



Loving Sophia

Jayelle Drewry

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Blurb

What happens when you play with fire? You get burned.

Dating Ethan James was risky, but it was a risk Sophia was willing to take. The heat and passion blazed between them hotter than the sun. Sophia was sure she had found the one. So sure, she told him she loved him—only to watch him turn and walk away.

Love 'em and leave 'em.

It was just for fun. A few dates, a few laughs. The way Ethan saw it, he and Sophia were friends with benefits. At least they were headed for the benefits part, until Sophia had to go and ruin everything by falling in love. So he did what any other sane bachelor would do, he cut his losses and left.

You don't know what you got until it's gone.

It didn't take Ethan long to realize he'd made the biggest mistake of his life. When he walked away from Sophia, he left his heart behind. Now he needs regain her trust and show her that loving Sophia was the best thing that ever happened to him.

Chapter One

“Hey, Sophie! Where are you?” A cheerful voice sang out, echoing down the hall into the hot, stuffy closet where Sophia worked.

Bent over a large cardboard box, Sophia Love ignored the call. This was supposed to be her lunch break. Instead, she was unpacking medical supplies. A chore her partner had conveniently forgotten to do.

“What?” Her voice was slightly muffled, which was a good thing. She had a hard time keeping the irritation out of her voice. *Damn it! Jami should have done this this morning!*

“Sophia!” The voice came closer.

Damn. She cursed under her breath. Obviously she’d done an excellent job masking her ire, or if she hadn’t, it hadn’t deterred Jami, her best friend and partner in Indian Path Animal Hospital. Straightening from the box of gauze, she looked up just in time to see a bright redhead pop around the closet door.

“There you are! Aren’t you going to eat?”

Sighing, Sophia held up a roll of gauze and gave her friend a pointed look.

“Oops.” Jami bit her lip, a contrite look on her face. “Sorry.” Almost immediately, her expression shifted back to its normal happy mode. “I’ll finish unpacking after lunch. Just stop and come grab a bite to eat.”

Dusting off her hands, Sophia looked around the closet. “Okay.”

Following Jami’s bouncing red curls into the hall, she headed to the back of the building, to the tiny room that made up their “lounge.” An old, scarred table, four chairs, an ancient refrigerator, and a rolling cart with a microwave on top swamped the room, making it almost impossible to move around. Jami’s lunch was on the table, along with a scattered newspaper. Jami plopped down, while Sophia put her lunch, a Lean Cuisine, in the microwave.

“Hey, what’s your sign?”

“Pisces, why?” Turning, she watched Jami thumb through the paper. “Oh no, don’t tell me you’ve started reading the horoscopes.”

“Sure, why not? Some people believe in astrology.” Jami bobbed her brows up and down. “*Destiny.*” Her attempt to mimic a Jamaican accent was horrible.

Rolling her eyes, Sophia snorted. “I don’t.”

“For someone not to believe in it, you sure did know your sign off the top of your head. No hesitation there.”

“Yeah, well, everybody in America knows their sign.”

“Still, horoscopes are a lot of fun to read. Want me to read yours?”

Leaning against the refrigerator, waiting for her lunch to warm, Sophia shrugged. Sometimes it was just easier to give in to Jami. “Sure.”

“*The Daily Single.*” Jami paused and shot a sly grin at her. “That’s you,” she said before continuing. “*There’s a time for hesitation, and there’s a time for action—guess what time it is when it comes to romance? That’s right, time to get off your behind and make a move—it doesn’t even matter in which direction.*” Looking up at Sophia, she wagged her brows. “Sounds like you’ll be going to Lori’s tonight.”

“Maybe.” The microwave dinged and she turned to get her lunch. Gingerly holding the steaming carton, Sophia sat down and began to eat. Hoping to end the conversation, she concentrated on the dinner in front of her.

“I know why you don’t want to go. You’re afraid. Afraid you’ll run into Ethan and he’ll have a date.”

“I am not! I could care less where he goes or who he goes with. He’s a free agent and so am I.”

Inside she cringed. *Liar, liar, pants on fire.* That was exactly why she didn’t want to go. Sure it was one thing to see him out on the town. It was totally another thing to see him with a date at a mutual friend’s party.

“Prove it. Go.”

“I don’t have to prove a damn thing.” She should never have told Jami about Ethan’s recent call. Big mistake. Two months ago, when she’d come into the office, depressed and crying, it had been Jami’s shoulder she’d cried on. It had been Jami who’d cussed Ethan for a cowardly dirtbag. But after a few phone calls and a couple of flower deliveries, Jami was ready to let bygones be bygones.

Jami started clucking, sounding amazingly like the animal she imitated.

“Sticks and stones... There’s nothing you can say or do to convince me to go over to Lori’s just to prove to you I don’t care if I run into Ethan.”

Jami shrugged carelessly. “Whatever. You can lie to me, but how long are you going to lie to yourself?”

After that pointed question, the conversation shifted to mundane topics. But the seed had taken root, and like a sore tooth, it worried Sophia for the rest of the day. Haunting her. She’d told Jami she had nothing to prove. She was wrong. She *did* need to prove something. To herself. She needed to prove she was over him. That she didn’t care if he dated a hundred women and went home with a hundred more. It was time, as her Aunt Bea was wont to say, time to grow up and put on her big girl pants.

* * * *

Floodlights lit up the yard and house, giving it a warm, welcoming glow. Loud thumping music, with an undertone of laughing and talking, drifted in the air. Peering over the fence, Sophia saw a group of bathing suit-clad guys around a large gas grill, arguing good-naturedly. Other small groups of men and women were spread throughout the backyard.

Standing on the outside, looking in—it wasn’t something she was used to doing. Friendly, good-natured, with an easygoing, affectionate personality, she didn’t lack for friendship. But here she was, hiding in the shadows.

She should be in there instead of hiding in the shadows that surrounded the backyard. Before dating Ethan she would have been. If only she could go back in time. She would slap herself silly for even thinking about saying yes when he’d asked her out. She’d known he was the love ’em and leave type. Hell, she’d teased him about his revolving bedroom door. She should have been content to be his girl pal. But no, she had given into temptation. Gambled on the possibility that he saw her as something more than good time. Instead, she’d lost her heart and a friend.

Biting her lip, she scanned the yard. “Damn,” she whispered. Jami wasn’t here yet. Stepping back into the shadows, she chewed on her thumbnail as she contemplated going

back to her car and waiting for her friend.

Yet, she didn't move. She had to know. Unable to resist, heart pounding with trepidation, she peeped over the fence again, looking this time for Ethan. Was she going to have to face him? And if so, was he alone or did he have a date?

Gnawing her lower lip she scanned the crowd.

Please don't be here. Please don't be here.

She slumped back against the fence. Eyes closed, her blood pounded in her ears, drowning out the sounds of the party going on a few feet away. Strangely, disappointment rather than relief washed over her. After gearing herself to see him, to talk to him, to watch him with a date, the knowledge that he wasn't there was a letdown. It felt as if she'd crashed after riding an intense wave of adrenaline.

She was embarrassed. *Damn it.* Was she going to hide the rest of her life because she'd gotten her heart broken? No. What was she, a woman or a chicken? The sounds of Jami's clucks echoed in her mind, and she stiffened her spine. She was not a chicken and she refused to hide in the shadows any longer. Putting her hand on the latch, she opened the gate to let herself into the backyard.

Gravel crunched behind her. Pasting a smile on her lips, she turned to see who it was. Maybe it was Jami. Chicken or not, she really didn't want to walk in alone. Her smile froze. Her heart stuttered before it began a mad gallop in her chest. Every bit of the pep talk she'd just given herself fell to the wayside. The urge to run, to hide, overwhelmed her. Yet she did nothing, freezing like a rabbit with a hawk circling overhead.

Ethan moved toward her, stalking her as if she were prey. He didn't stop until his chest was within inches of hers. His heat, his intensity swept over her. She shuddered, whether in fear or lust she couldn't tell. His cologne, subtle, clean and crisp, overwhelmed her, awakening other senses and tactile memories. Her nipples tightened and butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

Her gaze level with his neck, she studied his throat, absently noting his rapid pulse. Could he be nervous? The thought intrigued her.

She clenched her hands into fists so that she wouldn't reach out, touch him, placate the strong emotions he felt. Her mind fought her heart. She either needed to slay him with words or kiss him. Pride won, she did neither.

Reluctantly, unable to resist the pull of his gaze, she looked up. His face was cast in shadows. She didn't need any light to know that his chestnut hair would be a little too long and beginning to curl around his face and collar. Or that his dark eyes would have a sexy smolder. She knew every rugged inch of that face. Every silken lock of hair on his hard head.

Licking her lips, she spoke first. "Ethan." Her voice lacked its customary lilt, but she'd at least gotten the words out past the choking lump in her throat.

"Sophia. I'm happy to see you here. You're a hard woman to get a hold of."

His voice washed over her. The timbre, deep and sexy, was whiskey smooth and just as intoxicating. Even after six months of silence, the sound still had the ability to thrill her, send tingles of excitement racing through her.

Fighting its effect, she managed a small careless shrug. "I've been busy."

"Really?" Even as he nodded his acceptance of her excuse, his tone said she lied.

"Work's been hectic."

"Too hectic to return my phone calls? Too busy to call and let me know you got the

flowers?”

Her neck flushed with embarrassment. He hadn't sent the flowers until she had refused to return his calls. No doubt he'd thought that good manners would have her calling him. Good manners be damned. She hadn't called. “Yeah, I—”

“You're avoiding me.”

No shit, Sherlock. She'd made a point of not being available to him since he'd dumped her. What was he thinking? That she would fall back into being his buddy?

“No. No, that's not it at all. I didn't return your calls because as far as I am concerned we have nothing to say to one another.” Calm, cool, impersonal. Wow, she was impressing herself.

Leaning forward, he planted a hand on the fence beside her head. Sophia's heart jumped into her throat. Suddenly her self-control was shaky. If he leaned any closer, it would shatter like the thin façade it was.

“I think we do. I think there are a lot of things we need to say.” His warm breath brushed her cheek. She swallowed a moan. The flesh between her thighs warmed. His voice could still make her cream. “Things I need to say. That you need to hear.”

She needed to hear? She snapped out of her lust-induced trance. *Well, too damn bad.* The thought floated across her mind. He had plenty of fucking time to talk to her two months ago, when she still wanted to talk.

“Ethan, I don't want to have this conversation with you. I came here to talk and laugh with friends, not rehash old business.” This was exactly one of the many reasons she'd wanted to skip this party! Damn Jami and her clucking!

“Old business? Is that how you see us?” He tilted his head, his eyes studying her face.

Bad word choice on his part. Trepidation and nerves were replaced by a healthy dose of anger. *Us. Us!* As if they had ever been anywhere close to that. She had thought of them as *us*, as a couple. Yep, she'd thought that right up until he'd dropped her like a fucking rock.

Then, last week out of the blue, he'd left a message on her answering machine. And again a few days later. She hadn't returned his calls. A dozen peach-colored roses had followed. The card simply stating, *Call me.*

As if. She'd done all her calling months ago. When he'd first pulled his disappearing act, she'd tried to call him, left messages on his answering machine at home and with his secretary at his office. When she'd tried his cell phone, she'd been automatically directed to his voice mail. She'd left messages there too. All she got had been silence. Nothing. That had cut her to the bone. Slow she might be, but stupid she wasn't. She'd finally gotten the message and hadn't called him again.

“Us? *Us?* There is no *us*. There never was an *us*. We went out on a few dates, had a few laughs. That doesn't make *us* an item!” She could feel the threat of tears. Sophia stopped and forced herself to breathe, afraid that if she continued she'd start screaming like a banshee. The music from the pool party was drowning her out now. Before too much longer, that wouldn't be the case. When upset or angry inevitably her voice would grow louder and louder, and then, as her mother like to say, the waterworks would begin.

Instead of replying, Ethan cupped the back of her head and, fisting her hair, pulled her forward to cover her mouth with his. The action was so quick, so unexpected, she didn't have time to prepare, time to protect herself.

Shock and outrage kept her stiff—for a couple of seconds. Thoughts of stopping him, pulling away, biting him, slapping him, disappeared under the slick glide of his tongue. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him to her. His taste, sweet and spicy, flooded her senses. It was like offering water to a woman dying of thirst.

The kiss was rough, violent, hard and full of frustration and pent-up desire. Slanting his head, Ethan nipped her lower lip, demanding entrance. She gave it to him, opening her mouth and welcoming the thrust of his tongue.

Letting go of his neck, she locked her hands in his hair as their tongues dueled. She held tightly to him. Wanting, needing more. More. Her fingers twisted in his hair, locking him to her, and she returned his kiss with bruising force.

Tearing his mouth away from hers, he scattered kisses across her face and down her throat. His lips were a hot brand along her skin, leaving a burning imprint in their wake. He found her pulse and lightly bit down on the throbbing vein. It stung. It aroused. Her pussy tingled and moistened. Squeezing her thighs together against the erotic pain, she moaned as the passion between them escalated.

“I missed you.” His words were muffled. She wasn’t sure she’d heard him right. Didn’t care in the heat of the moment. All she wanted was another taste. Dipping her head down, she caught his earlobe between her teeth in a gentle grip.

The hand at the back of her head tightened. Using his hold in her hair, he pulled her head back. “Sophia, look at me.” She opened her eyes with some difficulty. Her lids felt weighted. Her vision blurred.

“Let’s get out of here,” he whispered, his tone husky with passion. His face was tight with desire.

It wasn’t a question, it was a demand. It would be so easy to follow. To simply let go and go home with him. To give in to her desire.

