connors’ place. I need to talk to him in person.”

* * * * *

Marly thought she’d gotten over blushing a long time ago, but she was wrong. When the adult store clerk recognized Bobby, he insisted on giving them a complete tour of the store—even the BDSM room with its scary-looking torture devices and all sorts of black leather. There were chaps that left the dummy’s sex hanging out, women’s bodysuits with holes cut so breasts, pussy and ass were readily touchable. When Bobby shook his head and told the clerk that wasn’t exactly what he had in mind, she let out a sigh of relief. She thought. But she couldn’t help imagining Bobby wearing those chaps and one of the full-face leather masks.

Laughing nervously, she helped select some milder toys, a big dildo and a set of butt plugs. “No, honey, you don’t need that,” she said when the clerk showed Bobby

how a device called a penis enlarger would make him grow bigger and harder. When they left, they had a big bag of flavored oils, some battery-operated vibrators and the silicone plugs and dildo they'd selected first. And a blown-glass dildo Bobby threatened to fill with ice water to cool her off. "We should stop over at Keith's and get on home to entertain Tina."

"Yeah," Bobby said as he helped her climb into his truck. "Baby, I'm sorry she's here, I was looking for a lot of one-on-one time with my brand-new fiancée. You do know Keith, don't you?"

"I know who he is. I've never actually met him. Why are we stopping by there now?" At one time Marly would have drooled to actually get the chance to see the All-Pro's home, but now that she had her own quarterback, meeting Connors didn't seem all that exciting.

"I'm going to try to sell him on Tina as a live-in babysitter. Coach said the other day that if he couldn't find one, he might have to sit out the rest of the season. Apparently his mom had to go back home."

That would be good—that is, it would solve the Tina problem for Bobby. Marly wondered, though, why he was willing to move back to the bench just so he could get Tina out of his place. "Are you doing this for me?" She didn't want that.

"No. I'm doing it for me. And for Tina. She has no education past high school, and she needs a job and a safe place to live, far away from her bastard of a stepfather and with somebody strong enough to protect her from him if he should be so stupid as to follow her here. Besides, she's always liked little kids. She'll make a good nanny."

Marly couldn't imagine anybody really wanting to take on the responsibility for somebody else's children, but then Bobby had a point when he said Tina wasn't prepared for a job that required a lot of training. "Have you talked to her yet?"

"I thought I'd run it by Keith first. He may already have somebody lined up." He turned into a gated community north of the stadium and showed his ID to the guard. "Keith said he'd called down so we could go on in."

“Yes sir, he did that. You’ve been filling in for Mr. Connors real well so far. Would you mind signing this for me?” The guard held out a marker pen and a football that already had a lot of Maulers signatures. While Bobby signed it, he chatted easily with the stranger. Marly guessed his six weeks of filling in for Keith had lent a bit of polish she hadn’t noticed when they first met.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks, sir. Take the first right and drive around until you get to the first big white two-story house. That’s where Mr. Connors lives.”

The house was magnificent, almost like an antebellum plantation house with its carriage lights and a porch with white columns. Bobby whistled. “Well, Keith certainly didn’t model this house by any back in Hedgecock. This must have been his late wife’s choice.”

“You’re probably right. It’s usually women who get the say about what style of home they want. After all, they spend more time in it than their husbands – especially if their husbands are star athletes.”

“I guess so. Do you want to pick out our house when we settle down?”

“Probably. I guess we should go on in.” She’d grown up comfortably well-off, but this place intimidated her. The idea that she might be expected to pick and live in a showplace like this one didn’t set too well. “I hope you don’t want a place this elegant.”

Bobby got out of the car and opened her door to help her out. “I’m just a west Texas country boy at heart.”

Marly grinned. “So is Keith.”

“Yeah, but from all I’ve heard, he grew up wanting all the trappings of success, more than I did. His mom remarried and moved out of Hedgecock as soon as she found a rich oil man to latch onto, or anyhow that’s what Mom has always said.”

When they rang the doorbell, the door opened right away. An infant’s cry resounded from the back of the house, and Keith Connors greeted them with a

frustrated look on his face. "Sorry about my son. He doesn't seem to like me nearly as much as he does the women who work in the Maulers front office. But he doesn't like the housekeeper at all and the feeling's mutual, so he's all mine when I get him home. Come on in."

* * * * *

The room reminded Marly of the parlors in a downtown men's club, all dark wood paneling and burgundy leather upholstery on a huge sectional sofa. Barrel chairs surrounded a game table, and an ornate pool table with carved mahogany legs and a navy-blue felt top dominated one side of the room. As her feet sank into plush navy carpeting, a plaintive cry drew her to the playpen that looked incongruous in such a men-only setting. "May I see if I can calm him down?" she asked Keith who apparently was planning to ignore the baby and sprawl on one end of the sofa.

"Be my guest. I've fed him and played with him and even tried to walk him around the house, hoping something would put him to sleep. Nothing worked. Would you all like soda or beer?"

"Not me. I have a feeling this little bruiser will be a handful." Not having handled a lot of babies since she'd baby-sat for neighbors during high school, Marly bent and gingerly picked up the gorgeous little boy, who had an unmistakable ripe smell coming from his squishy butt that was encased in a bright-blue plush sleeper. "I think he needs a change, Daddy. And he might be too hot in this outfit."

"Would you? His stuff's over on the bar." Keith turned to Bobby. "This trying to take care of that little guy by myself is gonna kill me yet. Not that I'd give him up for anything."

Marly extricated a handful of her hair from the baby's fist and laid him onto a pad on the counter behind the wet bar. Two neat stacks, one of disposable diapers and the other of tiny clothes, flanked the pad, and cleaning stuff was lined up in front of the bar sink where she imagined they'd displaced bottles of cherries, bitters and other

condiments for adult beverages. By then his cries had slowed down. Apparently he knew she was going to change him even before she started to unzip the sleeper. "What's your name, little fella?" It felt weird to be undressing somebody when she didn't know his name, baby or not.

"John Keith Connors, but I call him Jack. Do you have everything you need? He has a lot more stuff upstairs. I've found he gets clean enough when I hold his bottom under the faucet in the sink. There's some baby-smelling soap in that pink bottle."

"Oooh." Jack seemed to like getting clean, because his howls stopped and he broke out with a silly grin. "He seems to like water."

"Yeah. He doesn't like being dirty. I can't imagine me ever having been that particular, can you, Bobby?"

Bobby laughed. "It's hard to worry much about dirt when you make your living the way we do. I've dreamed about walking off the field someday without a bit of dirt on me or my uniform, but I don't think it will ever happen."

"Not unless they get a couple of beasts to fill out the offensive line." Keith laughed. "Are you okay over there?"

Marly diapered the wiggly Jack then kept him still with one hand on his belly while she found him a clean sleeper, this one a stretchy terry cloth that looked like it would keep him warm enough without being oppressively hot. "We're fine."

"Need a job? I'm looking for a live-in nanny for him so I can get back to work." Keith paused, shot a wicked grin toward Bobby before turning back to Marly. "No, I guess you wouldn't. I imagine you must be the only Maulers fan around who prefers seeing him taking snaps."

"Possibly. But Bobby may have a solution for you." Jack in hand, she came to the sofa and sat between the two guys. Boy, wouldn't Liz Grady turn green when she heard Marly had sat within touching distance of the great Keith Connors? She was already halfway jealous that Marly had caught Bobby's attention. "We have a guest from back in Hedgecock."

“And this might affect me how?” Keith reached over and took Jack, who laughed out loud when his dad lifted him over his head then brought him down to sprawl on his six-pack abs.

Bobby put an arm around Marly, as though he thought she needed the contact before he actually mentioned Tina. “Do you remember Tina Black?”

Keith’s look of puzzlement morphed into one of recognition. “A kid about your age, always hung around with you and a bunch of boys. I remember you all pestering me to play with you my senior year in high school.”

“Yeah. You know, back then I never really thought we were pestering you. I figured it out, though, when I was trying to avoid pesky little ones later on. Guess you deserve an apology, even though it’s been a long time. Anyhow, Tina’s here now, and she needs a job and somewhere to stay. Marly’s understandably not very happy at having my old friend staying in our guest room.”

Marly turned to Bobby. “Friend? You admitted you two had sex under the bleachers after games. Besides, it’s not that I’m unhappy, it’s that I want Tina to have a place to stay and something to keep her occupied.”

