



FREYA'S BOWER PRESENTS

The Art of Losing

LISA TROY

The Art of Losing

by

Lisa Troy



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For information on the cover illustration and design, contact valerie121@aol.com
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Dedication

*To my Mom, who raised me to believe I could grasp the stars if only I reached
for them.*

Chapter One

“Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one... Happy New Year!”

It was official. Nothing beat being single—and dateless—on New Year’s Eve. My heart clenched at the sight of my best friend, Becky, and her boyfriend. Like every other couple in the hip San Fran establishment, they kissed with obvious abandon. Laughter echoed around me while bliss brimmed over in the vast warehouse-turned-night-club. The fact I lacked the ability to share the sentiment isolated me even more from everyone. I flinched at the sharp cut of envy.

Damn you, Evan. If only—

Someone bumped into me, the buzz of champagne and happiness fogging his mind no doubt, and cut my tirade short. Liquid splashed on my arm, and horror put all my functions on pause when I looked down. Oh, no. He. Didn’t.

Yet sure enough, a light beige stain marred my previously snowy white dress just over my left breast. I jerked my head up to blast him for his clumsiness and demand he pay for the dry cleaner’s, but he’d already walked away.

The offender didn’t apologize, didn’t even give me an *I’m sorry* glance, simply kept going as if he hadn’t ruined my new dress. His retreating back mocked me. Dared me to knock some manners into him.

That did it.

Red-hot, OJ Simpson fury scorched the last, pitiful remnants of holiday cheer in me, and I stormed after the rude drunk. Hell, I’d wish Happy New Year to Becky later. The too-in-a-hurry-to-care man would hear a piece of my mind whether he remembered my outburst in the morning or not.

Following him was easier said than done. I almost lost him as I shoved my way through the crushing mass of bodies. The music blared from the speakerphones once more, and everyone was grinding together to the latest Timberlake tune. A jerk I’d never met grabbed me by the waist and twirled me around. I yelped in surprise—or maybe it was disbelief. He must’ve thought I would enjoy him pawing me in the pretense of dancing.

What was it with drunken men tonight?

A well-placed jab with my elbow earned me a grunt and my freedom. I turned just in time to spot my target heading for the side entrance. Adrenaline pumped through my veins.

I would get my man.

He still had his back to me. The wide Armani-covered expanse that hid him from me added to my frustration. The time had come to put a face to my dark-haired enemy. My heels must have stabbed holes in the club tiles I was so riled up for a fight.

I drew closer. He covered both ears with his hands. Mmm...good. He was out of ammo.

“I love you too,” he said before snapping his cell shut. The less than fine specimen of XY genes was lucky he’d finished his conversation. Hardly in a charitable mood, I would have cut it short.

“Are you blind or something?” I wish I could say I yelled loud enough to heard over the music, but, truth be told, where we stood it wasn’t necessary.

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Yep, I acted like a shrew—a little voice in the back of my mind even told me so—but it was New Year's Eve, and the person supposed to kiss me at midnight was probably having a sexstalcious time with the same woman I'd found him in bed with on Christmas Eve.

I had a *carte blanche* to be bitchy.

My nemesis of the moment didn't even turn. Un-freaking-believable. He ignored me a second time. "Hey," I shouted louder.

His shoulders tensed for the briefest of seconds, the only indication he'd heard me now. The fact didn't register while I hunted him down, but he was tall. I mean *really* tall, in terms of six-three or more. I stood behind him in my highest Jimmy Choo's, and still I didn't reach his shoulders. He did a slow turn, and my mouth would've dropped open if I could move a single muscle.

Leave it to me to go Glenn Close on the hunkiest man in the place.

Piercing, moss green eyes stared back at me, the color clear even in the dimly lit hallway. His Roman nose shouted of authority and those lips...I could easily spend a minute or ten learning their taste, discovering if they were as soft as they looked. If those lips delivered on the sin they promised. My gaze dropped to his collarbone. The top three buttons of his white shirt were unbuttoned granting me a teasing view of his bare upper chest. Did he have hair lower? Lots of it or just a thin line that trailed down to—

Dammit, what are you thinking?

I did a mental shake of my head. This guy had all but stepped over me, doused me with alcohol, and then left without uttering even a lame apology. For frigging sake, it was the holidays. People were supposed to be all nice and friendly, and I wouldn't let him off because he looked like a movie star. He was that hot. Resisting the urge to tap my foot, I glared at him.

A crooked grin creased his face and threatened to eradicate my resolve. God, it should be illegal for men to have dimples—even if it was only one.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand what you mean."

That axed whatever lustful feelings dared to make an appearance. I smiled my "one second before detonation" smile. "You ran over me with your Bigfoot hooves, that's what I mean." His blank stare fueled my anger, and really, I didn't need the encouragement. "Back there on the dance floor," I pointed backwards with my thumb, "you bumped into me."

His brows furrowed. "I'm sorry."

The parroting behavior didn't help his case much. "Well, that's just too little too late. It's New Year's. You can't go around assaulting people the way you did, barging into their personal space without even having the decency to apologize. What if you broke one of my heels? How would I hop my way off the crowded dance floor without breaking a leg? And...."

He smiled. There went my train of thought.

"What?" I asked through clenched teeth.

"Nothing." He continued to smile at me. The goofy smirk was the last straw, and yes, it seemed I'd stashed away a lot of pent-up fury. I wonder why....

I stabbed a finger into his chest—his very *hard* chest. "You're not only rude, you're hopeless. That's all I needed to end this awful night: an arrogant jerk mocking me on top of ruining my favorite dress."

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My little speech wiped the smile off his face. Ha! Okay, so I lied about the favorite part, but he deserved it.

I didn't have time to rest on my laurels though, because, in one swift stride, he closed the small distance between us. I had to crane my neck to look at him, and dammit, you really can't deliver a decent glare from a low vantage point. He managed to suck all the fun out of my blow-up.

The gorgeous ass leaned down until we stood nose to nose. "I wasn't mocking you." His deep voice sent an arrow of excitement down my spine. "I apologized—belatedly I admit," he added when I would have protested. *Dammit*. "Your tantrum was just too cute to resist."

My mouth fell open then. The hunk thought I was *cute*? Great, another blow to my already tattered ego. He didn't notice me as a woman but as a child. Straightening my shoulders, I chose to focus on the least hurtful part of what he said.

"Tantrum?" I narrowed my eyes.

I didn't do tantrums. My first-grade students throw one of those when they don't get to draw with crayons or sit next to their "bestest" friend.

He gave me that crooked grin again, and shrugged. "Tantrum, hissy fit, outburst...take your pick. You were very cute." He finished by flicking my nose with his index finger. *Flicking*.

I gaped at him, unsure whether to be offended or very offended. Before I'd decided, he pulled back a bit. "You said I ruined your dress too? Ah, yes, I must've spilled some of my champagne on you." His silkily delivered words brushed over my skin even as his index finger brushed over the stain.

An image of him going all the way, his hand closing around my breast, thumb sweeping over my hard nipple took over my brain. Oh God, it was already hard, awaiting his touch. Heat suffused my face, and breathing became impossible. I didn't get aroused that easily. I knew I didn't. Besides, he could have anyone he wanted. Women far more beautiful than me danced mere feet away. Why would he settle for a five-foot-two chubby nondescript, one he thought was cute?

Men don't hit on cute women; they hit on sexy ones.

Shit. He was toying with me, and I fell for it like a dimwitted blonde. Sure, I had the right shade, but dimwitted? I think not.

"You're an ass," I hissed and did a one eighty and walked away, too distraught by the conclusion my avalanche of thoughts brought me to. Why should I have stayed and showed him the error of his ways anyhow? He wasn't my problem to fix. To make matters worse, he looked at me and saw a six-year-old. Granted, my reaction hadn't been the definition of mature, but he had no right to judge me. He didn't know the hell I'd been through these past few days.

It was written in post-break-up *Godiva's* and margaritas: I, Emily Stone, could not take any more shit from the male populace. Evan had used up the final, pitiful quota.

Okay, I admit part of my reasoning for walking away was because I enjoy having the last word. I just seem to always have an answer ready, and if I don't blurt out the words, they'll dance around in my head all day long. It's not some innate need to come out on top. Honest.

Although if I were on top of him, I'd come for sure.

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The thought crept in my head, and a new wave of heat pooled between my legs. Dammit, what was wrong with me? I chased my arousal away by repeating to myself that he was an ass. I had no reason to think about tangled sheets and sweat-slicked, naked bodies.

I'd almost reached the edge of the dance floor when a large palm wrapped around my arm stopping my tactical retreat. Next thing I knew, I stared into the very handsome, very *angry* face of the man whose life's purpose for the last few minutes seemed to be to keep me off-kilter.

"That's the second time you've resorted to name-calling. The first one I let go because you're obviously upset."

I narrowed my eyes and tried to break free. He refused to let go. "How noble of you. Should I offer my eternal gratitude?"

He ignored my snide comment. "But now you're escalating. Do you think *maybe* you're overreacting about a simple run-in that happens all the time in clubs?"

I opened my mouth to blast him with the full force of my wrath and to tell him that no, not all men walked all over me, in clubs or out of them, but...wasn't that what Evan had done? Without giving a damn how much I would get hurt, he'd cheated on me six months before our wedding.

I should just tattoo a welcome sign on my forehead so everyone would know they could use me as their personal doormat.

Every bit of energy seeped out of me, and I suddenly felt too small—the way the last deflated balloon at the end of a birthday party withers into a wrinkly little ball. I ripped into this...this stranger for something harmless when I hadn't said a word to Evan, just turned tail and ran.

"You're right," I whispered just loud enough to be heard over the music. "I'm the one who's sorry."

I dared to glance once at his face, but not long enough to notice his expression. Even though I more than deserved his contempt, I couldn't handle it now. I would have backed away and left, but his hand under my chin stopped me. His fingers were warm, his touch familiar even though it shouldn't be.

"What's this?" His soft voice almost smoothed over the hard edges of my emotional state. He nudged my chin up, his intense gaze on my face. "Why the tears?"

Oh, God. The pity in his expression stung worse than his contempt. Would there be no end to my humiliation tonight?

I turned my head to the side, trying to break our connection, yet the pull remained, beckoning me to give in—to what I didn't know, and that scared me. He must've guessed I was a second away from fleeing with *Road Runner* speed because he placed his hands on my waist, strong enough to assert his unwillingness to release me, but not enough to force me to stay.

"Don't go. Think of my reputation with the ladies if someone I know sees you run away from me crying."

I chuckled. "Just tell them how nuts I am, and you'll be fine."

He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, his finger granting the shell a fleeting caress. "I wouldn't say nuts." His drawl warmed me in places a drawl had no right being. "I'd say it doesn't take much to get you heated up." Despite my best effort

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for them not to, my cheeks blazed. “But personally, I like that in a woman,” he purred, his lips all but touching my ear.

Words escaped me. A beat passed, two.

“What, no comeback, kitten?”

Compelled, I lifted my eyes to his, and then couldn’t look away. We stared at each other for a few seconds, which turned into endless minutes. His gaze lowered, fastening on my lips, and they tingled even though he didn’t actually touch them.

Yet. God, please, just one—

“How forgetful of me,” he said in a husky tone that should be reserved only for the bedroom. “Happy New Year.”

His mouth brushed mine in a gentle, fleeting caress. We’d never kissed before. Still, something told me this man didn’t do things in half measures, and this was just a mere sample. Right as his lips warmed mine, he pulled away. I bit back a very inappropriate whimper of frustration and opened my eyes to find him watching me, gauging my reaction. His mouth still hovered a breath from mine, waiting for a sign to take more.

Against my better judgment, I swept my tongue over my lower lip, desperate to know what he tasted like. Mmm, he tasted addictive.

He must’ve taken the action to be a green light because he fused my lips to his and unleashed the storm I sensed brewed inside of him. A low groan rumbled through his chest. One of his hands came up behind my neck to hold me prisoner, the other tightened on my waist. He feasted on my lips—sucking, nipping, and then licking the sting away, until I became restless. Heaven help me, but I needed a deeper connection. I parted my lips and, with a flick of my tongue, invited him inside.

He invaded my mouth with the taste of champagne and man. I struggled to breathe under his onslaught. Never had I been kissed this way before—and I’d been engaged for six months. This stranger made love to my mouth with a passion no other man had ever showed me.

Stranger....

The realization quickly cooled my rising lust. I must be out of my mind, kissing a man I didn’t know from Adam with such passion. Someone who only moments ago had told someone *I love you too* on the phone.

Stupid, stupid, Em. When will you learn?

I managed to wedge my hands between us and pushed him back. The element of surprise must have worked in my favor because I freed myself. Not giving him time to react, I slapped his face hard and ran for dear life.

This time, he didn’t halt my retreat.

I refused to ponder why this passive behavior of his—God, he didn’t even give me his name—smarted while I fled home as fast as I could on my four-inch heels. I wrapped my coat tighter around me, but it seemed a feeble protection against the bite of the air that swept off of the waters of San Francisco Bay. A few rebellious tears escaped. *The wind caused them*, my baffled mind desperately tried to calm me down.

Yet the moment I got home and took a good look in the mirror, I owned up to the lie. My cheeks were flushed, my lips swollen. My hair resembled a blond nest

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around my head, and my eyes... They glowed with a light only an encounter with a lover brings.

He got to me. And the last thing I wanted, the last thing I needed was to become another man's toy.

“New Year's Resolution. I don't get played by men. Men get played by me.”

Chapter Two

“Santa brought me a monster truck, with extra big wheels and head lights for the dark, and Will a blue scooter. It runs so fast, but Mom won’t let him ride it until he gets a helmet ‘cause we were very good this year,” Brandon rattled off in one breath. Excitement flushed his cheeks, differentiating him from his brother who sat next to him.

These two never failed to put a smile on my face. Following the twins’ rules, they were a force unto themselves and always managed to cause charming mayhem wherever they went. After listening to almost the entire class telling what they got for Christmas, Brandon’s little speech was the icing on the cake. What a great way to finish off the first day of school at Merriweather.

“We weren’t very good,” Will muttered and cast his eyes downwards.

“What was that, Will? Share with the class,” I said.

The blond daredevil peeked at me. “Just saying if we was good enough, Santa wouldn’t bring us a sister too.”

Yeah, I could see how a sister would mess with their little boys’ club.

Brandon nudged his brother with his shoulder. “Told you we shoulda taken her back.”

Will glared at him. “And I told *you* Santa doesn’t give receipts. You can’t take back something without one.”

I smothered a laugh the best I could and shook my head. Their mother sure had her hands full, but what a welcome bundle of trouble they were.

The bell rang. “All right, class, that’s it for today. Don’t forget to do your homework, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodbye, Miss Stone.” A chorus of voices echoed in the room to match the heavy pitter-patter of feet as they fled towards freedom.

In a matter of seconds, I stood alone in the classroom, and a small pang of sadness pierced through me. Even though at twenty-three I didn’t feel ready yet to be a mother, the longing still burrowed deep in my heart. I’d have children of my own—someday, I told myself while I gathered my stuff. In the meantime, I got to spend half my day with a few little devils. So what if they went home to their parents? I still showered them with love for part of the day.

Besides, for me to become a mother, I needed to find someone to be a father to them first. I didn’t have anything against single parents, but I’d watched my mother struggle with two jobs to raise me. I didn’t want to lead the same life she had. I wanted a husband by my side to share my joys and sorrows, someone to lean on from time to time and draw strength from.

And having that someone was the last thing on my agenda these days.

“Someday...,” I murmured walking to the teachers’ lounge.

“Did you say something, Em-Gem?” Becky, my friend and fellow teacher, draped an arm over my shoulders. “I keep telling you this habit of yours will get you into trouble, but do you listen? No.”

I rolled my eyes at the cheesy nickname she used when she wanted to tease me. “Aren’t you chipper today?”

“What’s not to be chipper about? Work’s over, and I’ve got a date tonight.”

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"You don't say?" I poured a cup of coffee. "Keep talking, and then I'll 'fess up about mine. Who with? Is he hot?" I wagged my eyebrows.

My friend shook her head in a so-so gesture and laughed. "With Steve, who did you think?" She must've read the slight displeasure on my face because she said, "Come on, Em. He's nice. Dependable, and he comes from a very good family."

Whoop-di-do! I tried to keep down the few sips of coffee I'd already downed. I smiled even though I didn't hear anything to smile about. I knew all these things about Steve, but they didn't urge me to root for the guy. If anything, he reminded me of Evan, the dependable, friendly accountant who ripped my heart out with a smile on his face. "Great, I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Em, he doesn't have the plague or something. I can see a future for us, and that's what I want. Stability, security, a family."

The hurt in her voice made me feel three inches tall. Just because those weren't a priority for me, it didn't mean I had a right to judge Becky for wanting them. "I'm sorry, Becks. I'm happy you found someone you think might be 'The One.'"

Her eyes twinkled. "Yes, I think I have." She sighed. "So, what's yours like?"

I laughed. "Like no man you'll run into at this fine establishment," I mimicked our prim and proper headmaster, Dr. Holland. "Tall and brawny, with eyes the color of dark chocolate and an ass you'd kill to take a bite out of."

Becky fanned her face and chuckled. "You're bad, you know that? Now, I'll spend an hour all gooey, with no boyfriend to relieve the pressure."

"You could always call Mr. Dependable and practice on how to start a family." I winked and she threw her small notebook at me.

"Evil incarnate. So, you're dead set on doing this pledge thing, aren't you? Where did my friend go, the one who said the only things she had in common with Sharon Stone were blond hair and a last name?"

I chuckled. I did use to think I was sexy as a beetle. But after the Evan fiasco I realized I needed a drastic change. I figured if I forced myself to feel sexy, I'd look it too. "She's MIA and hopefully won't return. And, yes, I'm determined. Hell, I'm already on my way. Can't you tell?"

"New clothes, new hair, new attitude..." Becky trailed off, and I could hear the wonder in her voice.

"New Emily," I finished for her. "You've no idea how much a person can change if she puts her mind to it. Even in only a few weeks. You just have to flip the switch and decide a new mindset is what the doctor would order."

To prove my point, I glanced down at what I had on. Nothing revealing, of course, I was at school, but where once my clothes were baggy, now my fire-red jersey blouse hugged my breasts, and my new Wonderbra enhanced my cleavage. Coupled with a tight black skirt that skimmed my knees, the outfit was proper enough for work but enticing enough to draw a man's attention. "The old Emily wasn't happy." I shrugged and pushed my new bangs to the side. "Drastic times call for drastic measures."

Becky sobered. "I know what Evan did was awful, but that doesn't mean you're to blame for his cheating."

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If only it were that easy. I'd told myself that a hundred times over, but doubt always managed to rear its ugly head. What if I'd paid more attention to how I dressed, my makeup? What if I'd been more adventurous in bed? I sighed.

"On some level, I comprehend what you're saying, but Evan's cheating forced me to take a hard look at myself. I let him do that to me, Becks. All the signs were there, yet I chose to ignore them. For what? The prospect of having a happy family even if only on the surface? No, thank you. I won't settle for second best, and since Mr. Right refuses to come along, I'll make do with Mr. Right-Now."

"Are you sure you can go through with your plan?"

"What's so difficult about it? Men date one woman after the other all the time with no trouble. I'll keep my heart to myself and set out to have a nice time for however long it lasts." I let out a mock sigh. "I have to tell you. It's a sacrifice. Six feet of hard man, abs to die for... Did I mention he rides a Harley?"

My friend gave me the evil eye. "I feel for you, truly I do. Now get out of here before you fall down the stairs by accident."

"With friends like you, who needs enemies?" I put on my coat and grabbed my bag. "Tomorrow, I want all the juicy details. I'll kiss and tell if you do. Bye!"

"Bye, Em-Gem. Ride safe."

I stared at her, my mouth open as I fought back a laugh.

Her face the picture of innocence, she added, "I meant because he might pick you up on his motorcycle."

I laughed then. "Yeah, I so believe you."

Outside, one of my students sat on the landing. I checked my watch. Almost half an hour since classes had been dismissed. How come no one had seen her, taken her inside to wait in the teachers' lounge?

"Hi, Amanda. Is your...brother late?"

Damn, I almost said mother, forgetting the poor kid had lost both of her parents in a car accident about a month ago. Her brother relocated from Boston to take care of her—a very noble gesture in my opinion. He decided to change his entire life so he wouldn't uproot his little sister and cause more upheaval in her already turbulent world.

She looked up at me, her dimmed green eyes brightening a bit, but not enough. Amanda had stopped being a cheerful, inquisitive young girl and grown quiet. At lunchtime, she withdrew to a corner table and ate by herself, refusing to go sit with her friends. I didn't want to force her into being her old self too soon, so I hovered close by and kept an eye on her, in hopes of finding the best way to ease her back into the colorful world children live in.

Sometimes, I'd go and sit with her for a few minutes, tell her funny stories, or simply eat my tuna sandwich, offering silent support. Being six, she might not realize what I did, but I had no doubt she took comfort by the subtle way she peeked at me and inched closer.

"Yes, he's late," she mumbled. Her gaze searched up and down the street again. I didn't know why, but her unspoken afterthought rang in my mind as clear as if she'd voiced it. *My mom was never late.*

My heart ached for Amanda because I knew firsthand how hard it was to lose a parent. My father had abandoned my mother and me, but it had been the equivalent of dying in the eyes of little ten-year-old me. Okay, so she wouldn't be

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oblivious to pain and death anymore, but I hoped she would eventually bounce back with the amazing resilience kids tend to show.

The door opened behind us startling me. Mary, a fellow teacher stood at the threshold.

“Oh, good. You’ll stay with her? She wouldn’t come inside, and I sat by the window keeping an eye on her.”

“Sure, I’ll keep her company ‘til her brother gets here.” I rubbed my gloved hands and climbed down stairs that seemed ice-cube warm to me. Thank God, I wore my long black coat today, or else I would’ve frozen my butt off, not to mention my skirt would need to go to the dry cleaner’s afterwards. “Why don’t I sit and wait with you?”

She fidgeted. “Oh, that’s alright, Miss Stone. He’ll come soon.”

I smiled. “Don’t worry, I want to. Besides, it’ll give us some time to chat. The bell rang before you had a chance to say what Santa brought you.”

“Oh, the gift. A new red bike and a helmet.”

She didn’t sound very excited, and I couldn’t blame her. Amanda probably wanted her parents back for Christmas. I righted the cute, little beanie on her head. “You’ll be the envy of the neighborhood, such a pretty girl on a brand new bike.” I gave one of her pigtails a playful tag.

“There he is.” She jumped up with the exuberance only children show for such trivial things.

A shiny, gold SUV pulled up in front of us, one of BMW’s latest models for soccer moms and dads to drive around in style and opulence. The sight reminded me of my broken down Honda that sat in the shop, and I winced at the comparison. I should’ve expected as much since Merriweather was a preppy private grade school.

I didn’t expect the man that got out of the car though.

The breath whooshed out of my lungs in a big white puff of frost. Amanda ran toward her brother—the man who would’ve undoubtedly kissed me out of my panties on New Year’s if I hadn’t run away.

He picked her up high in the air. “Sorry, pumpkin. I got held up in a meeting. Won’t happen again.” His voice seemed to come from far away, and, the entire time, his gaze never left mine.

My heartbeat rivaled any techno beat I’d listened to in my teen years. It couldn’t be. No one was that unlucky. I clutched the handles of my tote bag like a lifeline, but despite its numerous contents, no magic potion lurked inside to turn back time. I tried to keep my face devoid of any expression, even though I feared he had glimpsed my initial shock.

He set Amanda down, caught her little hand in his, and walked towards me. With each step he took, my nervousness grew. This whole debacle wasn’t to be taken lightly. A few words from him, and my job would be in jeopardy—the beauty of private schools.

Why did I have to go and piss off the wrong man?

My mouth turned dry at the thought of ending up unemployed. Finding a teaching position in the middle of the school year would be difficult, if not impossible, unless perhaps I moved.

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Which, in turn, meant many expenses when I couldn't afford to lose even a day's much less a month's paycheck.

"Thank you for waiting with Amanda for me," he interrupted the internal obituary of my professional career.

I narrowed my eyes at him. Today, he was every bit the corporate man, dressed in a suit and vest to match his arrogance. Well, I could show the same impersonal and cool demeanor. I pasted a fake smile on my face. Whether I wanted to or not, he was the guardian of one of my students, and I was duty bound to be polite to him.

"Don't mention it. She's a great kid. See you tomorrow, Amanda," I said, dismissing him. He'd have to be dumb not to read between the lines.

I wanted to talk to him as much as I wanted a cockroach invasion in my kitchen.

"Bye, Miss Stone." She walked to the car. Apparently, she had more smarts than her brother did because he showed no signs of leaving.

"You're *the* Miss Stone? You're all Mandy talks about these days, and she doesn't talk a lot." He delivered his last words in a low tone.

I wanted away from him, but for Amanda's sake, I stayed. Gritting my teeth, I promised myself a big glass—hell, a bowl—of Margarita when I got home.

"I'm Blake Edwards, Amanda's brother." He offered his hand, and I took it, grateful I wore gloves. I had no desire for any new skin on skin contact. We'd gone down that road before with disastrous results.

"But I guess you already surmised that, right?" The crooked grin I knew—and didn't want to find irresistible—appeared. Dammit, even the dimple winked at me.

"Nice to meet you." *Do not bring up New Year's.*

"We've already met, remember?" His voice dropped an octave, and even though I didn't need reminding, our kiss played in my mind in vivid Technicolor and Dolby Surround. His showing up had rendered me breathless already, so I fought not to pant at the memory. What was it about him that got to me? And why couldn't I have run into him just once during this past month? He must've come by numerous times to pick up Amanda.

New Year's wouldn't have happened...

I forced the butterflies in my belly to still, and adopted a blasé look. "Well, I wouldn't call that a meeting—more of an insignificant exchange between strangers." I made a show of glancing at my watch. "Oh, I should go, or I'll miss the bus."

"Let me drive you. It's the least I can do for holding you up."

Unbelievable! Did he not get that I disliked him? Okay, so the kiss may have thrown him off track, but the subsequent slap ought to have brought him back on.

Amanda cut my polite decline short. "Yes, Miss Stone. Come with us." Why did kids always listen to what they weren't supposed to anyway?

Margarita. Margarita. Margarita.

"Okay, if you insist." I smiled at the little girl. Why couldn't my lousy, no-good Honda have broken down next week? That way, I wouldn't have to accept this ride.

"I insist." He didn't sound unrepentant at all.

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I wanted to treat him to one of my glares, yet I reminded myself who he was and who I was. Instead, I shrugged and got in the SUV.

The drive to my place thankfully didn't take long. Blake—*Mr. Edwards*, I'd better keep our relationship very formal—remained silent for the most part, leaving conversation to Amanda and me. Before I knew it, he braked to a stop in front of my building.

"Goodbye, Amanda. I'll see you tomorrow," I said sweetly, trying to hide my discomfort.

"Bye, Miss Stone."

I hoped this really was good-bye and no other overtime came up. I didn't know how much longer I could stay in her brother's presence.

"Thank you for the ride, Mr. Edwards." I stepped to the curb, scrambled up the walk, and inserted my key in the front door lock.

"Don't you think we're past last names?" His voice rumbled from behind me.

I didn't turn around, and tried to keep my tone firm. "No, I don't."

"So," he drawled and placed a hand against the doorframe next to my head, "what do I have to do for you to call me 'Blake?'"

I peered at him over my shoulder. His green eyes twinkled with humor and something else, elemental. This didn't bode well for me. a) He was way out of my league, b) he had a girlfriend, probably back in Boston, which explained why they hadn't spent New Year's Eve together, and c) he didn't fit into my plans for this year.

Yet here I stood, primed to succumb to his charm.

"Be a good guardian to Amanda. That's the only interest I have in you, Mr. Edwards. Good afternoon."

Disbelief flashed across his face. I took full advantage, entered the building, and firmly closed the door on temptation.

The score stood two nil in my favor. Now, if only I could keep my winning streak.

Chapter Three

“Baby, I love the way you move.” He leaned to whisper in my ear, his hand at my back guiding me through the crowd to our table. Rhett probably wouldn’t believe me if I told him I’d never danced that way in my life.

Up until a week ago, I wouldn’t have done the bump and grind with such enthusiasm and abandon. It wasn’t that I thought it improper or anything. I’d always been fascinated by how other women swayed, mystery cloaking them, the seduction they emitted luring men closer. I longed to feel comfortable enough to act the siren too. How many nights did I catch Evan watching the dance floor avidly?

I simply didn’t think I had it in me.