A slight breeze wafted in night air and cool on her hot skin. The haze of desire dissipated from Sophia’s mind. Her gaze cleared enough to meet his smoldering stare.

“No.” Dropping her arms from around his neck, she turned her head in a silent demand that he loosened his hold of her hair. Instead, he tightened it. His determined look bore into her.

The need to put some distance between them clawed at her. Tonight had shown her just how weak she was. One kiss and she was clinging to him like a vine. One small taste and she was ready to spread her legs for him, the last two months forgotten in the heat of desire. Damn, she needed to stay away from this man. She was bad news for her self-control, worse for her heart. Wedging her arms between them, she pushed against the rock solid surface of his chest. He didn’t so much as budge.

“Let. Me. Go.” She spoke through clenched teeth; narrowing her eyes she matched his steely gaze with one of her own.

A heartbeat in time. Then another. For a moment she didn’t think he was going to do it. He loosened his grip, and Sophia slipped from his arms. Taking a step back, she crossed her arms protectively over her chest. “I’m not going anywhere with you.” The statement was for her as much as for him. If he kissed her like that again, she wasn’t sure her willpower would hold out.

“Why not?” He looked baffled.

No doubt he thought she was crazy not to go home and fall into his bed. She half agreed with him. Maybe a night in his bed would exorcise him from her mind, her heart.

Get him out of her system if not her heart. She was tempted ... for a millisecond.

“Just because you want something doesn’t mean it’s good for you or that you should have it. I’m not the one with the motto ‘if it feels good, do it.’ Nor do I follow the old saying, easy come easy go. Pun intended. That would be you.”

His face seem to pale, but she couldn’t be sure, it could be the shadows. A paled expression would suggest some sort of feelings that was more than lust. Feelings she knew damn well he didn’t have.

Sophia tightened her jaw and straightened her spine. Waiting for his next words. He stared at her in silence. Hmm. He had none. What a surprise. That was it, then.

Stepping past him, she walked calmly to her car. She didn’t look back to see if he watched her. Didn’t need to. She could feel him watching her.

At least this time she was the one walking away.

Chapter Two

Sophia opened one eye and looked at the clock. Eight in the morning. Moaning, she buried her head in the pillow. Sleep. She wanted more sleep.

Minutes later, she flopped onto her back to stare up at the ceiling, wide-awake.

Ethan James. Thanks to him, sleep had almost been impossible. Every time she closed her eyes, his face appeared in her mind's eye. Tossing and turning, she spent most of the night awake and thinking of him, or dozing and dreaming of him. The man was going to drive her crazy—

The doorbell rang, interrupting her thoughts. She sprang out of bed grabbing a tee shirt from the floor to pull over her head. That would be her mom. Standing on the other side, dressed to kill and raring to go shopping. The woman was a born shopper, and could run most women half her age into the ground. Retired, with time on her hands, she'd made shopping her new career. There wasn't a shop within a hundred mile radius she hadn't visited. All the places she frequented, the sales staff knew her by name.

By the time Sophia stumbled to the door, she could hear her mother fumbling with the keys on the other side. Her mother had a key to her apartment. In turn, she still had her key to her parents' house. In college, her friends had been amazed by the closeness of her family. Horrified that they all knew each other's business and felt free to give advice whenever they thought the situation warranted it, which was often. One friend, when being confronted with several aunts and cousins at one time had exclaimed, "They're a herd!" Rather than take offense, Sophia had laughed at the description. In part, it was true. She was part of a large, close-knit, extended family. Aunts, uncles, cousins, she had them all, and they tended to hang out together.

Stumbling to the door, she pulled it open. There stood her mother, an older replica of herself. Both had pale blonde hair and large almond-shaped brown eyes. Where Sophia kept her hair shoulder length, her mother's was cut short and pushed forward to frame her face. When she looked into Patricia Love's face, she saw a glimpse of herself, twenty years from now.

Sophia opened the door wider and stepped back to let in her mother. "Hey, Mama."

"Morning, precious." After brief hug and a kiss on the cheek, Sophia was left standing at the door watching her mother take over. Breezing into the kitchen, a trail of Chanel No. Five behind her, Patricia called over her shoulder, "I knew I'd have to drag you out of bed. I'll make you some coffee, while you shower. JoJo is going with us today."

Shrugging, Sophia closed the front door and headed back to her bedroom.

Stepping out of the bathroom a few minutes later, she could hear her mother talking to someone. Aunt Jo, no doubt, her mother's sister and number one shopping partner. She smiled to herself. Without drying off, she pulled on her old, ratty robe and headed back down the hall. Aunt Jo, or JoJo, was one of her favorite relatives and she loved her like a second mother. Expecting to see her feisty, redheaded aunt, she turned the corner into the kitchen with a huge smile on her face.

The smile quickly died.

Son of a biscuit maker!

Ethan James was sitting in her kitchen, drinking coffee with her mother. The unexpectedness of it left her speechless. While dating, she had asked him several times to meet her family. Each time he'd managed to find a way to weasel out of it. Thinking back, that should have been her number one clue that he was not in it for the long haul.

Yet here he was now, smiling, making small talk with her mother. Without thinking, her hand flew to her face, her hair. *Damn. Damn. Damn.* Here she was in her robe, no makeup and a bad case of bed-head. Knowing her mother, she was already sizing him up, deciding whether or not he was right for her. Of course, she would decide he was perfect. Her mother loved good-looking men. Ethan wasn't just good-looking, he was drop-dead gorgeous, and he could charm the birds out of the trees. Right up her mother's alley.

He looked up and Sophia's heart kicked into overdrive.

"Good morning, Sophia." Ethan gave her his most beguiling smile and stood up. And up, and up. She had forgotten how tall he was. How broad his shoulders were. But now, here in her tiny kitchen, she remembered. He filled it up. She felt surrounded by him, by his presence. He didn't reach out to touch her. He didn't need to. As his gaze moved across her face and over her body, she felt it viscerally, her nipples beading as a flush crawled up her throat. She knew the minute he noticed, one end of his lips tilted up in a smile. *Shit!* She was getting turned on in front of her mother.

"What are you doing here?" The question was stark, unwelcoming, earning her a frown of disapproval from her mother.

He slowly lifted his gaze from the lower lip she was biting to look into her eyes. The connection set off a little explosion in her stomach. "I came to see you." His deep, slow drawl struck a chord within her.

"Sophia Love! Where are your manners?" Her mother's horrified gasp broke the moment between them.

Looking over at her mother, Sophia felt a flush climb up her cheeks. Still, she refused to welcome him. *Damn it, he shouldn't be here.*

There was an awkward pause. She was not going to tell him she was glad to see him. She didn't care if her mother was glaring daggers. She didn't want him here and she wasn't going to say otherwise.

"That's okay, Mrs. Love. I'm sure Sophia didn't mean anything by it." Ethan spoke smoothly, not the least put out by her poor reception of him.

Patricia Love sniffed in disapproval, while giving Sophia the evil eye. Sophia knew she'd pay for her rudeness later.

"Ethan tells me ya'll are spending the day together." Sophia detected a speculative gleam in her mother's eyes. What Patricia was thinking was clear as a bell to her daughter. Who was this man? What was he to her daughter? "So, I'll leave and we can go shopping another weekend."

"Mama, you don't have to go." She really really *really* didn't want to be alone with Ethan. Because one of two things would possibly happen. One, she would do him physical harm, or two, she would fall into bed with him. Neither was acceptable.

"Yes, I do." She could tell by her mother's firm tone, that she wasn't going to change her mind. She'd be dialing her cell phone before she ever made it to the car, sharing the wonderful news that Sophia had a date with the most *gorgeous* man. What were the chances she'd hear from Aunt Jo and Aunt Bea sometime today? Pretty flipping good. Either a phone call or surprise visit.

“Ethan, I’m glad I got to meet you. Come by the house later and meet the rest of the family.” The urge to put her hand over her mother’s mouth was almost overpowering.

“Yes, ma’am. I look forward to it.” The temptation to smack those lying lips was even stronger. Standing in stunned silence, Sophia was mute as her mother strolled over, kissed her on the cheek and whispered in her ear, “He’s a keeper.”

The click of the front door closing jerked her out of her stupor. Whirling around, she glared at Ethan. He leaned against the counter, arms crossed over his chest, a cocky, provocative stance. Sophia couldn’t help but look at him. Chestnut hair, chocolate-colored eyes, and a body built like a line-backer, Ethan James was a sexy man. She got wet just looking at him. That kind of sex appeal should be illegal.

He grinned at her, revealing blinding white teeth. Damn the man had a killer smile. Then again, the man was a dentist. He should. Who wanted a dentist with an ugly smile? As Sophia continued to stare, his smile changed, becoming suggestive.

“Why are you here?” To give herself something to do, she went over to the counter, opposite Ethan, to pour a cup of coffee. Turning, she leaned against the counter so they were facing each other, her steaming cup held up like a shield. A mere three feet separated them. If he tried anything, he was going to end up wearing her coffee.

“Well, let’s see. You didn’t return my calls—”

“That should tell you something.” Interrupting seemed like the best line of defense.

“You ran away last night—” It didn’t work.

“I didn’t run.” Another interruption.

“Yes, you did. I kissed you. You liked it, got scared and ran.” His voice was firm and left no room for argument.

He had her there. She had run. Run from him and what he would do to her heart if she let him. Because she loved him and he didn’t love her. In a case of flight or fight, she had run. But that didn’t mean she had to admit to it. She put the coffee cup down with a snap. “Why are you here? What do you want?” It was best to keep on topic, the topic of his unwanted presence.

“That’s two questions. First, why am I here? Maybe to get what I wanted last night...” His voice trailed off suggestively.

She straightened in outrage. “As if, you cocky bastard.”

“Which is to *talk*. Something you refused to do last night.”

Rather than say anything she settled for an evil glare as she picked up her cup for another sip of coffee.

“And second, what do I want? You. I want you.” The statement was blunt and Sophia felt it like a punch to the solar plexus. There was a moment of silence. Ethan waited for her response, but she was clueless as to what that response might be.

“Well, you had me and threw me away.” She couldn’t keep the bitterness from her voice. “Remember? I do.” And how she remembered. Every friggin’ day and night.

“That’s not true.” Frustration lent an edge to his tone she chose to ignore.

“Really?” She could feel herself starting to tremble. Time for him to go. Past time. “This is pointless. We could argue all day.” Turning, she gave him her back. Her cup landed with a thump, betraying her agitation.

“You’re absolutely right. This conversation is pointless.” The tone gave her a split second warning, but it was too late for her to do anything anyway.

Colors blurred as hard hands clamped down on her shoulders and spun her around.

She had but a second to get her bearings and look up into his face, before he slammed his mouth down over hers. It was a wild, dominant kiss. He wasn't asking, he was taking what he wanted.

Stop. The word floated in her head. *Don't do this.* Warning. Warning. This is not a good idea. Lifting her hands, she grasped each side of his, as if to pull him away. Her hands fisted into the silk of his hair and gave a half-hearted tug.

Ethan responded by nipping at her bottom lip. His tongue thrust into her mouth, licking and curling around hers. The warm, velvet slide of his tongue along hers was intoxicating, melting any resistance she had thought to offer.

Oh God. Just like last night, one kiss and she caved in.

Knees crumpling, she collapsed against him, depending on him for support. One hand clamped to the back of her head and tangled in her wet hair. The other gripped her ass and pulled her into his groin. Her thin, damp robe offered no protection. His steely length pressed into her stomach. Wild sensations and emotions ripped through her. She wanted to arch into him and grind against the bulge of his erection. She wanted to crawl inside him; she wanted to tear away from him.

Yet, it was already too late. She gave up without a fight. His smell, his taste, the pressure of his body pressing into hers was more than she could fight, and a whimper escaped her throat. Last night's kiss had reawakened her desire for him. Her hunger for him. Maybe she could have resisted, if he hadn't kissed her last night. Maybe. But he had. And just like that she was addicted again, and like a junkie, she was in need of her next fix.

Chapter Three

Sophia locked her fingers on either side of his head, knotting them in the dark silken strands. Tilting her head and opening her mouth wider, she slid her tongue along his, tasting him, relishing the hot, velvet glide of their mating mouths.

Both of his hands gripped her ass and pulled her up so the ridge of his erection pressed against her mound. There would be bruises from the strength of his grip but at this moment in time she didn't care. The hard press of his cock caused a pleasure that bordered on pain. Unable to stop herself, she thrust against him in rhythm with their kiss. Yes. The stroke of his tongue, the press of his cloth-covered cock. It felt so damn good.

One kiss became another. And another. Time stopped and the world narrowed down to the dueling of their tongues. The taste and excitement of being in his arms was all she knew, all she could focus on. The slide of warm velvet tongue. The press of soft, moist lips.

So good. The feel of him. The taste of him. A moan rattled low in her throat. More. She wanted more.

Ethan broke the kiss, pulling just far enough back to separate their lips. His forehead rested against hers. His exhalation, her inhalation, as their breathing echoed in the silence of the room.

"I didn't come here for this," he muttered.

That was what his lips might be saying. But the hard push of his cock against her abdomen, the raggedness of his breath, the intensity in his eyes, said something else. And her pussy was agreeing. It pulsed and ached with need.

Damn it. Frustration bubbled up inside her. Why did he have to stop? Couldn't he have just gone with the moment?

"Yeah? What did you come here for?" she whispered breathlessly. Lowering her eyes, she watched the pulse pounding at the base of his throat. Such a tempting sight. A small show of vulnerability, need, excitement. Leaning forward, she kissed the hollow of his throat and was rewarded by the sound of his sharp inhalation.