“Sure.” The men said it in unison, and little Jack let out a baby cackle, as if none of them believed Marly wasn’t dead set on getting Tina out of Bobby’s line of vision as quickly as possible. Bobby pulled her closer to him and blew in her ear. He sent delicious little sparks clear down to her toes when he did that—and he knew it. She hoped her glare let him know she was a little unhappy about him obviously not believing her.

Bobby turned to Keith. “Tina’s dad died about the time my dad left, and when we were seniors in high school, her mom married again. The guy’s a real bastard. According to Tina, he left her alone until they were in an accident and her mother was left paralyzed. By then I was off to college. Her mom died this summer, and she moved in with my mom to keep away from her stepfather. Apparently he started stalking Tina, and Mom thought the best way to deal with it was to get her out of the creep’s reach.”

Keith got up with little Jack and fished a bottle out from under the bar. When he came back and sat down, he opened the bottle and held it to the baby's mouth. "Sorry, when he starts getting restless, the only thing to do is feed him. Tina didn't have anybody there to chase this creep away?"

"No. Garcia's big enough and mean enough to intimidate most everybody left in Hedgecock. And he seems to stay one step ahead of the sheriff. So Tina's here, bunking in with us until she finds a job. I thought about her when I heard Coach Lyle mention that you had a real babysitting problem."

Shifting Jack on his lap, Keith shot a doubtful look at Bobby. "Most young women want a little better job than being a nanny. The few who've applied seem to be auditioning for a spot in my bed."

That made sense. Marly had no trouble imagining Liz Grady or a few hundred other rabid female fans angling to get a piece of Keith by way of babysitting his son. "That must be pretty tough to take," Bobby commented.

"Yeah, it is. I've got no interest now in women—Jackie's still very much a part of me, even though she's dead. A few nice young women have seemed to get along well with Jack, but even they seem as interested in a Marlins quarterback as in—" Keith shot an apologetic glance toward Marly. "Present company excepted."

"You're excused. You've gotta know that even before I fell for this big lug, I was a rabid football fan. After all, I decided to devote the better part of a year to being a Maulers cheerleader." She squeezed Bobby's muscular thigh then leaned back in the cushions while he continued.

"Tina doesn't have any education past high school. No money. She's always been quiet and I doubt she'd try to seduce you because her stepfather's undoubtedly done a good job of turning her against men in general. But she's smart, and I'm pretty sure she'd fall in love with little Jack." Bobby paused. "I can't imagine she'd be afraid of being in your house, either."

Keith looked down at Jack, who'd grabbed hold of his big hand on the bottle and was squeezing it as though that would make the milk come faster. He looked down on his son with a loving smile. "She'd be safe all right. I'd never let a bastard like her stepfather anywhere near Jack—or Tina, if she's his nanny. I'd pay her well, of course. Taking care of this little guy is a big responsibility. I know."

Marly didn't doubt that. And she imagined Keith would be as good a protector as Bobby's old girlfriend was likely to find. Except for Bobby, she thought before slamming that thought to the back of her mind. "If you'd like, I could bring Tina down to the practice field with me and we could have lunch or something after you two finish practice."

"That would be good. Keith could collect Jack and we could go grab some takeout and bring it back here." Bobby stood and pulled Marly up from the sofa. "We've got to get going—not that you're not good company, but we've got a guest to entertain."

Keith got up, too, and walked them to the double door. "See you tomorrow then. I hope Tina will want the job. Congratulations, by the way, on your engagement. It made big news today in the Memphis papers."

"Yeah, I know." Bobby grinned and gave Marly a little hug. "You think your shoulder will be well enough for you to play this Sunday?"

Keith shrugged. "Probably. But I want it to be a hundred percent before I go rushing back out there. How's your knee?"

"I'll be okay to play on Sunday if I need to."

"You're doing a great job—for a raw rookie," Keith said.

"Thanks. See you in the morning then. We'll talk to Tina tonight so she won't be blindsided when you guys meet her tomorrow." With that Bobby steadied Marly as they walked down the stairs to the circular drive where he'd parked earlier. On the way home they sat in a comfortable silence Marly hadn't experienced with Bobby since he told her about his old hometown girlfriend's impending arrival into their lives.

Chapter Eight

Tina seemed surprised but not disturbed when Bobby told her about Keith and mentioned he needed a live-in nanny for his baby. Marly couldn't believe it! Tina might have been Bobby's girl when they were kids, but she didn't start breathing hard at the prospect of living in the same house with Keith Connors, the way most unattached women their age would.

Maybe she didn't know who Keith was. After all, he was eight or nine years older than Bobby. Marly herself didn't remember guys who'd grown up in her neighborhood but were that much older, but then none of her neighborhood guys had become household names. "Didn't you watch football when you were a kid?"

Tina smiled. "Of course. There isn't much else to do in Hedgecock during the football season. I didn't know Keith, though. He wasn't interested in snot-nose brats, the way I remember him calling us kids when Bobby and the other boys were trying to get him to play catch with us."

"He has a little boy now," Bobby said.

Marly figured Tina could use a little more information than that. "His wife died this spring when the baby was born. Little Jack's a cutie, but he's apparently too much of a handful for the housekeeper to handle. Keith said he needed a young, energetic woman who'd love Jack like her own and be there for him while he has to be away."

"He doesn't want this nanny to take care of him, too?" The idea seemed to disturb Tina, not thrill her the way it would excite most of the girls Marly knew.

"No. He told Marly and me he wasn't looking for that." Bobby's expression turned serious. "Tina, the man lost his wife less than eight months ago. Don't you think he needs some time to grieve?"

"I guess so." But she didn't sound certain.

Marly reached over and patted Tina's hand. "Keith's a decent man. He'd never force himself on any woman. Let me tell you, if he gets horny, there are hundreds of groupies who'd be thrilled to spend an hour in his arms and walk away. A dozen or more on the Maulers cheerleading squad would die to find out if he's as hot in bed as he is on the football field, but I've never heard any of them say anything about scoring with him."

"Oh. He must really have loved his wife."

When Bobby picked up Marly's hand and brought it to his lips, she bent and kissed his knuckles. "I wasn't around here when Jackie was alive, but from all the guys have said, he was one of the good ones, never taking groupies up on invitations for sex while on the road. He's probably one of the best-known athletes in the country, but from all I've heard, he was totally faithful to his wife."

"The baby's adorable. I think you'll like him a lot." Marly sensed that Tina needed love but didn't want it tied in with sex, not after the experiences with her stepfather that she'd confided when they first started their talk. Although she didn't come out and say it, Marly thought the filthy creep had probably raped her. "And I don't think you'll have anything to worry about with Keith."

"Well, I do need a job and a place to live. I guess this would take care of both. After all, it's not as if we're total strangers. I used to play sometimes with the girl who lived across the road from his mom's ranch. And I've talked with his sister several times when we'd run into each other at the grocery store." Tina looked around the condo. "He doesn't live in a place as fancy as this, does he?"

Bobby laughed. "Keith Connors is one of the biggest names in football. He lives in a huge place behind gates with burly guards. The man's last contract was for a hundred million dollars. His furniture is more traditional than this, but I'm pretty sure that unless his wife was an interior decorator, they had a professional lay out the place—and that it cost a bundle more than what I've got here. Right, Marly?"

“You’re right. From the gossip columns I read before they got married, Jackie Connors was a socialite from up around Chicago. As far as I know she never worked at all, and I’d say just by looking that her house was put together by professionals.” She wondered if Bobby would expect her to go all out in making their home a showplace, hoped not because she wanted a home that felt like home.

Tina smiled. “I think I might like this job. At least it would get me out of your hair so you can enjoy being engaged, doing whatever it is that engaged couples do.”

“It’s not that we’re trying to get rid of you, Tina.” Bobby’s voice was hearty, but he didn’t sound very sincere. Marly was sure he seemed less so when he laid a big, roughened hand on her thigh and gave it a squeeze.

“Yes you are, but that’s okay. I tried to talk your mom out of sending me here, but she insisted. I don’t know how she thought it was going to work, the three of us. And once I saw Marly and you together I knew you’d found the perfect match.”

“Yeah, I found Marly. She’s the only woman in the world for me. But I want you to be happy, too. If you’d rather, I’ll send you to college so you can get a better job.” He turned toward Marly, as if to gauge her reaction.