Yet tonight, after an initial uneasiness, I fell right into the role. If Rhett’s reaction was anything to go by...man, did I do it right. Perhaps, Evan just didn’t bring out the seductress in me.

Someone cut in front of me, and I came to a hard stop, causing Rhett to bump into me. My stop wasn’t the only thing hard. A rather impressive erection dug into the small of my back. I sucked in a breath. Rhett didn’t back away but pressed himself against me. A satisfied smile teased my lips, and I let myself enjoy the power of being a desirable woman. I’d never aroused Evan publicly. Of course, he hadn’t given me that “I want to eat you up” look Rhett gave me as we danced either.

Or the one Blake gave me on New Year’s Eve.

I plopped down on my stool and took a sip of my Appletini, the memory of that night souring the fruity taste. I refused to think about *Mr. Edwards*—or Evan—on my date. Neither one of them deserved me wasting even a second of my life on them.

“I’ll be right back.” Rhett brushed a kiss on my lips before he left.

I let out a little sigh and watched him go. He was everything I expected him to be, and then some. Wild, sexy, with an alluring dangerous streak, and he made me laugh. Our relationship was easy and fun, without the intensity that led to heartache.

Lost in thought, I played with the napkin and stared into my green drink. When he’d called yesterday to postpone our date, I admit I’d been miffed. I thought he might be trying to give me a polite brush-off. But something really had come up at work, an impromptu photo shoot because the other photographer had fallen sick. Postponing was for the best because I spent all day yesterday thinking about Mr. Edwards anyway. I blamed the two margaritas I downed the moment I got home, because there was no other logical reason for the way he consumed my thoughts.

“You’d be having more fun if you were out with me, kitten.”

I jumped at the sound of that deep, bone-melting tone. I glanced over my shoulder, even though I already knew whom I’d see. Sure enough, Blake stood behind me in all his lick-worthy glory. His dark brown hair was mussed as if he’d spent half the night sifting his fingers through the thick strands. Dark jeans hugged his long legs, showcasing them to perfection. He had even rolled up the

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sleeves of his white shirt to reveal muscled forearms. God, men with dark-looks do look great in white....

What sin had I committed to deserve this?

"Mr. Edwards." I smiled and took delight in the way his lips flattened into a thin line. "How nice to see you again," I lied through my teeth, my tone indicating that.

His eyes narrowed. "This game you insist on playing is getting old."

"I don't know what you're talking about." I looked forward again and took a sip from my drink.

Blake didn't give up. He moved until he was in my line of sight. "I'm talking about you and me on New Year's. You can't deny we shared a connection."

The denial dangled from the tip of my tongue, but I could very well imagine how he would call me on my lie. Too vividly. And the troubling thing was I didn't think I'd resist his kiss.

"Whatever connection we might have shared is beside the point. I don't date my students' parents." I hoped the frost in my voice balanced out the increased temperature of my body.

His smile brightened the dimly lit jazz club despite his irritating "I know something you don't know" expression. "I'm not Amanda's dad, so that's not an issue."

I folded my arms over my chest. "Still, you're her guardian."

"Her very *single* guardian."

Oh, the eye-candy was so busted. I arched an eyebrow. "Really? And whom were you talking to on the phone on New Year's saying I love you?"

He flicked my nose, an intimate gesture I was too slow to evade. "Amanda. I couldn't take her to the club with me, so we had dinner together, and I left her with a baby-sitter."

"You let her stay up so late?" I asked in an effort to divert his attention to a less dangerous subject.

"No, she insisted on setting the alarm clock and getting up to call me."

"Ah." A clever comeback indeed.

Okay, I now stood a reason short, but I refused to be deterred. I had a New Year's Resolution to keep and a new life to live.

"You're too nice," I blurted out.

"Excuse me?"

I fought back a chuckle at his insulted tone.

"Look at you. Rich, sophisticated, with a respectable job no doubt. You probably want to settle down and have two-point-five kids before you reach thirty-five."

"I have five years left. I'm in no hurry." His face darkened the more I said, and a part of me wanted to take everything back, but this was my way out. I'd just begun learning new things about myself, tapping into my sensuality. I didn't want to fall into the same hole again and focus all my attention on a man.

"Don't get me wrong, that's not a bad thing, I just happen to want my man rough around the edges."

"And what would a not so nice guy have done on New Year's?" he asked through gritted teeth.

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“He would’ve kissed me to shut me up. Then he would’ve pushed me up against the wall, and—”

Blake rested an arm on the table and leaned forward, invading my personal space. “And?” The suggestive burr spiked my temperature to a hundred and forty.

Images of Evan screwing his blonde bimbo from behind shielded me from the lust blazing in Blake’s green eyes. “If you don’t know what happens next, there’s no point in me telling you, is there?” I shrugged. The way my heart beat like a crazed tambourine, nonchalance was a far-away oasis to me, but I tried anyway. “You’re an Ashley.”

His gaze, though puzzled, bore into mine, and cut—I feared—through all the bullshit excuses I gave him. I bit my lip. Would my acting skills be up to the challenge?

Lucky for me, Rhett swaggered toward us, his thumb hooked on the waist of his khakis, a challenging expression on his face. Blake straightened, and the two men sized each other up. Sheesh...could they act any more macho?

“Rhett, this is Blake Edwards. He’s the brother of one of my students. Rhett Gaynor.” I babbled the necessary introductions to break the testosterone-laden silence and move things along.

Blake had to go. He had to stop torturing me with his nearness. Sexy, bad-boy Rhett didn’t pose any threat to me. Blake and his quiet strength...that was another story. I stood to lose my heart all over again. The Evan disaster had taught me I was far from a good judge of character when it came to men. I didn’t have it in me to take a new leap of faith just yet.

I was afraid I’d end up alone once more.

The two men shook hands and exchanged a silent nod. I stifled a snort as I remembered reading somewhere that back in the old days men would extend their hands to each other in a demonstration that neither one possessed concealed weapons and intended harm to the other. Blake and Rhett certainly didn’t fit the bill. Any passerby from across the street could read the mutual dislike on their faces.

Blake pulled out from the wordless cockfight first. “Well, I don’t want to crash on your evening.” If I had to guess from Rhett’s smirk, my date knew Blake lied. “It was nice seeing you, *Miss Stone*. Have a lovely evening.”

“I plan to.” I smiled at him.

Staring into my green cocktail again, I lost track of time.

“Ex?” Rhett asked.

I sat ramrod straight. “What? No, I met him a few days ago when he came to pick his sister up. We’ve barely said two words to each other.”

Rhett looked like he wanted to add something, but in the end, he remained quiet. Not that I expected him to demand more answers. He knew we weren’t going down the road of long-time commitment.

“Ready for another dance?” I stood, eager to banish Blake from my mind. And what better way than in Rhett’s arms?

His sexy smile returned. “Baby, any excuse to get my hands on you is good for me.” He waggled his eyebrows, and I laughed at his antics. We both knew I welcomed his hands on me too.

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We danced to the slow, sensual growl of Coltrane's saxophone, and I let my thoughts wander. His suggestion that we come here surprised me. I thought he was more of a Nickelback kind of guy. Then again, maybe he was both. A smile creased my face. Finding out all the aspects of his character would be fun. Besides, what was the point in intense, rock-your-world relationships that ended up in heartbreak? Hell if I knew. Rhett and this risk-free liaison he offered were just what I wanted.

"What's the smile for?" His hands gently caressed my lower back, spreading warmth in their wake.

I smiled wider. "I was just thinking how interesting getting to know you will be."

He pressed closer to me. "I'd love to get to know you too—especially in the biblical way."

I scrunched my nose at him. "You know, I'm on to you. You're just saying these things to get me riled up."

He treated me to one of his full-out-assault grins. "Is it working?"

I hated the answer that popped in my head.

If Blake was dancing with me instead of Rhett and flirted so outrageously, I would have dragged him off the dance floor and taken him home to have my wicked way with him ten minutes ago. My heart would have fluttered so crazy it would have given out and I'd have to get on the heart transplant list. Rhett's flirting caused a warm, fuzzy sensation, made me feel sexy and desirable, but nothing more.

At that moment, I hated Blake Edwards with every last piece of my soul. He was determined to ruin my life.

"I think I need to work harder," Rhett murmured and leaned down to kiss me. On a scale of one to ten, it earned a seven. Not bad for a first kiss, great actually. Yet I couldn't stop myself from comparing it to Blake's, which had been off the charts.

So? a wicked little devil whispered in my ear. Didn't you say you'll play the field? Go ahead, I dare you to put your money where your mouth is.

The trident-bearing figment of my imagination had a point. Okay, so I lusted after Blake. But Rhett was smoldering hot, too, and he was within arm's reach. Who said I couldn't enjoy myself tonight and let tomorrow take care of itself?

Yep, that's right. No one.

Chapter Four

The entire day's stress poured out of my body in waves, and I let out a sigh of relief. The silence in the teachers' lounge should have soothed my abused ears, yet they still rang with squeals of excitement and high-pitched children's voices. No matter... The fatigue was worth seeing fresh sparkles in the eyes of the children who won awards.

I rubbed a weary hand across my forehead and leaned my arm against the wall to stare out the window. Putting my fingers under the edge, I pushed to open the frame an inch. The heavy sheet of rain shrouding the world from all other noises lent me a semblance of peace. A peace I needed too much to care about the cold.

Organizing a school award ceremony took its toll on a person, even more so when you were still on probation. Dr. Holland hadn't said it in so many words, but I gathered I had to prove myself, since this was my first year working for Merriweather Elementary. The fact that he'd assigned me to every function since the beginning of the school year advocated that either the headmaster was partial to the trial-by-fire philosophy, or he didn't care for me much. Ha. He didn't care for me at all was closer to the truth.

"Face it, Em. He hates your guts," I muttered to myself. Thank God Becky wasn't here. She'd scold me again.

A pair of arms snaked around my midriff and locked me securely in place. I jumped, a small gasp breaking free from my throat. I peered over my shoulder right into Blake's green eyes. They studied me with a precision only lasers could muster.

"Who could ever hate a mild-mannered school teacher, kitten?"

Almost three weeks had passed since I'd run into him at the jazz club, and I had relaxed because he hadn't tried to contact me. Not once.

Earlier, he'd sat at a safe distance with the rest of the parents in the audience, and I barely spared him a glance. My anxiety to ensure everything went according to plan overshadowed even Blake reentering my life, a bright comet that came to light up the dark night.

I'd practically convinced myself whatever attraction I felt for him had withered and died. Yet the glimpse of his six-foot delectable body certainly didn't prepare me for this sudden proximity. The way he smelled assaulted my senses, bringing back memories of New Year's Eve—memories I had worked hard to ignore. A deep longing took me by surprise.

I never mooned over a man just because I was physically attracted to him; I would appreciate his eye-candy value and put him out of my mind the next moment without trying to talk to him, get his phone number, or end up having amazing no-strings-attached sex with him. This fact had been a thorn in my side for longer than I remembered. I wished I could be more casual about sex the way I saw other women be.

So why couldn't I stop thinking about Blake? I didn't know him well enough to be fond of him let alone form an emotional attachment. Did I?

Be honest. You missed the jerk.

"Wh-what are you doing here?"

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"I came to bring the teacher an apple," he murmured.

I rolled my eyes at the cheesy come-on. Never mind that my insides melted because it was Blake doing the bringing—I had to appear unaffected at least. He wouldn't have one with him anyway.

Out of nowhere, he produced a juicy red apple. Now I knew how Eve felt before the ultimate sinful temptation. But it wasn't the fruit I craved to sample. His gaze focused on my lips in that unnerving, arousing way of his, and I fought not to bite them.

"Shouldn't you come to me as a snake?" I teased to break the spell. Intense relationships weren't on my agenda, dammit!

His eyes snapped back to mine, and the way they darkened to a forest green worked the wheels in my head overtime, not to mention heated me up. The last thing I should want was to check out his...snake, yet the image of a naked Blake tortured my mind.

My cheeks went up in flames. "I didn't mean it *that* way." I tried to break free from his hold, but his hand tightened on my waist.

He didn't say anything to embarrass me more, just brought the apple an inch from my lips. Afraid I might talk myself further into a corner, I took a bite to keep my mouth full. Blake watched me eat, giving me the distinct impression he wanted to eat me back, and I quickly swallowed the mouthful almost choking. Accepting I'd never be fully confident around Blake, I turned to face him. "Thank you."

Mercifully, he pulled back a bit, and I breathed easier. The smile he gave me revealed his charming dimple, a trait he shared with Amanda. This thought brought me back to my senses, and I straightened, remembering where we were. I glanced past his shoulder. No one had come in the teachers' lounge after him, and the closed door kept the rest of the world at bay.

But for how long?

"You're welcome." He tossed the apple in the air and, for some reason, I grappled to catch the fruit when I should've let it drop. "You know," an alarm sounded in my head at his conspiratorial tone, "*Gone With The Wind* was on the other night."

I looked up into his face. So he *had* recognized the reference.

"Scarlet spends the whole movie daydreaming about Ashley only to discover at the end she wants Rhett."

"That's right." Triumph colored my voice, yet I should've known better than to believe I could outsmart Blake. The man's way with words never failed to frustrate—or arouse—the hell out of me.

"The way I figure, you have it backwards. You *think* you want Rhett when who you really want is me."

I gulped, terrified he might be right. Rhett was a great guy, and we had a blast together—in bed and out of it—but at times, the thought that something was missing niggled at my mind. Even though my worried heart fluttered in my chest, I pursed my lips. "Presuming much?"

His crooked grin upped his yumminess a notch. "Far from it. I know I'm not a shoo-in where you're concerned." Blake's husky words wrapped around my soul and almost melted the icy cage around it.

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“Good, because I’m not interested.” Yes, Rhett would have been a better excuse, despite the fact he and I had both agreed we could see other people, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell Blake I preferred another man to him.

“Really?” The expression in his face was almost too smug. “So someone else devoured me on New Year’s Eve, purring in my mouth like a satisfied kitten even though she’d wanted to take my head off moments earlier.”

I gasped. I wanted to say something—anything to change this opinion he had I was attracted to him, but nothing came to mind.

“Then again, you *are* different. You didn’t have bangs.” He pushed said bangs to the side of my face, his fingers lingering on my skin, the loving gesture giving me goose bumps.

God, what was he—a cop?—who remembered such details? He must be, because the alternative was he only memorized things about me. My heartbeat doubled at the prospect. No, no, no.

His finger trailed down the contour of my face, rested on my chin, and then moved lower, along my neck. “And you’re aloof yet you send off this...‘come and get me’ vibe.” His index followed the plunging V of my blouse and played up and down, skimming the upper swell of my breasts in the process.

Was I supposed to say something coherent? His finger, and the heat it spread—a heat that settled between my thighs—captivated me. My breasts grew heavy, silently begging for Blake’s attention, his touch. They didn’t listen to reason or arguments.

Thank God, my body didn’t have the last say. I wanted to slap his hand away so I could think clearly, but if I did, Blake would find out he affected me.

I raised an eyebrow. “Well, you should read the P.S. that comes with the vibe. It says if you’re arrogant and delusional, return to sender.”

He laughed. “Those comebacks of yours rival your curves in seductiveness, Miss Stone.”

“Comebacks?”

Blake set his palms against the wall, caging me inside his embrace. I plastered myself on the cool surface behind me, but he still stood too close for comfort. If I breathed in deep, my breasts would brush his chest.

No, don’t go there.

“Comebacks. You know, it’s when I say something, then you say something, sparks fly and this happens.”

Time slowed down to a torturous pace as Blake leaned toward me, lips parted, eyes smoldering with desire. *Move*, the voice of sanity ordered, but my body refused to obey, entranced by what Blake offered. His hot breath touched me first, followed by his warm mouth settling on mine.

Sparks? Hell, a forest fire broke out inside me, and its flames licked my nerve endings into full-blown arousal. His tongue traced the seam of my lips, and I reached out to grasp his biceps, desperate for something to hold onto, the apple falling with a thud on the floor.

We’d only kissed once before, so why did this feel so much like a homecoming?

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I knew damn well I should push him away and slap him again, but, God help me, I couldn't. I wanted him to keep kissing me. My tongue peeked out to greet his, and a groan hovered in the air—his? Mine? Neither of us seemed to care.

Blake deepened the kiss and embarked on an insistent exploration of my mouth, licking every inch as if he wanted to memorize everything. Yet despite his more than obvious need, he kept his hands to himself—much to my disappointment, I confess. His body heat teased me, so close but not close enough. I longed to have all those hard plains flush against my frame and I let out a frustrated whimper.

The evil man didn't cave. He continued to touch me only with his lips, intensifying the connection. My fingers dug into his torso, and I clung to him the way some damsel in distress from a historical novel would. A fitting comparison, since distress was a mild way to describe my situation.

By the time he pulled back, I had trouble catching my breath. Blake wasn't doing any better. His nostrils flared, and his lungs worked overtime under my palms. Gone was the playful, charming man, and a hunter stood in his stead.

Never before had a prey been more willing to be caught.

I searched for something to say that didn't include the words kiss, sex, and please in the same sentence. Realizing my hands were still on him, I withdrew them and linked them behind my back and away from temptation.

I cleared my throat. "You know, this is the second time you've explained a word to me. I *am* a teacher, Blake."

The way his eyes glittered stole whatever breath I had left. "Say it again. My name, say it again."

"Blake." My voice turned all husky, and, even to my own ears, it sounded alluring.

Sharon Stone eat your heart out.

"Have dinner with me."

"What?" *No, no, and no.*

"Have dinner with me and Amanda. Tomorrow's Friday so you don't have to worry about work the next day. I could cook for you."

He knew how to cook? Shoot me now....

My continued silence must have worried him, because he quickly added, "You'd make her really happy."

I narrowed my eyes at his low blow. Should I? Nothing had changed from the last time he asked me out on a date, except the fact I wanted him even more if that were possible. But I'd learned at a young age that what I want and what I can have are two different things. I bit my lip, the temptation to say yes eating away at my sanity.

If nothing else, Blake deserved to know the trouble he'd be getting himself into. "I'm still seeing Rhett." My stomach churned with what I could only describe as guilt, and I straightened my spine. I didn't owe Blake my loyalty.

"I don't care." His determined glare told me Blake thought he could steal me from him.

Can't he?

A sigh pushed past my lips. "Look, I'll be honest. I'm not interested in a long-term relationship right now."

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He raised an eyebrow. "I merely asked you out to dinner. Who said we'll see each other on a regular basis or that *I'm* interested in such a thing?"

Good point. I shrugged. "You don't seem like the 'fling' kind of guy."

Blake chuckled. "And you're afraid poor Ashley will fall madly in love with you, and you'll break his heart?"

Okay, put that way, it sounded silly. Not to mention I came off being a presumptuous *femme fatale* who ate men for breakfast. This image was even sillier in my mind's eye. Hell, Evan would have a field day if he caught wind of it. Plain Jane was my middle name according to him.

Still, I was beginning to hate Blake's uncanny ability to refute my reasons. "You're always twisting my words around," I grumbled. "What are you, a lawyer?"

"Actually, yes."

Damn. My life had turned into an episode of LOST where one never knows what comes next.

There was that crooked grin again. "And I'm famous for not letting the witness step down from the box until I get what I want."

My eyes widened. "No...You? Persistent? I never would have guessed," I said, but failed to distract him.

His smoldering gaze did a slow perusal of my body, and I gulped past the lump of lust in my throat. "I don't give up easily when I see something I want."

A shiver of delight raced down my spine.

"Say yes."

This was irrational. a) I would regret giving in, b) I would think back on this moment and recognize it to be the beginning of my downfall, c) I would always compare him with the men I'd date after we broke up.

And why would I start dating someone even though I knew for a fact it'd end badly?

"Yes."

Blake's eyes lit up as if his client had just been acquitted from a murder one charge. He buried his face in the crook of my neck and gave me a chaste kiss where my pulse beat that rocked my world more than the previous carnal one.

"You won't regret this," he said against my skin before he pulled back and bulldozed me into the date. "I'll pick you up tomorrow at six."

"I can take a cab, or the metro. Just give me your address."

Color me crazy, but I refused to depend on him for my ride home. I didn't trust him, and more importantly, I didn't trust myself around him.

"I'll pick you up, kitten." He sauntered to the door, satisfaction rolling off him in waves. It seemed our conversation was closed according to him. Surprised, I watched him turn the key in the lock.

He'd thought of everything.

"Build up your appetite," Blake advised me over his shoulder. "I plan on satisfying your every craving to the fullest."

Chapter Five

“So...Steve says he wants to do a threesome with you and me. Interested?” Becky’s voice broke the silence in the teachers’ lounge.

“Yeah, sure.”

“That’s it,” my friend thundered. “Why are you so distracted?”

I glanced up from the stack of *My Best Friend* essays in front of me. “What do you mean? I’m not distracted.”

She snorted. “All. Day. Long. You just agreed to a threesome with me and Steve.” Becky narrowed her eyes. “Fess up.”

I twirled the red pen in my hand. “I have a date tonight.”

“So?”

“I think I should cancel. No, I *know* I should cancel.”

Becky’s eyebrows furrowed. “I thought everything was great between you and Rhett.”

I glanced away from her. “The date’s not with Rhett.”

My friend didn’t understand my need for no strings attached relationships, and I feared she wouldn’t approve of my dating two guys at the same time.

“Ah.”

The single word sliced through me with its veiled censure. Or maybe I was being too sensitive. Becky wasn’t the judgmental type.

“Why the change of heart?” she asked.

The reasons were so many. The situation would be funny if it wasn’t happening to me. “He’s totally wrong for me.”

Becky raised an eyebrow. “Yet you told him yes.”

I brushed imaginary lint from my skirt. “Yeah, well, when I accepted I didn’t think with my head.” The minute Blake came within five feet of me, I stopped being rational. At the time, everything seemed possible, easy. I could even become America’s Next Top Model if I wanted to.

“He sounds like the wrong kinda guy with a touch of wicked.” Becky cut in the whirlwind of thoughts in my head. “Why not go with the flow and leave when the tide ebbs?”

I chuckled. Only Becks would utter such a metaphor.

“Aren’t you the one who wanted to have fun?” she persisted.

Yep, guilty as charged, but Blake made me nervous. I feared I wouldn’t be able to keep my heart out of the equation if I went out with him. He’d already wormed his way into my thoughts and dreams despite every effort on my part to keep him out of them. What if I fell in love with him, and he came to the conclusion—the same conclusion Evan did—I wasn’t good enough for him?

Stop it.

I straightened my spine. Who said Blake was Prince Charming? Perhaps he wouldn’t turn out to be good enough for *me*.

I groaned. “I’m over-thinking this, aren’t I?”

The look Becky gave me spoke louder than words.

“Okay, okay, you don’t have to say anything.” Gathering my things, I stuffed them into my tote bag and slung it over my shoulder. “I’m going home. See you tomorrow, Becks.”

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“Have fun tonight.”

My friend, always the optimist.

“Thanks.” I glanced at my watch. Three hours until Blake came by to pick me up. How an amount of time could seem too long and simultaneously too short was beyond me, but it did. I shook my head. I should have grown used to Blake’s singular ability to drive me crazy by now.

I walked into my apartment and threw my tote bag on the floor. Even though I tended to fall asleep in the bathtub, I needed a bubble bath. If I was to handle tonight with interested aloofness—fine, *lustful* aloofness—and walk away unscathed, I had to relax. I’d cross the second-date bridge when I came to it.

If I came to it.

After I undressed in a hurry, I filled the tub with my favorite vanilla-scented shampoo. I swirled my hands inside to create the required suds and submerged myself in the hot water. Leaning back to rest my head on the inflatable pink pillow, I closed my eyes.

Ah, heaven... My muscles melted into nothingness, and a sense of serenity infused my body as the scent of vanilla permeated the air. I picked up the washrag and passed it over my arms. Thoughts of Blake slowed down my movements, and by the time I reached my breasts, I was caressing rather than cleaning. My nipple beaded under my touch.

How would Blake caress me?

Would he tease and torture my flesh, his finger drawing slow circles around my areola driving me restless? I let my mind drift and pretended his hand stroked me and not mine. Would he be bold and cup the entire mound from the start, feel its weight? Roll and pinch the aching bud between his fingers until I pleaded for him to replace them with his mouth? I moaned as a lightning bolt of pleasure arrowed straight to my sex.

The sound, too loud in the quiet bathroom, snapped me out of my, literally and metaphorically, wet dream.

I threw the washrag away, water splashing around. God, I was all hot and bothered just by daydreaming about Blake. What had I been thinking when I agreed to go out with him?

He wasn’t Rhett. Blake got to me in more ways than one. Would I be able to get intimate with him but not attached to him? That I agreed to meet him at his house, not public place where anything could happen, was a grave tactical error on my part.

Maybe I should cancel.

I worried my bottom lip, and then it hit me. He couldn’t try to get past second base with his sister present. Relief washed over me and increased the bubble bath’s relaxing effect.

Amanda was my shield. I could do this.

Before I reached pruny-skin levels and fried my brain on the Blake merry-go-round, I got out of the water. I wrapped a towel around me and used another one to wipe the fog off the mirror. I glanced at my reflection. How should I fix my hair? Mmm, a woman could always count on curls to boost her confidence. I plugged in the curling iron and opened the bathroom door to get rid of the humidity.

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I never bothered with too much makeup, so I didn't see the point in starting now. Just some foundation, mascara, so my otherwise common brown eyes would seem bigger, and my pink lip gloss. Blowing myself a kiss in the mirror, I checked if the iron had heated up.

In a few minutes, bouncy blond curls framed my face. Now, for what to wear...I muttered a curse when I searched through my closet and came up with nothing fitting for the occasion. One dress was too sexy. I couldn't find the right skirt to go with the ideal blouse. A step from hyperventilation, something finally caught my eye, and I pushed the hangers to one side. Perfect. On a crazy impulse, I'd bought a pair of black leather pants a year ago, but never had the guts to wear them.

The new Emily though didn't just have guts. She had balls.

I shimmied into them, twisting and hopping until I managed to pull the pants all the way up. A glance at the full-length mirror told me what I already felt. The material clung to my body like a second skin, accentuating my curves. I paired it with a loose-fitting white lacy top that ended at the waist.

After a twirl in front of the mirror, I assessed the end result. Not too sexy, but not matronly either, the outfit combined last year's Emily and the current version. Just because sex was out of the question didn't mean I shouldn't look my best.

Someone buzzed my apartment from downstairs as I spritzed myself with perfume. God, was Blake here already? It couldn't be six yet. I checked my watch on my way to the door. No, a quarter to six. But I knew in my gut it was him.

I pushed the intercom's button. "Yes?"

"It's me." My pulse boomed in my ears at the sound of Blake's voice.

"I'll be right down."

I locked up and took a deep breath. *Okay, you're going to keep this night PG-6*, I reminded myself. I would ignore the intimate knowledge of how his kisses tasted and the way his eyes turned jade from arousal and simply treat Blake friendly. All right, a bit more than friendly.

The moment I exited the building, I drew up short. The door gave me a slight nudge forward when it closed behind me. I must have resembled a klutz—I certainly felt like one—but my legs were too weak to take another step.

Blake waited for me, hands in his pockets, leaning against the hood of a car—not an SUV and definitely not gold. The black Porsche suited him, with its sleek curves and quiet strength. He hadn't picked one of the new ostentatious models, if a Porsche can ever be called something else, but an older model that shouted old money.

He looked so perfect, so unreal, that Blake could have been a model ready for a GQ photo-shoot. The look he gave me, though, couldn't be faked. It undressed me right down to my black thong. I trembled to think how he would gaze at me without a heavy, mid-thigh coat covering my body.

He straightened off the sports car and galvanized me into action. Assuming an air of calmness I didn't feel in the least, I sauntered to meet him, a friendly smile on my face. Afraid he might steal my sanity with another non-friendly kiss, I kept a measure of distance.

I pursed my lips. "You're early."

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Unrepentant 'til the end, Blake trailed a finger down my cheek. So much for distance. The sweet intimate gesture forced the butterflies in my belly to do the salsa. "I was afraid you might stand me up."

And I was afraid he knew me too well. "The thought did cross my mind," I drawled, certain his show of vulnerability was just that. A show.

They should slap Blake's picture on the dictionary next to overconfident.

He opened the door for me. "What tipped the scales to my favor? Was it my irresistible charm?" Guess the show was over.

I brushed past him to get in, but couldn't think of a clever answer. "I didn't want to disappoint Amanda."

The smile he granted me had Blake written all over it, laced with arrogance and "I know you're hot for me" awareness. He leaned inside and fastened the seatbelt for me. The possibility he did it out of chivalry didn't even cross my mind. He just wanted to tempt me with his nearness. A whiff of his woodsy aftershave wafted toward my nostrils. Still aroused from the bubble bath, I gritted my teeth and pushed down my rising lust. I craved to lean forward—just a few inches—and lick the side of his neck, to see if he tasted as good as he smelled.