"To talk." His voice was husky, hoarse.

"Hmm." She hummed as she licked a path up his neck. His skin was slightly salty, with the faintest bristle, evidence that even though he'd shaved he'd have a five o'clock shadow by late afternoon.

"Sophia, we need to talk." It sounded as though the words were being ripped from his chest. His actions gave lie to his protest as his grip tightened on her ass and he tilted his head to the side to give her better access.

"I don't want to talk." She muttered the words against his skin. She didn't want to talk. That would result in stopping. That would cause her to think about her actions and be a responsible adult. Instead, she just wanted to feel him in her arms, her body. Knowing it was a mistake, she didn't care. Twice this man had touched her and she'd gone up in flames. She had to have him. Wanted to feel him thrusting into her, stretching her. She would regret her weakness later, yet right now she didn't give a damn about hurt feelings and regret. All she cared about was the fact that with one touch he had her ready to come. She wanted that climax. He *owed* her that climax.

Locking her teeth on his earlobe, she bit down then laved the sting away with the flat of her tongue. He shuddered in response. To be the seducer rather than the seduced was a new experience for Sophia. An empowering one.

“God, Sophia.” His moan was tortured. His hands constricted as he pulled her tighter to him, as he wanted to meld them together.

“Ethan.” She whispered his name, her breath stirring the hair curling around his ear. “Don’t you want me? Isn’t this why you came here?” Using the pointed tip of her tongue she traced a line down his neck then back up. “To fuck.” She whispered the last in the shell of his ear and felt another shudder wrack his body.

She did. She was turning herself on. The lips of her sex were slippery with excitement. There was a throb deep in her abdomen, an ache, a hunger. For him. For the feel of him pounding into her.

His hands slid up her back, his fingers running the length of her spine, and an invisible trail of fire was left in their path. Skin prickled as a light shudder worked its way through her body. Broad hands cupped her shoulders. “Yes.” He hissed. “No.” He tensed, and Sophia knew he meant to push her away.

No. She couldn’t let it happen. The time for regrets would be later. Stretching up onto her toes, she worked her way along the length of his jaw, licking and sucking. Cupping her hand behind his neck, she pulled his head down and kissed him. The kiss slow and languid, Sophia savored his taste. Minty. Hot. Ethan. She drew his lower lip into her mouth, and nipped him, hard. She looked into his eyes, No chocolate there. His eyes were blazing pools of black fire.

“Yes. No. You want me. You don’t want me. Make up your mind, Ethan,” she murmured against his mouth. She knew she wasn’t playing fair. But she didn’t care. She wasn’t playing for keeps. She just wanted to fuck this man, and hopefully in the process exorcise him from her mind, her heart.

Proof of his battle was there on his face. Glittering in his eyes. He wanted her. But her come-on was a surprise to him. *Good.* Satisfaction slid through Sophia.

“I want you,” he huffed, a frustrated male sound, “but we need to talk, Sophia.”

“Later,” Sophia promised him as she once again laid her lips to his. Never, she promised herself.

A smothered curse signaled his defeat. He knew it was a bad idea. She knew it was a bad idea. But he was giving in to her anyway. Triumph roared through her. *Yes.* Her pussy fluttered with approval. A tiny spark of doubt flared in the back of her mind. Fucking him wasn’t going to help her heart. Ruthlessly, she squashed the thought.

Ethan’s hands tangled in her hair, holding her still as he took control of the kiss. It was Sophia’s turn to quiver. His hands slid around to untie her robe and slip inside. Grabbing her hips, he pulled her against him. Sophia melted, the feel of his hands on her bare skin was intoxicating. The cotton of his shirt brushed her nipples while the rough denim of his jeans pressed into her lower abdomen.

“You feel so good,” he whispered against the skin of her neck.

“Hmm hmm.” She didn’t want to talk. Talking made it personal. She wanted to fuck. Fucking didn’t require talking.

Sophia pushed closer, until she was straddling his leg. His hands held her tight against him, he pushed his thigh up and into her. There. Right there. The scrape of his denim-clad thigh along her naked sex was electrifying. He rocked her hips back and forth

in a parody of sex. It wasn't enough. It was maddening to ride the wave of an orgasm yet not crest its wave. The rough stimulation was incredible. She could feel her cream soaking his leg. She was going to explode, come apart. There was no way she could survive the feelings coursing through her veins, tightening her muscles to the point of pain.

"That's it, baby. Come for me." Ethan's ragged whisper echoed in her ear. Pushing her toward oblivion.

"Ethan." It was a cry for more, the sound high-pitched and desperate. Need ate at her control and pulsed through her veins. It wasn't enough. She wanted it harder. Faster. As if he could read her mind, he gave it to her.

His hands slid down to her ass and he lifted her up. Automatically, she wound her legs around his hips. He scattered hot kisses down the length of her neck as he began to work her pussy along his jeans-covered cock. The tender lips of her labia were spread, exposing her clit to direct stimulation. Sophia curled her hands into him, holding on for dear life as she was effortlessly flung toward climax.

He took her mouth roughly, his tongue mimicking the thrust of her hips. It was going to kill her. She wanted to scream. Claw at him. Bite him. Rub against him until their bodies melded together. Digging her nails into him, she moaned in agonizing anticipation of coming. Grinding herself against him, she stiffened as her climax ripped through her. Tearing her mouth away, she buried her face in his neck and sank her teeth into his shoulder, biting him to keep from screaming. Shuddering, she rode the shock waves of feeling.

Moments later, the cold top of the counter met the bare skin of her bottom. Ethan fumbled for in his back pocket, and immediately produced a shiny foil packet. A condom.

She should have been angry that he had one. Cocky bastard. But at that moment, she was terribly glad he was prepared. Because, right or wrong, stupid or not, she wanted to feel him pounding inside her.

With trembling fingers, she reached down to unsnap his pants. He covered her hands with his, stopping her from pulling down the zipper. Sophia looked up, her heart in her throat. "Are you sure?" His voice was a deep rumble. His eyes, dark pools of intensity. "This is what you want?"

Yes. It was a mistake, but a mistake she was willing to make. "Yes."

He searched her eyes. A heartbeat of silence fell between them. Then he must have been satisfied by what he saw, because he moved his hands from hers. The sound of the zipper sliding down echoed loudly in the silent kitchen. Her eyes glued to his, Sophia reached in and her hand met with crisp pubic hair and hard cock. No jockeys for Ethan. He was going commando.

The hot length of him filled her hand. Velvet covered steel. So hard, yet so smooth and soft. A wonderful contrast. Slowly, she pulled his cock from his jeans. She dropped her gaze to his erection jutting out. It was an impressive sight. Thick and long, the smooth cap was red and swollen, slick from pre-come. It bobbed up and down slightly, as if it were nodding hello.

"I think he likes me." Sophia shot a quick smile up at Ethan.

"He'll like you more if you stroke him," he prompted.

"Oh really?" She arched a brow in question.

"Yeah, he's a real hands-on kinda guy." Ethan flashed a wicked grin and bobbed his

cock again.

It was almost surreal, sitting on her kitchen counter having this conversation with Ethan, while minutes before she'd been spitting mad. It was as if when she had decided to fuck him, all her anger had melted away. Obliterated by the touch of his lips, the slide of his tongue.

She wrapped her hand around his cock, just under the glans. Her fingers barely met. The thought of it pressing into her sent a shudder of need through her. Her vaginal muscles tightened. Slowly, she stroked down to the root and squeezed firmly before stroking back up to the tip. It was like hot satin over steel. Soon it would be in her. Stretching, invading. A tingle of excitement worked its way from her breast to her pussy. Sophia tightened her grip in anticipation. Ethan inhaled sharply, and more pre-come oozed from the slit of his cock. She swiped the drop with her thumb and smoothed it along the head.

"Hmm..." Sophia purred. "Long, hot, and hard. What more could a girl ask for?"

Ethan responded with a chest rumbling hum of agreement as he tore open the foil packet with his teeth. He tossed the empty packet carelessly over his shoulder and with swift, economical movements, he sheathed himself. Practice. The ease with which he did it revealed way too much practice. She suppressed a flicker of irritation.

Ethan placed his hands above each of her knees, and any irritation Sophia might have harbored vanished under the heat of his touch. Leisurely, he skimmed his hands down her calves, raising goose bumps in his wake, and cupped her feet in his palms. He lifted her legs up and braced her heels on the edge of the counter.

The action made her lean back on her arms, hands splayed on the countertop. Her robe parted and fell open, completely revealing her naked body to him. The cool air of the kitchen caressed the dampness of her flesh. It was an awkward position. She could feel the swollen outer lips of her sex gape part, leaving every inch of her bare and open for his inspection. Her breasts were rising and falling with the rapidness of her breathing, the hard points of her nipples stabbing up in the air. In the heat of the moment, she felt no embarrassment. She wanted him to look. Wanted him to see and desire her as much as she wanted and desired him.

"You are so damn beautiful." His voice was hoarse, his face stark with hunger.

Swooping down, he licked first one tight bud then the other before sucking it into the heated cavern of his mouth. Pressing the hardened nub up against the roof of his mouth, he pulled on it strongly. An electric shock wave traveled from her nipple to her stomach. A small whimper of need escaped her lips.

Empty. She felt empty. She wanted to be filled with him.

Letting go of her nipple, he straightened to stare down between them. "Look." Sophia looked down. "Watch me come into you," he demanded hoarsely.

The view was intensely erotic. The large rounded head of his cock rested against her opening, not pressing to get in, but simply resting there. The paleness of his condom contrasting sharply with the deep rose of her sex. Again her sex pulsed. She wanted to feel him inside her, stretching her, filling her. Clenching her teeth to keep from moaning, Sophia lifted her hips up, silently begging for him.

Hooking a leg over each arm and cupping her buttocks, he held her in place as he began to press inward. Even as wet and excited as she was, she felt a pinch of pain as she struggled to accept him. As if sensing her distress, Ethan withdrew.

“No. Don’t.” Frantic to feel him deep within, she was willing to take the initial discomfort.

“Shh. Shh.” Trailing small kisses up her neck, he soothed her. Locking his teeth onto her earlobe, he tugged at it. “You’ll get me.” He breathed into her ear. “All of me.” Sophia shuddered as her flesh prickled.

His hand moved between them, and Sophia felt him grasp his cock. Up and down. Up and down. Slowly, he slid the bulbous head along her nether lips, lubricating his cock with her juices.

“Now watch.” It was a guttural command she couldn’t refuse. She wanted to watch. Wanted to see him become part of her.

Dropping her head onto his shoulder, she watched, captivated by the view. Absently, she noted his girth and became aware of her own delicacy. She shuddered again.

“Ready?” His voice was a husky rumble.

“Yes.” Digging her nails into his shoulder, she refused to look away. She wanted, needed, to see him enter her. The tip of his cock again rested against her entrance. Pushing forward, he met with the slightest of resistance before her flesh gave in to the pressure and the cockhead slipped in. Not stopping, he continued to press forward, forcing her muscles to part and give way to his presence.

“Tight. Your pussy is so tight. I could come just putting my cock into you.”

Ethan’s erotic words, washed over her. Whimpering again, half in pleasure half in pain, Sophia arched her back and pushed forward to meet him until he was seated to the hilt.

The movement seemed to snap Ethan’s control. Not giving her time to adjust, holding her in place, he began to thrust. Slowly at first, until her muscles loosened, then picking up speed until his hips were hammering against hers.

Legs up, unable to move, she leaned back and put all of her weight on her arms. Throwing her head back, eyes closed, she concentrated on his thrust, the feel of him ramming forward and retreating. The delicious stretch and pull, give and take of his presence, had her gritting her teeth in agony and ecstasy.

“Oh, Ethan. Yes. More. Don’t stop.” The words were ripped from her mouth. So close, she was so close.

“Come for me, Sophia. Let me feel you come.” His grip tightened painfully, his hips pistoning furiously.

The orgasm ripped through her, the feelings so intense she cried out his name. Lights flashed before her eyes like fireworks. Her muscles tightened to breaking point as tremors shook her. Ethan’s hoarse groan followed and his body jerked in release. Tensely, he stood over her, in her. Neither one of them capable of moving, of speaking. Their ragged pants filled the air.

As her breathing eased, she became aware of several discomforts. The edge of the counter was biting into her ass. Her legs were still up over his arms, and the muscles were beginning to pull. She grimaced slightly. A girl was much more limber during sex than after. He was still resting inside her, and even though he was softened, she felt bruised from the pounding he’d given her. Lifting a hand, she pressed against his shoulder.

“Let me down.” Her voice was weak, as weak as she felt.

Straightening his back, he let her legs slide down his arms. With swift economical movements, he removed the condom and dropped it into the trash canister located under

the counter, Tucking his penis back into his jeans, he didn't bother to zip up. Instead, he helped her sit up, then stepped back so she could hop down. Her legs were wobbly, and he had to grab her elbow to keep her from falling.

"Okay?" His voice was as husky as hers.

Rather than speaking, she wasn't sure she could, she nodded. Pulling her robe closed, she knotted the belt around her waist. He watched in silence. It seemed neither of them knew what to say. Pushing against his chest, she eased from between him and the counter. She felt slick, slightly sticky between her legs. Shower; she needed to wash up. Turning to leave, she was stopped by the hand he placed on her arm.

"We need to talk."

Sophia nodded without turning to look at him. "I need to clean up first, then we'll talk." She knew she wouldn't get rid of him until he had his say.

"You just got out of the shower."

She glanced at him over her shoulder, he was frowning. A mocking smile curved her lips. "But it seems I need another one."