Tina didn’t show any surprise when Bobby made that offer, but it set off alarms in Marly’s head. “No need to waste your money. If I’d been a good student, I’d have found a way to do it myself. I find I like the idea of being a nanny.”

Her response made Marly reluctantly start to like the woman and realize, just possibly, that the situation was exactly what Bobby had said it was. Tina just wasn’t used to a decent guy, she guessed. They were old friends, and unlike a lot of players, Bobby apparently remembered his roots enough to offer a hand up to friends in need.

“As long as you’re sure you’ll be okay.” Marly’s antennae went up when Bobby seemed to press his offer, but she hadn’t seen any indication that keeping Bobby away from Tina was likely to be a problem.

“I’ll be fine as long as Edgar Garcia’s hundreds of miles away.” Tina paused for a minute. “Taking care of a baby whose father’s still in love with his dead wife sounds

like an ideal job, especially if he'll toss in tickets to home games so I can teach his son to love the game."

* * * * *

"See, baby, I told you that talking to Tina wouldn't end up being a disaster." Bobby slid off his jeans and laid them neatly on the chair beside the bed. "Wanna play?"

"I always want to play with you, big guy." Marly stretched out, naked, on the middle of the bed, reaching into the bag of toys she'd left in easy reach. "Lie down before your knee starts hurting again."

"It's already hurting, but not as bad as my cock. Ever since we were in that store, I've been thinking about using that big dildo to fill your sweet, hot pussy."

Marly laughed. "Then do it."

He'd never used toys and that scared him a little, but Bobby took the purple gel dildo. It seemed huge, bigger than his cock. "Give me that tube of lubricant. I've got the feeling this monster may hurt you."

"It's not as big as you, honey," she said as she handed him some cherry-flavored lube after sampling it and smacking her lips. "This stuff tastes good."

He took a little on his finger and brought it to his lips. Like Marly said, it tasted sweet and tart, sort of like cherry pie filling. Instead of spreading it on the dildo, he smeared some on her tight little nipples and bent to taste it for real. "I like your own taste better, but this is cool. Wanna taste some, too?"

Marly rolled on her side and grasped his erection. "Put some on here."

The red gel felt cool on his heated flesh, but then she took his cock head into her mouth and began to suck. "Yeah, baby, that feels great. Don't stop." The pressure had his balls tightening, but the heat of her mouth felt fantastic. Maybe he could contort himself enough so he could sample her, too.

There was no way, they'd tried it before. But he could make her feel good. Trying to maintain control and not come before he'd given her an orgasm, he smeared some of

the gel on the dildo and lay back until he could see her pretty cunt. "Keep sucking me. I'm gonna give you some store-bought cock."

The dildo slid in easier than he'd imagined it would, and he absorbed the trembling that resounded against his own cock. Slowly, carefully, he moved in and out as she moved her lips up and down on him, sucking harder with each inward motion. It felt great. Different. "Feel good, baby?"

"Oh yes." The vibrations of her words against him got him even hotter.

"Then grab one of those plugs for me. Imagine I have three cocks and each one of them's inside you." When she found a plug and handed it to him, he lubed it before penetrating her tight anal sphincter with it until she cried out. "Does that hurt?"

She raised her head and looked up at him, tears in her eyes. "It hurts, but it feels good, too."

"Relax. This is all new to both of us. Go on sucking me but feel free to bite if it hurts more than it feels good." He wanted to see her come apart, lose every bit of control and come from the play alone. "God but I love you." Very gently he worked the plug up her ass until the flared end was flush with her body. "Okay?" He hoped so because she was sucking him as if she never wanted to quit, so hard that he was going to explode if she didn't let up.

"Oooh yes. Do you want to put this up my ass? You can if you want to." She punctuated the question by licking lubrication from the slit in his cock head. "Does the idea make you hot?"

"Yeah, it makes me damn hot. But then I'm about to explode anyhow, from what you've been doing to me. I think I'll get rid of the toys and we'll have a wild, old-fashioned fuckfest." Rolling out of Marly's reach, Bobby came on top of her, kneeling between her legs while he retrieved the dildo. "Maybe I'll leave the plug in." Stroking her wet, hot pussy, he jiggled the butt plug and made her squirm.

"Oh God. Leave it there and come inside me."

When she begged that way, he couldn't say no. Shifting, he found her cunt and plunged inside. "Baby, this feels so damn good."

"Oh yes. I love the way you feel inside me...and how the plug makes me feel like my whole body's stuffed full."

He moved on her, fast and deep, stretching out his legs to take pressure off his knee and lowering his body. "You've still got one more hole to fill," he growled before taking her mouth and devouring it, loving the taste and smell of his own body mingled with cherries and the musk that surrounded them.

Sensations bombarded him, the silky feel of her body beneath him, her warmth and wetness that caressed his flesh like a velvet glove, the knowledge that he was taking her, claiming her in every way he could envision. When she shuddered and he caught her scream of completion against his throat, he came as he'd never come before.

It was a hundred times the high of throwing a touchdown pass, the wildest orgasm he'd ever experienced. As he rolled off her and pulled her close, his thoughts moved beyond sex...beyond raw sensation to a realization that Marly was not only his lover but his life. "Let's go shower, baby. I think the toys are gonna prove a good investment."

"Oh yeah."

Next time maybe they'd try the vibrators. Bobby wondered how much stimulation a man could take. He guessed they'd find out soon enough. As they showered together, he wondered why he'd ever thought having sex under the bleachers did any more than cause the usual physical release. Come to think of it, he doubted that he'd ever given Tina an orgasm.

He'd been a self-centered high-school jock, and he wasn't proud of it. When they got back in bed, Bobby gathered Marly in his arms and thanked God they'd found each other. He wondered how he'd survive if someday he lost her the way Keith had lost his wife.

He was pretty sure he wouldn't—or at least that he wouldn't want to. "I love you, baby," he whispered, moving her hair out of the way and placing a soft kiss on her neck just below the hairline.

"Love you, too. Now we'd better sleep or you'll have trouble rolling out of bed for practice."

* * * * *

How long had it been since he got a decent night's sleep? Keith stumbled out of bed and into the nursery, stifling a string of curses when he figured out his son didn't need a diaper change or food—that he just wanted to play. Hauling Jack to his own bed, he lay beside him and talked in a mock-stern voice.

"Look, bruiser, you need to sleep all night. All the books say so. They also say I shouldn't put you in my bed and risk smashing you, but we've both got to get some sleep."

"Da-da-da." Jack chattered a reply, one Keith thought might be an attempt to say "Daddy", but he wasn't sure.

"Da-da to you, too. If we're lucky you're gonna get a nanny so your old dad can go earn us a living." It irked him that the housekeeper Jackie had hired two years earlier absolutely refused to add child care to her duties, but it seemed as if Bobby Anthony might have come up with a solution. "If we don't, I may be retiring before my time. You understand?"

Jack just drooled and kicked his heels on the mattress. Some bed partner! Not that Keith had any desire to replace Jackie in his bed. Not now. Maybe not ever. Still, he envied Bobby for having a hot, gorgeous woman to curl up with at night. A woman who loved football the way Jackie never did. "Come on, kid, doesn't your motor ever wear down?"

After fifteen minutes or so, Jack nodded off to sleep, leaving Keith wide awake, wondering what Tina Black looked like now. His vague memory of her was as a

disheveled tomboy with mousy light brown hair and clothes that had seen better days. He didn't imagine she'd stir his dormant libido now, which was good. As he took Jack back to the nursery, he stopped a minute and looked at the last portrait he'd had done of Jackie.

The wind blew her blonde hair as she stood on a dock by the man-made lake behind their home, seven months pregnant with Jack. And she was smiling at something he'd said. A friend had shot the picture and given them an enlargement that Jackie had refused to have framed. But after she died, Keith framed it himself because it reminded him of the Jackie she never showed to anyone but him. Tell the truth, he hated the formal portrait of her that hung over the living-room fireplace—but he knew he'd feel guilty if he had it taken down and stored in the attic.