God, why did he have to turn me on with one look—hell, one word? It wasn't fair.

From this close, I could spot gold flecks in his emerald eyes. "I'm sure Amanda's your top priority." His tone suggested the exact opposite.

Aware of how all our banters ended, I kept my mouth shut and refused to let him rile me up. Blake didn't speak either, and for an eon—or at least it seemed that long, we just stared at each other. Arousal crackled around us in the small confines of the car, and, despite my best intentions, my breathing quickened.

A car horn sounded in the distance, and we snapped out of our mutual trance. Blake slowly pulled away and shut the door. I thought I heard him mutter a curse, but I couldn't be sure.

You're barely out of the apartment, and you almost jumped him. But I guess that's slow compared to light year's speed, right?

I flipped the finger at my inner critic. Dammit, I knew the night wasn't going according to plan. At least my plan, because I had a suspicion Blake felt his own went like clockwork.

He got into the car, too, and I brought my self-recrimination to a halt. I needed to focus if I wanted to get the night back on the right track. My mind whirled with the effort of choosing a safe topic of conversation, but I didn't have any luck.

"Hey." He cupped my cheek and turned me to face him. "Relax. I'm not going to debauch you in my car in front of your apartment building."

I smiled, both because of the antiquated term he used and the fact Blake once again read my fears accurately.

"Unless you want me to." His low, husky voice would have charmed a lesser woman into panting her acquiescence. It was hard to remember all my reasons not to capitulate as his eyes promised wicked pleasures I'd grow addicted to. Therein lay the problem, though.

I couldn't afford to get addicted to Blake.

"Mmm, I'll get back to you on that. Maybe on the ride home." I winked at him.

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Blake chuckled and leaned to kiss the tip of my nose. "I'll hold you to it."

At the first red light, he switched on the radio and chose a station with mellow tunes, which suited me, since I still couldn't think of anything to say. A few minutes later, though, the ongoing silence got to me.

"Amanda's a great kid," I finally said, deciding the safest topic was his sister.

The smile he gave me was rueful. "Thanks, but I can't take any of the credit. I only saw her on holidays and birthdays, if that. My dad and I weren't close, and even though Amanda's mom was hardly your wicked step-mother, we never bonded into a real family." He shrugged.

"Oh, nobody mentioned you were half siblings."

His hands on the wheel tightened. "Yeah, well, I don't think this means we're less related."

"No, that's not what I meant." I rushed to explain. "I simply—losing one parent can't be that traumatic compared to losing two." Mortified, I covered my face with a hand. "Just shoot me now."

Blake touched my arm. "I understand what you're saying, and you're right. Amanda's so young and to become an orphan so suddenly...." He paused, the words seemingly lodged in his throat. "She breaks my heart."

Men and expressing feelings don't mix, so his declaration had twice its usual value in my eyes. "I know telling you not to worry is pointless, but I'm certain she'll get over this."

His silence worried me because it may well mean I'd hurt him in some way, and I never wanted to do that. "Amanda is very lucky to have you."

"You think?" He flashed me an easy smile that seemed practiced. I could sense my words touched a sore issue for him. I trudged a minefield here, but if he'd been just Amanda's brother, I would have wanted him to hear my opinion on Amanda from a teacher's perspective.

"Yeah, I do. She's a strong kid, and I can see she's trying to get back to her old self. Give her some time, and she may surprise you." He didn't disagree, but he didn't agree with me either. "You're there for her and put her first—despite your own problems—and your thoughtfulness ensures she'll cope."

I squeezed his knee, trying to convey how much I respected him for his sacrifice. Blake put his hand over mine in a silent request for support. At least, I wanted to see it that way. For some reason, my body tingled with pleasure at the thought that Blake needed me for something—anything.

He took my hand and kissed the inside of my palm so sweetly, I blinked back tears.

"Thank you," he murmured.

"Nothing to thank me for. It's the truth."

Unnerved by the unexpectedly deep connection that bloomed between us, one I couldn't blame on sexual desire, I withdrew my hand and turned to stare out the window. This time, I welcomed the ensuing silence and took the chance to collect myself. However hard I tried, the pull toward Blake seemed indomitable.

"It won't work, you know." His voice rumbled through my troubled thoughts, and I jumped. Did he read minds now too?

I glanced at his profile. "What?"

"Your effort to classify me under the 'friends' category."

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Flames of embarrassment licked my cheeks.

He sighed, the sound ominous. "Listen, do you want me to take you back?"

His question stopped my heart. "What?"

"I thought you wanted this as much as I did, but the last thing I would do is pressure you into a date."

One would think after so many attempts to keep our date from happening, I would have taken a moment or two to consider his suggestion.

The second he finished, I rushed to reassure him. "No, I mean yes, I do want this. The connection between us...." I gulped, afraid to continue but knowing I owed him the truth. "I feel it. And that scares me."

Time literally stood still as Blake stared at me, half of his face cast in shadows.

Way to go, Em. Put yourself out there again. It worked wonders for you last time.

I lowered my eyes to my lap and focused on my folded hands, fighting back ridiculous tears. Dammit, I hardly knew him. I shouldn't care so much about what he thought of me.

I had Rhett, didn't I?

"Emily, look at me." Blake never used that stern tone. In an automaton way, I complied.

Hook.

His eyes shone with intensity even in the semidarkness that accompanied the sunset. "I can't promise you a happily ever after."

Line.

"I can only promise I've never wanted another woman the way I want you."

Sinker.

Chapter Six

"Miss Stone, you remind me of one of those chubby little angels I see in pictures."

I contained my impulsive wince at Amanda's words. Barely. Yep, every woman's dream is to be called *fat* on a date. But then again, I brought this on myself. If I had agreed to go out with Blake before tonight, this wouldn't have happened. Gritting my teeth, I resisted the urge to pull at the ends of my hair and straighten the corkscrew curls. Instead, I smiled at the little girl. I knew Amanda wanted to compliment me, and I couldn't hold against her the fact her words had the same effect to my ego as three rounds with Mohamed Ali.

And here I thought *she* may be in an awkward position meeting me outside school.

Where was Blake anyway? I glanced at the door. He said he needed to talk with Mrs. Dunlop.

Still, I couldn't say I wasn't grateful for the short reprieve. The ride here was short, but conversation had been strained after his confession. The sexual tension between us lingered with the subtlety of a white-elephant inside the small car.

I let out a resigned sigh. "Thank you, Amanda. You're very sweet."

Blake's sister beamed at me, her earnest smile wiping away most of the sourness that churned my stomach.

I turned around at a small rustling sound. A woman in her early sixties stood just inside the living room. She tried to conceal her amusement by pursing her lips. She must've overheard our discussion. I'm sure she understood my feelings.

The woman came towards me and gave me her hand. "Hello, I'm Mrs. Dunlop. I help around the house and babysit Amanda when the need arises." Her smile was genuine and brought forward one of my own.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Emily Stone."

"Yes, Amanda told me all about you. Twice." She let out a small chuckle and turned to the little girl. "Did you wash your hands?"

"I'll go right now." Amanda's earnest expression didn't seem to convince Mrs. Dunlop because she harrumphed but didn't say anything more.

"Very well. I'm off for tonight." She patted her gray hair, and looked at me. I had the distinct impression she was sizing me up. "Have a wonderful dinner."

"Thank you."

The front door clicked shut a few moments later, and I breathed easier. Even though Mrs. Dunlop was Blake's employee, she acted quite motherly towards both him and Amanda.

"Dinner's almost ready." Blake appeared in the living room's entrance for a second, and then he was gone again.

"Do you want any help?" I called out after him.

"No, I have everything under control."

Big surprise there. I would bet a month's paycheck, if I could, that very few things didn't go the way he planned. I only had to take a look in the mirror to see exhibit A.

I wandered toward the windows. The three panes created a slight arc, typical for San Francisco. The design had always fascinated me, even back when I lived

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in the small town of Bridgewater. Despite the sky's dark blue hue, the moon hadn't come out yet. I could very well imagine how the sun shone through during the day, though, its rays falling on the Persian carpet behind me bringing out the rich earthy tones.

Below, a couple across the street was caught in an intimate embrace, too similar to the ones Blake and I had shared. Lost in my reminiscing, I almost jumped when Amanda touched my leg.

"So soft." Her awed voice brought a smile to my face. "You don't wear these pants at school, Miss Stone."

How did I forget she was in the room too? Easy, this was a dinner date with Blake. My nerves weren't just rattled; they felt like they'd been shaken inside a pair of maracas.

"They have a policy against heart attacks, Mandy." Blake's voice rumbled from behind us, and I turned in time to catch him checking out my butt. His gaze took a slow upward trail, lingering on my breasts. He finally looked up into my face, but his eyes held no sign of remorse. Typical man.

Enjoying the scenery? I bit back the comment, remembering his little sister next to me.

Amanda's eyebrows crinkled. "A poli what?"

"A policy. It means the school's rules, how it works."

I rolled my eyes, understanding now where this tendency to explain words and provide synonyms came from.

Or maybe he just enjoyed being a wise ass.

"Oh, I get it now. Thank you, Blake," she chirped, her voice filled with satisfaction.

I ruffled her hair. This was one of the reasons I loved my job. Nothing compares to helping children learn new things, leading them into a completely new world and watching the wonder in their eyes.

Blake walked toward us. "Dinner's ready. Mandy, did you wash your hands?"

The little girl scrunched her nose and huffed. "Okay. I'll be right back, Miss Stone." She fled the room, leaving us alone. It was funny how she needed to inform me of her whereabouts the way kids did at school.

Blake said dinner was ready, yet, hands in his pockets, he simply stood silent a few feet away from me instead of escorting me to the dining room. The air around us changed, now charged with unspoken needs and promises.

"You have a lovely home." I finally broke the silence, afraid he would be content just to stare at me.

Blake curled his lip. "Its style is a bit too classic for my tastes, but I've got a lot on my hands right now to add redecorating to the list." He shrugged. "Maybe in September."

I surveyed the living room and realized with dread that my apartment wasn't much larger. Despite myself, I catalogued everything, and then pictured the area the way I would have it decorated. I'd place a low settee by the windows so one could bask in the sun while reading a book. Replace the carpet with a smaller Persian rug that wouldn't hide the beautiful hardwood floors. And I'd choose a white comfy couch covered by an afghan in vivid color to match the rug instead of

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the now brown staid one, its fabric easy to clean since a six-year-old was murder on—

What the hell are you doing?

I wanted to shake myself until my teeth rattled. Blake and I wouldn't have a future together, no doubt about it. I didn't have a right to say *tu casa es mi casa*, even if I played fantasy decorating. Come September, I wouldn't be in Blake's life. I may not even teach his sister. The thought knifed through my heart and left a hollow sadness in its wake, one I didn't want to dwell on.

Coming back to the present, I glanced up at his face. Blake's unreadable expression unnerved me. "Even if it's not completely your style, the house is still beautiful."

He came to me, close enough that I had to crane my neck to look into his eyes. His nearness took my breath away, but not before I inhaled his woodsy aftershave. I fought the urge to lean forward to appreciate the alluring scent better.

"No, *you're* beautiful, sweetheart." Blake trailed a finger down my cheek, and my heart galloped as though he did something far more intimate—caress the inside of my thigh for example.

I hoped he translated the flush that burned my cheeks to be a result of his compliment and not my libidinous mind. His flattering words warmed me, even though I knew he lied—a white lie at best. Cute, sexy sometimes, maybe, but me, Emily Stone, beautiful? Naah....

Still, he meant to compliment me. "Thank you."

His palm lingered, and the loving gesture reminded me too much of what had transpired yesterday in the teachers' lounge. Anticipation ran through my veins, and, unbidden, my lips parted, drawing Blake's gaze. Would I be able to keep his interest or would my inexperience disappoint him? I licked my lower lip. I shouldn't care, but I did.

At that moment, I wanted to please him more than anything.

"God, you're killing me," he groaned and lowered his face.

My eyelids shuttered, and the world drifted away at the expectation of his mouth covering mine. I felt hot and cold and light-headed—a schoolgirl before her first kiss.

"Are you two gonna kiss?"

My eyes flew open at the sound of Amanda's voice, eclipsing the loud beating of my heart. The same surprise that must have been etched in my features was in Blake's.

God, so close....

He cleared his throat and half-turned, but before he had a chance to answer, his sister added, "I don't mind, I'll be in the dining room," and walked away.

Unable to ignore the comical side of our situation, I buried my face in Blake's shirt to smother my laughter. His chest shook, too, with what I suspected was silent amusement. He kissed the top of my head and I pulled back.

"At least you can be sure our first date is memorable." My teasing grin was contagious, though his held a dash of devilishness.

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“Oh, you have no idea how memorable I can get, kitten.” His lips feathered over my ear. Blake nipped my lobe, and by the time I could think clearly again, he stood at the living room entrance. “Coming?”

Not yet, but I’m sure you’ll take care of that, my inner vixen purred.

“Yes.” I tried not to sound breathless and followed him.

In desperate need to slow down my heart rate, I focused on the pictures adorning the hallway’s walls. Sadness darted through me at the sight of Amanda’s grinning face standing between her parents. Poor girl... And then a picture of her and Blake. I smiled at the way she leaned on him with abandon and a trust only kids showed. At least she had him, someone who cared about her and would try hard so she didn’t lack for anything. And that’s a lot more than what I had growing up.

Loath to dwell on my childhood drama now, I focused my mind on Blake’s college graduation picture. God, but he’d been hot even then. Though his features were still a bit boyish, you could see the man he would become. The intense gaze that gave me goose bumps was there, the broad shoulders, the imposing stature.

We entered the dining room and wonderful, mouth-watering smells attacked my nostrils. My stomach let out a low growl. It mustn’t have been that low, however, because, as Blake ushered me to my seat, he said in a low tone, “I’m glad you’re feeling hungry.”

Heat bled across my cheeks. He drew out the chair for me to sit, and I almost didn’t hear his murmured words. “It’s good to know you can follow instructions.”

I gulped and reached for the pitcher of water to soothe my suddenly dry throat. With mortification, I realized my hand trembled a bit when I filled my glass. Even though it was a silly comment, Blake’s husky tone, loaded with naughty innuendo, added a whole new layer. I may be a vanilla girl—hell, I’d only slept with two men—but I had girlfriends.

I let out an inward sigh. Too many times I’d heard about my friends’ sexcapades, and I couldn’t deny my heart stuttered at the mention of spankings and light bondage. I was only human and a very curious one at that.

Yet despite my recent resolution to change the way I treated men and my relationships, I hadn’t ventured into the sex-games zone. And I never would have thought Blake to be into that sort of stuff. He was a very rich, serious uptown lawyer. I couldn’t see him spanking me. Hell-bent on proving me a liar, my mind conjured all too clearly the image of Blake bending me over his lap and....

So, yeah, my hand trembled.

The way his innocent comment sent me on a wild sexy daydream annoyed me. I gulped down some water to cool myself down. This had to stop. I focused on the reason I sat there—food. “Mmm, do I get to find out what we’re having now? It smells delicious.”

Instead of replying, he disappeared in the next room. When I asked him on the ride here, Blake refused to divulge anything about the menu. What if what he’d cooked was some weird, inedible concoction? A girl had to be prepared to ooh and aah even though she ate sludge.

Men.

“Blake cooks on special days.” Amanda’s voice from across the table brought me back to the here and now.

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“Really?”

He reentered holding a big platter, and I arched an eyebrow at him. A slight flush spread on his face—or so I thought anyway.

“Uh-uh.” The little girl nodded. “He tried to prepare a turkey for Christmas, but he burned it.” Amanda giggled. “We ate pizza.”

“An Edwards’ Christmas tradition,” Blake said loftily. He took my plate where he placed a delicious-looking steak and added rice, which I assumed he’d mixed with some kind of spices, because of its slight yellowish color. That or I was going to die of food poisoning.

“Established in 1908?” I looked at him, the picture of innocence.

He sent me a fake glare. “You’re in danger of me sending you to bed without dinner.”

Crazy I know, but I squirmed with arousal just hearing the words Blake and bed in the same sentence. I was tempted to keep goading him, but Amanda’s cheerful voice cut in.

“Don’t worry, Miss Stone. He tells me that, too, and he never does.”

I gasped. “And I thought you were a man of your word.”

Blake’s eyes glittered with retribution. “I hope to change your opinion in the future.” His voice came out silky, too silky for my peace of mind.

At this point, I’d engaged in too many flirty one-on-one’s with Blake, therefore I focused on the plate he set before me. I couldn’t be rude to the chef, and besides, the sooner I started eating, the sooner I’d finish and get closer to the night’s end. To safety and sanity. It wasn’t just because of my reaction to Blake.

I hate first dates.

Awkward, fumbling attempts of two near strangers that want to get to know one another yet lie to impress the person sitting next to them, first dates sucked. And my experience with them was awful to say the least. I rarely managed to impress my date enough for him to ask me out again.

I cut a small piece from the steak and proceeded to chew with trepidation. “This is good!”

Even I heard the surprise in my voice. Amanda giggled, and an impish smile broke on Blake’s face.

I cleared my throat. “I mean this is very good. My compliments to the chef.”

Still standing, Blake put a hand across his chest and bowed slightly, earning another bout of giggles from his little sister. After cutting her steak into small pieces, he sat at the head of the table between the two of us. “Wine?”

“Yes, please.” Alcohol was exactly what the doctor ordered for my abused nerves. Not too much, though. My inhibitions needed to be at their highest.

“This rice is excellent,” I said, the mouthful still not completely swallowed. And it was the truth; I’d never tasted anything so scrumptious. If I were my big-bellied uncle Mick, I’d smack my lips and hum.

Blake smiled, beaming with pride. “It’s a recipe I picked up from a friend in Greece when I spent the summer after I graduated from college there. Gives the rice a rich flavor, doesn’t it?”

I nodded, his words bursting my bubble of elation. Just another example of how different Blake and I were. He spent summers frolicking in Greece, and I

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spent them working two jobs to raise money to support Mom and me and pay for her hospital bills.

So? You're not here to compete for the Best Life Experiences award. Get over it.

The rest of dinner flowed uneventfully. Between Amanda's comments and the food, time flew by. Blake, being his usual charming self, played the host to perfection—in a way that neither Amanda nor I feeling neglected, making sure to refill my glass with wine, and ask if I wanted another helping of rice. The man had multitasking down pat.

"I can't eat anymore. I'm stuffed." Amanda sat back in her chair and put her little hand over her stomach.

Blake checked his watch. "It's almost your bedtime anyway. Say goodnight to Miss Stone and go brush your teeth. I'll come in a moment to tuck you in."

She hopped off the chair and, in a surprising gesture of affection, kissed my cheek. "Goodnight, Miss Stone."

I smiled. "Night, Amanda."

Blake rose from his chair to clean up the table.

"Let me help you with that." I didn't want to be left alone with my thoughts again, or appear lazy.

The homey feel of what we did failed to register until I walked into the kitchen and saw Blake load the dishwasher. With Amanda somewhere in the back getting ready for bed, the family picture was complete. Unnerved, I remained silent, put the dishes I carried in place, and hurried to get out into the living room again.

I'd been safer when my mind had taken that decidedly naughty turn a while ago. Fine, turns and U-turns. At least with sex, I didn't put my heart on the line. A shiver started at the back of my neck and crawled down my spine. The fear of not measuring up, and worse, being discarded again, dug its nasty claws into me, and I shook like a leaf. Again. Despite how much I craved Blake's nearness, I almost hated him because my insecurities flared to life mostly around him.

No, giving Blake my heart would be a mistake. If he wanted it, he'd have to earn it.

A warm, hard chest nestled against my back, and his hands snaked around my waist. How could he have already tucked in Amanda?

"So how did I rate on a scale of one to ten?" Blake's husky words caressed my ear. "And don't be too honest. The male ego is a fragile thing."

I smothered a laugh. "Eight and a half."

"Mm, women associate me with that number, but for an entirely different reason."

Chuckling, even as a ripple of anticipation coursed through me, I turned in his arms. The teasing light in his jade eyes warmed my battered heart. "You're bad, you know that?"

"No, kitten, I'm very, *very* good."

I laughed again and my breasts brushed against his chest. My lungs refused to work as pleasure worked its insidious way through me. My nipples turned into hard little buds aching for satisfaction. I pulled back from his arms and put a few feet between us. *Take things slow*, I repeated to myself and picked up a knick-knack from the fireplace mantel to appear unaffected by his charm.

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Yes, he suspected, but he damn well didn't have to be sure.

"Ah, why do you call me that? Kitten?" I deftly changed the subject. "I know I'm not thin, but I don't resemble Garfield either."

Blake threw his head back and shook with laughter. "I swear..." he gasped out. In the blink of an eye, his mood turned somber again. Determination carving his face, he reached out and dragged me back into his arms. Taking the knick-knack from me, he put it down and enveloped me in a tight embrace. This time though, his hands slid lower—to my butt. "I've been dying to do this all night long, and you think you're fat?"

"Well, I—"

He squeezed and pulled me towards him while not even an inch lay between us already. "You remind me of a kitten. One moment all feisty, your hackles raised for a cat-fight, and then a kiss later you're purring in satisfaction."

I tried to be offended because I wasn't that easy to manipulate really, but what he said was too sweet.

His eyes darkened, and I sucked in a breath. No man had ever looked at me with so much lust, his gaze telling me he wanted to eat me.

"You're lucky Amanda was here. Wear these pants again and I won't be held accountable for my actions." The sand-papery quality of his voice scraped over my nerve-endings and sent a shiver through my body.

"You wouldn't admire them so much if you knew how difficult they're to put on." The worlds slipped out before I could stop them.

"I'd be more than happy to help you take them off and find out." Leave it to Blake to offer to get me out of my clothes the minute we were alone.

"Amanda..." I tried to break free from him again. When he held me in his arms, my thought process malfunctioned. I needed to refuse for too many reasons.

"I didn't invite you into Mandy's bed. I invited you into mine." His tone brooked no refusal.

I gulped. PG-6. "Yes, but—"

Blake stole the argument right out of my mouth. Without waiting for permission, he surged past my lips. These were no teasing flicks and licks; this was a quest to bend me to his will. He plundered my mouth, and his hands caressed my butt, pressing me against his impressive erection. Heat pooled between my legs, and I responded to his kiss with fervor, my need to taste the moist cavern of his mouth equaling his.

In the same sudden way he took hold of my lips, he let them go. I gritted my teeth not to whine in protest.

"Stay." His voice feathered against my lips, his breathing matching my own in shakiness. He leaned toward me and captured my lower lip with his teeth. Slowly, he let it go. "Spend the night with me."

I would want to spend forever with him if I didn't tread carefully. The epiphany hit me in the head and knocked the breath out of me.

God, I was so screwed.

Chapter Seven

Looking into Blake's hypnotizing eyes, none of my reasons to refuse him stood a chance.

"Yes," I breathed. "I want to stay with you too."

His face lit with joy. Blake didn't give me a chance to second-guess my decision; instead, he treated me to another seductive crush of his mouth on mine. This time though, Blake didn't rush, he didn't impose. In and out, his tongue moved—a prelude of what was to come, flicking his teasing tongue against mine until I buried my hands in his hair and became the aggressor. I kissed him to my heart's content, sipped from his mouth, thirsty for his taste, his touch, for this intimacy.

His groan rumbled through me, and next thing I knew, Blake scooped me up in his arms.

"Another second and I would have laid you down on the carpet." Blake nuzzled the crook of my neck, his lips savoring my skin and short-circuiting my brain. "I find you to be most addictive, Miss Stone."

I arched an eyebrow and bit back a smile. "Don't you think we're past last names?"

He fixed his gaze on me, the hunger in his face sending darts of excitement to dance down my spine. "No. I think we're past words."

He kissed me long and slow, until where we were ceased to matter, everything ceased to matter except the fact I lay in his arms and would soon be his. After what seemed like an eternity and yet no time at all, he put me down. A quick disoriented glance around told me he'd carried me to his bedroom while he fed me intoxicating kisses.

My flimsy camisole was no match for Blake's nimble fingers. He threw it on the floor behind him and trailed his index finger across the edge of my white lacy bra, following the upper curve of my breast.

"Pretty."

I wanted to ask him what he meant by the murmured word—the underwear or its content, but couldn't get my mouth to work.

He caressed my torso with the adoration one would show *Botticelli's* Venus, wanting to pay homage to every curve and plain. His fingers reached the waist of my leather pants, and he pushed the tips inside. Anticipation sizzled in my blood with all this teasing, and I struggled to breathe as I waited for his next move. Blake unbuttoned the pants and tried to pull them down.

The damn thing didn't budge.

In any other case, I would have smirked, but I was too anxious to get rid of them. That *Friends* episode with Ross and the trouble he got in to remove his leather pants popped in my too-frazzled head, and I trembled in despair. The pants had to come off—*now*.

Blake kneeled before me. "Hold on to my shoulders."

The moment I did, in another demonstration of his take-no-prisoners attitude, he pushed and pushed and yanked the garment down. With a gentleness that warmed my heart, he took off my shoes and pants, and then sat back on his haunches. His appraising gaze seared a path along my body, and even though I

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wasn't completely comfortable with my figure, I felt like the most desirable woman on the planet.

Our gazes locked, and the deep-seated desire I saw there fed my own. I kneeled too and attacked his white shirt. "You're wearing too many clothes."

With trembling fingers, I undid the first two buttons. At the sight of the mouthwatering prize so close to my reach, my nervousness shriveled and died. I finished unbuttoning him and pushed the shirt off his shoulders, sighing when I was finally able to touch warm skin. Blake took the rest of it off, giving me a full view of what I'd only dreamed about so far.

For once in my life, reality was better than fantasy.

I never thought a lawyer could have the ripped body of a surfer. A dusting of dark hair covered his upper chest, and a fine line traveled the length of his torso, only to disappear underneath his pants. His six-pack beckoned me to touch and taste, but since we were both kneeling on the floor, I couldn't satisfy both cravings. Sighing, I settled with smoothing my hands over his hard chest, relishing how his muscles flexed beneath my caresses. Yet even that didn't hold my interest for long.

"Slacks. Off."

Yes, he had reduced me to caveman lingo.

With a smug chuckle that would have been infuriating if he didn't have a more than justified right to it, Blake rose, undid his belt, and lowered his zipper. I repaid the favor of relieving him of his clothes, only I showed extra zeal. I tugged down his boxers too.

God, but he was magnificent everywhere. And he really was a man of his word. Eight and a half. Oh my... I never appreciated honesty in a man the way I did now. On a sudden impulse to be the one who throws *him* off-kilter for a change, I bent forward and circled my tongue around the crown of his erect length, licking off the precum gathered there.

His groan encouraged me to do something I'd never done without being asked. I took him in my mouth as far as I could, and then withdrew with a slow, loving suck. His taste—salty and male and all Blake—burst on my tongue, and a moan broke free from my throat to whisper over the erection in my mouth. I wanted more, but before I went down the same seductive path, he pulled me up and kissed me hard.

"You'll pay for that, you little minx."

Blake didn't let me enjoy the feminine satisfaction that imploded inside me at his growled words. His hands cupped my naked breasts, and gasping, I arched into his touch. *When did he help me out of my bra?* He kneaded and played with the twin mounds, and I lost my train of thought. His mouth landed on that sensitive spot where neck meets shoulder, and he sucked. He bit. Whimpering, I angled my head to accommodate him. Fiery heat licked my skin, and not even the prospect of a hickey cooled me down.

"Blake, please."

He trailed kisses up my neck until he reached my ear. "You yield so easily, kitten?" His murmur turned the fog in my brain even thicker. How could I not yield when Blake touched me, kissed me, loved me?

"Do you?" he persisted and pulled back a bit to stare deep into my eyes.

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I realized then he wanted my surrender, needed to hear the words that I craved him enough to do anything.

"I yield." I brushed my lips against his. "Please make love to me, Blake."

His eyes flashed with something I couldn't decipher. "Your wish is my command."

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I should have said *let's have sex*, but then he lifted me and laid me on the bed—a virgin about to be sacrificed and he the debaucher.

Blake took a moment to survey his booty, his strong thighs bracketing my legs, and oh, so slowly leaned down and placed a sweet kiss on my neck, where I knew I would carry his mark all through the next day.

He moved lower and lower still. My anticipation swelled at the unhurried, deliberate way he savored my body like a fine delicacy, and I squirmed beneath him. A big part of me would have preferred the "wham-bam" approach. a) it would satisfy my need for an immediate climax, b) it would dull Blake's white knight armor some, and c) it would keep at bay any silly notions of feeling anything other than lust for him.