Satisfaction curled through her when the lines between his brows deepened and his lips tightened. She wondered if he thought she was trying to wash him off her. Sure, she could wash away the physical evidence, but she was positive she'd never be able to wash away the feel of him. Wasn't sure she wanted to. All she did know was she needed time. Time to think and collect herself. Thankfully, her knees supported her as she wobbled from the room. At least this time she was the one walking away.

Chapter Four

Watching Sophia walk down the hall, Ethan had to force himself not to follow her. He would like nothing better than to scoop her up, carry her into the bedroom and spend the rest of the day fucking her. Ride her until they were both exhausted and she knew with every nerve in her body the feel of him over her, in her.

He watched until she disappeared behind the closed door of her bedroom. She had never turned around once. Not even when shutting the door. Swearing under his breath, he turned back into the kitchen. Walking over to the table, he plopped down into a chair and picked up his cup to take a sip of coffee. It was cold and bitter, so he put the mug down immediately. *Damn*. Unable to drink the stuff, he settled for staring into its blackened depths.

Nothing was going as planned. Not a damn thing.

She didn't answer his phone calls. She ignored the roses. Yet, if he was honest with himself he knew why she'd ignore them. When a woman like Sophia tells you she loves you it isn't to be taken lightly. He should have dropped down on his knees and thanked God for giving her to him. Instead, he'd run. Fast. It hadn't been one of his most glorious moments. It was an action he regretted more than anything he'd ever done in his life. It was the one moment in time he would give anything to relive.

But hell. Wasn't she even curious about what he had to say? Most women loved to see a man grovel. And that's what he'd planned on doing. Well, not groveling, but some really sincere apologizing. If she'd give him the chance.

Most women.

That was the problem. Sophia wasn't most women. She was Sophia. Soft, gentle and loving. As beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside. And he'd treated her like he had all of the other women in his life. Casual. Temporary. When in reality she was neither casual nor temporary. Not that he had been willing to admit it. Not to her and definitely not to himself. No, hard-headed dumbass that he was, it had taken two months to understand she was as necessary to him as the air he breathed. Eight weeks of sleepless nights and unbearable loneliness. Sixty days to discover it was possible to feel completely and utterly alone in the middle of a crowd.

Ethan glanced around the kitchen. Small, compact, everything neat and orderly. The walls were a stark white as were all the large appliances, while the smaller appliances were a bright cherry red. It had an open, happy feel to it, reminding him of Sophia. At least he was in her apartment. Something he owed totally to someone other than Sophia. Thankfully, her mother had answered the door and let him in. He couldn't help but wonder if Sophia had known he was at the door, would she have even opened it? He had his doubts.

Last night's meeting had been a total fiasco. Why had he thought a surprise meeting would amount to anything? Ambushing her outside Lori's had not been one of his better ideas. What in the hell had he been thinking? He hadn't been. Instead, frustration and desperation had led him to take some piss poor advice. Advice he gotten over the phone via Jami and her damn faith in astrology. Which just proved how fucking desperate he'd become. All he'd succeeded in doing last night was pissing Sophia off and he'd cussed all

the way home. Cussed Jami and her hair-brained scheme, and cussed himself for giving it a moment's thought. To jump her the way he had. Just call him fucking Attila the Hun, 'cause that's how much finesse he'd shown last night. Or today for that matter.

How stupid can a guy be?

The answer to that question depended on how desperate the guy was. And Ethan had been pretty desperate when he'd met Jami while standing in the grocery store check-out line.

"Hey, lover boy! How's it hanging?"

Closing his eyes, Ethan grimaced. Damn. Of all the luck. He really didn't want to talk to Jami. Couldn't imagine she'd have anything even remotely nice to say to him. Knowing he had to be polite, she was Sophia's best friend, he forced a smile as he turned to speak.

"Hey, Jami. How've you been?" Immediately he dropped his gaze and began scanning her cart, counting the items. He was in the express lane. No more than ten items allowed. Maybe she'd have eleven or twelve and have to go somewhere else.

Nine. Shit!

"Just fine." Looking up, he noted her face was as bland as her answer, an impersonal smile curving her lips.

"Good." Turning back around, he hoped she'd take the hint.

She didn't. She stayed right in line behind him.

Rather than trying to strike up an unwanted and potentially awkward conversation, he pretended to read the tabloids and magazine covers beside him. One in particular caught his eye. Gateway to Hell Discovered in Los Angeles!

Gateway to Hell in Los Angeles? He didn't think so. His had his own private hell right here at Indian Path, North Carolina. A hell of his own making.

"Been on any dates lately?" The query sounded innocent, but he wasn't fooled. Jami could be a barracuda.

"Nope." Short and to the point. Maybe she'd get the message, though somehow he doubted it.

"Huh. Neither has Sophia."

That got his attention. It was a welcomed bit of news. Knowing she was searching for a response, he gave her none. Instead he kept his attention focused on the magazines in front of him.

"You know, I love reading these things," she continued.

Giving up, Ethan turned to face her. "What?"

"These." Wagging a book of horoscopes, she cocked a brow before asking, "Want to know yours?"

"Not really. I don't read that mumbo jumbo." If he'd ever doubted Jami was a crackpot he had his answer now.

"Come on, give it a try. What's your sign?"

Sighing, he gave in. There were two people ahead of him. That meant he had at least three or four more minutes with Jami. He'd rather talk about zodiac signs than some other subject. Besides, maybe she'd let something slip about Sophia. Something that would let him know she missed him, that it would be okay to call her. That she wouldn't try to emasculate him the minute she saw him. "Taurus."

"Ahh ... the bull." The innuendo in her tone had him growling and casting her an

impatient look. "Okay, let's see." Ignoring the look, Jami thumbed through the pages of the little paperback book. "Okay, according to this you're sensual, practical and reliable... Hmm ... I'll have to ask Sophia about that."

Narrowing his eyes, he stared at the top of her bent head. The little witch. He wasn't going to stand here and—

"Ha, it also says you're stubborn, possessive, and conservative. And you're a great lover."

She rolled her eyes on the last part, and Ethan had to lock his jaw to keep from saying something he would regret. Instead, he pushed his cart forward as he moved up in line. Just one more customer. Just one more, and it would be his turn and he could end this pointless conversation.

"Want to know your monthly horoscope?"

"Sure." He shrugged carelessly.

With a sense of relief, he saw the woman in front of him paying for her groceries. Yes! He almost bumped her with his cart in his effort to get to the cashier. Escape was in sight. Stepping in front of the counter, he put a little more distance between himself and Jami.

"Ha. Here it is." Refusing to take his silent hint that he really could care less about hearing what she had to say, Jami pushed up behind him while reading. "It's time to face the music when it comes to love. You've fallen hard. Stop running and accept it before it's too late. Dare to believe and make a leap of faith to get to the next level." Stacking groceries on the conveyer belt, Ethan listened with half an ear. Until a pointed nail dug in his shoulder. "Well. If those aren't some words you can take to heart. Good advice, if you ask me."

"What?"

"I read your horoscope." She gave him a look that asked him if he was stupid or deaf. "I'll read it again. It's time to face the music when it comes to love. You've fallen hard. Stop running and accept it before it's too late. Dare to believe and make a leap of faith to get to the next level." Pausing, she looked up him, an expression of exaggerated patience on her face. "Face. The. Music," she repeated slowly. "Stop. Running. Accept. It." Frowning, she thumbed back to the front of the book. "Hmm. I don't remember cowardly as a Taurus trait."

It took a minute for what she had said to sink in. He couldn't believe his ears. Freezing, he turned to look at her. She had caught his attention. He stared at her in amazement.

"That'll be twenty-three sixty-three."

The cashier's voice interrupted his thoughts. Snapping his gaze back to the girl at the cash register, he asked, "How much?"

Absentmindedly, Ethan paid for his purchases and collected the plastic bags. Nodding to Jami, he headed out the door, acting as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"See ya later, Chicken Little." Her taunt followed him out the automatic doors. The impulse to shoot her the bird was almost overwhelming.

"Remember. It's the fear of love that makes you lonely." Glass doors stopped her flow of words.

Yet her words ate at him. Nibbling at the back of his mind, ringing in his ears. "It's the fear of love that makes you lonely ... coward."

By the time he reached home even the damn horoscope was starting to haunt him.

It's time to face the music...

You've fallen hard...

Accept it...

Yeah, he'd faced the music all right. And nothing had turned out like he'd hoped.

To begin with it was mighty damn hard to apologize when the person you're trying to apologize to won't take your calls. Not that he was such a coward that he had planned to apologize over the phone. Hell, he'd just wanted to see how angry she was, possibly get the initial rush of anger over, then ask if they could meet and talk.

What he'd get? A whole bunch of emotional turmoil and uncertainty. The first time he'd called he'd felt like a sixteen-year-old calling a girl for the first time. His fucking hand had trembled! The agony of hearing the phone ring and ring. The answering machine had been a relief, at first. The answering machine had given him the opportunity to test the waters, so to speak. But it hadn't taken long for him to hate the sound of—“*Hi, this is Sophia, I'm sorry I missed your call. Leave your name and number and I'll get back to you as soon as I can.*” Yeah right. She'd never gotten back to him.

A less determined man might have taken that as a sign to give up. Not him, though. No sirree. As far as he was concerned that meant he would just have to try a more personable approach. Which had suited him anyway. Phones weren't his style. In the past flowers had always worked. It hadn't taken long to realize flowers obviously weren't Sophia's style.

Without thinking, Ethan took another sip of coffee, grimacing in distaste as he swallowed the cold, bitter brew. Rising from the table, he crossed to the sink to pour the stuff down the drain. His initial efforts had been wasted, just like that cup of coffee. But he couldn't blame her. Hell, he'd been running for years, who was he to begrudge her a few dodged phone calls? Still, he hadn't liked being on the receiving end.

So his next method of attack? Again he consulted the devil. He might not have been able to get Sophia on the phone, but Jami sure did manage to answer the one at the Animal Hospital every time he called. She'd been the one who'd told him to stop being such a fucking coward. Maybe he needed to *face* the music rather than trying to talk to it over the phone or send flowers. Pissed, he'd told her to kiss his ass. Jami, being Jami, had laughed and hung up.

Another man might have shrugged Sophia off as the one who got away and given up. But he'd found out part of the astrology analysis was true. He was stubborn and possessive. Sophia was his, damn it. He'd fucked up. He was man enough to admit it. Hell, he'd love to admit it to Sophia, if she'd let him. But she wasn't letting him. She wasn't talking to him.

When Jami had called yesterday afternoon, he latched onto her plan like the desperate man that he was. The plan was simple. Jami would get Sophia to Lori's. All he had to do was get there first and catch Sophia before she had a chance to go inside and surround herself with friends. Then he would suggest they go somewhere quiet and talk.

They'd leave.

He'd apologize.

Sophia would accept.

Bam. Things would be back to normal. He'd have his best friend back and a lover too.

But things weren't back to normal. Things had gone wrong from the minute he'd opened his mouth last night. Rather than charming her, he'd put her back up the minute he opened his mouth.

Restless, Ethan paced the small confines of the kitchen before flopping back down at the kitchen table. Slouching in the chair, Ethan tilted his head back to stare up at the ceiling. He let out a heavy sigh. He knew the answer of course. Nerves. He'd taken one look at her and lost his confidence. Last night his palms had been as sweaty as a high schoolboy's on prom night. So what had he done? Gone into macho mode. If only he could he'd kick himself in the ass for the way he'd acted last night.

Still, one good thing had come out of last night. He'd gone home with the knowledge that Sophia still wanted him. She could say whatever she wanted, but when he'd touched her, she'd responded. It was that thought that had him back here this morning.

A smile cracked his face. *Ahh*. But this had been a much more successful venture. Far more successful than he'd hoped. Yeah, she hadn't been thrilled to see him sitting at her kitchen table. He thanked the heavens her mother answered the door. It had given him the opportunity to talk with Patricia Love. Now there was a powerful ally. Or enemy, as she'd warned him not to hurt her daughter. His conversation with her had been almost as painful as a root canal.

After her mother had left, he'd touched Sophia and she'd gone up in flames. This time he'd gone with her. He really wished that he could say he regretted taking her so fast, so abruptly. On the kitchen counter with all the finesse of a caveman. But he couldn't. He didn't regret a damn thing. Thrusting into her body had felt like coming home and he couldn't wait to do it again. And again. And again. Next time, though, they were going to be in a bed. He wanted to lay her down and spread her out. Taste every inch of her skin.

"I see you're still here." Sophia's words jerked Ethan out of his thoughts.

Turning, he saw her standing in the doorway. Dressed. Pity. He rather liked her robe. "Yeah, I'm still here."

Mouth twisting, she sauntered into the room. "Wow. And I was almost positive you'd take the chance to run. You know, get while the gettin's good."

Leaning against the counter, she crossed her arms in what Ethan considered a protective gesture. She was scared. Not that he could blame her. He was scared too, and she hadn't hurt him the way he'd hurt her.

Rising from his chair, he crossed the small space between them to stand in front of her. She refused to look at him. Gently, he cupped her chin and lifted her face up. "Sophia, look at me." He uttered the command quietly, but firmly. He wanted, needed, to see her eyes. What she was feeling and thinking would be reflected there.

Her sigh wafted against his skin. It was such a forlorn little sound, and when she lifted her gaze, the emotion was reflected there as well. Ethan felt a queer pang in his chest as his heart contracted in remorse. He'd put that look there. He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip, the texture as soft and velvety as a rose petal.

"I'm sorry. More sorry than you will ever know. If I could go back—" He didn't keep the regret from his voice, his eyes. He hurt because she hurt. His fear and stupidity had cost them.