"We love you, Mommy." Jackie would never know how much Keith had loved her, or how empty his life was now that she was gone, even though their years together had been full of ups and downs, even a couple of separations when she'd gone storming off to her indulgent parents. He looked down at his son. "Let's get you back to bed now." His heart aching, Keith laid Jack in his crib and covered him with the blanket his boy had decided in the last few weeks was his favorite. Maybe he'd send Tina to the store to buy a dozen more just like it, because Jack was a beast when he didn't have that "blankie".

That is, he'd send her if she was willing to take on a bereaved widower and his baby while he tried to come back from his injury and take his place again as the number-one quarterback for the Maulers. He'd never realized until he risked losing that place that it defined him as much as it did. Oh well, he'd know soon enough. He crawled back in bed, tried not to think of what his backup was doing right now with Marly. Reminding himself he'd never been into voyeurism, Keith drifted off to sleep.

And he dreamed about a faceless woman. A woman who'd love Jack and like him. Someone who'd be proud of what he did on the field and teach his son to be proud, too. She wasn't Jackie, who'd barely tolerated his playing football when he could have taken

a job with her father's company. Keith had no idea who he was seeing up in the stands, screaming when a lineman sacked him, telling Jack his daddy was going to be okay.

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The next afternoon Keith collected Jack from the office, where he'd become a distraction for the women who'd volunteered to watch him, and went downstairs where Bobby was waiting with Marly and Tina.

It struck him that Marly was the stereotypical perfect trophy wife for a quarterback on the rise, while the other woman looked more like the stereotypical girl next door. Not ugly, but no stunning beauty, her light brown hair touched her shoulders and framed her small, roundish face. Taller than Marly, she was more slender. Less voluptuous, he thought, revising his first impression. Both of them had on jeans and sweaters, only Marly filled hers out in a way that made men stop for a second look.

Tina looked like someone's mom. Keith had no trouble picturing her growing up in Hedgecock, living in a much simpler world than he had traveled since going away to college and marrying a millionaire's daughter. Good, he'd have no trouble keeping his hands off her, something he'd wondered about last night. If she'd looked like Marly, his dormant libido would have been more likely to come alive. "Are you-all ready to go get some lunch? I figured we might as well have it at my house, so I ordered some pizzas that should get there about the time we arrive."

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Once Tina got in the backseat of Keith's car and started amusing Jack, Bobby led Marly to his truck. "We thought this would work better, so they can see how they get along. Besides, I like having you all to myself. There's been little enough of that since we got home from LA."

“Speaking of LA, how’s that knee feeling?” Marly frowned, because she’d noticed Bobby limping again when he came out from practice. The one downside to having an athlete for a lover was that he was always getting dents and dings that caused him discomfort if not downright agonizing pain.

Bobby laid a hand on the knee. “It’s okay. The trainer wrapped it again after I spent an hour in the hydrotherapy pool. Coach wouldn’t let me take part in the contact drills this morning, but I did get to throw some. Keith looks a little rusty, but I imagine he’ll be good to go by a week from Sunday.”

That would be good for him, not so good for Bobby. “Does that bother you? You’ve been doing such a great job while he’s been out.”

“Yeah, it bothers me, but it’s nothing I can’t live with. Keith’s a better quarterback than I am now, but I figure that seven or eight years from now, I’ll be better than him. I came here expecting to get traded unless something bad happened with Keith, and there’s no way I can wish anything horrible on him. He’s gone out of his way to teach me a lot.”

Marly hated the idea of living far from her family, but she wouldn’t complain. After all, Bobby had come a long way toward being the hero her life rotated around, and she wasn’t about to let him leave Memphis without her. “I know. If we move, we move. I’ll survive not being within an hour’s drive of my mom and dad.”

That was the first time Marly had come right out and said that. Bobby had assumed she would, but he liked hearing her say the words. “We’ll cross that bridge when it comes, but truth is, I’ll probably be on the trading block pretty soon after Keith gets back to work. That will happen in a hurry if he offers Tina the job and she accepts.”

Bobby was glad he had Marly persuaded that he had no sexual interest in Tina or anybody else except her. At least he hoped he had. The fact that some creep had dumped her the way she’d finally told him made him want to kill the guy if he could

find him—or wrap her in his love and make damn sure nobody ever hurt her again. “Want to get married soon?”

“Mom wants a year to plan the circus she has in mind.” Marly pouted, obviously not thrilled with the idea of Ringling Brothers coming to town to help celebrate her marriage, to him or anybody else.

“I bet we can persuade her she wouldn’t like the media circus that probably would happen if you marry me in Memphis. I’d like to do it quietly, with just your family and my mom and a few friends of ours from the team. Since I’ve been playing every week, I’ve developed a phobia about reporters.” He had a sneaking suspicion Marly’s mom’s idea of a wedding would intimidate his mom and everybody from Hedgecock who might attend, and he didn’t want that. Especially since he was pretty sure Marly wasn’t enthusiastic about a huge blowout, either.

“You know, we could do it here or in Hedgecock, except there aren’t enough hotel rooms there to handle even a few out-of-town guests. Or I could do the way a lot of players do and buy out a resort for a weekend and invite our guests there.”

Marly sat a few minutes, obviously thinking about the choices he’d suggested. “Going to Cabo or some resort like it would seem copycat, and I like to think we’re original. I vote for here, a small wedding for less than a hundred people, at my parish church with a reception at Dad’s restaurant.”

No, Marly wouldn’t want to follow anybody else’s pattern, and she seemed too frugal anyway to okay him spending fifty thousand or so to haul fifty or sixty guests to some popular Mexican or Caribbean resort. As far as her suggestion to do it here went, Bobby wasn’t too big on a church affair since he hadn’t been to Mass since he was too small to protest going, but it obviously meant something to Marly, or more particularly to her parents. He really didn’t want to get married in Hedgecock. He’d moved on from there when he left for college, and the only thing that drew him back now was his mom.

“I wouldn’t mind that. You can blame me for nixing the huge blowout if you want to. First thing, I don’t want to wait a year. Second, I have no desire to go on display for

Memphis' most intrusive reporters, especially since I'm sure I'll have been traded long before a year's up."

Marly smiled. "I know you aren't very religious, and I'm not either. But Mom and Dad will be happy if we get married in church. And I think I can make them believe I don't want the hoopla either. My best friend from college had a three-ring-circus wedding last year, and the marriage didn't last six months."

After he pulled into Keith's driveway and stopped the truck, Bobby leaned over the console and gave Marly a grateful kiss. She was so beautiful, but that wasn't important. He'd found his soul mate and he wasn't about to lose her over anything—particularly something as unimportant as the ceremony that would join them for the rest of their lives. "Let's go in and see how Keith and Jack are doing persuading Tina to come take care of them."

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"They're in the game room. Mr. Connors said to send you in when you arrived. Just follow the noise. You'll find them." The middle-aged woman who answered the door wore a black and white uniform that reminded Marly of what female servers wore in four-star restaurants that boasted microscopic servings at obscene prices. She didn't look any too happy when she answered the door and invited them in.

Mr. Connors? She'd never imagined Keith would have servants who called him "Mister". The formality just didn't seem to fit with what she knew of him, or the way he'd acted toward them last night. She and Bobby turned the corner and laughed out loud when they found Tina and Keith on the floor with Jack. Their mouths, even the baby's, gave evidence that the pizza was already here and had been at least partially consumed. Both adults looked happier than Marly had ever seen them as they clowned for Jack's amusement.

“Come on, join us. There’s plenty of pizza on the bar, and drinks are in the refrigerator. Tina and I just found out Jack likes pizza crust. She says it’s good for teething.”

Marly wasn’t all that sure she’d have tried feeding pizza to a baby, but then she guessed Jack was old enough to start trying some adult foods. “It looks like he’s having fun. You guys, too.” She put two slices of pepperoni pizza on a plate and handed it to Bobby. “Here you go. Plain, vanilla pizza. Just the way you like it.” She’d laughed at Bobby the first time they’d eaten at her dad’s restaurant, because he’d carefully picked all the visible ingredients besides the meat off his serving before devouring it. Smiling at the memory, she served herself a slice of the pizza that looked to have every imaginable topping on it. “This looks good.”

Bobby handed her a soda and took a beer for himself. “I haven’t figured you out yet, baby. You like beer with ribs but you want soda with pizza. I always heard pizza shouldn’t be eaten without beer.”

“Real Italians drink wine with their pizza.” Marly didn’t much care for the Chianti that was traditional with southern Italian food either, but she figured her dad would cringe if she didn’t say it.