His hands clasped my waist, a silent command to stay put since he didn't bother to stop spreading kisses across my breasts. By the time he finally closed his lips around a nipple, my breathing had turned hard and tortured.

Yet I didn't want my torture to end.

Blake's mouth was fire and ice on the aching bud. I buried my hands in his silky black locks, urging him to take more of me. He groaned around my flesh and eagerly complied. When he pulled away, I let out a small sound of protest.

"I wouldn't want to be negligent." His velvet whisper broke through the sensual web he weaved, and then he gave the other mound the same treatment.

Despite how much I enjoyed the foreplay, I craved the taking. I tugged at his hair. "Blake, please. You promised." I didn't care about the petulant tone of my voice.

I needed to have Blake inside me now.

He lifted his head and his gaze pierced all the way to my soul. "All in due time, my sweet."

"The time is now," I half snarled. I thought after the way he pursued me he'd show more eagerness to finish the act. I should have remembered his tendency to do exactly the opposite of what I expected him to do. I'm sure I would have, if any part of my brain was still active.

"I beg to differ. I'm not done with your delectable little body just yet."

"But—"

"Stay." The tone he used didn't leave room for argument.

His tongue continued the titillating sojourn of my body and swirled inside my navel. My anger evaporated. I'd never considered the small indentation an erogenous zone, but then again Blake possessed the ability to turn me into a string of lustful cells with just one look. He bent his head, caught the elastic band of my panties with his teeth, and snapped it lightly.

"Mmm, something smells delicious." He echoed my words earlier in the evening.

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He hooked his fingers at the sides of my thong and pulled it down my legs. Heat suffused my cheeks, and although we were both naked, I felt exposed. Vulnerable.

Blake held the tiny piece of fabric in his hand and raised an eyebrow. "Miss Stone, it would seem you're very naughty."

There was no reason for me to be ashamed, but his chastising tone accomplished its purpose. "I...."

Thong thrown on the floor, he leaned down until his breath feathered across my face. "Lucky for you, that's how I like my woman."

I gulped. My lips parted in anticipation for his, but he just gave me a wicked smile and slid down my body. Bastard.

His hands crept under my thighs, and he nudged my legs apart with his knee. He settled between them and pushed them outward some more. Stretched open, a voyeur's wet dream, I clenched my hands into fists to keep from covering myself. He could see every little detail of the most intimate part of me.

Blake didn't let my nervousness rise, thank God. He graced the top of one thigh with a brush of his lips and buried his head between my thighs. A strong ripple of awareness coursed through me at the kiss of his heated breath on my tender folds. It wouldn't be long now. It couldn't... My patience had reached its limits, and I was a step from screaming—and not in a good way. Feverish with desire, I ached with the need to come.

Out of their own volition, my hands moved to cradle his head and pull him toward me, but before they could execute their task, Blake's mouth settled on my aching, wetter than wet core.

I moaned.

He groaned.

My hands fell listless against the mattress when Blake swept kisses along my too-sensitive center. Up and down he moved, his caresses meant to stoke the fire burning inside me but not drive me over the edge. Feather light, they teased and taunted, promised yet purposely failed to deliver. Whimpers echoed around us, and, with detachment, I realized they came from me.

For all I tilted my pelvis, Blake refused to give me the release I needed. I didn't know why I even tried since I'd never been able to come by this. Then again, now I realized the lure of the act, sensed the intimacy of it. Blake kissed my cleft because he wanted to taste me, take me in every way, not out of obligation or selfishness, so that he could facilitate his way into me.

"Blake...Blake...." I lost count of how many times I chanted his name. Finally, he must have realized my despair because he drove his tongue deep inside me.

In.

And out.

In.

And out.

Until I felt caught in a maddening loop. I buried my fingers in his silky hair and urged him on and on and on... I don't know how much time later, but Blake closed at last his mouth around my clit and cinched the deal. I cried out and arched into him, my thighs tight around his head, my senses careening from a pleasure achieved for the first time.

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His erection nudged at my opening. Still only half way down to earth, my eyes flew open to stare at his face, inches away from mine.

"You're gorgeous when you come, kitten," he said thickly. "This time, take me with you."

Blake slid inside me, his hard length stretching me, filling me in a way that seemed almost too intimate. Everything struck me as new, different. When he was fully seated, I let out a small cry. This shouldn't feel so special.

Even in my haze, I noticed his brows knitted.

Blake froze inside me, and him not moving at all was worse than him moving slow. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

"I...", *I'm scared*, "I'm fine. Don't stop. It feels too good."

His eyes flashed with understanding, and then he moved, and words failed us both. Nothing could do justice to what we shared, not even the groans, moans, and whimpers that composed the background music of our joining.

Blake possessed me time and again, his movements no longer steady, his breathing no longer so even. I wrapped my legs around him and matched him push for push. Despite the building arousal low in my belly, I couldn't help but watch the powerful male looming over me, his face a hard mask carved by lust and need, the well-defined muscles in his strong arms flexing with effort, his chest glistening. I breathed in the scent of his sweat, and for the first time, it wasn't a bad one. I didn't smell just a chemical secretion, I smelled Blake's desire, his yearning for me.

Desperate, I closed my arms around him and dug my fingers in his strong back. I wanted....

"More. Give me more of you, Blake."

And he did. Oh, how he did.

His eyes slid shut, and he thrust inside me over and over, each time more forcefully. He grabbed my butt and ground me against him. His need seeming to match my own, he went wild above me. Too soon for me, I reached the crest for the second time.

White and blue and yellow lights flashed behind my closed eyelids. Blackness threatened to take me. Shaking from head to toe without any say in it, I resembled a victim of a San Francisco earthquake.

"Emily, oh God, Emily." Blake grunted low and came inside me, or rather, in the condom I hadn't realized he'd put on.

He didn't use my name often, so the occasion turned doubly special. I caressed his back, the only way in which I could communicate at the time, and he trembled under my touch. I joined him in trembling when I came to the most frightening conclusion. I could only think of one reason that being with him was so different, so intense.

Blake Edwards meant more to me than I wanted to admit.

Chapter Eight

Rays of light tortured my closed eyelids. I groaned and buried my head in the pillow. How could I have forgotten to close the damn blinds? I couldn't sleep if semi-darkness didn't reign in the room. A few seconds ticked by before I came to terms with the fact I wouldn't return to the blessed world of dreams. *Dammit!*

I wrinkled my nose. The pillow smelled funny—not bad, just different. And...it seemed a bit harder. Memories of last night crashed into me in a sensory tidal wave jerking me into full awareness. Yep, this was most definitely not my room. For one, it had double its size, with high ceilings and practical furniture scattered here and there. A four-poster bed dominating the space completed the Spartan yet elegant style of the room.

A bed whose sole occupant was me.

I brushed the sheet at Blake's empty side. Cold. Not as cold as the knot in my stomach, but close. Even though there could be a number of reasons for Blake's absence—Amanda getting up, or a client in jail, I couldn't help but be a bit disappointed. That must be the risk someone ran when he came close to perfection.

People always expected perfection from him.

My body tingled at the reminiscence of how perfect he was last night. Blake's kisses had drawn an invisible roadmap on me, and my dismay at waking up alone doubled. What a great way to start the day—snuggled next to Blake.

I plopped down on the comfy mattress and pulled the comforter tighter around me, up to my chin. Now that the heat of the moment had passed, and Blake wasn't within touching distance, the worrywart part of my brain worked in full gear. Granted, my thoughts unfolded slowly, due to the lack of caffeine in my system, but one stood out in glaring neon clarity.

What happened to my decision not to rush into sex with Blake?

Not only did I do the exact opposite, I did it on the first date no less... My face burned with embarrassment. I threw an arm over my eyes, but there was no hiding from the truth. My behavior, and the fact I had told him I wasn't interested in a relationship, could only be interpreted by Blake in one way.

Emily Stone is an easy lay.

"God, could I be more stupid?"

I didn't even breathe, thinking that maybe by some kind of miracle, if I lay stock still, time would go back, and last night wouldn't have happened. No, that wasn't what I wanted either.

Dammit. So what if Blake thought I was a bit on the slutty side? Why should I care? I shouldn't. We'd had amazing sex last night. Nothing to be ashamed of between consenting adults.

An almost inaudible snick interrupted the tomblike silence in the room.

"What did you say?"

No, I refused to believe that was Blake's voice. There were limits even to my flair for humiliation. I peeked beneath my arm and, sure enough, Blake stood at the door, watching me stonily, a huge breakfast tray in his hands.

"Oh, coffee, thank you," I gushed and jumped up in excitement, both because of the enticing hot brew and the opportunity to change the subject.

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The covers slid down my body, and my naked state registered right before I flashed Blake. I clutched the sheet to my breasts and held it like a shield. The need to cover myself seemed stupid, especially since Blake had done more than see all of me, but I couldn't help myself. I sent him a small smile. "I don't function before I have at least one cup."

Yet instead of bringing the tray to bed, he placed it on a chair and turned around. The grim expression on his face didn't bode well for the immediate future.

Blake stalked toward me. "Why do you think you're stupid?" His voice too smooth, he cut right to the chase.

I clenched and unclenched a fistful of sheet, trying to come up with an appropriate answer. The truth was not an option. Blake didn't take his gaze off me, and I fought not to squirm. He was doing that whole unsettling reading-me thing again.

His lips flattened into a thin disapproving line. "You regret last night."

The assessment was close enough to fluster me. After all, I had my pride and already felt inferior to Blake to add easy to my endless list of virtues.

A muscle twitched in his cheek. "I see." He opened his mouth, but instead of saying anything to me, he just muttered a low curse and walked out of the room banging the door behind him. Shock held me immobile for a few precious seconds, and then adrenaline pumped fast in my blood at the possibility of pissing Blake off enough to lose him.

I didn't have time to think why I was panicking, so I made a mental note to think about the reason later.

Amanda's presence in the house ruled out running after him naked, or with the sheet wrapped around me in a toga fashion. Unwilling to lose more time, I grabbed the first thing I saw—one of his shirts. When I came out into the hallway, Blake was nowhere to be seen.

Shit.

My heart thumping fast, I turned left and eventually found the staircase. I probably should have paid more attention last night, but Blake was kissing me en route, so sightseeing didn't hold much of an appeal. I ran downstairs, all the while trying to button up the too big for me shirt.

I found him in the living room, staring out the window.

"Blake."

At the sound of my voice, his shoulders tensed and I was hit by a strong sense of déjà-vu. *Just like New Year's Eve*. No, this time around, I wouldn't run away. I'd stay and deal with the consequences of my actions.

"I'm sorry, I know how it looks but I really don't regret what happened last night."

Blake turned, hands in his pockets, his face devoid of emotion. "What helped you decide?"

"I didn't need to decide. I just...."

"Spit it out, Emily. You told me you were only interested in a fling. I obliged. Why would you feel the need to sneak out the door and avoid seeing me in the light of day?" He sifted a hand through his dark hair.

"I didn't want to—"

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“Don’t worry. I just thought I’d keep your interest for more than a night, but I’m a big boy. I can handle the truth.”

But *I* couldn’t. I’d never witnessed Blake truly angry at me before, so I wasn’t prepared for his searing gaze or his lashing tongue. Tears stung the back of my eyes because despite my best efforts, what I feared most happened. Loath to show him how his words wounded me, I walked toward the couch on the other side of the room.

I played with the ends of the shirt. The truth couldn’t hurt me at this point. Everything had gone straight to hell. “I was afraid you’d think I’m easy,” I mumbled.

Blake let out a sigh behind me. The next second, he put his arms around me. Strange...he was shaking. I glanced up at him over my shoulder and saw him silently laughing.

With a grunt, I twisted in his embrace to face him. “You’re laughing at me? I bare my soul, and you laugh?”

He didn’t answer me, just laughed and laughed. And to think I felt bad about him getting the wrong idea. I shoved him hard, the intention of getting dressed and the hell out of there the first thing on my mind.

Blake wouldn’t let me go. I twisted and turned and twisted some more, but he rivaled an irritating octopus that latched onto its treasure and wouldn’t let go.

He cupped my face in his hands. “You’re nuts, you know that? Do you really think after everything I went through to convince you to go out with me I would consider you easy? I even used my kid sister to guilt you into agreeing to dinner, for God’s sake!”

Put that way, he had a point, but still... “It was our first date.”

“Emily, no matter the circumstances, you’re hardly easy—on any level. Trust me.” He finished with a hint of sarcasm.

“You *just* said you think I only wanted a fling and—”

Blake’s lips sealed mine in a sweet, slow kiss that seduced my senses to such a degree I went on my tiptoes to follow him when he pulled away. He swept his thumb across my lower lip.

“That’s what I was afraid you wanted. I was angry because I hoped...I hoped you wanted more from this, from me.”

I do. The immediate assertion almost fell from my lips in my effort to soothe his worries. “I don’t want to have just a fling with you,” I said diplomatically and hoped he would be satisfied because he wouldn’t get anything more from me.

His insecurity about us gave me a feeling of security, and I hugged him tight. “Dammit,” I grumbled in his shirt.

“What is it now?” The humor lacing his words couldn’t be mistaken.

“I’ve always wanted to have breakfast in bed. This was the first time a man did that for me, and I freaking ruined it.”

Blake laughed and scooped me in his arms. “No, you didn’t, kitten. We can still have breakfast in bed. And then I can have you.”

God, but the man knew how to make me melt with just a few words. I leaned to kiss him, and then almost jumped out of his hold. “Amanda?”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “She’s next door playing at a friend’s house.”

I relaxed against his chest again.

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“Don’t ever doubt my opinion of you, Emily,” he said in a somber tone, and I glanced up at him. “You deserve the best, and I plan on trying hard to deliver. But you have to meet me half way. Have faith in me, in us.”

Why not ask the moon and the stars while you’re at it? After Evan, my faith in men was in short supply. Yet the sincerity in his stare pushed me to reply, “I’ll try. Girl scout’s honor.”

We reached the top landing, and he smiled. “Good enough. Now...did I tell you how sexy you look in my shirt?” Blake’s whispered words in my ear sent tingles of delight across my body.

I curled my arms around his neck. “I don’t believe you did.”

“How remiss of me....” His velvet-spoken murmur poured over me like warm honey.

He laid me on his king-sized bed with him at my side. A hand slid between my legs just above the knees and parted the shirt with ease. I’d only had time to do half of the buttons.

“Do you know how hard it was for me to stay mad at you....” Blake began his seduction, all the while caressing the inside of my thigh, his fingers toying higher with each second that ticked by.

I couldn’t tear my gaze from his face. His eyes glittered intensely with desire, their mesmerizing effect worthy of any magician.

“...when you stood in front of me all tousled up from sleep, my shirt gaping open to tease me with glimpses of this sweet heaven?” His hand cupped me, and I arched into his touch, my eyes drifting shut.

“You’re wet, kitten.” His scorching breath breezed across my cheek, but my face went up in flames because of his words. “I take it you enjoy my touching you?”

My inner muscles contracted in silent request for his invasion. Afraid I wouldn’t say anything coherent, I nodded.

“What about when I kiss you?”

I opened my eyes to find his face looming over mine. A woodsy scent teased my nostrils, one I’d come to recognize as Blake’s. “Yes, kiss me.” *Please.*

His eyes twinkled with mischief. “Where would you have me kiss you, my sweet Emily?”

“Here....” I forked my fingers in his hair and brought his mouth down on mine. Our lips mated, and our tongues danced in languorous strokes. I swept my hands across his back and shoulders, reveling in his warmth, his strength. The frenzied lust satiated for the time being, we were content to lie in each other’s arms and stoke the embers of our need. The fire didn’t take long to flare back to life though.

I broke the kiss and guided his head lower. “And here....”

I stopped his descent right over my breasts. His hands on my waist tightened, and a small smile curled his lips before they closed around my nipple to launch their sensual onslaught. The same way he did last night, Blake showed incredible zeal, refusing to leave an inch of skin untouched. His tongue danced around the tight bud, playing with it as he sucked. He pushed the twin mounds close together and devoured both nipples. Sweat broke on my skin, and I let out a long moan.

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Seconds away from losing myself in the magic he knew so well how to weave, I remembered the route had another stop. My hands cradled and lifted his head. If I wasn't so aroused, I would have laughed at the look on his face. He resembled someone deprived of his favorite treat. I pushed at his shoulders, and his devilish grin was almost my undoing.

"And let's not forget," I breathed out in a husky voice I hardly recognized to belong to me, "here." I lead him to the apex of my thighs.

His mouth inches from where I longed for it to touch, Blake lifted his eyes to meet mine. "I can smell how wet you are for me."

My sex convulsed, and I bit my lip to keep from begging him to get me off.

"But what about breakfast in bed?" the sly devil asked, his gaze filled with mock innocence—an innocence one shouldn't show since he recently had his head buried between my thighs.

I let out a choked chuckle and pushed his face down. "I've found a better way to start off the day than coffee."

Chapter Nine

...Forty, sixty, eighty.

Only eighty bucks to pass the next month. Fucking great! I threw the measly bills on my kitchen table and buried my face in my hands.

The word bankruptcy danced behind my closed eyelids, mocking my attempt to block out reality.

Today was without a doubt the *coup de grâce*. I found a note from my landlord under the door, saying that he decided to raise the rent due to the economic crisis. The last piece of a cruel domino, crushed underneath all the other pieces before me, I fought to breathe.

You don't need a rent agreement. In a few months, you'll move in with me anyway. What's the worst that can happen? Evan's careless advice rang in my head, and despite how much I wanted to blame him, the fact remained—I listened to him even though I knew I'd be taking a risk. I chuckled. Another reason why men shouldn't be trusted, or I shouldn't be trusted with men. Either worked.

"What am I going to do?"

First, Mom's hospital bills fell on my shoulders, but I didn't mind since the treatments had given us both hope she might survive cancer. And when she didn't...well, money was the last thing I cared about.

Next, my good-for-nothing car broke down a week ago. I tried to stay positive even after the mechanic's phone call to inform me the problem was a busted transmission, which would cost me a thousand dollars. Rhett's suggestion to ask a friend of his to take a look at it had helped my "the cup is half full" mentality, but now—after Blake—I didn't feel comfortable taking Rhett up on his offer.

Mom's and my collective meager savings had run out with the previous year. This month, there was hardly any money left from my paycheck, and February had just begun. How was I going to pay for groceries?

The gas? The phone?

Despite fate's persistence to turn my life into a sitcom drama, I willed myself not to hyperventilate. The shrill ring of the phone jerked me out of my somber musings. Apparently, Fate thought I needed to be tortured more.

"Hello?"

"Yes, Miss Stone?"

"This is she."

"I'm calling from Jake's Auto Shop about your car." His voice wasn't a happy one.

I rubbed my forehead. "What about it?"

"You said you'd call back to say whether you wanted it fixed or not. You haven't." The burly mechanic who'd towed my car sounded pissed. And he wasn't a man I wanted pissed at me. Even from a distance.

I swallowed hard. "I'm still trying to come up with the money."

"You have until tomorrow to decide," he said, his words clipped.

"I will. Thank you." The line went dead on my words, and with it, so did my last hopes. I needed that car. My beat-up Honda was my only concession to luxury—if you could call it that. This past week, I'd walked more miles than I had

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the whole last year. The metro station was too far from my apartment, and I had to take three buses to get to work, which meant getting up an hour earlier to be at Merriweather on time. And now it seemed this would become my normal routine.

Well, as wake up calls went, this one took the cake. Spending almost the entire weekend with Blake may have taken my mind off my problems for a while, but now I was knee deep in consciousness.

I fought the tears that surfaced at the thought of moving to a cheaper, smaller apartment. A quick glance around told me what I already knew to be true—my current place was a step up from a hole. Only the bright colors and small, cute furniture gave it the illusion of livable.

My legs lead-heavy, I put the cordless phone back on its base. And noticed the red blinking light of the answering machine.

Don't push the button, the voice of my fast-dying optimism begged.

Yet that damned red light would be in the back of my mind until I did. At the end of my rope, I ignored the sense of foreboding. I just hoped after the message ended, I wouldn't use said rope to form a noose around my neck and hang myself.

Even Becky couldn't call me a drama queen for my reaction. This time, it was more than justifiable.

"Hey, baby." Rhett's voice filled the room, but where once I'd perk up at the husky rumble, now a sick feeling churned my stomach. "Where did you disappear to all weekend? I tried your cell, but I couldn't reach you. I wanted to take you out to dinner and tell you my big news. Well," he sighed, "I guess I'll talk to you during the week."

The Betty Boop clock on the opposite wall read six. No reason why I shouldn't drink. Grabbing a bottle of white wine and a glass, I walked the few feet separating the kitchen from the living room and plopped down on my mini couch. At least, it was long enough so my legs didn't hang out over the edge. My empty stomach protested, but I ignored the warning. Food wasn't on top of my to-do list. I poured a glass and placed the bottle on the floor next to me. Mmm, definitely better tasting than guilt.

God, Rhett.

I hung my head backwards. Now here was another problem that I needed to find an immediate solution to. I swirled the wine in my glass as if I could find the answer in its shallow depths the way witches used to do by looking into their cauldrons.

When I accepted Blake's invitation to dinner, I didn't think I would have trouble continuing to date Rhett too. Okay, not *too* much trouble anyway, because Blake invoked strong feelings in me. Still, I held to my hopes. After all, I came clean with him about seeing another man and told him I was interested in a no-strings-attached relationship, right?

Wrong.

The strings connecting me to Blake were so many—of the heart, body and spirit, that my situation would have been ironically funny if it wasn't so scary. Not even with Evan had I felt so in sync, and I'd known him for a year before we got engaged.

"In sync doesn't mean in love," I told the empty room.

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It was ridiculous, after all. We'd only gone on one date, and we'd known each other for less than a month. I couldn't be in love with him. Nope, physically impossible.

I pulled my legs up to half-lie half-sit on the couch. If I were smart, I would continue my relationship with Rhett to keep my emotional balance. It was way too soon to get attached to Blake. Chuckling, I poured myself a second glass of oblivion. When in my life had I done the smart thing? Never. I always chose the difficult path, a character flaw I couldn't seem to shake off.

"Well, it's never too late to start."

Because I didn't have enough things to worry about... I rested my arm on the back of the couch and laid my head there. My mind wandered back to the time when my job application at Merriweather had been accepted. I'd actually squealed for a whole minute, I was so happy. The chance of working for a private school with this kind of reputation had been manna to my hungry soul. Not only had I landed my dream job in a city I'd fallen in love with from the moment I'd set foot in it, but the money was good for a first-time teacher. One more year and I'd have paid off Mom's hospital bills.

A sad smile curled my lips at the memory of that day. I'd called my cousin Cade, the only relative who'd lent me support through Mom's illness until the very end, and taken him out to lunch to celebrate. Getting this job had been the first good thing to happen to me in a long time, and I'd thought my luck had changed.

Think again. I sneered and bottom-upped the glass.

The phone rang once more and the prospect of having it disconnected didn't seem so gloomy now. I'd received all the bad news I could handle for the day. No more! Damning Bell and his invention, I got up from the couch and wobbled toward it.

"Stone's Distillery, how may I help you?"

The person on the other end of the line let out a small chuckle. "Only you could make me laugh after the day I had."

"Becks?" I asked to be on the safe side, since my judgment was just a tad impaired now.

"Em-Gem, are you drunk?"

"I'm *tipsy*. There's a difference," I said loftily and headed back to my domain of the moment—the couch. The room spun a bit so I sat down and curled my legs under me, the wine bottle safely wedged between my thighs. "You weren't at school today."

Becky sighed. "Yes, my aunt fell while cleaning the windows and broke her leg."

"I'm sorry. It's not serious, is it?"

"No, the bone was fractured above the knee and will heal easily."

"Good. Moving around a double-story house will be hard though."

"Yeah, but she can sleep in the downstairs guest room. All things considered, Aunt Lynne had a narrow escape."

Becky's words reminded me of my mom again, and the narrow escape she *didn't* have. Dammit, there went my alcohol-induced bliss. The glass forgotten, I took a desperate swig right from the bottle.

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“So what brought on the wine fest?”

The almost imperceptible strain in Becky’s voice registered even through the light fog in my brain. She hated putting the other person on the spot, so she tried not to pry into people’s personal lives. A silly notion when it came to best friends.

If I didn’t confide in my BFF, who would I confide in?

I sighed. “Problems, problems, and more problems. Do you want them in chronological or random order?”

“Money issues?” Becky asked hesitantly since it wasn’t the first time the topic came up.

“That too. The only way to avoid an eviction is for me to find a second job. Yesterday. How am I going to do that, when I can work only in the afternoon and no later than ten if I want to be able to wake up in the morning to go to school?”

My friend’s silence spoke louder than any false reassurances. She couldn’t think of a solution either, and I didn’t expect her to. It just felt good to vent to someone other than myself.

“And I slept with Blake,” I blurted out.

She hooted. “You go, girl. See? There’s always a silver lining.”

“I think mine must be a nickel one.”

“What do you mean? You’re going out with two, very hot guys, who haven’t turned out to be jerks so far, and you’re having great sex. I swear I’m content living vicariously through you.”

My silence must have told Becky something was wrong because she groaned, “Oh, don’t tell me Blake was a dud. He so didn’t look the type.”

I laughed. “No, definitely not a dud. I think it’d be better if he was bad in bed.”

“Okay, now I *know* that’s the alcohol talking. How can you say such a thing—especially after Evan?”

I rubbed my forehead. “Because I’m confused. Dammit, everything would be fine if Blake wasn’t so perfect.”

“Em, are you trying to tell me you’re in love with Blake?”

“No.” My answer came out maybe a bit too emphatic. “I just went off track a bit. Great sex messes with your thought process.”

“Uh huh. So you feel nothing for Amanda’s hunky big brother?”

“Of course I do—lust. And I like him. He’s smart, funny, sexy. That doesn’t mean he’s ‘*The One*.’ I still have a couple of oats to sow.” There, I sounded quite reasonable.

Becky sighed. “Are you trying to convince me or yourself? Honey, you’re fighting a losing battle. When you go into something, whether a relationship or a project, you don’t do it half way. You put your heart into everything you do. Sooner or later you’re going to fall in love.”

I shifted on the couch, my breathing faster after hearing her explanation.

I’m not that person anymore. At least, not where men are concerned.

“It didn’t happen with Rhett.”

“Maybe you weren’t ready for anything more serious when you first started dating Rhett. Or maybe Blake is ‘*The One*.’ Or it could be the next guy. Not even your stubbornness can change fate.”

I rolled my eyes. Becky, the Romantic. Everything had a happy ending in her mind, and she only saw the best in people.

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“Becks, I make my own fate, and I’m not the same starry-eyed woman I was.” My voice volume increased, but I couldn’t stop myself. Yes, I craved Blake’s touch, his smile, his voice, but I didn’t lose sight of the fact my relationship with him had an expiration date. I wouldn’t let myself fall in love with him knowing how much it’d hurt when he walked away.

Happily ever afters happened only in fairy tales and romance novels.

The memory of Evan and his Christmas blonde popped unbidden in my head to prove my point. My blood boiled all over again, and the fog in my head cleared some more. Dammit.

“I don’t tell you that by believing the right guy for you is out there you’re setting yourself up for disappointment, so please don’t tell me I’m wrong for not wanting to get heart-broken again.”

Becky stayed silent for a couple of seconds. “You’re right. I just want you to be happy, Em, and maybe I’m trying to force my way of thinking on you. I promise I won’t say anything of the kind again.”

My heart clenched at the regret in her voice. I closed my eyes and mouthed a curse. “No, Becks, you didn’t say anything wrong. I’m just cranky and took it out on you. That’s what friends are for, voicing their opinion without the fear it’ll be misunderstood.” I sighed. “The best thing for me is to sleep my mood off. We’ll talk tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure. Bye.”

“Bye.”

I dropped the phone next to me and grabbed the bottle. Becky didn’t get it. Being able to dabble in men was my safety net, and Blake hadn’t convinced me to let him through—special amazing sex or not.

I didn’t know if any man would ever gain my trust again.

Chapter Ten

The bell rang, indicating the school day's end, and I let out a deep sigh. I welcomed the sound so much, one would think it was a new Pink single. I'd hated this Tuesday from the moment I'd opened my eyes.

The headache that greeted me into consciousness thumped as if there was a fifteen-member construction-site crew working in my head. The pounding didn't abate even after two Advils, but I couldn't call in sick. Tomorrow, I would have to sit through one of Headmaster Holland's lectures, not to mention I would never hear the end of how irresponsible I am.