"Ethan, please. Just go and don't come back. I can't do this. I won't let you hurt me again." When she tried to turn her head, he tightened his hold on her chin.

“I can’t.” He couldn’t leave her alone. Without her, he felt incomplete.

Cupping her face, he lowered his lips to hers. It was a soft, gentle glide of skin on skin. He wasn’t offering passion, but rather tenderness. It was a silent plea for forgiveness. For long moments she remained motionless, neither fighting nor participating in the embrace. Just when he was about to pull back, a small moan escaped from her as she gave in and looped her arms around his waist.

Rather than deepen the kiss, he gently moved his lips against hers. Then breaking the connection, he pulled her to him, closing his eyes in relief as she let her body rest against him, her head on his shoulder. She felt so damn good in his arms.

“Baby, I’m so sorry I hurt you. I’d give anything to go back and undo what I’ve done.”

“Ethan.” She sighed his name. The sound telling him more than words could. Telling him she hadn’t quite forgiven him. Telling him she wanted him but was still hurt and confused. Telling him he might have won the battle, but he had yet to win the war.

“Time, Sophia. Just give me time and a chance to make it up to you. To prove to you that you can trust me.” The words *I love you* clogged his throat. He wanted to say them. He simply could not. It was like a lump stuck in his throat. A weakness he knew he would have to overcome or lose Sophia for good. Having lost her briefly, he knew he didn’t want to be without her again. Yet words still failed him.

“Time.” She pulled back and he let her. Earnest brown eyes searched his face. He wasn’t sure what she was looking for or what she would find in his eyes. Tensing, he waited for her to pull out of his arms and insist he leave. He wasn’t sure he was going to be able to do that. He might be reduced to begging. Tension built within him and he could feel sweat gathering under his arms. His nerves stretched taut, ready to snap.

She must have found what she was looking for. Slowly, she nodded. “Okay.”

He waited for the rush of triumph. But it never came. Instead it was relief that poured through him. He knew he wasn’t out of the woods yet. No. He could earn her forgiveness. Now the question was could her earn her trust?

Chapter Five

Buddy's was a local seafood joint situated on a private dock along the inner coastal waterway. To call it a restaurant would be a stretch. It was an old boathouse that over the years had been converted to a one-room seafood hut owned and operated by Buddy Randall and his son Bud Junior. Everything in the place was cheap. Mismatched chairs were coupled with polyurethane coated plywood tables. Newspapers served as tablecloths. While Styrofoam cups, paper plates, and plastic forks made up the dining tableware. The menu was written on a chalkboard propped up by the door along with a sign that read *Seat Yourself*. So what kept the locals coming? The food. Fresh seafood caught by Bud Junior and prepared by Buddy. Buddy's was the best kept secret of Indian Path.

"This was a great idea." Sophia wasn't being polite or facetious. She *loved* Buddy's. Just thinking about the food, smelling the pungent odor of seafood cooking, had her mouth watering and her stomach cramping with hunger.

"So, guys, what'll it be?" A waitress appeared at Ethan's elbow, wearing cutoff jeans and a faded red tee shirt, *Buddy's* emblazoned in white ink across her chest. Early twenties, sun-streaked blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, white teeth flashing in tanned face, she was the perfect picture of a beach bunny.

"You know what you want or do you need a minute?" The little beach hussy still hadn't looked at Sophia—her attention for Ethan only. Yet other than a friendly smile, Ethan showed no reaction to her over-friendly smile and flirtatious gaze, which in all honesty, didn't surprise Sophia. Ethan didn't have a wandering eye. When he was with her, he was focused on *her*. Still, she didn't have to like other women eyeing her man.

Her man. The thought stunned her. *Wow.* Had she really made the jump back into this relationship this fast? Yes, they had sex. Great sex. Incredible, mind-blowing sex. But was she willing to forgive and forget months of heartache this quickly?

"Sophia." Ethan called her name, pulling her from her thoughts. "Do you have a preference?"

Sophia shook her head and shrugged. "No, it doesn't matter to me. I like everything on the menu."

"All right." He nodded before looking up at the waitress. "We'll start with a peck of steamed oysters, a pound of boiled shrimp, and a bucket of beer."

"Light or regular?" Buddy's served only Budweiser.

"Light."

"Want all the trimmings?" The trimmings were melted butter and garlic, homemade cocktail sauce with horseradish, corn on the cob, and sliced tomatoes.

"Oh yeah." The way he said that, the deep timbre of his voice, reminded her of Barry White, and Sophia had bite her lip to keep from laughing. Obviously Ethan liked this place as much as she did.

"Cool. I'll be back with your beer." Snapping her order book closed, the waitress disappeared behind a set of swinging doors. She was back in minutes with a metal bucket full of ice and six Bud Lights.

Twisting the top off a bottle, Ethan offered it to her before opening one for himself.

Tipping the bottle against her lips, she took a long swallow and settled back into her chair, content. Ethan did the same. Bonnie Raitt and her steel guitar played in the background. Absently, Sophia drummed her fingers on the table in time with the music. Ethan reached over and clasped her hand in his and the warmth of his hand seeped into her skin. In silence they watched boats go by, some headed out to sea while others were headed to the marinas. For that moment everything in her world was right. This was what it had been like between them.

Holding hands. The comfortable silences. Just two people enjoying being together.

Another metal bucket was plopped onto the table, this one full of steaming oysters. A pile of napkins, mitts and oyster knives followed. "Okay, guys. Dig in. I'll be right back with the rest."

They took her advice to heart, eagerly digging into the pail. The waitress returned with the shrimp, corn, and tomatoes. Little was said as they ate heartily. Shucking oysters was not easy, yet it was well worth the effort it took to get into one. After opening a particularly difficult one, she crowed at the treasure within. "Woo hoo, look at this bad boy." She held up her prize, a large juicy oyster at least two inches long.

"You know, the first man to eat an oyster was either starving or blind," Ethan mused.

Sophia shrugged in acknowledgement that oysters were not pretty. "Yeah, but after that first one, especially one like this," she waved her oyster knife in front of him, the shellfish swinging off it, "don't you know he couldn't get enough." Then, mouth open, she dropped it in. The slick, salty taste was incredible, indescribable. Closing her eyes, she swallowed, then moaned in appreciation.

The sound of Ethan's groan had her eyes popping open. There was a pained look upon his face.

"You okay?" He looked like he had a bad oyster.

"Yeah. I just found out why oysters are considered an aphrodisiac."

Puzzlement lasted for a second before realization struck. Her face heated with understanding. It was the first sexual reference he'd made since they'd made love yesterday. Saturday and today had been about adjusting to one another again, about re-establishing emotional bonds. They had spent the day together talking, holding hands, kissing. Last night, he'd gone back to his place, rather than try to stay with her.

"Oh." She wasn't sure exactly what to say. She'd never considered seafood to be particularly sexy. Just the opposite. Messy, smelly, but damn good. Hmm. Maybe there was a connection.

"Yeah. Oh." His voice was dry, his amusement turned toward himself and easing her feelings of awkwardness.

"Really? I'm not feeling anything." She popped a shrimp into her mouth, chewed and swallowed. "Nope. Nada. Nothing."

"Hmmm." It was a deep purr. The Barry White tone was back. This time, rather than humor, desire trembled through her, swirling in her stomach like warm brandy. "Well, I'll have to work on that, won't I?"

The thought of what he would do had butterflies fluttering in her stomach. She swallowed a shrimp without chewing. It went down like a lump.

"Beer?" He lifted a bottle from the bucket on the table.

All she could do was nod. Twisting the top off, he clunked the bottle down in front of her. "There you go."

Picking up a shrimp he nimbly peeled it and dipped it into the melted butter. She couldn't take her eyes off the deft movement of his hands. Beautiful hands. Talented hands. Simply thinking about them on her skin had her nipples peaking.

She looked up at him. His intent was plain to see. He'd played nice long enough. He wanted her and tonight he was going to have her. Sophia felt the sexual current zap between them. Holding her gaze, he lifted the shrimp. "Open up."

Sophia let her mouth fall open and he dropped the shrimp in. The taste of butter, garlic, and shrimp exploded on her tongue. He hand fed her. Alternating shrimp and oysters, and dipping them in butter before lifting them to her mouth. Only a native would understand he was courting her. Oysters were a bitch to shuck, the sharp shells rough on the hands, while peeling shrimp was tedious.

With each bite, the sexual tension between them cranked up a notch until she could barely swallow. Heavy-lidded eyes watched as she licked the butter from her lips. A flame leapt to life in his eyes, and answering heat bloomed in her as well. Never again would she doubt the aphrodisiac qualities of seafood.

"No more," Sophia muttered. "I'm stuffed."

"Just one more bite," Ethan cajoled, showing her the oyster he'd just shucked. "Now look at this one. Isn't she a beauty?" It lay nestled in the half-shell. Large, moist, the edges delicately ruffled and lined in black, the sight was suggestive and she understood why some considered the delicacy to be a sexual stimulant.

"Think of the taste. Warm, slightly salty, mouth-watering and satisfying. It'll slide down your throat, nice and easy," Ethan murmured.

Sophia felt a flush crawl up her neck. The sight of the oyster fired her imagination, while his words heated her blood. Warm. Salty. Slide down her throat.

Leaning over, he rubbed the slippery morsel across her bottom lip. "Just open up ... and let me in." Unable to resist, Sophia parted her lips. He lifted the morsel to her mouth, lightly rubbing the slick, salty bite along her bottom lip before placing it on her tongue. She never took her gaze from his.

Let me in, he'd asked. *Yes.* That was exactly what she wanted to do. Let him in. Feel him moving against her, in her. Sophia swallowed. He was right, the shellfish slid down her throat effortlessly.

"Are you ready?" His question was slow, quiet. He was asking more than just if she was ready to leave.

Was she ready? Such a simple yet complex question. Yes. She was. Sophia felt herself nodding. Desire and satisfaction flared in his eyes with her consent. She was agreeing to more than just leaving the restaurant. They both knew it.

"Good." He glanced down to find the check. Sophia used the second to close her eyes and take a deep breath. Ethan's muttered, "Well, I'll be damned," had her popping them back open. He stared down at the shell in his hands, an arrested look on his face.

"What?" She leaned forward to see what had his attention.

"Look." He tilted the shell.

Sophia caught her breath. "Oh, Ethan. A pearl." Over the years, she'd seen many half-formed pearls melded to the inside of an oyster shell. Never, not once, had she found one like this. It rested in the center of the shell, oblong, off-white, about the size of her pinkie fingernail.

"Here." He plucked it out of the shell, took her hand, and dropped it into her palm.

“The pearl is a wonder of nature. Something rare and priceless. A treasure to be kept and protected.”

“You should keep it.” Sophia tried to hand it back to him. Ethan covered her hand with his, closing hers into a fist in the process.

“No. I want you to have it.” He stared earnestly into her eyes. “I want you to keep it and think of us.” This time she didn’t object to him pairing them as a couple.

“Why?” she asked softly.

“The pearl starts out as a mistake, an irritating piece of sand that the oyster can’t get out of its life. So it adjusts, and over time something wonderful, rare, and unique is created.” His voice was low, solemn.

Sophia’s heart pounded heavily in her chest. She knew what he was saying. It was poetic, it was beautiful. It was the closest he had come to telling her how he felt.

“So, though what we’ve found isn’t flawless, it’s rare, and I want you to keep it. Treasure it. Love it, no matter that it’s far from perfect.”

Looking into his sober face, Sophia felt tears well up in her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, but didn’t know what to say. She was in turmoil, emotions churning inside her. As if sensing her inner struggle, Ethan squeezed her hand gently and let go. He excused himself to go pay the bill.

In background, a bluesy Nora Jones song, *What am I to You* played. She found herself singing along with the chorus. For the first time, the meaning of the lyrics struck a chord deep within her. The plaintive question, *What am I to you*, echoed what Sophia was feeling, wondering. A lump formed in her throat. It was as if Nora had read what was in her heart and was sharing it with the world. She felt exposed, vulnerable.

The emotion, the doubt, was poignant. The songwriter, having given her heart to her lover, wanted him to love her back. Much as she was with Ethan. What was she to him? Could she trust what he was trying to tell her with the pearl? Sophia opened her hand and looked at the gem. Wonderful and rare he had said. Did he mean love? Or the physical?

The last chorus faded away and a warm hand cupped her shoulder. Starting, she turned and looked up. Ethan stood behind her. His face serious, and his eyes had an intensity she’d never seen before. “Let’s go.”

He pulled out her chair, and wordlessly, she stood. Placing her hand in his, she let him lead her out the door. All the way home the song had continued to play in her mind. No, she didn’t know exactly what Ethan felt for her. She didn’t know why he had left her so abruptly. Why her love had scared him to the point of leaving. But he was back now, wanting another chance. His words over dinner was the closest he’d come to confessing a deep emotion. It gave her hope that maybe they could work things out.

Tonight she could revel in the power of his lovemaking. The power of their two bodies connecting, uniting, becoming one. She’d felt it before, she wanted to feel it again.

Chapter Six

Standing just inside Sophia's living room, Ethan shut and locked her front door, the sound of the tumblers clicking into place overly loud in the silence of the room. Turning, he faced her. It had been light when they had left, and she had yet to turn on any lamps. The only illumination came from a streetlamp streaming through the windows. It cast their features in shadow. They were wrapped in the dimness of the night, protected, cocooned. Ethan found the darkness liberating. With her unable to see his expression, he felt he could give free rein to his emotions.

He crossed over to her and cupped her slight shoulders in his hands. Pulling her into his embrace, he buried his face into the side of her neck. Chest, pelvis, thighs touched, she fitted into him perfectly, as if she were made for him alone. Breathing deeply, he inhaled her perfume. The scent wrapped around him, enchanting him.