“Ugh,” Keith said, looking up at them as he and Tina took turns pushing toy cars back and forth for Jack to roll back to them. “I can’t stand wine of any kind. Give me a beer any day, or even a soft drink.”

Tina looked at him. “Uh, Keith, if you don’t like wine, why do you keep a huge refrigerator full of it in the kitchen?”

“For guests,” he said shortly. “Bobby, do you think your knee will be up to playing this week?”

“I guess.” Bobby sounded as confused at the sudden change of topic as Marly felt. “How’s the shoulder feeling after the workout today?”

“Sore. But I could play if I had to. I imagine that if I don’t get back on the field pretty soon, I’ll be out of a job. You’ve done amazing things considering this is your first year.”

They chatted for a while, until a pungent odor let Marly know Jack needed a change. “Shall I take him upstairs and do the honors?” she asked Keith.

“No. Let Tina do it. I’ve shown her around the house, so she knows where to find his stuff.”

Tina grinned. “I think I can find his room again. Come on, little guy, let’s go get changed.”

As Jack left, giggling in Tina’s arms, Marly figured this was going to work. Sure, Tina didn’t seem to fit in this elegant mansion the way the housekeeper did, but then neither did Keith. “Seems you’re getting along pretty well,” she commented to Keith when he moved off the floor onto a bar stool.

“She’s easy to relax with. And Jack already seems crazy about her. My only worry is how she’ll get along with Mrs. Gardner.”

“The woman who answered the door?” Bobby’s tone hinted that he doubted the housekeeper much liked anybody.

“Yeah. Jackie hired her when we first moved here. All the good I can say about her is that she keeps the place straightened up. I’m fairly sure she thinks I’m some sort of a caveman since I wander around the house in cutoffs and T-shirts instead of whatever it is she thinks the master of the house should be wearing.”

Bobby washed down the last of his pizza with a big slug of beer. “I’d fire her. Having the hired help look down her pointy nose at me would be the last straw.”

“Now, Bobby,” Marly chided gently. “There is something to be said for a clean house, and I can’t see you actually cleaning yours, even though you are pretty neat for a guy.”

Keith's laugh sounded forced. "I'm not very neat, so I need someone to pick up after me. Mrs. Gardner's not all that bad. She's always stayed out of my way as much as possible."

"What if she's not nice to Tina?" From the little Marly knew, Tina had lived a hard life. She deserved some peace if she was going to take this job.

"Then I'll fire her and let Tina hire a cleaning woman she gets on with. I can live with a mess before I'll make Jack do without her. He loves her already, and it's only been a few hours." Keith sighed, as if making that decision had taken a load off his back. "I shouldn't have gotten upset when she mentioned the wine collection. It was Jackie's. She liked 'fine dining', as she called it. It's hard when I have to think of her."

"I imagine it is." Never having known Keith before, Marly was surprised at his sensitivity, but she understood it. After all, he'd lost Jackie and now was floundering around, trying to make a go on his own. "When do you want Tina to start?"

"Now."

"Is she okay with this? After all, she's just gotten here, and she might need some rest before taking on Hurricane Jack." Bobby grinned, as if he could picture the havoc Keith's eight month-old terror might instigate with a tired, new nanny.

Keith smiled. "I talked with Coach Lyle, and I'm going to stay home with them for the next two days. Between us, Tina and I should each be able to get a bit of rest, and I won't have to subject poor Jack to Mrs. Gardner. I never saw another woman who seems to despise babies the way she does."

Marly laughed. This was going to work out. She knew it. "We'd better go home and get Tina's stuff," she told Bobby. "Not that I'm anxious to lose our houseguest so soon."

He bent over and whispered in her ear. "Liar. I know you can't wait to get home so we can play with our toys." Then he turned to Keith. "We'll go get Tina's luggage and bring it over here. I'm pretty sure she hasn't even unpacked."

Chapter Nine

By Friday, Tina had settled in and Keith was back at practice. Bobby thought he looked rested for the first time since they'd gotten to training camp back in August. Coach Lyle had given Bobby the start but told him Keith would be taking over the following week. They'd talked for a few minutes in the parking lot before getting in their cars and heading home.

Not that Bobby hadn't expected this. He knew he'd soon be traded to a team whose starting quarterback had bombed out or gone down with a season-ending injury at mid-season, and whose backup was a dud. But he wouldn't be going alone, so it was okay.

He imagined taking Marly to the frozen North, or the balmy South, or anywhere in between. Even to the West Coast. It wouldn't matter, as long as he had her with him. When his cell phone rang, he smiled at the sight of Marly's name on the LCD screen and turned on the speaker phone.

"This week will be my last start. Coach just told me Keith will be ready in time for next week's game."

"Then come home, honey, and I'll console you. My practice was over early, so I wanted to get some planning done for our big day. I let Mom talk me into wearing a white dress, but I nixed the veil."

"Hussy. You know you're no wide-eyed virgin. But go on, wear that white gown, not that I think you can persuade even your own parents that your big jock fiancée hasn't sampled you pretty thoroughly before the wedding." Bobby loved to tease her, even when she bristled and let her hot Italian temper show. "Just remember, baby, I like you best when you're wearing nothing at all." Blood rushed to his sex as he recalled the game they'd played last night, with vibrating dildos and cock rings and the sexy-smelling heated oil they'd spent hours massaging into each other's bodies.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. Mom and Dad want us to come over for dinner. They’ve got something they want to give us.”

Bobby pictured some antique that was a family heirloom, or maybe a cookbook with all of Dom’s secret recipes. “I’ll manage the appropriate reaction, whatever it may be.”

But Marly wasn’t so sure. Her parents had given her older brothers houses when they got married, which was probably the only reason they’d stayed in the old neighborhood. “It might be a house, you know.”

“Nah. They wouldn’t buy us a house when they know we’ll likely be living somewhere else but here. Would they?” His voice had an edge, as if he figured this was somewhat likely.

“Remember they bought houses for my brothers.”

“Your brothers didn’t make several million bucks a year when they got married, did they?”

“No, but—”

“No buts. They can give us whatever they want to, other than a house. I’ll buy that for us, and I doubt it will be here in Memphis.”

“You don’t want to live here in the off-season?”

Bobby groaned. “No, baby. I want us to make a year-round home wherever it is that I end up playing. We can visit your folks whenever we want to. They’ve got plenty of room to put us up for a week here and there.”

Marly was torn. Her parents had given in on the wedding plans. They’d taken Bobby in their open arms and treated him like another son. She knew they really wanted to keep their kids nearby for family meals and outings, and it hurt to know Bobby was so emphatic about keeping families at a distance. Her family, that is, she thought uncharitably, because she figured he’d move his own mother in with them at

the drop of a hat unless her romance with the Hedgecock banker ended up with a wedding, as Marly hoped it would.

“Is this going to be a problem?” His voice sounded cold over the phone, as though he wasn’t anxious to humor her and keep them close to Memphis.

“I don’t know. I’ve always thought we’d come back here, that this would sort of be our second home...that we’d live here once you retire.”

“Baby, I’ve just started. I’m hoping retirement won’t come into the picture for at least fifteen or sixteen years. Besides, what makes you think I wouldn’t want to go back to my own hometown?”

That made her furious. “Bobby, you’ve said a million times that you’d never want to go back and live in Hedgecock. You’ve never even taken me there for a visit with your mom.”

“And I don’t,” he ground out. “But I don’t want to live under the collective noses of your family, either. You want a place in Memphis, fine. We’ll pick a place out close to Keith’s place, or buy a bigger condo in the building where we live now. Why this sudden urge to stay close to Mom and Dad?”

Marly didn’t know. Maybe it was the wedding. Or maybe it was all the changes piling up on her life at once. “I don’t know,” she said after trying to figure out for herself what had her emotions on a roller coaster. “I don’t know why we’re arguing. Mom and Dad might have decided to give us that atrocious brass coat rack they got from her grandparents when they moved to a retirement home.”

“I don’t want that, either.” Bobby chuckled, though, so Marly thought she’d probably lightened his mood a bit. “I guess it would be easier to haul around the country than an entire house, so I might be inclined to accept it graciously. By the way, I’m pulling into the parking garage now, so you might want to get naked and meet me at the door.”