Faced with this bleak future, I dragged myself out of the apartment, managed to get to school, and endured eight hours of being in a classroom full of six-year olds with enough energy to light up San Fran for a week. Thank God, my headache receded with the passing hours, but I still had to force myself to walk out the school's entrance and go home.

Lost in my own little world, I glanced out at the street to see Blake waiting for me, against the hood of his car. My heart did the Macarena at the sight of him. I paused for a moment, so that my eyes could properly feast on him. God, but he was exactly what the doctor ordered.

I wanted to jump in his arms and ask him to kiss my weariness away, but sanity reasserted itself. The last thing I needed was for Hell-Holland to see me with Blake—in front of the school no less. I'd be without a job by this time tomorrow, and I couldn't afford unemployment when my debt accumulated with every breath I took.

The thought put a damper on my excitement, but I refused to let my money problems burden my relationship with Blake so I widened my smile. I skipped a few steps running down the stairs to meet him, happiness bubbling inside me.

Apparently, a spoonful of Blake worked better than Advil.

Half way down the flight of stairs, my cell vibrated. A search and rescue mission recovered it from the bottom of my tote bag. The moment the name on the screen registered in my mind, I wished I hadn't found the phone in time to answer. My eyes flew guiltily to Blake, but I couldn't hold his gaze for more than a second.

I was awful at this playing the field thing.

"Hi, Rhett."

"Baby, you're one hard woman to reach." His warm voice poured through the phone line.

I winced. "Yeah, I know. My battery died during the weekend, and I didn't have my recharger with me." It felt good to tell the truth. I hated lying because, apart from leading to trouble, I always, *always*, got caught.

Lucky for me, Rhett didn't ask why I spent the whole weekend away from home or where exactly away I was. That was the beauty of no-strings relationships. A peek at Blake, and his bad imitation of not scowling told me I wouldn't have the same luck with him. A wave of warmth swept over me. His aggravation meant I mattered to him.

I turned sideways. Even though I didn't want to stare at him while I talked to Rhett, having my back to Blake didn't feel right either.

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“Well, you worried me going AWOL like that.”

I smiled. “Why, Mr. Rhett, I didn’t know you cared.”

“Remind me to cure you of that misconception next time we meet. Which is the reason I called actually...can I see you tonight?”

I rubbed my forehead, but unfortunately it wasn’t the magic lamp, therefore it wouldn’t grant me the wish of coming up with the right answer. I wanted to meet with Rhett so I could prove to myself and the world I didn’t love Blake. But the man in question waited for me at the bottom of the stairs, and he would want us to go out given that we hadn’t seen each other since Sunday—*two whole days*, I could just hear him.

If I told him I couldn’t go out tonight, Blake would know the reason why. It didn’t take a genius to figure out I was talking to Rhett, and Blake was a smart guy. He would either go through the roof or be hurt by my rejection and sulk, and I hated both options.

In King Solomon’s shoes and knowing I’d failed to fill them, I answered, “I can’t tonight, Rhett. How about tomorrow?”

“Okay, baby. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Bye.” I snapped my cell shut and walked down the rest of the stairs.

Blake’s mood must have improved, because he smiled at me. Venomous disappointment spread along my veins. I’d been wrong after all. He really didn’t care what I did with other men.

That’s a good thing, right?

My cheeks hurt from the wide smile I gave him. God, it felt fake.

“Hey, stranger.” He played with my coat.

“Hey, yourself. Don’t tell me you’re waiting for me.”

“Guilty as charged. Know any good lawyers?” His eyes twinkled with mischief, and he sent me the crooked grin that made my insides melt.

“Mm, the only lawyer I know is good in other things. I haven’t checked out his legal expertise yet.”

Blake pushed his legs apart and pulled me closer to him using the edges of my coat. “You can check me out any time, kitten. And be very thorough.” He leaned forward to kiss me, and, though it killed me, I drew back. Puzzled eyes stared back at me, and I cursed Hell-Holland and his rigid ways. I gave him a meaningful look to remind him of Amanda.

“Not here, Blake. We’re in plain sight.”

“I was going to kiss your cheek. I didn’t forget there are kids around. My sister is in the car for heaven’s sake.”

I scrunched my nose. “It’s not just that. Holland is very old-fashioned and, believe me, he won’t be very happy if he finds out we’re an item.”

He grinned and pulled at my coat again. My words seemed to wipe away the last remnants of his foul mood. “An item, huh?” He flicked my nose. “Let me worry about Holland.”

Unable to help myself, I reached out and caressed his arm. “That’s just it, Blake, my job is my business not yours, and I won’t let you handle whatever problem rises for me.”

“When two people are in a relationship, Emily, they help each other. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

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A little devil pushed me to ask, half-hoping Blake would disappoint me, half-wishing he wouldn't. "So if I told you I may have to move because I don't have an agreement and can't pay my raised rent, how would you help me? Would you find some clever legal loop hole?"

Blake let out a little laugh. "No, I'd do something easier. I'd give you the money."

I raised an eyebrow at his fancy-free way. "Meaning you'd *loan* me the amount?"

He straightened off the car and towered over me. "Meaning I'd *give* you the money, kitten, and I wouldn't break a sweat. This month and every month something comes up."

Shock rippled through me. I expected him to do the gentlemanly thing, but not show this kind of vehement commitment. Who would be so cavalier when it came to money? Blake was well off, but he wasn't Trump. "Why? You hardly know me."

"You're wrong." He pushed a bang out of my face, his fingers lingering on my skin before retreating. "For the last two months, you've been Amanda's sole topic of conversation. I know you're twenty-three, that you live alone, you prefer cats to dogs, live on coffee, but *that's only for grown-ups*." He used a mock stern voice. "I also know your car broke down, so lately you've been taking the bus to school, and that today you weren't your usual self." Concern filled his emerald-hued eyes. "What's the matter, Emily?"

"I just had a headache, that's all," I hedged.

My truthful—albeit not completely—explanation didn't convince Blake. "Whatever you need, you come to me," he growled the caveman declaration, the *not Rhett* left unspoken, but clear if only I dared to read between the lines. He cupped my cheek. "Now, what do you need?"

"You, just you." I buried my face in his coat and hugged him tight, in part to hide the tears and in part because I wanted to. No one had ever been there for me in the unconditional way Blake just professed. To hell with Holland, I would seize these few moments of happiness. I breathed in his familiar scent mixed with his woodsy aftershave and basked in the security his embrace provided, no matter how temporary. I trembled.

He kissed the top of my head. "Em, you're shivering. Are you alright?"

Hell if I knew. Despite what he said, the last thing I would do was ask Blake for money. The balance of his bank account had nothing to do with why I wanted to be with him, and I didn't want him to be even the least bit suspicious of the reasons I craved him. If anything, the fact he was loaded worked against him.

I pulled back, knowing I played with fire the way I hugged him in front of school and country. "Yeah, with you on my team, I'm fine."

His eyes scanned my face, and my heart tripped, afraid he would read my deep anxiety and the white lie I just served him.

When he nodded, I let out a breath. "Okay. I want to see you tonight."

Typical of Blake—he didn't ask, he *insisted* that we see each other. While his words brought a small smile to my face, they also reminded me of my dilemma of just a few minutes ago. Guilt churned my stomach, even though technically I had nothing to feel guilty about. Blake was being so nice to me, I felt that...that....

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"I don't deserve you." The words fell out of my mouth before I had time to stop them.

"What?" Surprise coated the single word and I wanted to kick myself. How could I have said that out loud?

"I mean...you're such a nice guy and—" I lost my voice at the sour look on his face.

His hands on my waist, he gave me a light shake. "You still think I'm nice?"

Laughter bubbled in my throat and broke free at his almost insulted tone. I had to clench my hands into fists to not wrap them around his neck and kiss his wounded expression away. One incident of misconduct was enough for the day. "Great, glorious, striking...."

I could see by the unchangeable furrow of his eyebrows, he wasn't impressed by my praises. I leaned a bit closer and whispered, "How about this?" This time around, I was the one who played with the lapel of his jacket.

"You're my Triple O."

His hold on me tightened, and his eyes darkened with desire. "And here I thought I was the sweet-talker in this relationship." His gruff voice matched the hungry expression on his face.

I removed his hands from my waist and held them, my thumbs sweeping circles on the back of his palms. "Conceited much? I'm not without a few tricks up my sleeve. One day I may show you."

"Interesting. And what feat must I accomplish for the pleasure of your tricks?"

I choked on a bout of laughter when I realized he'd once again twisted my words around to give them a naughty meaning and slapped his arm. "I don't do those kinds of tricks. Anyway, I have to go, or I'll miss my bus. Come by my place around six? We can go see a movie or something."

Blake gave me a duh look. "What am I here for, just to look good? I'll drive you home."

I tapped my chin. "Mm, you're not hard on the eyes, that's for sure."

Blake chuckled, turned me around, and pushed me toward the passenger's door. "Get in the car, Miss Stone."

The hair at the back of my neck stood at attention, and I glanced up at the school's second floor windows. A curtain fluttered—I guessed *back* into place—and even though I had no idea who, I was certain someone had witnessed my conversation with Blake. The sour sensation in the pit of my stomach told me it was Holland.

The sensible voice in my head I ignored more often than not told me I would find out soon enough.

Chapter Eleven

A small moan of appreciation escaped my lips as I rolled the cream on my tongue right before I swallowed. Never before had the pungent taste been so welcome.

Lemon pie, the perfect comfort food for the occasion.

I forked another bite, and my gaze landed on the discarded newspaper to my right. Disgruntled, I curled my lips and glanced away. One would think, after such a thorough search, there would be at least one or two entries circled.

Wrong.

Almost an hour of going through the classifieds, and I'd come up with nothing. A part-time, only in the afternoon job that entailed teaching skills didn't exist—or if it did, it was merely in my dreams.

The break had almost ended when Becky rushed into the teachers' lounge, her face slightly flushed. "Don't tell me that's your famous lemon pie."

I could hear the craving in her voice. Nodding, I pulled the plastic plate closer to me. Past experience told me what would follow.

She sat in a chair next to me. "Can I have a bite?"

I waved the fork back and forth. "Nuh-uh, sorry, I haven't eaten anything today, *and* I'm fighting off a panic attack about my imminent bankruptcy. The pie's mine."

My friend folded her hands on the table. "Would I win a small piece if I told you I found you a job?"

My eyes rounded. "What?"

Becky took advantage of my shock to slide the plate her way and snag the fork from my loose fingers. "Mm," she echoed my delight of just moments ago when she sampled the lemon pie, no intention of satisfying my curiosity soon readable on her features. She was actually torturing me.

"Becky! Spill."

With a mischievous grin on her face, she licked the fork clean and put it down. "In my apartment building there is a little boy and his father—nice people. Yesterday, I ran into him, and we got to talking. His son, Matthew, is in danger of repeating the school year, and, given I'm a teacher, he asked me if I could tutor him."

My breath lodged in my lungs at the enormity of what Becky said. I wanted to jump up and do a victory dance. *Good things rarely happen to you*, a little voice inside me whispered. I swallowed tightly. Could this break be real or was I about to wake up any moment now?

"I came up with a fib and suggested you in my place," Becky continued. "You have an appointment today at seven at his apartment to meet with him and his son and discuss the details."

My vision blurred. I hugged her tight and had to blink away tears. How did I come to be so fortunate? Last year, I was practically on my own—with the exception of my cousin, Cade—and now I had not two, but three, people in my life who cared about me and did whatever they could to help me.

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“Thank you,” I mumbled into Becky’s hair. I pulled back to peer into her face. “Are you sure you don’t want to take the job yourself? It’s an extra source of income, after all.”

However badly I needed the money, I’d feel guilty if I knew Becky sacrificed her own needs and wishes for my sake.

She squeezed my hand. “You need this more than I do. Besides, it will give me the leverage I require to ask you to bake me a pie ‘til doom’s day.” Becky waggled her eyebrows.

Nodding, I couldn’t help but chuckle. “I’ll even throw in free delivery.”

Becky’s eyes gleamed with mischief. “Only if the delivery guy is Playgirl material. You seem to have a knack for finding their kind. I’ll lure him inside with the promise of warm, homemade pie and have my wicked way with him.”

I almost choked at her wistful tone. Becky doing a one-night stand? “What about sensible, trustworthy Steve?”

“Delivery boy will be my last fling,” Becky said in a solemn voice.

Laughing and trying not to cry, I pushed the plate with the half-eaten piece of lemon pie in front of her. “Here, consider this an advance partial payment.”

Becky ate, and I planned. I would be on my best professional behavior today. Do whatever it took to get this job. Okay, not *whatever*, but close. Life and fiction were filled with stories about tutors and house employees who got involved with their boss, and only the fictitious ones ended well. Since this was real life, I had no intention to have anything other than a business relationship with Mr.—

“What’s his name?”

“Oh,” she said, her mouth half-full, “Robert Davis. He’s the vice president at a big advertising firm. Loaded.”

“All that money and he’s staying at your building?”

Becky glared at me. “What’s wrong with where I live? He rented the apartment until he finds a house that meets his requirements. His old one held too many memories, and he sold it to start fresh.”

My eyebrows furrowed. My puzzlement must have been evident, because she continued. “His wife left him a few months ago. She didn’t even fight him for custody of Matthew.”

Sympathy for Mr. Davis’s son drowned out all other emotions. How could a mother forsake her own child? I dealt with kids every day, but no matter how frustrated I ended up when it was time to punch out, I felt blessed for playing even a small part in their lives. “That’s so sad.”

“Yeah, the little guy breaks my heart. They moved in 3A about two months ago, and every time I run into them, Matthew is more uncommunicative, aggressive.”

That feeling I knew all too well. As a kid, I’d thought my dad had walked out on us because I’d done something wrong, I wasn’t good enough. I’d spent the first weeks after he left being a model daughter. I studied hard, stayed quiet, and helped my mom around the house. Each day, I waited and hoped.

Surely he’ll come back now, the childish thought still had the power to hurt me.

And then the anger had come. I remember it like it was yesterday how one day I stopped waiting and turned into a regular hellion. I talked back to my teachers,

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didn't study, and my *coup de grâce*...I shaved all of my dolls' heads when money was too scarce for me to have new ones.

If Daddy considered me bad, why not actually be bad, right?

I sighed and tried to focus on my future—after all, I couldn't change the past. "From what you say, I've got my work cut out for me."

* * * *

"Just breathe. You've done this before."

The little pep talk didn't work its magic. My rebel heart refused to listen to reason. I wiped my sweaty hands against my black pencil skirt and tried to will my heart rate to slow down. All the things that could go wrong flashed before my eyes, and adrenaline pumped fast in my blood. I passed a finger over my front teeth for the nth time to check if food was stuck there.

"You won't make a fool of yourself."

"Excuse me." A deep voice laced with amusement boomed from behind me.

I jumped and glanced over my shoulder at the stranger. My cheeks turned even warmer at the teasing grin on his face. He leaned toward me, and I moved out of his way. With rising mortification, I watched him press the button for the elevator. My eyes drifted shut as I cursed my luck inwardly.

Why did these things always happen to me?

Because you keep talking to yourself in public places.

The elevator was up on cloud number one thousand and nine it took so long to get here. About to faint from keeping my breath, the ding of its arrival saved me from embarrassing myself even more. The doors slid open, but I let the strange man walk ahead of me. For some reason, knowing where he was comforted me.

"Which floor?"

I looked up into his face. He was staring at me, a small grin teasing his lips.

I cleared my throat. "Third. Thank you."

He pressed the button for the third story and stepped back.

The cart was very clean. Even the gray tiles on the floor sparkled, considering the number of people who walked in and out of here each day. I smoothed down my skirt again—anything to avoid looking in the direction of the other occupant of the elevator. The blessed ding sounded, and once more, I followed him.

We both walked down the light blue hallway, the scarce lighting lending a horror-movie quality to the eerie quiet that cloaked our surroundings. The floor almost seemed uninhabited. The thought was ridiculous, yet I couldn't shake off the feeling.

With a slow pace, I checked every door to find 3A. At least, my recent embarrassing incident managed to divert my focus, and I somewhat forgot about my anxiety. It wasn't the first apartment. No, not the second one either. Passing by the third one, worry slithered in my mind. Was I on the wrong floor?

I paused, and that was when the other man's footsteps registered. He still hadn't gone in any apartment either. Before, I didn't pay any attention to him—I didn't want to. But now, I could do nothing but stare at his wide shoulders and the back of his blond head. Did he have a threatening or a friendly face? For the life of me, I couldn't remember.

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I clutched my bag's strap tight. Granted, this was Becky's building, but one heard so many stories in the news... Too unnerved to think straight, I slid my hand downward and into my bag to have the mace I carried with me handy when the stranger saved me from the trouble.

He stopped in front of a door and pulling a key from his pocket, unlocked it. By that time, I was close enough to read the number.

3A.

No, no, no, no, no.

As he turned to close the door, he looked up at me. I must have resembled a victim of Medusa, standing there motionless.

His eyebrows furrowed. "Can I help you?"

I gulped past a dry throat and tried not to look like a crazy stalker. Yeah, right. The wise thing would be to just turn around and leave. No way would he hire me to tutor his son—his *troubled* son—after the show I put on for him downstairs. I didn't have enough self-confidence to sit idly by and listen to him while he explained how incompetent and wrong for the job I was.

Even so, I needed the money more than I needed air.

I swallowed my pride and smiled. "Mr. Davis?"

"Yes."

I offered him my hand. "Hello, I'm Emily Stone. Rebecca Grimson referred me to you about a tutoring position."

You could hear a feather drop in the complete and utter silence that followed. His gaze raked over me, and I fought not to blush. Damn my fair skin. Still, I refused to cower under his probing scrutiny and held my ground. "We had an appointment at seven to discuss the particulars?"

My question seemed to pull him out of his trance because he shook my hand and nodded. "Yes, of course, nice to meet you. Please come in." He drew back.

I let out a relieved breath. For him to invite me in, I mustn't have looked that crazy. He ushered me to the living room. I took a seat on his maroon plush couch. Yes, maroon.

"How about a cup of coffee?"

"I'd love some," I lied through my teeth. My stomach performed the same death-defying somersaults those skateboard fanatics I ran into at the park were so eager to do.

My cell rang, and I rushed to pull it out of my bag and silence it. The name on the screen glared at me. Blake. With a heavy heart, I flipped it open.

"Hey, Blake. Yeah, I'm okay. Listen can I call you back? I can't talk right now. Okay, bye."

Mr. Davis came back with a tray as I dropped the phone in my bag. He set a big mug on the coffee table in front of me. I hadn't noticed earlier, but he had a pleasant face. He sat down in the armchair, and, leaning forward, he rested his arms on his thighs, his riveting blue eyes focused on me.

With a warm smile, he asked, "So, when can you start?"

Chapter Twelve

The pint of *Ben & Jerry's* anchored me on the spot at the sight of Blake. His face dark and menacing, he leaned against my front door. My good mood almost evaporated, but the next instant I squared my shoulders. This was a moment to savor, and I refused to let him ruin the buzz of success for me no matter what.

Walking toward him, I smiled. "Hi, Blake. What brings you by?"

He straightened away from the door, scowl firmly in place. "Your cell is off."

I sighed at his accusing tone, determined not to get riled up. Yes, I'd switched my cell off the second time he called. "I told you I couldn't talk."

A muscle twitched in his cheek. "Next time, please inform me when there's an opening in your date calendar. That way, I won't interrupt your evening with Rhett," Blake snapped.

I took a deep breath. In truth, I had to cancel my plans with Rhett to keep my appointment, and Rhett hadn't shown half the testiness Blake showed. A testiness the man in front of me had no right to. "We didn't have a date tonight. And if you had let me explain before going off on me, I would've told you I was at a meeting about a potential job, not out with Rhett."

Tonight, Blake's halo didn't shine that bright. Even Mr. Davis had treated me better. He had turned out to be charming and easy to talk to. The fact his son hadn't thrown a tantrum at the news I would be his new tutor even though it was evident the little boy despised the idea told me Matthew had manners. And the way Mr. Davis hadn't cowered to Matthew's watery eyes had elevated my opinion of him even more.

I gritted my teeth and fished my keys out of my bag. The outcome of this long and stressful day caught up with me. Tension radiated across my shoulder blades and down my arms. Soon, I wouldn't be able to move my neck. All I wanted was to take my clothes off and eat my ice cream in peace, not fight in the middle of the hallway for my neighbors to hear. I looked up at him, but refused to be swayed by the regret etched on his face.

I didn't check up on him, and I demanded the same kind of consideration in return. Dammit, wasn't that every man's dream, to do whatever they wanted, no questions asked? Blake couldn't be in love with me this soon, so the only logical reason left to explain his attitude was ego.

"Goodnight, Blake."

Brushing past him, I unlocked and got in my apartment, the door closing behind me with a soft snick. I let my eyes drift shut and leaned against it. Now, I felt even more drained. I'd spent the last bits of my energy in my confrontation with Blake. The ice cream fest I'd planned didn't appeal to me anymore. I'd just crawl in bed and sleep.

The knock boomed in the silence of the room, sending vibrations along my back.

"Emily."

How could a word—one that I heard daily, over and over—mean so many things?

I'm sorry.

I need you.

The Art of Losing

I'm not going away.

Or maybe I read too much into it, being my usual crazy self. *Don't open the door. This is getting too complicated. Get out while you still can.* The wisdom in the words of that inner voice was irrefutable. I took a step away from the door, and then a second one. The third and fourth came easier. I placed my bag on the table and toed my shoes off. No, not gonna fall for his act. I walked toward the kitchen and put the ice cream in the freezer.

I waited and listened. The more time passed, the more my breathing shortened. He didn't knock a second time. Had he left? Unbidden panic rocked my body, and I turned to open the door.

He still stood there, waiting, a hand on the frame, the tie loosened around his neck. Without my heels, Blake towered over me, a male animal in its prime. Our gazes met and held, and my heart quickened in my chest. He said nothing, just looked at me.

Dammit, I wanted that apology bad. I deserved it.

And even though I longed to speak and break this spell he put on me with so little effort, I remained silent too. All I could do was breathe and brace for the storm brewing in the green seas of his eyes.

Without any warning, Blake grabbed my waist and pulled me up. Our mouths clashed in ferocious need. His groan echoed mine. His tongue speared into my mouth, reasserting Blake's right to me. I draped my arms around his neck for purchase as he slid his hands down my thighs to my knees and urged me to wrap my legs around him. His hard-on prodded my cleft, and my inner muscles clenched with the desire to feel him inside of me again. Now.

Unable to show any kind of restraint, I rubbed against him.

Blake ravaged my mouth, and I ravaged his back. I had no idea what drove him, but I was blowing steam from his recent macho show, not to mention I wanted to erase the disappointment and hurt that took up residence in my heart because of his behavior. What he did or didn't do shouldn't matter so much—enough to ruin the whole success glow I had going on up until I found him at my doorstep.

Blake walked inside the apartment. A thud broke into my kissing frenzy. He spun me around to trap me between him and the closed door. Sooner than I wished, he pulled away, a sufficient distance for our lips to be close but not close enough.

The need to taste him again clawed at my insides. Goose bumps broke on my skin at the intensity of my attraction to him. I wanted to kiss and lick every inch of his body. I longed to wake up next to him, his body a warm wall of protection, his scent branding my skin.

This was too much. This was crazy. I turned my face to the side and let my legs drop. I shoved him back. He didn't budge. Desperation flowed through my veins, and I shoved harder. He had to let me go because a) I needed distance. b) I needed sanity. c) I needed to remember all the reasons not to start feeling what I felt for Blake.

"No, no, hear me out, Emily," he rasped out. His voice, tinged with anxiety, forced me to look at him.

The Art of Losing

Blake cupped my cheek and brushed my bangs aside with his other hand. “I got jealous. When you answered your cell and whispered, I thought you didn’t want someone to hear you were talking to me. I thought you were hiding.” He exhaled. “I spent hours picturing you with Rhett—laughing, kissing, lying in his bed.” He hammered out the words with a rage that, even though it pleased me on some level, was uncalled for.

When I pushed this time, he dropped his hands and stepped back. “I never lied to you, Blake. You said you didn’t care if I was seeing Rhett or not too.” After I’d put enough distance between us, I turned around and fixed him with a hard stare. “Did you change your mind?”

He glanced away. Oh, no. My heart fluttered against my ribcage. I had to be crazy to ask that. What if he said yes? What if he told me to choose between the two of them? What the hell would I do? I laced my hands behind my back to keep from reaching out to him and waited for his answer, dreading to hear an ultimatum but longing to put an end to the torturous wait.

Blake rubbed his neck. “No, I didn’t. Tonight was a kneejerk reaction. It won’t happen again.”

I narrowed my eyes. The words placated me, but somehow, they rang false. Blake didn’t seem the kind of guy who would have a change of heart with just a few words. For the life of me, I couldn’t muster the energy to care. I’d gone on enough roller coaster rides for one day. I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Look, Blake. I’m really not in the mood to fight—or talk for that matter. I’ve hardly had the time to sit all day, and my neck is killing me. Can we do this tomorrow? Maybe you should think about our relationship some more, and then decide.”

There, I gave him an out.

In the blink of an eye, he closed the distance between us and closed his arms around my waist. “I don’t need to think about anything. I want you, and if that means sharing you with another guy, I will.” He shrugged, and poisonous tendrils of guilt wrapped around my heart. I knew he couldn’t stomach easily the idea he had to share me with Rhett. I should end it before any of us got hurt.

I opened my mouth but couldn’t push the words past my lips.

He swept soothing circles along my back. “You say your neck hurts?”

Unnerved by the sudden change of subject, I nodded. He leaned down and kissed the tip of my nose.

“I’ll give you a massage. Do you have oil or maybe some lotion?”

“Yes,” I croaked. Images of Blake’s hands on my neck, my shoulders, my back and lower, flashed in my mind and turned my mouth dry.

Blake glanced past my shoulder. “Go lie on the couch.”

I swallowed tightly. “It’s too small. We’ll have to use my bed.”

He reminded me of a cat that ate a family of canaries. “I thought you’d never ask.”

I chuckled, relieved the tension between us was easing, and led the way. Now how did I know before he spoke that he’d be all broken up over having to move this party to my bedroom?

Men.

The Art of Losing

The moment I laid eyes on my bed, all hilarity abandoned me. I turned to stare at Blake who removed his jacket. He rolled up his sleeves and arched an eyebrow. “Aren’t you going to take your clothes off?”

Easier said than done. Stripping in front of him in the heat of the moment was one thing, but to undress in an almost a clinical way, while he coolly watched and would spot all of my flaws? Nuh-uh, I wasn’t strip girl material, not by a long shot.

“Yeah, let me get the lotion first.” I’d hardly finished the mumbled sentence before I ran to hide in the bathroom.

I hit my fist against the counter. What was the matter with me? Blake had seen every inch of my body. This wave of embarrassment was irrational. I stared at myself in the mirror—cheeks flushed, eyes shining with lust.

I placed my palms around the sink and leaned forward. “You want this. Now go get it.”

Retrieving the massage lotion my friend Jan had manufactured for me and a large towel, I ambled back to my bedroom and to Blake, an extra swing in my walk. In my absence, he’d taken his shoes and tie off too. I placed the bottle on my nightstand and spread the towel over my comforter.

With my back at Blake, I removed my blouse and skirt. I could feel his gaze roaming my figure, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. Just to tease him some more, I peered over my shoulder and winked. A glance at his crotch revealed my show—tame as it may be—affected him.

Delight bubbled in my heart. I unhooked my bra and, after giving him a side view of my breasts, lay down on the bed, and rested my head on my folded arms. “I’m all yours, Mr. Edwards. Work your magic.”

Blake said nothing. He let his hands do the talking for him. Straddling me, he popped the bottle open. I forced myself to breathe slowly in and out, an attempt to regulate my breathing and my growing arousal. He was giving me a massage because my neck and back hurt, I reminded myself.

Hours seemed to tick by until he touched me, his palms warm and slick. Thoughtful, he didn’t squirt the cold lotion directly on my skin. I bit my lip to keep silent, not show him how turned on I was. The scent of ylang ylang wafted in the air, and I remembered Jan telling me it was an aphrodisiac.

Blake plied my aching back with soft yet firm strokes that bordered on caressing. His fingers traveled up and down, working the knots of stress and worry and making them disappear. A moan of appreciation escaped from my throat.

“Is there anything you’re not good at?” My voice came out sleepy and content. I could get used to this.

Blake leaned forward, and his erection nudged my back. “There is one thing. I’ll tell you all about it when the time comes, kitten.”

A shiver traveled along my spine to join his hands. His teasing tone didn’t fool me.