Lifting his head, he covered her mouth with his, kissing her hungrily, her taste as intoxicating as her scent. He thrust his tongue into her mouth and pulled her up against him. God, she felt so good. Her breasts pushing into his chest, his clothed cock pressing into the warmth between her thighs. Just a few pumps and he would come in his pants. Fuck, he needed to get control.

Ethan ripped his mouth from hers and buried his face in her hair, holding her tightly to him. His breath stirred the hair next to Sophia's ear, the silky strands caressing his lips with each inhalation. A slight quiver worked its way through her body, telling him she was as excited as he was.

"Sophia." He whispered her name and nothing else. Nothing else came to mind. Words and emotions were trapped inside with no outlet except the physical. He wanted nothing more than to scoop her up in his arms and take her to the bedroom. There he wouldn't need the awkwardness of words. There he could use his body to show her what he felt.

Sophia slid her hands up his chest and curled them into his hair. He couldn't stop the shudder her touch evoked. She tilted her face up to his. In the darkness, he couldn't read her expression. He didn't need to. Her desire, her need, was evident in the way she rested against him.

"Kiss me." Her voice was a husky plea.

"Gladly," he murmured. He brushed his lips gently across her face, scattering butterfly kisses along her brow and eyelids before moving to her cheekbones and the tender curve of her jaw and was rewarded with a sigh of pleasure. The first time had been rushed, a wild and furious mating. This time it was going to be different. He wanted to go slower, to enjoy the journey as well as the destination.

Using the tip of his tongue, Ethan slowly traced a heated trail from her jaw line to the base of her neck. Her pulse beat madly against his lips. He suckled at the sweet flesh, hard enough that she would bear his mark. Primitive satisfaction filled him. He wanted to mark her so every time she looked in the mirror she would know who she belonged to.

He licked a path to the sweet spot below her ear. He nipped at the lobe before investigating the whorl of her ear with his tongue. Whimpering in response, Sophia tightened her grip in his hair, her nails scraping along his scalp. Ethan smiled in her hair.

God, she was so responsive, her desire a catalyst for his own. Crammed within the confines of his jeans, his cock throbbed painfully.

“You like that, baby?” His lips brushed her ear.

“Hmmm...” Sophia’s moan was music to his ears. He kissed her again, his tongue sweeping in for a slow, languid taste. Stoking the fires. A whimper escaped from her. She rubbed her mound against the thrust of his cock, and Ethan felt his own need build. A need for more than the taste of her lips.

He skimmed his hands down her chest, across her breasts, feeling her hardened nipples through her shirt and bra. “Let’s get rid of this.” He tugged at the bottom of her shirt before lifting it up and over her head. The shirt was forgotten before it ever hit the floor. He undid Sophia’s bra and her breasts sprang free. The faint illumination from the streetlight fell across her chest. In the dimness he could see the shape of her breasts. They were round and full, trembling with her shallow breathing. Lowering his head, he licked one nipple then the other before latching onto it and pulling it into his mouth. With a thumb and forefinger, he pinched the other, rolling the nub in synchronization with his suckling. Another rasp of his tongue and her knees buckled.

Ethan swept her up against him. Her arms wrapped around his neck as he cradled her against his chest. She weighed next to nothing. Luckily, he managed to carry her down the hall and into her bedroom without running into a wall. Swiftly, he carried her to the bed and placed her in the center. Crawling onto the mattress, he lay beside her and pulled her into him.

“You are so beautiful.” He skimmed the back of his hand down the side of her face. Her skin was as soft and delicate as a rose petal. Words escaped him. He didn’t know what to say. But he knew what to do. Leaning down, he worshiped her breasts with his mouth. Sucking and laving one nipple before moving to the other. With one hand, he traced a pattern on her abdomen and lower stomach—slow, gentle circles around her belly button, then back up to torment the nipple he wasn’t suckling.

“Ethan.” Her whisper was music to his ears. “Please.”

“What, baby?” he murmured, his lips moving against her flesh. “Tell me what you want. What you need. Tell me and I’ll give it to you.” He needed to hear her ask him. Beg him for his touch. Needed it to wipe away the remnants of guilt he felt for what had happened Saturday morning. Yes, she had been willing, but it had been a fast, furious coupling, not what he had wanted or envisioned for their first time.

He began to work the fastenings of her pants. A snap, a rasp of the zipper, and he slid his hand inside over damp, silken panties. He didn’t do anything else. Just let his hand rest there. If she wanted more, she was going to have to tell him.

“You need to tell me what you want.” He bit her nipple and growled, then lapped the turgid peak before switching to the other to give it the same treatment. He felt her nails dig into his scalp, and her pelvis arch up against his hand. She tossed her head back and forth across the pillow.

“You want me to pet your pretty pussy? Hmm?” Ethan whispered. “Play with your clit until you’re squishy with juice and cream and begging to come?”

He kissed his way down her chest, delighting in the way her breasts quivered with each breathless gasp she made. Sophia liked dirty talk. He’d remember that. “Maybe I’ll taste your honeypot. Find out if you’re as sweet as you smell,” Ethan whispered against her stomach before he kissed the spot above her belly button, then tongued it.

“Yes.” Sophia ground her pussy up against his hand. “Please.”

Curling his fingers in the waistband of her pants, he pulled them and her panties down and off at the same time. A small triangle of blonde pubic hair covered the protective folds of her pussy, her labia swollen and puffy with desire. Ethan slid lower down the bed until he was between her open thighs, fighting the urge to bury his face in her pussy and eat her until she screamed.

Slowly, he kissed her hipbones and the insides of her thighs, working his way toward her heated cunt. Inhaling deeply, he drew in the scent of her arousal. With his thumbs, he stroked the seam of her labia. He was rewarded with Sophia’s whimpered plea, “Please...” as she squirmed against his hands.

He opened her sex, lowered his head and took a long, leisurely swipe. Sweet and spicy. She was oozing cream. Sophia’s hips shot up, and her thighs tightened as if she would hold him to her. He took his time, slowly thrusting his tongue inside her, sliding his tongue along the crevice, seeking out tender, sweet spots.

Moisture flowed from her. She twisted and pushed against him while incoherent cries and moans escaped her throat. She was close to coming and he hadn’t even touched her clit yet.

She knotted her hands in his hair, pulling him closer, tighter to her pussy. For a moment he couldn’t breathe, and he wondered if a man could drown in pussy juice. He latched onto the hardened nub of her clit. Sophia’s whole body stiffened in reaction, as if electrified. Ethan thrust his finger inside her, curling it so he could stroke the sensitive spot behind her pubic bone. Sophia went off like a rocket, her pussy fluttering around his finger as the orgasm tore through her, a scream ripping from her mouth. Tremors shook her body. Ethan continued to stroke and suckle her through it. When the last of the tremors shook her body, he slid up to lie beside her. He took her in his arms and held her.

His dick was killing him. It felt like it was going to explode and he would die right there on the spot. He fought the urge to roll on top of her and just thrust in. Wet and malleable as she was right now, he’d have no problem thrusting home. He wouldn’t have to worry about going slow or easing into her. As relaxed as she was she could take every damn inch. Instead, he lay there, holding her in his arms, stroking her back as her breathing calmed. Abruptly, her breathing evened out and he knew she had gone to sleep. He couldn’t help but chuckle. Here he was, hard as a pike, dying to fuck, and she was asleep. Well, this was the closest he’d ever come to a “wam bam, thank you, ma’am.” This hadn’t been about his satisfaction. This had been about Sophia and her satisfaction.

Gently, he turned her over onto her side. Curving an arm around her waist, he snuggled up to her spoon fashion, chest to back. He could wait. The night was young, and he wasn’t going anywhere.

* * * *

Turning, Sophia skimmed her hands down his chest, grasping the edge of his tee shirt to pull it over his head. She got as far as his midriff before his hands covered hers, halting their upward movement, the muscles of his chest tensing.

“Sophia—”

She put the tips of her fingers over his lips, stopping him from talking. Not tonight. No talking tonight. “Shh. No talking.”

“But—” His lips brushed against her fingers as he started to protest.

“I mean it. We’ll talk later.”

His breath escaped in a sigh, his shoulders relaxing in capitulation. Knowing she had won, Sophia pulled the shirt up and over his head. In the darkness of the room, she couldn’t see any details of his chest. Tonight she would use her hands, lips, and tongue to explore his body. She would see with her heart and body rather than her eyes and hope that he did the same.

Leaning forward, she placed her lips against his chest. The skin was hot and smooth, the muscles firm beneath. Slowly, she trailed moist, open-mouthed kisses along his upper chest. Reaching a nipple, she flicked the erect nub with her tongue before biting down on it. A groan rumbled from deep within him as his hands came up to cup her head. The slide of his hands through her hair and along her scalp was an erotic touch in itself and she shivered in delight.

She licked and kissed her way down his abdomen, curling her tongue in and around his belly button.

“Sophia.” He muttered her name like a prayer.

She worked at the snap and zipper of his jeans, then pushed the jeans and boxers down and over his hips. Ethan lifted up to help, his cock rising up to brush along her cheek with the movement. Ignoring it, she moved on to his lower abdomen, nipping the skin there before licking the sting away.

“Sophia.” He tightened his hands in her hair, nudging her in the direction of his cock.

Refusing to take the hint, she worked her way to his inner thighs. His body hair tickling the sides of her face as her lips teased and tormented the flesh next to his balls. There he was damp with the sweat of desire, the scent of his arousal heavy in the air. His cock was bobbing, as if begging for her attention. His ragged breathing was loud in the dark room. Her breasts grew heavy, her pussy aching with desire. She sucked one of his balls into the warm cavern of her mouth, pulling on it gently before giving the other one the same treatment.

“Oh, baby, please.” His voice was low and husky with need. Answering need caused her stomach to flutter. Turning him on was turning her on.

Releasing his balls, she leaned back. From her position she could see nothing but the shadowed outline of his cock. And what a mighty fine specimen it was. Long, and thick as her wrist. No wonder she had felt a slight pinch at his entry yesterday.

“Please what.” She knew what he wanted. She was going to give it to him. First she wanted to hear him say it. Hear him ask for it. Make him beg, like he had made her.

“Suck me.”

“I am,” she teased, knowing what he was asking for. Thrilling at his tone.

“My cock. Suck my cock.” It was a plea. It was a demand. It was what she wanted to hear. Reaching up, she wrapped her hand around his steely length. Slowly, she stroked him up and down, testing his firmness, getting a feel for his cock. Rising up to her knees, she leaned forward and swiped the head like a lollipop.

“Suck it.” He sounded tortured. Once again he tightened his grip in her hair, as if he wanted to pull her mouth onto him, force himself deeper. “Stop playing and suck my cock.”

Opening wide, she pulled the bulbous head into her mouth, the slick fluid of his pre-come coating her tongue. Ethan groaned in agonized pleasure. Using the tip of her tongue to probe the slit of his cock, immediately more pre-come oozed into her mouth and she

felt a shudder wrack his body. An answering shudder worked its way through her as her sex lips grew slick and wet with arousal.

Breathing through her nose, Sophia relaxed her jaw muscles and bobbed her head down his length. All the way, with his cock knocking at the back of her throat, there was still a hand span left of his length.

“Yes. Yes. That’s it. All the way. Take me all the way.”

She pulled back until only the tip remained, then with one smooth movement she engulfed the length of him again. Up and down. Up and down. Her lips and hand working in perfect rhythm. His hips began to thrust until he was fucking her face, tunneling into her mouth as far as her hand would let him go. His seminal fluid leaked out in a continuous stream. He pumped faster as he neared completion. Sophia’s pussy pulsed in time with his thrust, hungry for the thrust of his cock.

One. Two. Three. His moves became more desperate as he neared his goal. “I’m there. If you want to...”

Sophia tightened her lips around him. Giving him her answer the only way she could.

“Oh, baby. That’s it. That’s it.” With the fourth thrust, he exploded. His cock pulsing, his sperm flooding her mouth, forcing her to swallow.

Letting his cock slide out of her mouth, she rested her face against his thigh. His taste still on her tongue, her lips numbed from being stretched so tight. Her heart was racing like mad in her chest, as if she had climaxed rather than Ethan. Her thighs were slick with her own arousal.

Ethan placed a gentle hand along her cheek. She could detect the faintest of tremors in his fingers. A smile of satisfaction curved her sore lips. To see that reaction was worth a throbbing, hungry pussy. In the dark, she could hear his breathing begin to slow. She felt him moving, heard the plop of his clothes hitting the floor.

“I’m glad we ate at Buddy’s.” The comment was odd, out of place. Leaning back, she looked up even though she couldn’t see his face.

“Why?”

“Because now we get to test the oyster theory.” With that, Ethan rolled over, pulling Sophia beneath him.

Chapter Seven

“Sophia. Earth to Sophia.” Sophia snapped to attention to see Jami waving a hand in front of her face.

“Boy, you were in another world.” Jami plopped down in the chair beside her. “I don’t know how you eat that mess.” Making a face at the Lean Cuisine box, she leaned the chair back on two legs and put the carton on the counter behind them. Sophia didn’t care, she wasn’t particularly hungry anyway. “So, what’s on your mind?”

For a minute she thought about lying and saying nothing. But they had been friends too long and Jami would know she was lying. “Ethan.” She didn’t know what else to say, the man had her tied in knots.