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From the look on Bobby's face, Marly figured he hadn't actually expected her to do it, but Marly greeted him wearing nothing but a smile. "I'd just finished my shower when I called you. I didn't have time to get dressed."

Bobby scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the sofa that faced the bank of windows overlooking the river. "Think somebody might see us?" he asked as he shucked his clothes and scooped her onto his lap. "The idea excites you, doesn't it, baby?"

"You're a bad, bad boy. If you didn't keep me so hot all the time, I'd punish you." She nipped at his neck, leaving a growing bruise. He'd be mad about it in the morning, but he'd wear her mark the way she wore his, on her finger all the time and frequently on intimate parts of her body as well. "But I find all I want to do is love you."

"Then let me inside, baby. I had a hard day at practice so you'll have to put out most of the energy." He lay back and dragged her over his hard, tough body. "Climb aboard. Every time I listen to your voice I get hard. It's all your fault."

She knew the glow would wear off eventually, and that Bobby would come home intent on sleeping or relaxing in the hot tub instead of this, so she'd enjoy it while it lasted. Stroking his warm skin, circling his nipples with her fingertips, she touched him with more love than explosive lust. He felt so good inside her, his sex throbbing inside her well-loved pussy. Not thrusting, just filling her with a slow-burning fire they might bank for later or let develop into a burning flame. Either one was fine.

Fine because she loved him. She even loved the fact that he'd wanted to be there for his old lover and to take care of his mother financially now that he was in the position to do so. When she rode him like this, slow and easy, she couldn't work up the resentment that she'd felt at first when he assured her he wasn't going to live under her parents' loving thumbs and he wasn't going to let her do it, either. "That feels so good." While he wasn't moving much, he was getting her hotter with every teasing pulsation of his cock inside her.

As hot as she'd been last night when they played with toys until they were both dripping with sweat from all the forceful sensations, the pure lust of it all. "Want more?" he asked, but she just wanted to stay there, with him inside her, needing the closeness and feeling of belonging that seemed to surround them, her tired hero still determined to bring her the release.

"Just relax and enjoy it, honey. We've got the rest of our lives to experiment with kinky sex. Right now you're tired, and I want you to rest."

"You know, I think I love you more every day. And I know I've got enough gas left in my engine to give you a climax." Bobby raised his head and took her mouth, his warm breath sweet-smelling when he traced the seam of her lips with his tongue. The gesture seemed so generous because the effort it cost him to lift his head was unmistakable.

"I don't need one now. Let's go in the bedroom and I'll give you a rubdown. Then you can get an hour or so of sleep before we have to see the folks."

"Thanks, babe. The feel of your hands on me will soothe away the aches and pains."

More like it would ease the tension, Marly thought as she recalled their earlier conversation while Bobby was driving home. "You know I'll follow you anywhere," she said as she massaged pungent oil into his throwing shoulder and back. He rewarded her with a muffled sigh. "Go on, go to sleep. I'll be quiet."

Soon his taut muscles loosened up and he started to snore softly. Marly lay beside him, soaking in his warmth. Nobody was going to come between them, not even her own well-meaning parents. Or her own fragile ego wondering when she'd lose Bobby. "I trust you, my big handsome jock. Really I do."

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Marly knew right away that Mom had planned something special. The aroma of homemade lasagna surrounded her and Bobby as soon as they opened the door, and

when they went into the kitchen she noticed four prime steaks on a platter waiting to be cooked on the Jenn-Air grill.

Mom was calorie-conscious. She might serve either the steaks or the lasagna with the huge antipasto tray for an ordinary dinner, but not both. So Marly figured she had to consider this night a very special occasion. "We can't stay late, Mom," she said by way of warning. "Bobby had a rough practice today."

"That's okay. Marly, will you show Bobby to Dad's den?"

Oh no. Daddy's private place where kids are invited only for very solemn occasions or lectures. "Sure. Come on, Bobby. Brace yourself. We only get invited in here when something serious is going down."

"I think I'll survive." He grinned as he got up and followed her down a narrow hallway to a room at the back of the old house.

"You may be surprised. But remember I'll still love you whatever happens."

For a long time Marly stared at the closed door, wondering what was going on inside. When she didn't hear shouting or the sound of flying objects, she went back to the kitchen. "What did Daddy want with Bobby?"

"I'm not sure. Here, taste the marinade. I think it's a little too acidic."

"It tastes fine, Mom. Just like it always does." Marly wondered why her mom always kept quiet when her dad critiqued everything about their meals. "I'm glad Bobby isn't in the restaurant business. He eats everything set before him and doesn't say anything negative."

"Good for you, *bella*. All men have their little eccentricities. A lot of them are worse than your dad's tendency to criticize every bite he puts in his mouth. It may take time for those little things to surface, because during the courting period, they're trying their best to reel a girl in."

What irritating habits might Bobby be hiding? Marly thought about his practice of never leaving anything lying around. She figured that if that was his only quirk, she

could live with it. "Bobby never leaves anything out of place, but he doesn't complain when I do."

"Sooner or later he will. I bet he cringes every time he comes here and sees coats and boots strewn around the front hall. You'll slip and leave something where it doesn't belong, and eventually he'll explode over it, just like Daddy does with some of the dishes I cook."

Marly smiled. Mom was probably right. Still, Bobby hadn't appeared to have a problem dealing with the mess in Keith's game room the other day. "Can I help with anything?"

"Yes, you can set the table while I grill these steaks. I imagine your dad and Bobby will be coming out here any minute."

They did, and Marly didn't notice any blood. Surprisingly, they were talking pleasantly about this Sunday's game. The meal went well, even though Marly felt like holding her breath, waiting for someone to bring up *The Gift*.

Mom brought out tiramisu for dessert, and when she did Dad handed Bobby an envelope. "For your first home," he said as though he'd never once thought of giving them the deed for a house he and Mom had chosen.

"Thank you, Dad." Bobby slid the envelope into Marly's hand without opening it. "We both appreciate your generosity."

On the way home he told her how he'd persuaded her dad to forget about giving them a house around the corner and put some of the money he'd planned to spend into a down payment for the place they'd someday buy or build.

"It wasn't easy, believe me. I finally had to say flat-out that I felt a man should buy his own home, and that seeing as how I make more than I can possibly spend, it would be unfair for him to buy me a house when he had two boys who might need the money at some point."

"I wouldn't have believed you could do it." Marly squeezed his thigh, still having trouble picturing Bobby changing her stubborn father's mind.

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Keith was back leading the Maulers for the second week now. Bobby was expecting to be traded any day. Just two weeks were left until his and Marly's wedding. And life was incredibly hectic.

He'd never realized how much planning went into a ceremony and reception for just twenty or so guests, but Marly was pretty much at the mercy of her mom every day when she didn't have cheerleader practice. His urgent assignment now was to call his own mother and find out what she planned to wear. "Why don't I just send you to one of the nice boutiques here in town and have you pick out something for Mom?" he asked Marly who shot him a disbelieving look.

"She'd kill you. She'd kill me. Every woman wants to select her own clothes. Don't they have any stores in Hedgecock?"

"Not that you'd consider dress shops. There's a general store where they sell jeans and shirts." Mom would have to come a few days early and shop here, or make a trip to San Antonio, and Bobby wasn't sure she could get the time off work, or that she'd let him pay for her outfit. "I'll call her. Why couldn't we just do this casual?" Fortunately he already had a suit, the one he'd bought to wear to games when he might have to meet reporters afterward. He was pretty certain his mom had nothing suitable to wear to the shindig Marly's mother was engineering.

He was pleasantly surprised when Mom told him she already had the perfect dress, shocked when she admitted she was getting married, too—to Mr. Tate from the bank. They weren't doing anything special, just going to San Antonio for a long weekend and getting married in the chapel at St. Mary's College. "We'll be married next Saturday and spending a few days playing tourist at the Alamo. This will work out fine, so we can come the next weekend to be with you and Marly."

"I love you, Mom. Be happy. You deserve it after all those years, keeping me on the straight and narrow." He shut off the phone and turned to Marly. "That was a lot easier

than I thought it would be. She and Mr. Tate are getting married this weekend. I had no idea they were serious about each other. She said she already has a dress to wear.”

“The color, Bobby. What color is your mother’s dress? My mom wants to know right now.”