He used his knuckles next, in a crab-like movement from my lower back to my neck, a cause of both pain and relief. His palms wrapped around my neck, and with his thumbs, he brushed away the byproduct of my weariness. At the end of the massage, I’d be rested enough to clean my apartment from top to bottom.

The Art of Losing

Blake painted sure circles on my skin, the endless loop blurring my thoughts all into one. Magic fingers. Layer after layer, my defenses lowered. I'd never had a massage before so I didn't have another experience to compare this one to, but I'd give Blake five hands or whatever they gave to the best masseur. Where did he learn to do this? God, I was too languid to satisfy my curiosity.

His hands glided to the sides of my torso with expert ease, the delightful friction stimulating, yet relaxing. When his fingertips connected with my breasts, I stiffened for a moment and went into overload. My body temperature spiked at the thought of him moving his hands around to cup the twin mounds. My nipples dug into the towel, its surface rasping them into pinpoints of desire. I sucked in a breath. In a fraction of a second, every notion of inertia faded away to be replaced by a deep-seated longing. Yet Blake refused to sate it and moved lower. Next thing I knew, he moved away completely.

"Don't stop," I whimpered and half rose to turn and look at him. That I saw the arousal vibrating through me reflected in his darkened eyes comforted me.

"I won't." He reassured me in a gruff tone, pouring a dollop of lotion on his palm, and I collapsed back on the bed.

Blake enfolded my waist in his tight hold and applied pressure at the base of my spine with his thumbs. He moved from left to right and back again, in a slow cadence that drove me wild. My body temperature had to be off the charts, yet his hands burned when he touched me all the same. I had half a mind to beg him to make love to me, but strings of insecurity held me back. I didn't feel comfortable enough with him yet to demand anything.

With a slick move, he hooked his fingers at my thong and oh-so-slowly lowered it. I couldn't pull enough oxygen into my lungs; my skin sizzled with anticipation. I became powerless once caught in Blake's sensual maelstrom.

The elastic slid down my butt, abrading my too-sensitized flesh. He stopped its descent high on my thighs, and from the tight hold, I could well imagine the decadent picture I presented him with, my backside plumped up, compliments of my underwear. This was my last coherent thought before he started kneading my cheeks, round and round and round....

Cum gathered on my folds, increasing my arousal. The only thing I heard in the room was my ragged breathing even though I tried not to be loud. I fought not to squirm and lost. The need to rub my peaked nipples against the towel underneath got the better of me, and I moaned at the exquisite pleasure. In a flash, Blake placed a hand on my back and immobilized me, putting an end to my fun.

I grumbled.

He chuckled.

"Stay still. This session is purely for therapeutic purposes."

The amusement lacing his voice jumpstarted my irritation. The bastard was torturing me and enjoying every second of it. I pushed at his hand and rose on my elbows. Twisting my neck, I glared at him. "My butt looked stressed to you?"

He smirked. "No, that was payment for services rendered. Now lie back down."

Without waiting for my compliance, he pushed me to the mattress. He worked slowly, with thorough intent, and I distantly remembered his compliments about

The Art of Losing

my ass. The man meant business. He wedged his thumbs between the thong and my skin and moved them toward the center. When the two met, he toyed with my folds, pulling and releasing.

A long groan fell from my lips. My entire body hummed with desire, a result of Blake's talented play. Yet however much I enjoyed the buildup, I'd lost my patience minutes ago, and I wanted—*needed*—to reach the crescendo now. If I could just sneak my hand underneath and touch my... In a stealthy move Nikita would envy, I grazed the curls over my mound with my fingers—*yes*.

I gasped when Blake rudely yanked my hand away and locked it at the small of my back, his palm a makeshift cuff. "No playing with yourself," he ordered and imprisoned my other hand too.

I turned to glower at him. "What?"

His face was taut, and a fine line of sweat covered his forehead. "I'm the one giving the massage. I call the shots."

A trickle of excitement spread inside me. Hands bound behind my back, Blake's undeniably stronger frame pinning me down, I was powerless to stop him. He could do to me anything he wanted. My heart hammered against my ribcage. Granted, I knew he wouldn't hurt me, but if I didn't let the veil of pretense fall and played along, I'd be his prisoner.

Was there any chance I'd cry foul play?

I wiggled a bit just for show, and then settled down like a—

"Good girl." An answering ripple of who's-in-control awareness swept away my last doubts at Blake's praise.

With his free hand, he picked up where he'd left off. His devilish index finger wreaked havoc to my senses since it stayed barely past the edge of my thong and refused to delve deeper, where I craved Blake's touch. I shivered, whether from anticipation or the perspiration coating my back I didn't know.

God, I was so aroused he didn't even need the lotion. But I needed his finger inside me. I let out a desperate breath and tried to spread my legs to give him access, but my damned underwear were in the way. At that moment, Blake took pity on me and moved the thong lower. My thighs bumped against his legs, and he graciously widened his stance. Even so, I only gained one or two inches.

It was enough. It *had* to be.

He trailed his finger along my sheath, and I cried out, my body bowing at the contact as much as Blake would allow. But still, he refused to push it inside and was content with simply spreading the wetness along my sex. Mmmm, maybe I didn't need penetration after all. I'd come from him petting me alone. His digit slid inside me with torturing slowness, and I changed my mind. When he started pumping, I lost it.

All the while, he said nothing, and the silent treatment added to the whole illusion of forced captivity I had going on with my overactive imagination. Was he even breathing hard? The way my ears buzzed drowning all other sounds, I couldn't tell.

"Oh, God... *Please*, Blake, I need..."

"I know what you need." He finally broke his vow of silence. A second finger came to join the first, both gliding inside me with embarrassing ease. Or it would've been embarrassing if I cared.

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Some distant part of my brain registered how the sucking sounds of Blake's thrusts and withdrawals completed our sensual cadre. And then he pulled back. I sobbed at the loss of his touch, but before desperation seized me, he flipped me over.

A gasp tumbled from my lips. Blake's face was flushed, his nostrils flared reminding me those of a wild animal's and his eyes... God, his eyes glittered with primal hunger. True to his character, even though he couldn't have known about my fantasy, he caught my arms with one hand and lifted them over my head, lying down beside me.

"I want to watch when you come, Emily. Will you come for me?"

I trembled at the intensity of his gaze as he looked his fill, pausing at my naked breasts and exposed mound. He didn't need to say the words, I could see the appreciation in his eyes, and for the first time in my life, I thought me having that effect on a man wasn't absurd.

His palm followed the route his gaze took moments ago and landed on my pussy. Under the warm, possessive hold of his hand, I vibrated with the need to belong to him. I tilted up my pelvis in invitation, one he took without delay. Blake's scorching breath fanned my cheek erratically, in complete contradiction to the way his fingers invaded me at a steady pace. He threw me so off-kilter I didn't know which way was north.

Heat emanated from my clenching sex and spread from head to toe. The convulsions multiplied, and I twisted my arms in Blake's hold, desperate to reach that peak.

"Easy, baby. I've got you." His whispered words somehow registered.

Lava-hot blood flowed in my veins, and I muttered incoherently. He pressed circles on my aching bud, feather soft at first, and then firmer and firmer. I arched into his fingers needing to come.

"Yes, that's it. Fuck my fingers."

I breathed in a lungful of air and screamed, the dirty talk triggering my orgasm. Waves of Blake-induced bliss hit me, as I contracted around his ever-moving fingers, trying to keep them inside me but loving the fact I didn't, longing for the next thrust. Swept off to oblivion, I lay exhausted in Blake's arms while he dropped kisses on my forehead.

Blake's mumbled words caressed my ear, but I vaguely recognized what he said. Love...beautiful...I want you. His voice fell like a soothing blanket over me after the sharp pleasure he'd just given me. Word by word, I left the clouds behind and returned to earth, to my bed and Blake's embrace.

The feel of his hard length prodding my hip jolted me back into full alertness. God, he would think I was some kind of blushing virgin the way I'd fallen apart in his arms, and he still maintained that damned control of his. Again. The knowledge that keeping his arousal in check wasn't so hard for him stung, and the old and hateful fear I wasn't good enough crept into my heart. This time, though, I gritted my teeth and refused to give into it. Instead, I would fight back.

I would show Blake I could give as well as I got.

Besides, fair was fair. He'd worshipped my body until I thought I'd faint from carnal satisfaction. Now it was my turn.

The Art of Losing

Determination tanked me up. Giving him a quick kiss, I rose from the bed. I fought back a smile at the surprise on his face. “I’ll be right back.”

Mr. Edwards, prepare to be knocked on your ass.

Chapter Thirteen

Naked, I walked out of the bedroom, Blake's gaze shadowing me long after I left his line of sight. The cool air kissed my skin, a foreign sensation since I'd never even thought of prancing around my apartment without a stitch of clothing on me, let alone actually done the deed.

To be honest, I was really getting into it.

I felt naughty, an irresistible vixen able to tempt any man and bring him to his knees. Well, to be accurate, I planned to go on mine.

A wicked smile teased my lips while I opened the freezer. It slipped a notch when I didn't find the ice cream. What the... Where did I put the carton? I jerked the fridge open and breathed out in relief. There it was. God, Blake had me so tied up into knots I'd left my dessert to melt. Thankfully, it'd turned out in my favor, because now the ice cream was in perfect condition for what I had in mind.

Blake waited for me like a caged black panther, his face lined with expectancy. His need to pounce on me the moment he saw me, and how he fought it, showed in the way he clenched and unclenched his fists. In the time it took me to gather my tools of torture, he'd removed his shirt. Shadows and light played peek-a-boo with his muscles as they rippled and tempted me to join in the fun.

With the ice cream hidden behind me, I leaned toward him and kissed his chest. My hungry lips reacquainted themselves with the delicious hard planes in front of me. The taste of his salty skin and his manly flavor burst in my mouth. He breathed in deep and buried his hand in my hair, his fingers combing through the strands. His nipple beckoned me, and I answered its call. Blake let out a deep groan when I sucked the sensitive bud. He actually growled at my nip.

His hold on my head tightened. "You're going to get yourself into trouble, kitten."

I pulled back a bit, pride swelling inside me at the sight of his nipple, red and protruding. I raised a reprimanding eyebrow. "You had your turn, Blake. Now, I'm in charge." I adopted a casual air and pulled back even more. "Unless you want me to stop."

A muscle jumped in his cheek, and I'd bet good money he gritted his teeth, but he said nothing. I gave him a farewell bite and sank to my knees. His eyes flared with lust and I rubbed my thighs together, feeling my own come back to life. The other night, I didn't get a chance to give Blake a blowjob. Yes, remiss of me, but hopefully I'd make up for it in spades.

I placed the carton on the floor next to me and attacked his belt. Anticipation came off him in waves, and I pushed down an answering bout of nervousness. I needed to succeed in this; I needed to feel I could hold my own in a relationship.

And it's even more important because this is Blake.

I shook off the silly thought. Playing this way just hadn't come up with Rhett yet. Tonight didn't mean anything other than a night of hot sex.

"What's that?" His gruff question pulled me out of my stupor and my hands stilled, his zipper half down.

I followed his gaze to the ice cream. "Chunky Monkey." My nonchalance amazed and filled me with pride at the same time.

The Art of Losing

Blake laughed out loud. In the past, this ironic strike of fate would've deterred me, but not tonight. So I must've had a weird premonition when I chose the flavor. End of subject. Determined the night would go as planned, I pulled down his pants and boxers and Blake's amusement died a sudden death.

I picked up the carton and peered at Blake with all the sultriness I could muster. It must've been enough because his lips parted, and he seemed to want to say something. In the end, he decided not to. I took a soul-deep breath and prayed I got this right.

Ready or not, here you come.

Taking Blake's erection in hand, I swept my index across its length once, and brought the other monkey into play. His breathing grew hard—as the rest of him. I pressed the crown into the gooey surface until it was nicely covered in the light yellow confection. Blake let out a small hiss above me, but didn't tell me to stop. The carton almost fell from my hands at the sight of his ice cream coated hard-on. What a treat... Before I ended up drooling, I tongued some of the sweet delicacy off him, and then polished him clean with slow, thorough licks. I drew back, and his hands grabbed my head to keep me in place.

I stared up into his flushed face. "Let me go, Blake. I'm hungry."

His pupils dilated to the point I couldn't distinguish the green anymore. Thankfully, he complied. I repeated the process, this time diving deeper to spoon more ice cream, and turned Blake's hard erection upward. The liquid sped down his length and my eager mouth followed the sweet trail. A raspy sound of pleasure rumbled deep within Blake's chest when most of him went past my lips.

"Shit," he cried out.

I didn't need to imagine what the hot/cold treatment was doing to him. The way he pulsed against my tongue spoke volumes. Most of the banana flavor had disappeared by now, and his own registered.

Like everything else of Blake: addictive.

I risked a glance at his face and caught him watching me with rapt attention. The play of muscles in his upper chest, glistening with sweat, transfixed me. God, but he was magnificent. And all mine.

A surge of power swept through me at the realization of his complete surrender to my ministrations. Wrapping my palms at the base of his penis, I bobbed my head at a leisurely pace, enjoying the feel of him, hard and soft at the same time.

Blake's control snapped. A grimace distorted his face. He snarled and cupped my head, his hands forcing me to increase the rhythm, his fingers clenching in my hair, pulling at the strands. An electric shock shot right down between my thighs at the erotic sting.

"Suck it. Suck my cock, baby."

I sucked hard, the dirty words egging me on, and pulled a groan from Blake's chest. I fluttered my tongue against his length and earned another deep groan.

"Emily...."

The tortured word matched the look on his face, but I refused to give in. I enjoyed giving Blake pleasure this way, watching his eyelids drift shut, the bead of perspiration trickling down his yummy, ripped to perfection chest to disappear in his belly button. I didn't want it to end yet.

The Art of Losing

I wanted to give him everything.

Relaxing my jaw, I took him deeper. He bumped against the end of my throat and, for a second, I panicked I might suffocate. I could just imagine the headlines.

Grade school teacher dies from penis asphyxiation.

“Breathe through your nose, baby.” Blake’s advice calmed me even though a small dart of jealousy lodged near my heart. He knew what to do, which meant I wasn’t the first one. In the back of my mind, I knew the thought was naïve, but I’d have preferred to harbor the illusion I was special to him. I pushed the ugly feeling aside and let myself enjoy the moment.

In the end, that was all I would have with Blake—moments not forever.

I swallowed, and his large frame jerked.

“Damn, do that again.”

I complied, placing my hands on his thighs to support myself better.

“Yes, that’s it, Em....” Blake pushed forward trying to take over again, his large palm holding my head.

I pulled back and released him with a loud pop. I wasn’t done yet. I would etch this night in his memory, overshadowing all other women before me.

Driven by this possessive instinct, I ignored the delectable glistening specimen of male hardness before me—the deep purple of its head a testament to how close Blake was to blowing. I even ignored the almost angry look he gave me and focused my attentions on his sac. I brushed my mouth against it tentatively, dragging my lower lip on its surface, hoping I was doing it right, hoping the saying, “There’s no wrong way to suck a man off” was true. My tongue toyed with the sensitive flesh. Blake’s thigh trembled against my cheek. Yep, the saying was one hundred percent true.

Blake stepped back. One hand wrapped around his shaft, the other one around my head, he pulled my head forward. “Suck me, Emily. Now.”

I trembled at the authority in his voice and, deviating from my original plan, I took him in my mouth again. With no finesse this time, I sucked him hard as he pumped fast in and out of my mouth. We were both caught in the moment: I lost in this newfound power over him; Blake lost in carnal delight.

My lips stretched to accommodate his girth, and I knew they’d be sore later. I didn’t give a damn. This part of sex life was often portrayed as cheap, but while I kneeled there, Blake thrusting in my mouth with absolute ecstasy etched on his face, his gaze boring into mine, the experience was anything but cheap. It felt so personal, so private, so...I couldn’t put it into words.

He stilled, and a ripple went through him. “Em,” he groaned. “I’m going to come.” He started to pull back, even though I could see the regret on his face.

No, I wanted everything. At his retreat, I moved forward, my hands tightening on his thighs in silent message. A moan rose from my throat to wrap around his erection.

“Fuck! Swallow my cum, baby. Take all of me.”

He drove inside my mouth once, twice, and then with a loud cry, he came. spurts of hot semen hit the back of my throat, gifting me with his salty taste. My body temperature reached brain-frying levels at the highly erotic sensuality of the act. I swallowed with eagerness, amazed it seemed so natural, so right.

The Art of Losing

With a final heartfelt grumble, Blake withdrew. I lapped at his softening penis, swirled my ever-teasing tongue around his crown before releasing him. I couldn't keep back a pleased smile. The execution had been flawless if I did say so myself.

Blake knelt down before me and cupped my cheeks. "I think I'm going to buy stock in *Ben & Jerry's*. God, I'll never look at ice cream the same way again." He took a deep breath. "Where did you learn to do that? On second thought, don't answer that." A small growl entered his voice.

Satisfaction coursed through me. I widened my eyes. "Don't tell me you're an ice cream virgin?" He squeezed my waist, but I continued undeterred. "Come on, it's only natural I teach you something, don't you think?"

The low guttural sound was my only warning before Blake fused his lips to my ravaged ones. My cheeks flamed from the knowledge he would taste himself. I clung to him, arms around his neck, hands buried in his chocolate strands, and shared the flavor with him. My tongue stabbed inside his mouth, and he more than met my passion. Cupping my ass, he pulled me toward him. The light mat of hair that covered his chest chaffed my nipples, and I whimpered. The sharp pleasure was almost too much for my very aroused body.

We were close, but not close enough. I half climbed on top of him, my legs bracketing his, and pushed him back on his haunches. Blake held my head with almost bruising force while he swallowed the moans he elicited from me. I twined my legs around his torso, and my dripping pussy brushed Blake's cock. Electric tingles rushed across my body. He hardened under me, and my desire spiked once more to near orgasmic levels. I rocked up and down, coating his shaft with my arousal, and he became fully erect in no time. A man after my own heart.

Blake helped me, lifting and lowering me, as he kissed me with a desperation I knew all too well. God, I was almost there. In a few moments, I'd come. Before I reached the blessed peak, Blake broke the kiss. His hands—pincers was more like it—locked me in place an inch away from him. Startled and aroused beyond sanity, I looked at him. His eyes closed, he breathed slow and deep.

"Don't move. Don't move, or I won't be able to stop myself." His tone was past tortured; it was haunted.

A few hurried heartbeats later, he opened his gorgeous eyes to blast me with the heat of his lust. Other than that, Blake's face held no expression, as if his emotions were so many and so intense, no visual could do them justice. I tried to draw air into my lungs, but it seemed there wasn't any in the room.

"Scoot back."

What?

Every cell in my body protested with fervor, but then he added, "Grab my pants from behind you and get the condom out of my wallet."

A relieved breath whooshed out of me. Loath to put too much distance between us, I glanced over my shoulder to locate the pants. I twisted, turning half-prone, and reached out to get the answer to our prayers. My fingers closed around the edge of one pant leg, and Blake slapped my butt. I jumped. That shouldn't have my inner muscles clenching or more moisture gathering on my pussy.

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I gave him a mock glare, fished the wallet out of his back pocket and returned to my previous Blake-enfolding position. "What was that for?"

He forked his fingers through my hair. "So you know not to tempt a man at the end of his rope. Put it on me."

I swallowed past the lump of take-me-now hunger in my throat and found the condom. All thumbs, I managed to rip the packet and get to the latex ring. God, Blake's request would be a tall order on any day, but now, when the only thing I could think of was taking him inside me and letting him fly me to heaven? Damn near impossible.

Yet the act fascinated me, and I put my burning desire aside for a few seconds to place the condom on his crown and slowly unroll it downward. Blake sucked in a breath, and I spared a glance up. The flush on his face spread to his neck and collarbone. After completing the task, I couldn't resist a slight caress on his sac.

Blake took a deep breath and gripped my thighs. "This is going to be a fast ride. Fast and hard."

A shiver raced down my spine, yet instead of being cold, I was hot. Too hot. I wanted Blake any way I could get him. The notion scared me half to death, but my delight at his warning drowned out the feeling. Even now, when he was almost out of his mind with arousal, he thought of my needs first. I brought my face closer, but at the last moment bypassed his parted lips to whisper in his ear, "Fast and hard, slow and teasing, on a bed or against a wall, I can take anything you dish out." I nipped his lobe for emphasis.

Blake answered by lifting me up and pushing me down on him to the hilt. My back arched, and I might have screamed. No preliminaries, no getting to know the invading territory, Blake was a man of his word. He leaned toward me, and his mouth latched on my breast while he worked me on his cock. I whimpered at the varying torture he subjected me to, swirling his tongue around my nipple when I pulled upward and sucking every time he smashed me downward.

If he stopped, I might just die.

I held on to his slick-with-perspiration shoulders, desperate for some leverage. We raced together to completion, one helping the other, egging the other on. I convulsed around his pistoning length, and he jolted. His groan reverberated on my skin.

"Yeah...ride me, kitten. Just like that." Blake took my mouth the way he took my body, with no mercy, no reprieve. I didn't need either.

I wanted Blake uncensored. Real. Mine.

"Shit, I'm not gonna last long." The panted words warmed my lips. "Are you with me?"

In every way that mattered. I nodded and snaked one hand between us to play with my clit. "Lead the way, cowboy."

His intense gaze never left my face. Afraid he'd see into my soul, I tried to draw back and build up some kind of protective shield to hide behind, but he would have none of it.

"Stay with me, Emily. Let's do this together."

I let out a small cry at his words. Every time I pulled away, Blake sensed my withdrawal and reeled me back in. And I really didn't want to get this close with

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any man, but how could I resist the just-below-the-surface pleading tone of his voice?

“Together,” I whispered.

I ground myself against his pelvis in a circular motion, and I actually saw stars. So close... On the next thrust, Blake trembled beneath me. He tensed, and his fingers closed harder around my waist. When he came, he took me with him, and we tumbled over the other side together.

I followed Blake on his descent to the floor, his breathing tortured. A shudder took hold of my body now that the moment’s heated passion had passed, and he hugged me, thinking I was cold no doubt. Little did he know he was the cause of my trembling. Together. How could one small, seemingly harmless word, spread icy panic through my veins?

Together didn’t last. Alone was now unacceptable. So where did that leave me?

Chapter Fourteen

“Go.”

The little hands didn’t possess the strength to push me out the door, still, Matthew gave it his best shot. Even though I knew better than to take the rejection personally, I’d never been good at playing the duck and letting things roll off my back. I lacked the experience to deal with a small child’s obvious hatred.

I took him gently by the shoulders. “Matthew, I can’t leave. Your dad hired me to help you with your homework.” *“He shows complete disinterest about everything that has to do with his school”* were Robert’s exact words.

Matthew twisted out of my hold. “I hate my dad, and I hate you. Go help him.”

He ran and collapsed on the bed, burying his face in his pillow. His small back moved up and down, the slightest of movements, but enough to let me know he was crying. My heart clenched in pain for him. Impotency surged inside me threatening to choke me, and I closed my eyes. That Matthew shed silent tears cut me more.

Taking a deep breath, I approached the bed and sat down. He didn’t acknowledge my presence in any way. My hand hovered over his back, but at the last second, I decided not to touch him. He didn’t want my comfort. What he wanted, what he needed was his mom’s loving arms around him, her soothing words. I would pale in comparison.

At that moment, I almost hated the mystery woman for causing so much pain to her own child.

“Tell you what.” My tone nonchalant, I pretended not to recognize he was crying. “Give me a week, and if each day I manage to make you smile, you’ll keep me. If not, I’ll tell your dad I can’t help you with your homework after all, because...because you live too far and I got tired of coming and going on the bus.”

Matthew turned his head away and wiped his face with his little fists, in an effort to hide his tears. He peered at me over his shoulder. His eyebrows furrowed. “You’d lie?”

He was so cute with his accusing big blue eyes.

“Yes, but this is a special lie I’ll tell just for you. It’ll be our little secret. What do you say, deal?” I offered him my hand.

Matthew looked down at it, then up into my face again. He bit his lip, and I bit back a smile. Kids were so transparent, a refreshing change from the fake smiles and pretend kindness world of grownups.

Please, honey, take my hand. I want to help you so much.

In the short time I’d spent with him, even if in half of that period he played the role of the little brat with extreme zeal, I’d come to realize he was a good kid in desperate need of some guidance. If only he gave me a chance, I’d give back a hundred and ten percent.

He shook my hand, and I let out a relieved breath. He quickly pulled back and moved higher on the bed to lean against the headboard. Hugging his pillow, he leveled me with a smug stare and shrugged. “You won’t win anyways. You don’t look like a funny people.”

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I flicked his nose. "We'll see about that. And it's 'You don't look like a funny person'. People is used when you're talking about more than one. For example, there were so many people in the elevator with me, it stunk." I pinched my nose with two fingers. "Pfft."

Matthew's lips didn't so much as twitch. Unwilling to feel defeated so early, I breezed past his aloofness. "So, what do you have to do for tomorrow?"

"Nothing."

I narrowed my eyes. "Matthew...."

He adopted an air of superiority. "It's a special lie just for you." And then he stuck his tongue out.

Oh, but he was going to be a handful. I glanced around the room, trying to find a way to entice him. Nothing stuck out to me, not one item seemed special. Come to think of it, this didn't resemble a kid's bedroom in the least. Sure, the bright blue paint, and the details done in a deeper shade suggested that much, but for all I searched, I didn't see any toys. No stuffed animals on his bed, no little action figures or cars sticking out of drawers, no cute pictures or posters hanging on the walls.

Our surroundings were so bare one would think a soldier lived here.

A light went on in my head. "Do you own a *Playstation*?"

Matthew sent me a duh look, yet he remained silent. I may have spent a little more than two hours with him, but I knew he had manners. He acted rude on purpose to drive me mad or away, or both.

"What's your favorite game?" I persisted.

"Lego Star Wars."

"Which character do you usually choose?"

His eyes lit somewhat, and I knew I lured him into a conversation. "I switch characters. Easier to win that way."

Bingo. "Okay, let's play against each other and whoever passes to the next level first gets to decide what we do afterwards, more playtime or homework."

Matthew looked away. "We can't."

"Why not?"

"Dad broke the CD." His lower lip quivered.

Dammit! Would anything go my way this evening? Fate must have decreed for me not to keep this job. Well, *Miz Fate, I urge you to reconsider*. I knew it in my heart I could help Matthew.

I tried to tell myself there must be a good reason for what Robert did, and how he raised his son was none of my business, but I had little success. Matthew had wormed his way into my heart, and I felt strangely protective of him.

If I thought Matthew's mood was bad before, I soon learned my mistake. He clenched his hands into fists and flattened his lips. He had more to say but he didn't add a single word. Granted, this was my first year of teaching, but it didn't take an expert to realize the little guy would soon blow up if he continued to bottle up everything inside.

His gaze focused at the opposite wall, he pretended I wasn't in the room, shutting me out completely. I rubbed my forehead and looked out his bedroom window, all the while, options ran rampant in my head.

The answer stared me in the face from across the street.

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Triumph brought a big smile to my lips. I turned to Matthew. "I'm unforgivable. My first day with you, and I didn't bring something to celebrate. Start on the right foot."

Matthew perked up at that. "Something?"

"Yeah, a treat." I tapped my chin with a finger. "Ooh, what about a sundae? I could run down to the minimart across the street and buy some ice cream, syrup and stuff, and we can prepare the sundaes together. What do you say?"

He cast his gaze downward. "Dad doesn't let me eat candy."

"He won't say no to this, I'm buying because it's my first day on the job. What kind do you want?"

Still, he didn't allow himself to get excited. Matthew sniffed. "You won't be able to make it," he grumbled.

Oh ye of little faith. "Try me."

He peered at me, hesitance shadowing his eyes. "Banana split."

"Great. I'll be back in ten, and we'll take over the kitchen. Just bring your happy face." I winked at him and stormed out the door, afraid he'd change his mind if I waited too long.

I found Robert in the living room watching the news. He looked up from the TV, a warm smile on his face. "How are things going?"

"The progress is slow, but I'm confident he'll come around completely. I'm going across the street to buy some ice cream." I held up my hand to silence whatever objection he might utter. "I know we're supposed to be doing his homework, and Matthew told me he's not allowed to eat any candy, but it'd be a great way for us to bond and for him to accept me easier, so I'm asking you to allow for an exception."

Robert placed the remote on the coffee table and stood. "Of course, no problem. He's allowed to eat candy, just not too much." He buried his hand in his pocket and took out some bills. "Will twenty dollars be enough?"

God, it was tempting to take the money. I waved no. "You shouldn't pay for my treat. Besides, this was my idea."