“Hmm. So, are you two back together?” Jami asked the question nonchalantly. Sophia frowned at her response. Nothing about Jami was nonchalant. For a moment Sophia couldn’t help but wonder at the attitude before shrugging it off as the weight of her own thoughts crashed down on her.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” If Ethan had his way the answer would be yes, they were back together. She wasn’t so sure. This time she needed to think things through, rather than just follow her heart like last time. That was what got it broken to begin with.

“Sooophhhiaaa.” The singsong quality of Jami’s voice snapped her back to attention. Looking up, she saw Jami grinning at her and shaking her curly red hair. “So I take it you worked out your problems.”

“Well. Not really.” Damn, she didn’t want to admit that. It wasn’t his fault. She hadn’t given him the chance, hadn’t wanted to hear his explanation. First out of anger, then because they had been busy with other things. A slight quiver shook her at the thought of those other things.

“You spend the weekend with the guy—” Jami cocked a red brow. “You did spend the weekend, right?” Sophia nodded. “And you never talked about what caused you to break up the first time! Does this make sense? No, it doesn’t.” Exasperation edged Jami’s tone. “What did you do all weekend?”

Sophia blushed from the roots of her hair down and could feel her ears burning, heat radiating off her face. A smile curled the corners of her mouth. Yes, she had done exactly what Jami was imagining she had done.

“Never mind. Stupid question. Good for you. I hope you had fun.” She paused, obviously waiting for Sophia to say something. “Well, give up it, girl. Spill the beans. Has he got what it takes?” Impatience colored the demand.

Sophia glanced at Jami out of the corner of her eye. Jamie leaned forward, arms braced on the table, eager for details. Her friend’s face had the look of a dog begging for a treat. Any minute she expected her to roll over, sit up, and beg.

“It was... I don’t know... Incredible. Mind-blowing.” She shook her head in amazement. “I didn’t intend to sleep with him. Hell, I was trying to throw him out the apartment.” Not that it had been much of an attempt.

“Mmmm. Yummy. He got all macho, didn’t he?” Jami licked her lips and wiggled her brows.

“Yeah, he did.” And she had sunk like a rock in water. Just thinking about it caused a

tendrils of heat to curl in her stomach and a throb between her legs.

“I won’t ask for the gory details. Just tell me one thing. Is he as good as he looks like he’d be?”

Was he as good as he looks? Oh yeah. Her lips curled in a Cheshire cat smile. “Better. The best. I screamed so much my voice was hoarse.” That was the honest truth. The things they had done to each other, with each other. She had never dreamed she could be so wild, so uninhibited. A little shudder of remembrance rocked through her and her nipples tingled.

“Well, no wonder you’ve been sitting around in a daze. So, are you seeing him tonight?” Jami sat with her elbow on the table, chin propped up on the palm of her hand. Sophia could tell she wasn’t going anywhere.

“No, I’m not.” Closing her eyes, she waited for the question that was sure to come.

“Why not? He’s a dentist, he doesn’t work overtime.”

“Because I told him I needed time to think. I’d just had the best sex in my entire life. I’m not ready to make any type of decision.”

“Sophia Love! After the way you have pined over this man, are you going to sit there and tell me you need to think it through? What is there to think about? You love him!”

“I know that! But I need time to think.” Those words were ripped out of her chest, painful and throbbing. She couldn’t quell the doubts, the residual anger. Plus a tiny, small, mean part of her wanted him to feel the insecurity she had felt.

Jami sat back in shock. “I’m not going to say anything. Your life. Your mistake.” Throwing her hands up, Jami got up from the table to leave.

“But let me say this. If you love him and you want to have some kind of future with him, then you—”

“I thought you weren’t going to say anything.” Like she could restrain herself. Jami always shared her opinion, whether or not the recipient wanted it.

Jami made a face, causing Sophia to laugh. “Just this and nothing else. We all get hurt when we love someone. It’s part of the package. You love, you get hurt. Sadly, the ones you love the most can hurt you the most. But does that mean you shouldn’t fall in love? No, it means we learn how to forgive and forget.” On that, she left the room.

Sighing, Sophia propped her chin in her hand. Jami’s interruption hadn’t helped her. Instead it caused more doubts. Doubts she didn’t need when there was a choice to be made.

Were she and Ethan back together? Were they a couple? Did a weekend of incredible sex equal a relationship? If the answer was yes, then that led to a whole other set of questions. If he told her he cared, would she even believe him?

This weekend she’d made love to him, whereas he’d probably had a weekend of great sex. Born and raised in a small southern town, she was brought up with certain ideals. One of which was that sex was not a recreational sport. It was a natural part of loving someone and wanting to be with that person, a special, sacred act between two people in love. Though she hadn’t been a virgin, she’d had only one lover other than Ethan, a fellow med student.

The relationship had lasted most of her college years, ending only one semester before graduation. She’d loved Mark, they’d discussed marriage. The relationship had been comfortable, the sex pleasant. Being with him had been like being with a very dear friend. Thankfully, that was something they had both finally clued in on. That’s what

they were, dear friends. She had felt none of the overwhelming lust for Mark that she'd felt with Ethan. Where Mark had lit a warm fire, Ethan had ignited an inferno. He'd touched her and she'd gone up in flames, burning every thought, every protest, out of her head.

She'd known the minute she'd met Ethan that he was *the One*. He'd smiled at her and her heart was his for the taking. Up until then she'd laughed and pooh-pooed people claiming to have fallen in love at first sight. She wasn't laughing now.

The question was, did she want to risk getting hurt again? Did she want to stay in a relationship with a man that had fled the one and only time she had said she loved him? Sure, he had come back, but no avowals of love had crossed his lips, just an apology and a plea for a second chance. So a choice had to be made. What would it be? She was at war with herself.

In her heart she wondered, did she dare continue a relationship with him? Did she have the courage and strength to wait until he fell in love with her? Would he ever return her feelings? Her heart said yes, give him time. While her pride warned her to get out before she got hurt even more. Why wait for him to fall in love with her? He either did or he didn't. If she wanted companionship and trust, buy a dog. Great sex? Buy a vibrator. One she could houstrain, the other she could turn on and off at will.

Damn it. She was driving herself crazy. This was stupid. Slapping her hands on the table, Sophia stood. She needed to get back to work.

* * * *

Ethan stared out his bedroom window. The night sky was clear and cloudless and sparkled with the light of a millions of stars. The moon was a large silver orb, high in the sky. Yet he saw none of it. In his mind's eye was the image of Sophia. A multitude of images. Sophia smiling, laughing, frowning in concentration. Every expression on her face as beautiful and compelling as the next. Ethan had dated a lot of women, some incredibly beautiful women, yet none of them held a candle to Sophia.

Monday morning he'd awakened early. Sophia had been a warm bundle, snuggled against his back. Lying there, he'd soaked in the comfort of being with her. When she'd shifted in her sleep, he'd rolled with her. Head propped up on an elbow, he'd studied her. No question, she was a beautiful woman. Smooth, blemish-free skin, soft as a rose petal. A thin straight nose, long enough it could almost be considered pointed. Sculpted cheekbones and arched brows. Pink lips, soft and full, slightly parted in sleep. He'd run a gentle forefinger along her bottom lip, testing its velvety texture. A tangle of blonde hair had spread out behind her. Yet she was far more beautiful on the inside. Warm, giving, she drew people to her like a magnet. It was that internal beauty that kept him tied to her. Made him love her. Amazingly, stupidly, it had taken him losing her to admit it to himself. He'd marveled at his own idiocy and vowed he'd tell her he loved her the minute her eyes opened.

When her eyes had opened, he'd lost all nerve. Emotional coward that he was, he'd kissed her good morning and made love to her, never telling her how he felt. After showering, he left to go back to his place and dress while she had gone on to work. Neither of them had made any declarations. Instead, she'd asked for time to think, and he'd reluctantly agreed.

Sighing, Ethan turned away from the window. His gaze landed on his rumpled bed.

The bed he was having such difficulty sleeping in. The bed he wanted to see Sophia sleeping in. Wanted to see her lying there naked, brown eyes warm with invitation, arms open for him. For a moment his heart stopped when he thought he might not ever see her there. He hadn't spoken to her since they'd made love. He'd called, but she had yet to return any of them. This was but a small taste of what he'd done to her and it hurt unbearably. If he hadn't known her so well he would have sworn she was getting back at him. But that wasn't Sophia's style. She was too empathic. Her name fit her personality so well. Sophia Love. Dr. Love. When they first met he called her the Love Doctor. It had been in jest, at the time he had no idea how true that moniker was. She had healed his bruised heart.

A heart that he hadn't risked since graduating from college. Chapel Hill was the only university in the state offering a DDS program. So off to Orange County he'd gone. Young, sex-starved and stupid. It hadn't occurred to him that girls would deliberately be on the look out for dental students as potential husbands. He'd had no idea that some would see him for his future potential earning ability. Instead, he'd dived right into the social scene and fallen in love with the first girl he slept with. And the second. The third had cured him—but only after she left him to marry a man who was going to be a “real” doctor. Besides, she had gone on to explain, he still had another year in school while the “real” doctor was graduating in the spring. That had opened his eyes and hardened his heart. From then on he'd dated many and often, never settling for one. His motto, *Keep it causal*. It had been a good motto. A fun one, easy to live by. Until Sophia.

It hadn't taken Sophia long to blow that adage out of the water. By the third date, he'd known he was getting in deep. Yet he couldn't stay away from her. Since he hadn't been able to give her up, he'd decided not to let his emotions go any deeper. The easiest way? Refusing to meet her family. It hadn't worked. He fell in love with her anyway. When she had the courage to say what he couldn't, he'd run. The next months, he'd gone out determined to force her out of his mind, determined to replace her with someone else. It hadn't worked. He'd gone to bars with a few friends, hit the party scene hard. Each night had been a disaster. Standing there in the midst of all those people, he'd never felt more alone in his life. A woman had come up to him and struck up a conversation. Half-heartedly, he'd tried to listen. To laugh at her jokes, smile and nod when needed. But it had been fake. He'd been fake. At the end of the night he'd gone home alone. For a while, he'd been pissed. Angry at Sophia for tying him up in knots, and furious with himself for letting her. But as the weeks had gone by, his anger had disappeared. Slowly, his head acknowledged what his heart had been saying. He didn't want to live without her, realizing it hurt more not to be with her than anything else.

Shucking off his shorts, he climbed, naked, into his bed. Lying on his back, hands behind his head, he stared up at the ceiling. God, he'd knew he'd hurt her. Knew he'd have to make it up to her.

If things had gone as he planned...

Nothing had gone as planned. He hadn't spoken to her since Monday morning. She was dodging phone calls again. He'd let her. He figured he deserved a little payback. At least he hoped it was just a little payback because he didn't know what he would do if she didn't want him anymore. If she didn't love him anymore.

Rolling over onto his side, he bunched up the pillow. She still loved him, Ethan reassured himself. She never would have made love to him if she didn't. She never would

have uttered it before if she didn't love him deeply. Sophia wasn't the type of woman to give her love lightly, nor take it back easily.

Tomorrow. One way or another, all of this was going to end tomorrow. He was tired of waiting. It was time to move forward.

Chapter Eight

Sophia hit the delete button on her answering machine. Ethan had left another message. He had left one every day this week. Coward that she was, she hadn't returned a single call. Each day the messages had gotten a little shorter. Not angry, not demanding, but firmer, a warning that he was going to talk to her. Today had been the shortest. *Call me*. That was all. Call me. The tone had been different. Final. It was a warning that he wasn't going to let her hide anymore, her time was up.

Strangely, she felt a sense of relief at the silent ultimatum. Time was up, she was tired of running. Tired of wavering. By avoiding him, was she cutting her nose off to spite her face? The answer was simple. Yes, she was. He made a mistake. He was going to make other mistakes. She was going to make mistakes too. What was her excuse? Pride and fear that he'd hurt her again. That he hadn't declared his love when she did? It hurt. It was embarrassing. He'd avoided her, hurting her more. But had he done anything that was so unforgivable? No, and pride was a silly reason to turn away love. Did she want to end a relationship because he hurt her feelings? No.

The best thing she could do was call him. Have the talk he wanted to have last weekend. Ask him why he ran. Tell him how much it had hurt. She had nothing to lose and everything to gain. But first she needed a shower to wash away the smell of cats and dogs. Eau de animal was not the most alluring of perfumes.

A knock on the front door stopped her before she could do more than kick off her shoes. Shoulders sagging, she headed to answer the door. It would be her mother, or an aunt, or a cousin. As much as she loved her family, and welcomed their unannounced visits, she really didn't want any company tonight. Nor did she want to have to answer any questions about Ethan. And there would be questions. Her mother would have made sure everyone knew about him. She wasn't ready to tell her family anything until things were right between her and Ethan.

A knock came again, this time harder, more forceful. Whoever was knocking was all but beating on the door. Frowning, Sophia put her hand on the knob.

"Sophia. I know you're in there. I'm not leaving until we talk." Ethan's voice was muffled, but the words distinct. So was the tone.

Heart pounding, Sophia froze, unable to move. Her mind raced. She'd planned on talking to him. Planned on settling this with him once and for all, but he'd caught her off guard. She hadn't had time to plan what she was going to say, or do. A hand went to her hair. Nor had she had the opportunity to bathe and fix up. Now she was going to have to see him without her makeup, hair pulled back into a ponytail, and smelling like she'd been around animals all day. Not the alluring picture she'd planned.

"Sophia, open the door." His voice softened, became cajoling. Some sixth sense must have told him she was standing on the other side.