“Royal blue.” Why the hell should colors matter? He was trying to let the idea of his mom marrying Mr. Tate sink in. Not that he objected. Mom couldn’t have found a better man in Hedgecock if she’d tried.

Bobby shook his head as he watched Marly use the speed-dial. Women! He should have figured out they were all obsessed with coordinating colors when Marly had rifled through his tie rack the other day and promptly gone out to get him one she thought went better than any he already had with the dark-gray suit he’d had to have tailored for the wedding. Damn, he hadn’t needed a new suit, but Marly had insisted and he’d dropped another few thousand having another one made. It wasn’t as though he wore suits every day, or that he could saunter into any store and buy one off the rack.

Thank God the madhouse would soon be over. Bobby’s agent said a deal was almost done with the Orlando team, and he almost looked forward to getting away from the madhouse here. “George Woodley didn’t call me on the house phone, did he?”

“No. Was he supposed to?”

“I thought he might.” Though Marly insisted she’d be okay with them moving right away, he didn’t want to remind her that would almost certainly be happening. “I think we ought to ditch this wedding and go elope tomorrow. I bet we could still get a license if we hurried down to the courthouse.”

“No. Not that I wouldn’t like that, too, but I’m not going to let my mom down. I’m disappointing her enough as it is.”

“I know, baby. Just keep reminding her that you’re marrying a pro quarterback and that reporters would be an annoying fact of life if we went for a huge wedding.”

* * * * *

Time flew when you were having fun. It also seemed to evaporate when you didn't have a moment to yourself. Marly could barely take in all the changes. They were getting married and moving to Orlando two days later where he'd be starting for a team that had lost its last six games behind a hapless quarterback who no longer had a job. Yesterday she'd flown to the land of 24/7 entertainment and chosen a furnished apartment from several empty ones owned by the team owner there. Then she'd flown back here and gone to the shower Liz Grady had hurriedly arranged.

Bobby was with his mom and her new husband in the condo while she was staying here at home for the last few days—her dad's idea, not hers.

She rubbed her aching pussy, recalled the few times they'd made love here in the ruffled four-poster. As crazy as it had looked, having her big, burly jock surrounded by the trappings of her youth, it had been good. Good thing they were getting married tomorrow. Reception or not she intended to grab her new husband and take the edge off her starved libido the minute they left the church.

Meanwhile she took out the vibrating dildo that didn't hold a candle to the real thing and tried to imagine it was Bobby inside her.

* * * * *

It was about time. Bobby stood at the front of the chapel, Keith at his side. The sounds of organ music filled the place, and ruby-colored light flowed through stained-glass windows. His mom and Mr. Tate were already seated on the front row, and a handful of his Mauler teammates dotted the aisles. Tina sat near the back with little Jack, looking content as she rubbed her cheek on the baby's shock of blond hair.

He caught himself starting to tug at his tie and willed himself to stay still. As the music started getting louder, he tried to look appropriately serious. He saw Liz Grady in the doorway, watched her glide down the aisle and take her place on the other side from Keith. She was one beautiful, sexy woman, but she didn't hold a candle to Marly, who stood in the entryway with her father. She looked like an angel in something white

and soft-looking, and her long hair flowed over her bare shoulders like a dark curtain. The diamond studs he'd handed to her mom last night twinkled in her ears. She lifted her bouquet, a big white orchid surrounded by some of the same little white flowers that were in his boutonniere, and shot him a smile that sent blood flowing quite inappropriately to his groin.

Later, buddy. He tried thinking of something un-sexy, of the priest who'd reluctantly agreed to marry them without them going through months of counseling, and who undoubtedly was staring down disapprovingly from the altar. He took a deep breath and watched her come to him until he reached out and took her hand. What had seemed otherworldly suddenly felt right.

Marly felt his heat, even though they stood a few inches apart. Her heart was overflowing. As music surrounded them and dappled sunlight sent rays of color over them, she knew this was right. Words flowed over them, somber and melodious, words that registered only on a visceral level because Bobby was all she could focus on in her conscious mind. Her Bobby, not the budding star signal-caller she'd wanted at first, but the loving, decent man she'd come to love. A little demon whispered in her ear that her future husband's talent off the field was pretty awesome, too.

She had to jerk her brain back to the ceremony when the priest began reading the traditional vows Bobby had balked at until he gave in to please her and her parents. Trying to keep her hands from trembling, she watched him slide a diamond-studded band beside her engagement ring. "I love you, baby," he whispered when she slid a simple, wide gold band on his left ring finger.

"I love you, too."

The priest cleared his throat. "You may now kiss the bride." She loved Bobby's audacity when he took her in his arms and gave her a kiss that sent longing clear to her toes. "It's my pleasure to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Robert Anthony."

Marly didn't hear the benediction, because her ears were ringing from that hot, wet kiss. When the music rose, she watched Keith take Liz's arm and hurry down the aisle before looping her arm through Bobby's. He must have been in a big hurry, because she could barely keep pace with him as he hurried them out of the chapel.

"Let's find someplace and make love." His grin was positively evil, as if he didn't intend to wait one minute to consummate the vows they'd just made in front of God and all their families and friends. "You mind if the driver knows what we're doing?"

"Not really. I imagine everybody will know. After all, they've all been conspiring to keep us apart for the last week. Come on. If he's shy he can always park and take a walk."

* * * * *

"Take your time getting to the reception," Bobby ordered as he shut the panel dividing the passengers from the driver's seat. Then he pulled Marly onto his lap. "Look, we've got privacy, sort of. Open up for me. And help me find your hot little pussy in all this fluff."

"You're bad. But I love you. I'm also so horny I'm going to die if you don't get inside me this minute." She struggled with his belt and zipper, finally freeing him and shoving his pants out of the way. "The panties have an open crotch. See, I thought ahead."

Yeah, she had thought ahead. Her cunt was wet and hot and ready for his first thrust. So ready that he felt the imprint of her fingernails through his suit jacket and shirt. "Like this?" he asked, lifting her at the waist and slamming her hard onto his swollen shaft. "I think the priest may have noticed my hard-on."

"Did you care?"

"No. I just didn't want to embarrass you if the guests figured out how desperate I was to get inside you."

“Like your mom?” She slid a hand between the buttons on his shirt, and her playful antics damn near made him come on the spot.

“No, Mom has known for a long time that she raised a bad boy. She tried, but she couldn’t make me restrain the testosterone that started flowing way back when. Come on, baby, ride me. Come for me. I’ll try to wait, because I don’t have a condom with me and I don’t want to get your dress all messed up.”

She kissed him, her tongue darting in and out of his mouth. “How about letting me get you off? It’s not fair, you having to wait any longer.”

“Okay. But first you have to come for me.” He lifted her again and again, each time sliding harder and deeper in her delicious cunt. “Squeeze me.”

When she did, she began to convulse around him. He had to quit breathing to keep from coming inside her. But he didn’t. Instead he let her slide off him and go to her knees. Her pretty mouth took up where her pussy had left off, taking him deep down her throat then retreating to lick and suck his cock. “God, baby, I’ve missed you. I don’t think I’ll ever let you out of my sight again.” Maybe there was some way he could finagle his new coach to let him take her with him for out-of-town games.

But not now. Pressure built in his balls. His muscles tensed. “I’m coming, baby. Swallow hard or you’ll mess up your makeup.”

She did, and somehow they managed to straighten their clothes and look reasonably respectable when they arrived at their reception. “We’ve banked the fires, brand-new wife. Now let’s go enjoy our party.”

Epilogue

“Those two seem made for each other,” Bobby’s mother told Keith as he showed Jack off to her. She’d noticed how this other hometown hero had stayed close by Tina even though the sexy-looking maid of honor had tried awfully hard to lure him away.

Keith smiled, but she noticed his eyes held sadness. “Yeah. They do. I’m glad they found Tina for us,” he said, his gaze settling on her and his adorable little boy. “She’s been a lifesaver.”

“I’m glad, too. She needed something to do, somewhere safe where she wouldn’t worry about her perverted stepfather coming after her.”

“You don’t need to worry. I’m not about to let anyone hurt her.”

They chatted a few minutes while Caleb spoke with Marly’s father. “I bet they’re talking about the market. Cal can’t seem to get it off his mind these days.”

“I know all about that. I worried all the time until I quit trying to manage my investments this fall and turned them over to a professional. Not that he’s been doing a whole lot better lately than I might have done myself.”