"Thank you. I really appreciate the effort you're making with my son. You're kind and easy-going yet firm. I'm certain Matthew will fall in love with you in no time. He'd be crazy not to."

The last bit unnerved me, and the smile on my face froze, but I quickly shook the weird sensation off. No way. The way Robert's eyes shone with sincerity, he couldn't be coming on to me.

I widened my smile. "I hope I can help him. Be right back."

Slinging my tote bag over my shoulder, I turned to leave, but my impulsive streak got the better of me. "Robert, I hope I'm not overstepping my boundaries, and if I am, tell me, but I noticed Matthew's room is a bit...bare. It doesn't have the things a kid's room should have."

Robert sighed. "Yes, I know. The boxes with his stuff got lost in the move, and I haven't replaced them yet." He let out a derisive chuckle. "Some father I am, huh? Almost three months have passed, and I still haven't gotten around to decorating. Damn it, I could have hired an interior designer, I know. It's just...." He glanced away for a second, then his eyes focused on me again, full of sorrow.

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“My wife, Andrea, always handled these things. She did such a great job with Matthew’s old room, I guess I feared I wouldn’t measure up.”

Robert seemed so sad, so...no, not broken, but bruised for sure. I almost kicked myself for thinking he hadn’t been affected by his wife leaving and classified him under the stereotype “unfeeling guy” category that didn’t have his emotions hurt.

Keep going, Girl Scout. All the way down to the minimart and don’t look back. You can’t save everyone. Robert can take care of himself.

“If you want, we can go to IKEA together one afternoon, and I’ll help you pick out a few things. It’d be no trouble.” Nice. At least I was consistent about screwing up my life.

Robert’s grin was wide. “You don’t know how grateful I am. I’ll be available whenever’s good for you.”

His voice was tinged with too much appreciation, and I felt uncomfortable. I chuckled. “Don’t make an angel out of me yet. After all, part of my job description is to help Matthew be his old self, right?”

“Even so, I’m in your debt for helping me with Matthew. My son means the world to me.”

His intense stare forced me to glance away. “I’m just glad I can facilitate things. Well, I should go. I don’t want to keep Matthew waiting.”

I ran down to the minimart, my thoughts and feelings in a tangled web. Becky’s words came back to haunt me. *You put your heart into everything you do.* That was the problem with me. I got too involved with other people’s problems and worries.

“Maybe, my New Year’s Resolution should have been to not let anyone play me, not just men I go out with.”

I crossed the street, saw an ATM opposite the building’s entrance, and made a mental note to withdraw some money after I punched out. All forty-five bucks of it, a belated Christmas present from Aunt Linda. I needed the money, and though I knew the deposit’s sole reason was so she could say she looked out for me and ease her conscience, I couldn’t return it.

In a fast forward pace, I picked up some chocolate and strawberry ice cream, three bananas, cherries, nuts and whip cream, and refused to think about the dent the purchases would put in my limited budget if there was no happily ever after and Matthew didn’t fall in love with me the way I hoped. I hefted the grocery bag in my free hand and jogged to the building’s entrance.

Robert rang me in and waited for me leaning against the open apartment door. “Back in a flash. Are you always this fast and efficient?”

I felt the beginnings of a flush creeping up my cheeks and gave him an awkward smile. “I just ran down to the minimart, hardly a Guinness-book worthy feat. Where’s the kitchen?”

“This way.” Robert stepped ahead of me to lead.

“Hey, Matt, the sundaes’ ingredients are here and waiting for you,” I shouted.

“Don’t call him Matt. His name’s Matthew.”

I took a step back at Robert’s snapped words, but pulled myself together and placed the groceries’ bag on the counter. “I’m sorry.”

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He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "No, I apologize. I wouldn't have a problem, except his mother called him Matt, and I don't want him upset."

Talk about a foot in the mouth moment. "God, I didn't know. I won't call him that again."

A small smile curved his lips. "Thank you. I appreciate it. I'll disappear to give you two some alone time." He left me in the kitchen with mortification as my only companion.

I heard Matthew before I saw him. The light, hurried pitter-patter of feet stopped a few seconds before he walked in the kitchen, his stride slow, his face devoid of expression.

I gave him a wide smile. "Let's get you in the honorary seat."

He scrunched his nose. "Honorary?"

"A place of honor."

I scooped him in my arms and seated him in the high stool in front of the breakfast nook. I'd never seen a similar one before. The table had two levels, one that reached the middle of my torso, which I figured was where Robert sat in the high stool, and one lower with a regular chair, for Matthew.

He glanced at me. "This is Daddy's stool. I'm not supposed to sit here."

"Well, you are today. Just promise me you won't fall."

He shook his head fervently. I pulled all the ingredients out of the bag on the lower half of the nook. I hadn't found maraschino cherries in the minimart, so I settled for the real thing. After I washed them, I glanced back at Matthew. He eyed the ice cream and all but licked his lips. Poor kid.

"Where are the knives, Matthew? And what about plates?"

Matthew placed his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his palms. "In that drawer and in that shelf."

"Okay, we're good to go. We'll do yours first, then your dad's and finally mine." I peeled one banana. "So how do you like third grade? Is it more interesting than second?"

He shrugged. "I dunno."

"You know you'd really do me a favor if you told me what you thought. I teach first grade, but I'm thinking of changing next year and I don't know which one to choose." I sliced the banana in two. "You want both chocolate and strawberry?"

"Yes, please."

"So, how 'bout it?" I scooped a large ball of chocolate ice cream.

His eyes were glued on the sundae-to-be. "I guess third grade is more fun. We still have to do math and other boring things, but we learn cool stuff, too, about rocks and plants. Next week, Miss Lindsey said we're going to build a volcano."

"Wow, that does sound very exciting." I scooped up the strawberry flavor next. "Do you want to add the syrup and whip cream yourself?"

For the first time since I met him, Matthew's eyes actually lit. "Can I?"

"Sure." I placed the plate in front of him, and handed him the bottle after unscrewing the cap. "It's just chocolate syrup. If you spill some, we'll clean the mess up, no harm done."

Matthew didn't go crazy with the syrup, showing a restraint unusual for a kid his age. I shook the canister of whip cream and passed it to him, taking the bottle from his hands. His face glowed with satisfaction when he was finished.

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“One last thing.” I moved to the sink and draping a joined stem of two cherries over my mouth, I curved my upper lip toward my nose. I turned to Matthew with my makeshift mustache in place. “Cherries anyone?”

Matthew giggled, the special lyrical sound only kids seem to muster that never failed to wrap around my heart and turn my world just a bit brighter.

Now if only I could make it through day two.

Chapter Fifteen

"I never liked that little shit."

A smile crept onto my face at my cousin, Cade's, words. A week ago, I might have even shared the vitriol I heard in his voice, but now the whole subject left me surprisingly cold.

"Yeah, well, better to find out now than three years after we're married, right?"

Cade gave me a sideways glance as he passed a car in front of us, and then focused on the road again. He didn't believe me.

"Look, of course I'm hurt. And, yes, I cried my eyes out, cursed Evan to hell and back, blamed him, blamed myself, blamed the blonde in his bed." I took a deep breath. "I loved him. But the fact he didn't deserve my love cured me. I moved on. I'm actually seeing someone."

"Who?"

I glared at him even though I knew the effect was wasted since he looked straight ahead. "You are not going to run a check on him. You don't need to, Blake's a great guy, and...."

Blake's name slipping out of my mouth robbed me of speech. Sure, I wasn't about to tell Cade not one, but two guys occupied my dating calendar at the same time—that was TMI in my book—but why didn't I mention Rhett instead? I'd dated him longer, after all.

"Blake?" Cade persisted.

"Yes, Blake Edwards. He's a lawyer, lives downtown, and takes care of his little sister because their parents died in a car accident. Satisfied, or do you want height, weight, and eye color too?"

Cade grinned and parked in front of Merriweather. "No, I'm sure I can find those out on my own." He chuckled when I narrowed my eyes. "I'm just kidding, you know that. Someone has to look out for you, Em, and I've appointed myself to the task. You can come to me for anything."

I leaned over the transmission box and kissed his cheek. "I do know, Cade. And you have looked out for me. You even signed me up for the self-defense class you were giving for Christ's sake. Your concern means the world to me, never doubt that. We'll make plans to have lunch next week, okay?" I got out of his Camaro.

"Sure thing, kiddo."

I let out a deep sigh at the endearment. We had a three-year age difference, yet he insisted on playing the wise old-timer. Considering he was a cop, I guess he'd seen a lot more than I had, and in that way, he was older.

"Bye, Cade. Have a nice day."

"You, too."

Despite his well-meaning wish, it turned out to be one of *those* days.

It all started during the first break. I'd just poured myself some coffee and was about to take my first energy-boosting sip when Hell-Holland's secretary breezed into the teachers' lounge.

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Miss Janet Anderson adjusted the tortoiseshell glasses perched on her nose and looked down at me. "Headmaster Holland wishes to see you in his office without delay, Miss Stone."

I'd gotten used to her way, so I managed not to roll my eyes at her bad imitation of a medieval chambermaid. Poor thing was trying to get on Dr. Holland's good side. "I'll be right there. Thank you, Miss Anderson."

She turned on her heel and walked out without even a cursory nod. According to her way of thinking, she didn't have to be polite to a person beneath her in the Merriweather ladder. "I'm off. Lord Holland has beckoned me, my lady, and I dare not evoke his wrath."

Becky wore the same sour face I must be wearing. "I will keep you in my prayers, fair maiden."

I let out a fake gasp. "Your kindness warms my heart. But I shan't postpone my fate any longer. Farewell, sweet Rebecca." I chuckled.

"Godspeed, brave Emily."

Yeah, right. If I'd ever been brave and bold, I must've been drunk or in the clutches of temporary insanity. I joked my way out of difficult situations and confrontations.

Some people used punches; I used punch lines.

I passed by Janet's desk, but she refused to acknowledge me. *The feeling's mutual, Miss Staid-Pants*. I knocked at Dr. Holland's door. Anxiety churned in my stomach as I waited for him to answer. In my limited experience, when Holland summoned someone, it was never to share good news.

"Come in."

I opened the door, and he glanced up from the papers in front of him. "Miss Stone. Please have a seat. A matter has come to my attention that we need to discuss."

A shiver of foreboding settled at the end of my spine. I sat down. The creak of the leather chair sounded almost disrespectful in the silence of the room. His office creeped me out, and I had a feeling I wouldn't get used to the stuffy furniture and wall-to-wall bookcases no matter how many times I dared enter Dr. Holland's sanctuary. Whenever I walked in here, I became a clumsy ten-year old again that had to watch her step and not spill anything on the rich, definitely more than I could afford, *Aubusson* carpet. It wouldn't surprise me if the headmaster had copied the design of Napoleon's office. He certainly thought he was emperor of the small domain that was Merriweather.

The room even smelled stuffy, which shouldn't shock me. Holland didn't seem the type to open the windows often to let some fresh air in.

"Are you familiar with the term *in loco parentis*, Miss Stone?" He peered at me over his gold-rimmed glasses, his beady eyes scrutinizing, searching for even the tiniest chink in my armor.

I cleared my throat. "Yes, it means in the place of a parent."

"And it describes our responsibilities as a constitution whose goal is the education of young children."

When Holland started a conversation in his "In the beginning, God said Let there be light" way, I usually just tuned him out and nodded and replied only

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when necessary with yes, of course, and you're right. But today, some sort of sixth sense warned me to pay attention.

"I agree wholeheartedly, Mr. Holland."

He pursed his lips. Damn, my attempt at sucking up at him failed to soften him up. He'd never get over the fact he hadn't hired me, would he? I'd forever be a thorn in his side, reminding him I was the choice of his replacement for three months.

"Your actions suggest otherwise, Miss Stone. This morning, I was looking out my window by chance and caught you kissing a man in front of the school, where any number of young, impressionable students could see you."

I gulped. Heat of embarrassment stained my cheeks, and I found it easier to look at his thinning gray hairline than his accusing eyes. "The man was my cousin Cade who happened to give me a lift this morning. I don't know if it was discernible from a second-floor window, but I kissed him on the cheek."

I tried to calm my runaway heart. Things could be worse. Cade I could explain. At least he hadn't mentioned Blake. That curtain moving in the window the other week was my personal axe, and I really didn't want it to fall.

Ever.

Holland grunted. "Well, today's transgression hasn't been your first one. It's been brought to my attention that you're intimately acquainted with the legal guardian of one of your students."

Shit!

His wording was like a slap in the face. Even though he wasn't crude, he described my relationship with Blake to be trivial—an everyday thing. And for some reason that annoyed me. No matter it was exactly what I'd been doing ever since Blake and I hooked up

I squared my shoulders and straightened in my seat, reminding myself over and over to stay polite regardless of what he said next. This time, I didn't avoid his stare. "Yes, I'm seeing Mr. Edwards, but I don't understand how that has anything to do with my efficiency as a teacher."

"It's my responsibility to remind you of the fact you signed a contract, and in that contract it clearly states Merriweather reserves the right to fire you should you behave in a manner unbecoming a school-teacher."

Yeah, because that was something I could forget. I wanted to blame Blake for this—I'd *told* him he would get me into trouble—but I couldn't. I knew I'd put my job in jeopardy if I went out with him, yet I did it anyway.

I had no one to blame but myself. Man, that sucked.

"I do remember. Still, since Mr. Edwards is single, I don't understand what the problem is."

"Your *seeing* someone immediately related to a student will without a doubt create problems," Holland sneered. "The fact our institution is an educational one doesn't mean it's any less of a business. I don't want the lines between staff and paying customers blurred, something that will no doubt happen should I allow you to act the way you have been acting in the last weeks. Make no mistake, I have no interest in your social life, Miss Stone."

I wanted him to stop talking, so I could get out of here and breathe normally, but, apparently, Holland thought he needed to be even more clear he considered

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me lower than vermin. “I would think I shouldn’t have to point out the impropriety of your actions.”

I realized I was wringing my hands together and stopped. What gave him the right to judge my moral character? I raised my chin. “In other words, you’ve branded me with a scarlet letter without giving me the opportunity to explain said actions.”

Holland’s eyes widened just a fraction. Well, hell, I even surprised myself with this show of spunk, no wonder the same happened to him. “Yes, I *am* socializing with Mr. Edwards, but I’ve been careful enough not to do anything improper in front of my students or other Merriweather students for that matter.”

He sputtered, but I didn’t stop. Nothing would deter me now that I’d begun.

“I’m sure you have good reasons to feel so offended, but I’m standing by my decision and would be happy to defend myself should you wish to bring me before the school’s committee.” God, I hated talking in such a pretentious manner, but I’d learned the hard way Hell-Holland wouldn’t tolerate anything less formal.

Damn, I was beginning to feel sorry for Janet.

His face turned red, and for a second, I thought he might have a stroke. He leaned forward on his desk. “You dare threaten me?”

I parted my lips and hoped I really looked innocent. “Threatening you wasn’t my intention, I assure you. I wanted to be clear: I won’t end my relationship with Mr. Edwards because you deem it has to be so, and I’m prepared to see this accusation to the end.”

Holland raised an eyebrow. “And if the end is that of your employment in Merriweather?”

“Dr. Holland, I’m sure you know that the demand in teachers has increased over the last years. Even though Merriweather pays quite well for a private school, matching the salary of a public one, and offers a wonderful working environment, more than one teacher has resigned to join the public sector.”

I left the part I would find a job easier than Merriweather a replacement for me unsaid because I didn’t want to press my luck. By the scowl on his face, though, I’m sure Holland got my meaning.

I was taking a huge gamble here. I needed this job badly, but I figured Holland, despite his big talk, wouldn’t do anything to fire me this late in the school year. Merriweather prided itself in the quality of education it provided, and I doubted a teacher meeting the establishment’s high standards wouldn’t already be employed somewhere else.

Come next year, who knows what would happen, though.

“I may not be able to fire you this year, but consider yourself on probation.” Holland spewed his venom with glee, echoing my thoughts. “One more incident of immoral conduct, and you will be brought in front of a disciplinary committee for breach of contract.”

The blood in my veins turned into ice. My bravado had a short expiration date after all. “Thank you for giving me another opportunity, Dr. Holland.” I even smiled and hoped my sincere lack of gratitude didn’t show. “May I go, or do you have something else you wish to add?” *My lord*, the snide title almost slipped out.

“No, we’re finished.”

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In more ways than one, no doubt. He didn't need to say it. From now on, he'd be watching me, waiting for the slightest *faux pas* on my part so he could throw me out. *Isn't that what he's done since the beginning anyway?* I refused to worry about what sort of scheme he'd come up with. Too many variables were involved for anyone to say with absolute certainty if he would succeed or not.

Hell-Holland focused on the papers in front of him, dismissing me altogether, so I took my cue and left. The moment I closed the door to Holland's office behind me, Janet looked at me. There was no doubt she knew exactly what the headmaster wanted to talk to me about. She might even be the one who'd ratted me out.

"Bad news?"

The sugary satisfaction lacing the question turned my stomach.

"Hardly," I drawled. "A simple misunderstanding I was quick to clear up. Have a nice day."

Her eyes widened, and I knew she must've caught her jaw from dropping at the last minute. A satisfied smirk creased my face as I walked down the hallway. So what if my deception would soon be discovered?

It's all about living in the moment. And at this moment, Janet seethed, and I was queen of the mountain.

Life was good.

Chapter Sixteen

“You’re awfully quiet.”

The veiled accusation jarred me out of my inner self-flagellation. I gave Rhett a small smile, another desperate attempt to appear normal and fancy-free, and quickly glanced away.

The truth was even the way the waitress folded the napkin next to my Appletini bothered me.

The imprint of Rhett’s lips still lingered on mine, ever since that one kiss we’d shared at my apartment building’s entrance, and I’d fought the urge to wipe them. My stomach churned reminding me of the time I’d stolen out of the house to go skinny-dipping with Tommy Wachowski. ’Til this day, I was sure I tripped over Mom’s gardening tools and woke her up because of my guilty conscience—not clumsiness.

I looked up into Rhett’s amused face. “I’m sorry, I zoned out for a moment.”

His half grin told me he believed there was more to my behavior, but he refrained from voicing his thoughts. I didn’t blame him for doubting my sincerity. For the past hour, I’d been distant in every way. I’d almost jumped at the feel of his hand at the small of my back as we walked inside the bar.

I rubbed my temples. “So, what about your job? On the phone, you told me you wanted to take me out to celebrate.”

A huge grin widened his lips, and I inwardly sighed in relief. This subject would get me off the hook.

“I landed a shoot for *Newsweek*.”

My jaw all but dropped. I may not know the ins and outs of the photography industry, or even what’s the best light to take a picture, but I knew this was big. Huge.

I hugged Rhett tight. “Oh my God, I’m so happy for you.”

His eyes shone with the glow only hard-won accomplishments bring. “It’s the break I’ve been waiting for.”

“You deserve this and more. Your work is breathtaking.”

And it was. Rhett had such a good eye. He managed to capture greatness in little things, in moments you didn’t think were important. The night he’d showed me his “artistic” book as he called it, not the models he photographed on a daily basis, I fell in love with his work.

One in particular had drawn my attention. A young girl swirled her fingers on a fountain’s surface, captivated by the play of sunshine on the water. Blond hair glinting in the sun resembling a halo, she reminded me of a water nymph that had escaped from a fairy tale, while at the same time an all-too-real busy flea market dominated the background, busting with people that argued over prices and checked out this merchandise and that.

The combination of the two fascinated me because, in my eyes, it showed you could find magic in every-day life, you just had to look close enough. I’d more or less jumped up and down like a kid when Rhett enlarged and gave it to me. The picture now hung on one of my bedroom walls and was one of the first things I

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saw in the morning, a reminder to live each day to its fullest, not just let life pass me by.

I squeezed his hand. "What's your subject going to be?"

A wicked glint entered his eyes. "I pitched an idea of mine—sated women after a night of carnal delights." He leaned and continued in a conspiratorial tone. "Your photos cinched the deal, baby. You'll be my main model, my *star*."

I slapped his arm. "You don't have naked pictures of me."

Rhett waggled his eyebrows. "That's what you think." He chuckled and took a sip from his whiskey. "The story's an *exposé* about a religious commune."

He brought his chair closer and snaked his arm between my body and the back of the chair to pull me toward him. Unable to meet his eyes, I stared straight ahead.

Rhett's breath was hot against the side of my neck. "I'd love to capture you in the throes of passion, though. immortalize the unleashed lust that suffuses your face, the innocence burning in your eyes when you come."

Innocence wasn't the reason my cheeks burned, but shame. This was Rhett, a man I'd had sex with, whose arms had held me through the night, so why did his knowing one of the most intimate things one could know about a person unsettle me? Sleeping with him was my choice, something I really wanted and enjoyed, so why—

"Hey... Where did you run off to again?"

His voice brought me back to the here and now, and I turned to give him a weak smile. "My mind's preoccupied with school things." I winced. "I'm lousy company tonight, aren't I?"

I was also a lousy liar, but that wasn't news. Okay, half liar, because now my thoughts did wander to this morning's conversation with Holland. After the heat of the moment passed, and I could think with a clear head, I realized the enormity of what I had done. Challenging anyone, let alone my boss, wasn't the norm for me. Hell, I hadn't even faced Evan when I'd found him cheating on me; I'd just walked out the door and never looked back. So why had I told Hell-Holland to shove his opinion?

Blake. I didn't want to lose Blake.

The realization I was prepared to risk my job to keep him in my life jarred me more than I could handle. Out of sorts, I took a big gulp of liquid Appletini courage. Not surprisingly, it didn't help.

Desperate to collect myself, I stood up. "I'll be right back. Going to the ladies' room."

Rhett nodded and said something, but I didn't hear what. My mind reeled. I blindly headed to the back of the bar. Closing the restroom door behind me, I fought to breathe.

I couldn't love him...could I?

Yet overwhelming evidence slapped me in the face one example after the other. The way my heart raced in my chest every time he drew near me. How just the thought of him put a smile on my face, the explosive orgasms he gave me that always brimmed with an undercurrent of emotions—it became harder and harder to ignore. Add to that, sparring with Holland and the guilt eating at me because I was out on a date with Rhett, and I could put out an ad.

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“Face it, *kitten*, you’re head over heels, madly, irreversibly in love with the man.”

I heard a wheezing sound and, with dismay, realized it came from me. Thank God, no one was in here to witness my breakdown. With my hands on my knees, I bent forward to place my head between my legs, but it did nothing to help regulate my breathing.

Another woman might be happy—love was after all something praised in literature, songs, what every person longed to experience at least once in their lifetime, right? Well, ice cubes of fear slid down this woman’s back.

I didn’t want to be in love; I didn’t want to complicate things.

Yes, Blake was everything a man should be—caring, sexy, witty, had all the right moves, and seemed to be interested in me. Yet being able to dabble in men, my safety net was now gone, obliterated by my stupid heart’s decision to want only Blake.

“Damn, damn, damn.”

The panic attack refused to ebb. With each passing second, the enormity of my mistake sank in more. On unsteady legs, I tried to pace the fear out of me.

It didn’t work.

A glance in one of the mirrors confirmed not only did my heart race like a scared little rabbit’s, but I resembled one too—face white as snow, eyes wide open and slightly unfocused, chest heaving with the effort to breathe. God, I was a sight.

I nibbled my lip. And what about Rhett?

No question there, I had to stop seeing him. I couldn’t share my body with one man—no matter how hot bad-boy Rhett was—while my heart belonged to another. My contemptuous sneer echoed in the empty restroom. I couldn’t even go out on a date with him without feeling awful, let alone have sex with him. I rubbed my forehead and willed my logical self to make an appearance. I couldn’t do anything to change the fact I loved Blake, and I couldn’t pretend otherwise.

“One step at a time,” I told myself. “First, I’ll deal with Rhett, then I’ll wing it.”

I love well thought-out plans. They give you a sense of control, create the illusion everything will turn out okay even while you are on board of the Titanic and every lifeboat has just sailed away.

I returned to the table and gulped down the last of my drink, my gaze fleetingly meeting Rhett’s. Wringing my hands, I took a deep breath. “Rhett—”

“So I think you should break up with me.”

I blinked. “Wh-what?”

Rhett draped his arm over the back of my chair. A sad smile graced his face with its hard angles and sexy masculinity. “Something’s different, Emily, and I think it has to do with another man. You’ve fallen in love. Am I right?”

I glanced away, a mixture of guilt, embarrassment, and uneasiness warming my cheeks. He captured my chin between his thumb and index finger and turned my face toward his. “Am I right, baby?”

My mouth went dry. How did he know after only one hour of being with me when it had taken me weeks to realize it myself?

“Yes,” I croaked, anything more than that one-syllable word beyond me.

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“That man we ran into at the jazz club last month. The one whose looks while we danced would have killed me three times over if it was possible.”

“He watched us?”

My heart beat a fast, loud tempo almost drowning all other sounds. Could this mean Blake felt something for me? From the very start?

Rhett tilted his head. “Sure did. Poor man’s crazy about you. I’d have to be blind not to see it.”

Could Rhett be right? Was *I* the blind one? spurts of buoyancy filled my heart, and I was floating. Past experience, though, brought me down from the clouds fast. I couldn’t overlook the chance he had misinterpreted Blake’s actions. What if I was just a challenge to him and nothing more? A woman who dared turn him down that Blake had to have?

Yet the need to side with Rhett pulled me with the irrefutable pull of a magnet. A few days ago, when Blake realized I was talking to another man on my cell outside the school, he’d looked a little green around the edges even though he hadn’t said anything. I was sure of it. And the night I got home after going to Matthew’s for the first time, he had blown a gasket assuming I was out on a date with Rhett.

Unbidden, a smile seduced my lips. Hope buzzed through my body until I thought I would burst with the emotion. If Blake did love me....

Rhett trailed a finger down my cheek. “You know, seeing you smile at the thought of another man in a way you’ve never smiled at me does little good to my ego, but the photographer in me can’t help but appreciate the pretty picture—love incarnate.”

I winced. Talk about handling things all wrong. But Rhett blindsided me with his opening statement. “I’m sorry, Rhett. How did I get so lucky to find a great guy like you?”

His derisive smile pinched my bubble of happiness. “Yet I’m not the one you want.”

I squeezed his knee. “You’re not lacking compared to Blake. In some ways, you’re even the better man.” Rhett never judged me, never pushed me, he let me be me. *Then again, he doesn’t have feelings for me. Love screws with a person’s perspective.* “It just wasn’t meant to be.”

He took my hand and passed his lips over my knuckles so softly I felt even worse about the whole situation.

“And I’m sorry for that because you’re a special lady, Emily. Don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise.”

His compliments, though ego-boosting, concerned me. Could Rhett have fallen for me? Did I hurt him by admitting my love for Blake?

He must have read the anxiety in my face, because he added, “No, I don’t love you. If I did, I would’ve fought Mr. Legal Guardian for you ‘til only one of us was left standing.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief, and then remembered why we were here in the first place. “God, I really ruined the night of celebrating you had planned, huh? I’m awful.”

Rhett chuckled and kissed my temple in a brotherly fashion, which was kind of unnerving since we...well, did really un-brotherly things in the past. “Don’t

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worry about it. I'm not heartbroken, although I will miss you. We had fun together, didn't we?"

"Yes, we did. More fun than I ever had." Until Blake anyway.

I didn't fake the wistful tone. Rhett had helped me at a time when I'd needed validation. I might not have accepted Blake's proposition if Rhett hadn't nursed my confidence back to normal levels and showed me my desirability. For the most part.

"Ever since you dropped off the radar last week, I saw this coming." He shrugged. "Can't say I'm surprised. You're a one-man woman, you're not cut out to prowl the date scene."

Irritation simmered my blood. "Why does everyone believe that? I *can* be wild, you know." I was almost tempted to give him a play-by-play of the Chunky Monkey night. Almost.

Rhett let out a sexy, all-too-knowing laugh. His voice dropped an octave. "Oh, I know you can be wild, baby. You just save it for only one man, the one who holds your heart."

I swallowed tightly. No one had the right to sound so sexy when you dumped him.

He was smooth too. Rhett managed to ease my worries while I was the one breaking up with him—per *his* request to boot. I should be taking notes because he was a professor when it came to break-up etiquette.

Of course, I didn't want to have to know anything about that. I wanted Blake and I to stay together forever. But was that possible? Evan and I hadn't succeeded, my parents hadn't, nor had my aunt and uncle, Cade's parents. Those lucky ones who'd stayed married seemed to be a drop in the bucket.

God, the emotional roller coaster had started already. I closed my eyes as insidious dread slithered through my veins and shivered.

What if Blake did love me but turned out to be another Evan? Would I survive his betrayal?

Chapter Seventeen

“What do you wear to a profession of love?”