Sophia opened the door. He stood with his arm propped up on the doorframe and it seemed like he filled the doorway. Dressed in denims and a tight white tee shirt, he oozed sex appeal. His stance leant him an aggressive air, the predatory look in his eyes adding to it. She trailed her gaze over him. The jeans were old and worn, and hung low on his hips. The tee shirt was old too, well-worn and thin. Shrunken by too many trips to the

washer, it molded to his chest and shoulders, outlining the lean muscle that lay beneath. Lean muscle and smooth skin that she had felt and tasted, that had slid against her body and pressed into her and rocked her to ecstasy and beyond. She shivered in remembrance, her nipples tightening and tingling, butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

Something in her face must have given her thoughts away. He stepped closer until barely an inch separated them. Her nostrils flared as his scent overwhelmed her. Tilting her head back, she looked up into his face. Eyes narrowed, lips flattened in determination, he was intimidating. Her heart began to gallop in her chest. She was getting excited. "Ethan. I was just about to call you." Her voice was breathy, faint.

His lips twisted in a semblance of a smile. "I bet you were."

Swallowing, she took a step back. He advanced forward until he was completely in the apartment. "I was. It's time we talked." She definitely felt like she was at a disadvantage. Taken off guard, she didn't know what else to say.

Ethan took another step forward, forcing her farther back into the apartment. Not taking his eyes off her face, he shut the door behind him. The click of the lock was loud in the silence of the room. Wow. This was definitely side of Ethan she had never seen.

"We'll talk later." His voice brooked no arguments, yet she felt like she owed herself one.

"But I have some things I need to say." Sophia held a hand up, a pitiful attempt to keep him away.

He grasped her hand with his and pulled her to him. It was not a fast or violent motion. She could have pulled away. Instead, she let him pull her to him. Let him take over.

"I know a better way to communicate. We'll use words later." His voice had deepened and it vibrated through her, causing nerve endings to snap to attention. A weakness seeped through her, a languor. When her body touched his, she made no protest, but lay against him willingly, even as some far corner of her mind scolded her. She shouldn't like him taking control like this. Yet, it felt so good to rest against him, to feel his arms around her again. To let him take over.

*

Ethan felt the give in her body, the slight relaxation of her muscles. She was his. If they couldn't talk, then they would communicate with their bodies. He would show her with his hands, his lips, and his tongue, what was in his heart.

Cupping each side of her head in his hands, he pulled her to him. His mouth closed over hers in a ravenous kiss. He kissed her greedily, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. Curling his tongue about hers, velvet sliding along velvet. He pulled her tongue back into his mouth, to suckle it. She collapsed against him, her weight welcomed. He could feel her breasts pressing into his chest, her abdomen pushing against his erection.

Ethan began to rotate his hips, brushing his cock against her stomach. Pulling his head back, he looked down into her face. Eyes closed, her skin was flushed, her lips red and swollen. He tightened his grip on each side of her head, and she opened her eyes. In their smoky depths he saw desire but he wanted to see more than simple desire. He wanted to see love and forgiveness.

He kissed her again, pouring out his aggression and frustration. The kiss was not gentle. She rose up to meet him, as if she, too, wanted to send out her pent-up emotions in the physicality of their kiss. Their lips ground together, their tongues dueling madly.

Letting go of her head, he slid his hands down her torso, then up to cup her breasts. Their peaks were ridged and pointed. He tweaked them between his thumbs and forefingers. Sophia whimpered in response and pressed tightly to him.

Letting go of her breasts, he grasped the bottom of her shirt and, breaking the kiss, pulled it up and over her head. The shirt was forgotten as he stared down at her chest. Her breasts were cupped in a white bra. The mounds pushed up into prominence, her nipples thrusting against the satin material. Slipping his hands into the cups, he tested the warm weight of them. They fit nicely into his palms, a delightful handful. Pulling them free of the bra cups, he studied the contrast of his rough, sun-darkened flesh against the pale creaminess of hers. It was an erotic sight and he could feel his cock pulse and throb. Her nipples were a light pink, tight and begging for his kiss. Swooping down, he pulled one into his mouth. He laved the tip with his tongue before suckling strongly, pressing the tip up against the roof of his mouth.

Sophia squirmed against him, thrusting in a silent demand for more. Cupping the back of each thigh he pulled her up until she could wrap her legs around his waist. Jerking his head back, he stared down at her. Seeing she was as eager as he, he backed her against the wall. Leaning heavily against her, he captured her lips with his. Then he began to thrust, dry-fucking her against the wall.

*

Sophia dug her nails into his shoulders, and using them as leverage, began to match his rhythm. Each thrust was a direct hit against her clit. Lightning coursed along her skin. She could feel her sex pulsing, throbbing. She was wet and getting wetter by the minute. She wanted to come. She wanted him inside her. She wanted to feel him pounding against her.

Tearing her lips away, she threw her head back and moaned. "Fuck me."

Opening his mouth, he licked the pulse beating at the base of her neck. Tangling her fingers in the hair at the back of his neck, she pulled his head back. "Fuck me."

Turning, Ethan strode down the hall to the bedroom and over to the bed. Dropping her onto the mattress, she lay sprawled before him. He loomed over her, looking savage in his need. Quickly, efficiently, he began working at the snap of her jeans. Within seconds he had them undone and his hand slid in and cupped her. She could feel her moisture pooling against his palm. He thrust a thick finger up and into her, causing her to clench her muscles around it, wanting more. Eyes closed, she began rubbing herself against him, the rough texture of his palm scraping her clit, pushing her closer to climax. When he thrust a second finger inside, she shattered. Her vaginal muscles clamped down, contracting.

She wasn't aware of him pulling free of her or stripping her jeans from her. But she felt air cool against her wet flesh. She heard the snap of his jeans button and the rasp of the zipper, the tear of a condom wrapper. Rough hands grasped her thighs and pulled her up to the edge of the bed. She wrapped her legs around his waist. This time there was no cloth between them. His cock slid between her slick folds.

"Open your eyes." Rough, guttural, it was a command. Sophia opened her eyes. She looked up into his face. It was tight with need, the look in his eyes was desperate. "Tell me you love me." Sophia jerked in response. His hands tightened on her hips. There would be bruises there tomorrow. "Tell me you love me." His eyes were burning into hers. She felt her heart stop and then begin to pound, in fear, in excitement.

“No.” She shook her head. “Fuck me.” She tried to impale herself on him. He wouldn’t let her, holding her still.

“You love me.” The words were uttered through clenched teeth.

Yes, she did. With all her heart. But she also wanted to fuck him, Right now. She wanted to feel the thick slide of his cock. Her body was demanding love later, fuck now. “Damn you, fuck me.” She couldn’t impale herself, so she rubbed herself up and down the length of his erection. Her nether lips were slick, and the friction was incredible. From that alone she could make herself come.

Giving in, Ethan guided the head of his penis to her opening. Then he thrust in. Sophia screamed. Gripping her hips he began to slam into her, his rhythm fast and furious. Her breasts jiggled with the force of his thrust. Suddenly, he stopped, his cockhead barely inside.

“Tell me you love me.”

“No.” Sophia didn’t know why she was fighting him. Fighting herself.

He rammed into her three, four times and then stopped, buried to the hilt. “Tell me you love me.”

“I love you.” She said the words, unable to fight any longer.

It was enough. Holding her hips he once again began to slam into her. Again and again and again, he thrust deeply, burying himself in her. It was too much. Sophia clawed the comforter, twisting the material in her hands. Then she exploded, her whole body stiff and trembling. Ethan was right behind her. Head thrown back, he roared his release.

*

Ethan fell forward on top of Sophia. Exhausted, replete, he didn’t want to move, but her gasping breaths told him he had to. Rolling over, he sat up, and then stood. Sophia stayed as he left her, legs draped over the edge of the bed, arms thrown out, eyes closed. He quickly divested himself of his condom and crawled back into bed. This time he lay back against the pillows, and pulled Sophia up against him.

The longer they lay there in silence, the more Ethan began to realize he might have won the battle but not the war. Satisfaction turned cold. He’d forced her to confess her feelings. He’d wanted them freely given. A queasy feeling lurked in the bottom of his stomach. With gentle fingers, he tilted her face up until he could stare into her eyes. The expression in them was unreadable, her thoughts hidden.

“I love you.” He blurted the confession in stark, desperate tones.

The confession made him feel good and terrified him at the same time. He never realized the vulnerability, the amount of trust it took to make such a confession. His heart pounding, he waited for her reaction. In this second she could crush him ... as he had crushed her. As her silence continued, he began to fear he had damaged her love, her trust, beyond repair. Swallowing, he decided to bare all.

“I love you. I loved you from the beginning. There’s not been a moment I haven’t loved you. I was just too blind, too stupid, too scared to acknowledge how I felt. I would give anything to be able to take back that night, to have you tell me you love me again, because I wouldn’t run this time. This time I’d tell you how much I love you.”

She was silent for so long, Ethan felt his heart begin to sink. It wasn’t enough. He’d hurt her too badly. Only now did he understand the courage it took to bare your heart. Now he could understand the hurt of being rejected and that silence was as much a rejection as the words themselves. Then she looked up. He saw acceptance, forgiveness.

He felt emotion well up in his throat. He buried his face in her throat and hugged her to him. Breathing deeply, her perfume surrounded him, filled him.

“I love you, Ethan James.” A gentle hand stroked through his hair.

He rolled over, trapping her beneath him. “I didn’t think I would ever hear you say that again.” Fuck, his throat was tight. He swallowed with difficulty. He owed her an explanation. He’d give her one. Tomorrow. Not tonight. Tonight he wanted to rejoice in her forgiveness, her love. “I love you, Sophia Love. My own personal love doctor.”

Sophia looped her arms around his neck. “Let’s play doctor.”

Epilogue

“Whatever you do, don’t let them intimidate you or push you around,” Sophia warned Ethan. Her family had the tendency to be overwhelming.

They were in the car headed to her mother’s house. It was the first time they’d left the apartment since Thursday afternoon. Sophia figured if they didn’t leave, her family would all probably show up on her doorstep.

“I’m not nervous,” Ethan reassured her.

Yeah, right. She could tell that by the death grip he had on the steering wheel.

“Good. My family’s going to love you.”

“I hope so.” His voice hinted at the nerves he had denied feeling. Poor dear. She almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

“Mama, Aunt Jo, and Aunt Bea love men. They’re going to spoil you rotten. It’s going to take me weeks to undo the damage.” That wasn’t an exaggeration. They would pet him and dote on him. Tell him how handsome he was. How smart. How strong. Their southern drawl would be thick as molasses and twice as sweet. He’d leave feeling like a king.

Ethan picked up her hand and, keeping his eye on the road, kissed the back of it. Then he placed it on his knee. Sophia squeezed his leg. Intrigued by the firm muscle beneath her hand, she began to explore. Stroking and squeezing her way up his thigh, stopping only when she came across the ridge of his penis.

Ethan shifted restlessly. “What are you doing?” There was a smile in his voice.

Duh. He knew good and well what she was doing. “Playing.” That and getting his mind off meeting her family. She gave him a firm squeeze and started working at his zipper. Plus she loved to tease the man. He always responded so quickly.

“No. I’m not going to your mother’s house with a hard-on.” Covering her hand with his, he halted her progress with the zipper.

Pouting, Sophia pulled her hand away. “You’re no fun.”

Ethan shot her a look. “Wait till I get you home. I’ll give you more fun than you can handle.”

“Ooo, promise?” She gave him her best vamp look.

“Oh yeah. Now be good,” he admonished.

Noting how close they were to her mother’s, she flipped down the sun visor and checked her lipstick. Everything looked good. “Turn here. It’s the second driveway on the left.”

Ethan pulled up into a driveway full of cars. Cutting the engine, he sat there, staring up at the house, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. Wow, he really was nervous. “They don’t bite.” His nervousness was starting to wear on her and she was starting to worry herself.

Turning, he grasped her by the back of the neck and pulled her to him. She went willingly. “Give me a kiss for luck.”

“You don’t any need luck.” If anybody needed any luck, it was her. She was already dreading the stories her family was going to tell him. If her mama got out the photo album, Sophia vowed to grab Ethan’s hand and make a run for it.

“For courage.” His grip tightened, and he made as if to pull her closer. Sophia put a hand on his chest to keep some room between them. Right now there was guaranteed to be any number of eyes peering out, watching them.

“You don’t need any courage either.” She rolled her eyes. Please. The big baby was acting like her family was the firing squad or something “Because you love me.”

Now that was a better reason. Who cared who was watching? “Okay.” Leaning forward the last few inches, she brushed her lips across his. It was a light, soft, gentle kiss—for about two seconds. Steely arms wrapped around her, crushing her against a rock-hard chest. Taking over, his tongue dove in to play with hers.

He broke the kiss. “You ready?” His lips moved against hers as he spoke.

“Yeah.” The question was, was he ready?

Sighing, he let her go. “Here goes.”

As he circled the car to open her door, Sophia used the time to do a quick fix on her lipstick. When he helped her out of the car, she noticed the lipstick smears on his lips.

“Wait.” Rummaging around in her purse, she located a napkin. “Let me get the lipstick off your face. You don’t want to go in here wearing my lipstick.” He’d never hear the end of it if he did that. “There. Now you’re ready.”

He put his arm around her shoulder. They walked up the drive to the front porch. Her mother’s house was a white two-story with a wraparound porch. They stepped on the lower step in unison. The screen door squeaked as her mother came out of the house, a wide smile across her face. “Come on in. We’re dying to meet you.”

The End

About the Author:

A native of North Carolina, Jayelle has called both the coast and the mountains home. No matter the locale, reading had been a fundamental part of her life. Seeing as she spent so much time reading, family and friends continually asked when she planned on becoming a writer. Finally, her husband and mother bought a laptop and ordered her to write *something*. She did.

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