Bobby’s mom nodded. “Cal set Bobby up with somebody he trusted. My boy told him he wanted to play football and let experts manage his signing bonus.”

“Good idea. I wouldn’t ever have tried to do it myself except for the fact my wife, or rather my late wife’s father, insisted on it.” Keith shook his head. “Good thing Bobby already made arrangements for investment management, or his in-laws might have had ideas he couldn’t very easily ignore.”

“You must have gotten married young—not that twenty-two’s any great age to be starting a family, but I can’t complain because Bobby was three years old before I made it to twenty-two.”

“I did. I was twenty and Jackie was a year older.”

“You two waited a long time to have little Jack.” Melanie clapped her hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry.”

Keith took her hand, tried to smile. After all, Melanie Anthony had been a ray of sunshine among a lot of the old crones who’d worked at the high school when he was there. “It’s okay. We tried. Jackie wanted a houseful of babies, but it didn’t work out. Finally we had Jack, but something went terribly wrong and she died.” It surprised him that he got the words out without fighting tears. The hurt was still there, still deep and painful, but at last he’d managed to talk about it.

They chatted a few minutes about Colin Zanardi, the first of the Hedgecock High quarterbacks, and Dave Delaney, who’d been Keith’s own hero back when he was a little kid and Dave was tossing passes over on the field. “Dave’s got Hall of Fame credentials, but he’s hit the skids. Too much partying, too many grasping wives. I hear his latest wife walked out on him and took their two kids with her. He’s playing for Colin now, down in Savannah.”

Keith hadn’t been back to Hedgecock since high school. He doubted if anybody would have held that against him since his mom had remarried and moved to Colorado right after his graduation. He remembered Dave telling him he’d never looked back either. Somehow it seemed sad. He’d made a lot of memories at the old school, and he should have been giving back. *Pay it forward* was the mantra of most NFL stars, and he’d failed to spread some of his wealth, and his knowledge, back to his roots. “You know, we should all be ashamed because we haven’t gotten together and done something to help Hedgecock.”

“Well, it’s never too late,” Melanie said. “The school needs new bleachers and concession stands before they fall completely apart. We’ve been planning a reunion to raise money for that, a festival celebrating all the Hedgecock quarterbacks. It should

work if all you boys would come back for a couple of days and draw in folks with money from San Antonio, maybe even Dallas and Houston. ”

“We could always do a football camp.” Keith held one here each year for high school athletes. He always had fun, and he thought the kids did, too. “I might be able to set one up in Hedgecock, but I doubt many of the families could afford the tuition and fees.”

“I doubt it, too. That’s why we were thinking of incorporating a weekend camp with the reunion, so the camp would draw kids from farther away. Times are hard these days. Even your sister’s having a rough time, raising your nephew on her own.”

“Maybe that would work. If you want, I can talk to the others and see what they suggest.” He made a mental note to send money to Diane and insist this time that she keep it, for Dylan if not for herself. Never mind that they’d grown apart, largely because Jackie hadn’t been able to stomach Hedgecock or anything in it. He’d stayed away because of her, but now there was no one to stop him if he wanted to reconnect with his roots.

“Let’s keep in touch,” he told Melanie before seeking out Marly’s parents and thanking them for the most enjoyable gathering he’d attended in months.

Mrs. Ragusa checked her watch. “I wonder when the newlyweds will arrive in Orlando, I already miss them and they haven’t been gone much more than an hour.”

“Bobby told me the plane would land around midnight our time. That would be one a.m. there. I imagine they’ll call you when they arrive.” Keith imagined calling the parents would be the last thing on Bobby’s mind, probably Marly’s, too. It seemed they could barely keep their hands off each other. When Keith tried to remember when he’d been so hot and so carefree, he couldn’t. He guessed those times had been replaced in his memory with the carefully timed matings that got more frantic every time Jackie had insisted on attempting another pregnancy. This was too happy a night for him to think about the fact his only child had been conceived in a cold, sexless laboratory, or to consider his lack of interest in sex since his wife had died.

He looked around the room, found Tina waiting alone near the door. "We'd better get going and put Jack to bed."

* * * * *

Where Memphis had the air of an old but feisty lady, Orlando seemed like a never-ending kaleidoscope of activity. Tourists still milled on International Drive when the limo brought them to the hotel where he'd made reservations. Bobby couldn't care less about anything else but getting to their suite and going to sleep in Marly's arms. His ring felt strange on his hand, until he thought about Marly putting it there.

He kept Marly close as he checked them in. Anywhere else the lobby would have been deserted, but not here. He felt the stares, wondered if the people were gawking at his beautiful wife. They might be sizing him up, if they recognized him. In any case he didn't like the attention, not now when every sane person should have been sleeping.

"Hurry up, for God's sake," he growled at the sleepy clerk. He scribbled his name on the credit card receipt and grabbed the key card out of the man's hand as soon as he offered it. "Doesn't anybody sleep around here?" he said to no one in particular.

"You act like you need some sleep." When they got in the elevator Marly stood on tiptoe and gave him a kiss.

"I do. Some wedding night this is gonna be, with me having to show up at the stadium by eleven for a game. I can just imagine how it will go, since I've never practiced with this team. Sorry, babe. I didn't know this trade would happen before the wedding. I'll make it all up to you."

After he opened the door to the hotel's bridal suite, he lifted Marly and set her down inside. "This place is supposed to have a Jacuzzi. Let's go soak for a while before we go to bed."

Hot water bubbled around them as they cuddled near a strong jet in a corner of the sunken tub. Its whooshing sounds kept them alert, but Marly could literally feel

Bobby's exhaustion. Hers too, even though she'd gotten more rest than he had. "Let's go to bed before we go to sleep in here and drown. Don't worry about tomorrow, you'll do fine."

He dragged himself to his feet and climbed out of the tub. "Don't bet on it. I've never gone in and played an actual game with players I've never even seen on tape before. Come here."

When she stepped out of the tub, he wrapped her in a huge, soft towel. "Thank you for marrying me and hanging in for all the curves in the road. I promise this all will work out."

"I know." And she did. He had a career to build, and she was here to help him. "Let me give you a quick rubdown. Tomorrow or the next day will be soon enough for us to find out if sex is more fun with wedding bands and a marriage certificate."

"Okay. You can stay here and sleep through the game if you want to. I'm sure I won't be breaking any records unless they're for the most interceptions or something equally as bad."

"You won't. And if you do you'll just be getting those miserable stats out of the way. Relax, let me love you the easy way tonight." Spilling some of the now-familiar-smelling oil on his back, she deliberately made her touch slow, gentle. A soothing touch, one to draw out the tension and let him sleep.

Water still swirled in the hot tub after they got out, and the fragrant bath salts hung in the cool, damp air. For a long time after Bobby drifted off to sleep, Marly lay beside him, watching the slow, rhythmic rise of his breathing and wondering how she could have been so lucky as to make this hot jock want her, not just for her body but for *her*. For the sexy cheerleader, but also for the slightly insecure woman who had so much trouble believing he wanted her for always, not for just a fast, hot fuck.

He'd told her that first night that he was looking for more, and now she was persuaded. Who but a man who loved her would have let himself get caught up in planning for a quick wedding, even though he'd surely suspected the timing might

have coincided with this trade? "You're my love, my lover...for always." Snuggling close to her Bobby, she finally slept.

The End

About the Author

Ann Jacobs is a sucker for lusty Alpha heroes and happy endings, which makes Ellora's Cave an ideal publisher for her work. Romantica®, to her, is the perfect combination of sex, sensuality, deep emotional involvement and lifelong commitment—the elusive fantasy women often dream about but seldom achieve.

First published in 1996, Jacobs has sold over forty books and novellas, some of which have earned awards including the Passionate Plume (best novella, 2006), the Desert Rose (best hot and spicy romance, 2004) and More Than Magic (best erotic romance, 2004). She has been a double finalist in separate categories of the EPPIES and From the Heart RWA Chapter's contest. Three of her books have been translated and sold in several European countries.

A CPA and former hospital financial manager, Jacobs now writes full-time, with the help of Mr. Blue, the family cat who sometimes likes to perch on the back of her desk chair and lend his sage advice. He sometimes even contributes a few random letters when he decides he wants to try out the keyboard. She loves to hear from readers, and to put faces with names at signings and conventions.

Ann welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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