“A single strand of pearls and Chanel No 5.” Becky’s lips didn’t even twitch whereas I choked on a bout of laughter.

“When did you get so cheeky?”

She tapped a finger against her chin. “Mm, I don’t know. Maybe I’ve always been shameless, and I simply came out of the closet.”

I shook my head. Thank God, I’d asked Becky to come over. If not for her, my nerves would’ve gotten the better of me. I could joke about it all I wanted, but telling Blake I loved him didn’t become any less frightening.

Riffling through my clothes, I pushed hangers left and right. I blew a huff of exasperation. “I don’t have anything new to wear.”

It’d been ages since I bought something, what with my close to zero cash flow. A girl had to look her best when on a quest to win the man of her dreams. My heart flipped in my chest just at the thought of him. I wanted Blake to love me back with every cell of my body, every piece of my soul.

Becky gave me an annoyed look. “You’re overreacting. I’m sure Blake hasn’t seen your entire wardrobe. You’ve only been dating for a few weeks.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“What do you mean?” Puzzlement was written across her face.

I curled my lips. “For someone determined not to fall in love anytime soon, I sure threw in the towel before the bell even rang.”

The admission stung my ego just a tad, but not as much as the knowledge Blake had slinked past my defenses with no apparent trouble.

“Besides, he’s seen the best pieces.” I turned to look at her and cinched the belt of my robe tighter. “Pearls and Chanel it is.”

“Movie theaters may have a casual dress code, but I think that’s *too* casual.” She got up from where she lounged on my bed and took my place in front of the row of clothes. “Now, shut up and let me work my magic.”

I waved my hand at my closet. “Have at it.”

I went to the dresser’s mirror to comb my hair again. Becky muttered to herself too low for me to hear.

In the morning, I’d thought telling Blake I loved him was the normal, smart thing to do. Becky agreed with Rhett that Blake loved me, too, and she’d spurred me on. Not that I needed her to twist my arm much; I just needed a shove in the Blake direction. I couldn’t live in doubt, fear the moment when he’d get bored with me, or meet the woman with whom he was truly destined to be would one day come.

No, no Evan repeats for me, thank you very much.

With every thought, I pushed the brush through the strands harder. Thank God, I didn’t have any knots, or I would have gone to the date with bald spots. I finally admitted my hair didn’t need any more brushing and plopped down on the bed.

I wrapped and unwrapped the belt around my fingers. “What if I make a fool of myself? I was the one to set the rules. I told Blake I wasn’t interested in a serious relationship. How can I say now, ‘sorry, I changed my mind?’ He’ll think

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this is some sort of female scheme, that I appeared to be unavailable so he'd pursue me, and now I want to trap him or something."

Becky turned and gave me the evil eye. "Deep breaths, in and out." I narrowed my eyes at her "soothe the baby" tone. "If he thinks you'd do such a thing, then you're better off without him. Listen, he agreed to things being casual, didn't he? Maybe he'll agree to turning serious also."

Well, he had said he wanted me any way he could get me. Wasn't that a roundabout way to say he wouldn't be opposed to an exclusive relationship?

"What about this one?" Becky took out a black strapless dress with a sewed-on red belt.

I blinked, but the dreaded piece of clothing was still in Becky's hands. I tried to swallow past the lump of hurt pride in my throat. "That's what I was wearing when I walked in on Evan and his mistress."

Becky paled some and trained stricken eyes on me. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. All's well that ends well, right? Besides," I shrugged, "I mustn't have been so in love with Evan after all. I mean, a) I didn't even throw a vase at him, b) forgiving him never crossed my mind, and c) I fell in love with Blake in two months."

She nodded. "You're right. Besides, Evan was a jerk." Becky had never spoken against him while we were engaged, so this came as a bit of a surprise. But then again, she was always very tactful. "So the dress stays?"

I gaped. "What? No, it'll bring me bad luck. I should've thrown the damn thing away the moment I took it off that day."

"Are you nuts?" Becky rattled the hanger in her hand. "This is a gorgeous dress, and you look hot in it. Evan would've acted shitty regardless of what you wore, hon. Look at it. Not too flashy, therefore perfect for a night out at the movies."

"Okay, so I'll wear it another time, not tonight when I need everything going for me." I walked out of the room and into the bathroom.

She followed me. "Come on."

Damn, she had her stubborn face on. And all about a stupid dress? I leaned close to the mirror. Surely, my eye shadow must be a bit smudged.

"This is the perfect opportunity to put the past behind you once and for all. Wear this black, little number and create new memories, memories a hundred times stronger and happier."

I raised an eyebrow. "Happier? You're that certain tonight will go the way I hope?"

Becky closed her eyes, and, in the mirror, I saw her lips faintly move. No doubt she was counting to ten until she could reply without screaming.

"I swear. If I have to say it one more time, I'm going to commit you to a nunnery. No men there for you to torment me with stories and doubts about them." She did a one-eighty and sent me a sweet smile. "Now, will you please wear the dress?"

I nibbled my lip. Becky had a point. Even though the whole Evan debacle didn't hurt so much anymore, it still affected the way I acted. His betrayal lingered in my mind, a scarecrow that shooed away thoughts and hopes of finding my other half, and, more importantly, having complete faith in him.

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No more.

Blake deserved my trust—what's more, he'd earned it. Taking a deep breath, I swirled around and extended an arm. "Give me the dress."

Becky's face lit up. "That's my best friend." She trailed after me as I returned to the bedroom. "You should wear those black, three-inch shoes we bought at *Fiorella's*. Oh, and that cute, red wool bolero you have. I saw it somewhere in there."

I gave her a two-finger salute. "Yes, ma'am."

Someone buzzed from downstairs, cutting off my next words. I glanced at the clock. Half an hour until Blake was supposed to come and pick me up. *Supposed* being the key word. "Unbelievable. He's early again."

"Aaw, isn't that sweet? He's anxious to see you."

I rolled my eyes and pulled the dress over my head. "Maybe he's just bad at figuring out how much time it'll take him to get here."

"Uh-uh." Becky winked at me. "I'll let him in and myself out." She came over to me and hugged me tight. "Everything will go great, I just know it."

"Well, I'm glad one of us is sure."

"Stop." She squeezed my arms.

I sighed. "Okay."

The buzzer sounded again and I almost jumped.

"I better go, or he might start buzzing other people's apartments to get in." She laughed and headed to the door. "Call me with the details."

"Will do."

I straightened the dress and pulled up the zipper. Dammit, it wouldn't go all the way up. I grunted and railed but the stupid no-good excuse for a zipper mocked my attempts. The front door closed with a small snick. Frantic now, I pulled and pulled but to no avail.

"Emily?"

"In here," I shouted and dropped my arms, resigned to the fact I couldn't zip the dress on my own.

Blake walked in the bedroom, and a satisfied smile broke on his face. "You read my mind, kitten."

His hands landed on my hips with a proprietary air. A thrilled shiver ran down my spine. He lifted me up, one arm sliding across my back and the other wrapping around my waist to secure me in his hold. It never failed to amaze me how he could do that like I weighed nothing. I closed my eyes a second before his mouth touched mine—wet, smooth, hungry yet patient. Lips brushing against mine in a silken caress, his tongue traced the seam of my lips almost hesitantly, and with a sigh, I let him in. Our breaths mingled and became one. I strained to get closer, desperate at least for physical closeness since I couldn't have an emotional one.

Love me.

I buried my hands in his hair, reveling in the soft feel of the rich brown thicket. Blake took a few tentative steps forward. The back of my calves hit the bed and, to my deep chagrin, I broke free from his mouth. "Blake, stop, we'll miss the movie."

"We can go tomorrow night," he murmured in between kisses along my neck.

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Despite my objection, I tilted my head to give him better access. Blake's scent teased my nostrils and triggered memories of the nights we'd spent together, wrapped in each other's arms, weakening my resolve. He suckled lightly the sensitive junction at my neck and shoulder, and I whimpered.

"Blake...."

He groaned, the sound sinking beneath my skin to send shivers up and down my body. "I love it when you moan my name. Your tone is never the same," he whispered against my collarbone. His eyes blazed with want when he looked at me. "Desperate, needy, shameless, pleading... You show me I'm not the only one burning inside so bad it hurts."

Every trace of saliva disappeared from my mouth at his confession. My heart stuttered, and then went into overdrive. I wouldn't be surprised if he could hear the rhythmic pounding.

Tell him now, a little voice urged, but fear slinked into my mind. No, I had a plan all prepared, and I would follow it. Everything would go great if I did.

"Let's go tonight and come back here after the movie. I want to go out with you. I promise I'll make it worth your while." I purred the words to seduce him, my finger toying with the lapel of his jacket.

Granted, I needed an extension, but I also wanted another chance to test the waters with Blake outside the bedroom, be absolutely sure.

Blake sighed and slowly put me down, letting my body brush against his and turning the slide agonizing. His hard-on let me know what putting an end to our make-out session cost him. Even though I felt sorry for him, I couldn't bite back a smug half grin. He was ready to go after a less-than-two-minutes kiss with me.

Blake chuckled, a masculine all-too-knowing sound, and gave my butt a playful slap. He was really getting into spanking. I had to watch out.

"Minx."

My grin widened. "What can I say, you're good for my ego." He took a backward step, and I turned around. "Could you zip me up?"

He swept my hair over my shoulder and placed a tender kiss at the base of my neck. "At your service, my lady."

How different, un-stale, the formal archaic words sounded coming from Blake's and not Holland's mouth—they vibrated with emotion. He slowly trailed his fingers down my back in search of the zipper, caressing my heated skin with the barest of touches. The frisson they created at their wake erased all thoughts of my evil employer. With disgusting ease, he pulled the zipper up the rest of the way.

Taking a deep breath, I composed myself. "Let me get my shoes and purse, and I'm ready to go. You wouldn't have to wait at all, but you're early. *Again*."

Blake hummed his admission and wandered around the room. "Nice picture."

I glanced up. "Yes, wonderful, isn't it? One of Rhett's best pieces of work." Damn strap wouldn't close.

"Rhett's? He's a photographer?"

"Freelance, yes. And you won't believe this. He told me last night he landed a shoot for Newsweek." I brimmed with enthusiasm when I finally managed to secure the strap of my shoe.

"Did he?"

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His tone dripped with tension, and my head snapped up. The rest of him didn't fare any better. Hard lines defined his handsome face, and his hands were clenched into fists. Silence hung between us, and suddenly miles seemed to separate us, not mere feet. Too late, I realized my mistake.

"Blake...."

This time, saying his name didn't have the desired effect.

He glanced away, breaking our connection, refusing to see what must've been evident in my face. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, but I need to explain...."

He looked at the photo again and when he stared at me a moment later, nothing from his turmoil remained. I almost believed I imagined the whole thing.

"No need to explain. I don't have a right to question you."

But you do.

Before I had a chance to tell him though—plan be damned—he walked out of the room, his steps measured and deliberate. I would have preferred if he'd stalked out. Anger I could fight tooth and nail, but silent acceptance? That disarmed me.

Did he really not care and just nursed a stung ego because I sang Rhett's professional praises, or was he jealous?

I couldn't be sure; therefore, I couldn't choose how to handle this. Clutching my purse tightly, I followed him. During the ride to the movie theater, we chatted about everything and nothing. This cheery Blake had me clenching my teeth. Every time I tried to bring up Rhett or last night, he steered the conversation elsewhere. Finally, I gave up and decided to enjoy our time together and stick to my plan.

Blake seemed to have put the whole incident behind him. He had an arm draped around my waist. While we walked, he fed me popcorn, stole kisses in the dark—in other words, he was his usual, charming, sexy self, so, in turn, I relaxed.

Stepping out of the theater, I didn't know any more about the movie than I did going in. Damned if I cared.

"Do you want to go get a drink?" Blake's hand trailed patterns on my hip as we looked at posters of upcoming movies.

I turned to gaze at him and got lost in the green depths of his eyes, their gold flecks mesmerizing me yet again. My love for him, which always simmered in the background, bloomed in my heart. I burrowed in his arms, hiding my head against his chest to smother the confession that almost slipped out of my lips.

"Not the answer I expected, but I can't say I mind."

I pulled back an inch or two at Blake's amused tone. "Actually, I've had enough of the outside world. Now, I want to have you all to myself."

His face lit, and he smoothed his hands up and down my waist. "That's all I ever wanted, too, Emily."

The air lodged in my lungs. Was that just one more of his teasing comebacks, or did he mean he didn't want to play second fiddle to Rhett?

"Then, I guess we're pretty lucky," I said, my voice trembling, "because we'll both get what we want."

I swirled away from him, anxious to get home and tell him how much he meant to me.

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“Emily.”

Everything inside me came to a breath-robbing, painful halt. For God’s sake, San Francisco was a city big enough for one not to run into someone they knew for months and months. Yet here I was, standing in front of the one man I least wanted to see. Tonight or ever.

I’m shredding this dress to pieces before I burn it.

“Hello, Evan.”

Chapter Eighteen

"You don't know how glad I am to run into you."

And you don't know how sorry I am.

Evan used that special tone he did when he wanted something. This time, the husky timbre slid off me, leaving me unaffected. I slowly unclenched my fist, loath to show my emotional uproar to a man who didn't deserve to cause my heart even a momentary flutter.

Before I had the chance to tell him that nothing he had to say interested me in the least, Evan added, "We need to talk."

Blake must've sensed my unease. His hand slipped around my waist, his fingers flexing against my hip. Having him by my side suddenly made all the difference in the world. "I can't imagine why. Besides, as you can see I'm not alone. Blake," I glanced at his blank countenance, "I'd like you to meet Mr. Evan Drake, an acquaintance. Evan, this is—"

"Blake Edwards." Blake interrupted me before I had a chance to say he was my boyfriend.

Smug satisfaction shone in Evan's face. He shook Blake's hand, and at that moment, I hated both of them. Evan for taking for granted I'd talk to him about anything after almost three months of complete and utter silence on his part, and Blake for giving him the opening to try and worm his way back into my life.

"Nice to meet you." Evan's cool smile grated on my nerves. "Would you mind if I stole Emily from you for a second?"

I gritted my teeth. "I don't—"

"It's okay, Emily, talk to your acquaintance. I have to call home, anyway. I'll be back in a couple of minutes." Blake uncurled his hand from around my waist and strode towards the movie theater exit.

With no apparent discomfort, I was dismissed. Ridiculous on my part really, but his retreating back hurt me more than catching Evan with his pants down. To me, he didn't just walk away from a conversation he wasn't interested to witness.

He walked away from *someone* he wasn't interested in—me.

A shiver took hold of my body, and I had to cross my arms over my breasts to keep it together. I tried to shake the shiver and the bad feeling off, not read anything in his desertion—his quick, no-skin-off-my-back desertion, but deep down I knew I was only kidding myself.

With just a few words, Evan had damaged the fragile, budding connection I had with Blake, and I feared I would never get it back.

I glared at him. "What do you want, Evan?"

Fool that he was, he took a step toward me. "Listen, baby, I know I've hurt you, and I'm a complete bastard. I don't deserve you, but please hear me out."

My jaw dropped. He couldn't be that delusional, could he? Or did he consider me to be such an insecure loser, he figured I'd take him back after he cheated on me? I took a deep breath. I shouldn't scream my head off in public.

"Look, Evan, whatever you want to say, it's late. *Three months* late. If you wanted to try to salvage what was left of our relationship, you should've tried when I Fed-ex'd you my engagement ring."

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I moved past him to go find Blake, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me back. “Let go of me.”

I thought the hissed order would get my point across, but when I turned to face him, he snatched my other arm too. I tried to squirm away, but Evan wouldn’t let go. Determined lines etched his face, and his blue eyes shone with the excitement he showed every time he had to tackle a logistics problem. Not a good thing.

“I’m talking to you now. I only waited because I thought it’d be the best way—let you cool off a bit first. Give me another chance, Emily. I screwed up, yes, but I love you.”

A bit? I let out a small chuckle, and then a full-blown laugh burst from my throat, but Evan’s ravenous mouth swallowed my sarcastic retort. I froze, my mind reeling with the unexpected attack. Cool, collected Evan didn’t have an impulsive bone in his body.

His hands wrapped around me in a possessive way he had no right to. Evan groaned and pressed against me, his hard erection prodding at my belly. His tongue knifed between my lips, laving, tasting me. Shudders of disgust coursed through me, and I shoved him with as much force as I could muster. His hold loosened, and I pulled myself from his clutches. Gasping for air, I took a few steps back.

“If you ever lay one hand on me again, I’ll chop it off and feed it to your dog.” My voice trembled with fury. I clenched my hands into fists to resist the temptation to slap him. Onlookers were already whispering, unabashedly staring at us, enthralled by the public fight.

Evan closed the distance between us, towering over me. Damn my small height anyway. I couldn’t even utter a decent threat. Anger both at him and the fact I wasn’t taller, stronger, a Xena lookalike able to kick his ass had my body temperature skyrocketing. In the back of my mind, I knew I couldn’t fend off a bigger man’s attack, but I’d never felt this helpless before.

His eyes widened and even though his surprise might have been genuine, I didn’t care. “But I thought....”

“You thought,” I spat.

I resisted the temptation to bang his head against the nearest wall. “It’s always about what you want, isn’t it? I showed you I don’t want to pick up where we left off, and I just *told* you, too, but being your usual egocentric self, you don’t care about what I want.” I took a deep breath to control my frustration yet the accusation tumbled from my lips anyway. “I loved you, and you cheated on me days after you proposed, and you didn’t even have the decency to run after me and apologize; you just lay next to your mistress looking at me with guilt-ridden eyes, more sorry because you were caught than because you did it in the first place.”

He flushed a deep red. “You smothered me with your love. You give too much, more than the other person asks of you, and then you get all pissy when they don’t hold up their end. I didn’t want to get married, but you made me feel guilty about not proposing.”

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I would not let his words hurt me. He was just creating excuses for himself. Adopting an air of nonchalance, I tilted my head. "Then what are you doing here? Aren't you thanking your lucky stars you got rid of me so easily?"

"Because I love you anyway. We're meant to be together, baby."

"Big of you, I'm sure, but I think you're meant to be with the fish at the bottom of the ocean."

Evan narrowed his eyes, and his face turned ugly. "Don't doubt even for a minute no other man will notice you, Emily. You may have loosened up a bit, but it's only on the surface. You'll always be the scared, little girl I met two years ago, insecure and weak. Did you really think you can do better than me?"

"Actually, I don't know. But I'm not willing to settle with a sorry excuse for a man. Goodbye, Evan."

On shaky legs, I walked outside to find Blake. This was the last blow of Evan's flailing ego, I repeated to myself. He didn't know me. Yet I couldn't help but doubt myself.

Would I be woman enough for Blake?

You have been so far, and then some. Don't let that jerk get to you.

Locating Blake, I raised my chin and approached him. A cigarette in his hand, he leaned against a wall. His face unreadable, he stared at nothing.

"I didn't know you smoked."

"Yeah, well," the end of the cig burned brighter when he took a drag, "I guess there are a lot of things we don't know about each other." The puff of smoke he exhaled hovered between us, a physical manifestation of how messed up and blurry things were.

He sounded in a bad mood, and that triggered my just below the surface anger to bubble over. If he was cranky, what should I be after being mauled?

"You said you'd come back." If my words came out accusing, it was because I meant them to be.

His lips tilted in a mocking smile. "I did, but you were too occupied with lover boy to notice me. FYI," he threw the cigarette down and put it out with the sole of his shoe, "it's not polite to fool around with one man while you're on a date with another."

I stared at him feeling like the crushed butt under his shoe. No, Blake couldn't have said that. I heard wrong. He saw Evan kissing me by force, and he thought I enjoyed being treated this way? What's more, he didn't help me? He believed I was so sleazy I would kiss someone else when I knew he was a few feet away?

I tried to get my mouth to work and get the answers to these questions before I went mad, but I couldn't. With every second that ticked by, the trembles grew. Blake's stomach-turning accusation added to Evan's sickening taste in my mouth...it was too much.

No matter what we had agreed on in the beginning of our relationship, I couldn't believe he thought so low of me. I glanced away and rubbed my arms to fend off the icy loneliness that suffused my heart.

He pushed away from the wall and shoved his hands in his pockets. "So are you ready to go, or did you have a better offer?"

I didn't realize I'd raised my arm until I slapped his face. Even in my chaotic state of mind, I sensed Blake could've stopped me if that had been his intention.

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He didn't because he wanted that slap between us, something else to hold against me. Nevertheless, I couldn't fight anymore. I felt...beaten.

What was there to fight for? He'd judged and condemned me already. I smiled bitterly. I guess not all lawyers think everyone's innocent until proven guilty.

My eyes stung with unshed tears, tears I couldn't let fall because once I started I wouldn't be able to stop. Wearily, I shook my head. "Funny thing...you're the second person to ask me that in an hour, and up until a minute ago, I would've told you I could never have a better offer."

I let out a small, pathetic chuckle, but that was okay. I was small and pathetic. "Shows how much I know."

I walked away. No goodbyes, no see you around. Every type of farewell seemed too dull for what I was leaving behind.

"Emily, wait."

Blake's voice stopped me as if he'd actually reached out an arm to do it. Thank God, he didn't. My tenuous self-control would've crumbled. He didn't come near me, and I didn't turn around to face him. I held my breath and waited, unsure of how I would react if he delivered another scathing retort.

"We should talk about this."

I tightened my hands around the knot of my coat belt. "What's left to talk about? You figured me out."

"I..." Blake paused. When he spoke next, his breath ruffled my hair. "I want you to tell me what happened back there. I need to know."

I glanced up at him over my shoulder, past the point of caring about the desperation lacing his statement. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Chapter Nineteen

Blake didn't call.

Why I expected him to call after last night's Hiroshima episode I had no idea. And to be fair, I didn't pick up the phone either.

Why I wanted him to call baffled me even more. I let out a sigh of self-deprecation. What I wouldn't give to have the luxury to curl up in bed and stay there, keep the world at bay for at least a day and wallow. Reality was, not only did I have to work, but because I dealt with kids, I spent the day with a cheerful smile on my face pretending nothing was wrong.

"I finished, Miss Stone."

Matthew's voice brought me out of my brooding. I glanced up from where I half lounged on his bed, to his expectant face. The change in his behavior in just two weeks amazed me. Gone was the moody, uncommunicative little brat that tolerated me only because I succeeded to steal a smile from him every day, and a young, vibrant boy stood in his stead.

"Let me see." I took the notebook and checked the math exercises while he kneeled next to me on the bed. His breath whooshed in and out of his lungs rapidly, his anxiety almost palpable around us. The way kids needed grownups' approval never failed to warm my heart.

"Excellent. Seventeen out of twenty. You've become my best student, Matthew." I ruffled his hair and returned his radiant smile with one of my own—the first genuine one of the day.

Putting the notebook down, I got up. "Okay, today we're going to do something different."

Matthew giggled. "We always do something different."

Of course we did. I needed to capture and hold his attention to get him interested in school things again.

"Yeah, well, today will be special. We're going to take a little field trip."

Matthew's eyes lit and he jumped up and down on the bed. "Where, where? The zoo?"

I chuckled. "No, not that far. To the minimart across the street for you to practice counting nickels and dimes."

He froze. "And if I get it wrong?"

I picked him up and enveloped his frail body in a tight hug. "I'll be right there next to you. Nothing will happen, okay?" He nodded, and I lowered him to the floor. I tapped his butt. "Put your shoes on, Young Skywalker."

I gathered my stuff in my tote bag and took his small hand into mine. "Ready?"

We passed through the living room, and I paused. Glasses perched low on his nose, Matthew's dad seemed engrossed in what he was doing. I cleared my throat. "We're going across the street. We won't be long." At my words, Robert looked up from his laptop.

"Very well." He glanced at Matthew and put his hand in his pocket. "Buy me a cola, will you?" He gave his son a dollar and winked at me.

When I'd asked him for permission, he'd approved with enthusiasm. But then again, he always supported my efforts to bring the little boy out of his shell.

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Matthew almost seems his old self. Thank you, he'd told me, taking my hand into his.

At the door, I helped Matthew into his jacket. "You're not allowed to run off and leave my side at any time, okay?"

He squeezed my hand. "Uh-uh."

The bell over the door jingled when we entered the minimart. Matthew practically pulled me towards the fridge to get his dad's cola. I had him check the price, and before we reached the register, I stopped. "So, if you give the woman a dollar how much change will she hand back to you?"

He glanced upward while he thought about his answer. I didn't want to add to his nervousness, so I pretended interest in the detergents displayed on the shelf to my right.

A woman in a far isle caught my gaze. Something about her didn't sit well with me. Her basket was empty even though the doorbell hadn't rung after we came in, which meant she'd been there before us. Instead of looking at the shelves, her sole focus was Matthew. In that moment, the strangest expression crossed her face, and I couldn't be sure what it was, heartache, bitterness? Maybe she'd lost her own child or maybe—

She must've sensed I watched her because her stare snapped up to clash with mine. That emotion I had no trouble interpreting. I took a step back. Her eyes blazed with pure unadulterated hatred. A shiver ran down my spine. What was that all about?

Matthew pulled the end of my coat. "Did you hear me?"

I crouched down in front of him. "I'm sorry, honey, I got distracted." I looked her way again, but she was gone. I half expected to hear the Twilight Zone theme song playing in the background. I shook my head to clear it. "What did you say?"

Matthew repeated his answer. "But there are so many answers, because she might give me a nickel instead of five pennies or one dime instead of two nickels, or—"

I flicked his nose and stood to my full five-foot-two height. "I know there are many answers, but the important thing is yours was correct. Now, let's go see what she'll give you."

Matthew shifted from left foot to right while the woman at the register rang the cola. With a serious expression on his face, he handed her the dollar and waited for the change.

"Now count it. Is the change right?"

He opened his palm and separated the different coins.

I glanced at the cashier. "We'll just be a moment. Math exercise."

She smiled. "No problem. Business is slow now anyway."

In less than half a minute, Matthew declared she was right.

"I'm glad we agree. Here, consider this a thank you." The cashier handed him a lollipop.

His gaze begged me for permission, and I nodded.

"Thank you." He beamed at her, hid the treat in his coat pocket, and followed me outside, a bounce in his stride.

In the elevator, Matthew bit his lip and kept sneaking glances at me. "Miss Stone."

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The hesitance in his whole stance put me on alert—low, but still an alert. “Yes, honey?”

“We have to watch the stars and take notes for school, and Dad won’t want to do it. I was thinking maybe you could help me?”

Helping Matthew observe fixed constellations in the sky meant I would have to stay later than usual at their apartment. I would return home beat. Yet the hope I could read in his eyes stopped me from refusing him. “When is this project due?”

“Mrs. Graham said we’ll do rocks and foss...foss....”

“Fossils.”

“Fossils first, then we’ll start learning about stars. Maybe, the end of next week.”

He had to want this bad to ask me the minute his teacher mentioned it. I gave an internal hoot at this voluntary show of interest.

I sent him a big smile. “Sure, Matthew. I’ll gaze at the stars with you.”

“Cool!” He squeezed me in a hug and ran off down the hallway to their apartment. “Good night, Miss Stone. See you tomorrow.” He breezed inside, leaving a gaping Robert behind him.

“What was that all about?”

“Next week, we’ll be watching stars. Here.” I handed him the bag with the cola.

“So you’ll be leaving at what—ten, eleven?”

“Around that time, yeah.”

“Then maybe you should come later.”

“I guess. We’ll see how it goes next week. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Now that I didn’t have anything else to busy myself with, last night’s events swarmed my thoughts. I couldn’t go home and think about them alone; I’d go insane. Better to lose my mind in company.

I pressed the elevator button to Becky’s floor and prayed she wasn’t out. She’d taken the day off to take her mother to the hospital, so I hadn’t had a chance to talk to her today.

My terrible emotional state must’ve shown on my face, because Becky opened the door, took one look at me and sighed. “What went wrong?”

“Everything.” I huffed and stormed inside. “Will you offer me a glass of wine to go with my whine?” I plopped down on the couch.

“Uh-oh. This sounds ominous.” Becky vanished into the kitchen and came back with a bottle of red wine and two glasses. “You spill the bad news, and I’ll try not to spill the wine.”

I chuckled. As always, Becky managed to lighten my laden-with-relationship-worries mood. “Stop it, you’re not that bad. You’ve only spilled a drink—”

“*Three* times since January.” Becky raised an equal number of fingers. “I’m afraid this will be my thing for the new year: spilling water, juice, wine.”

She passed me my glass, and I took a sip. “At least you’ll have an excuse to get a new wardrobe.”

Becky scrunched her nose and sat next to me. “Just my luck. You get to collect men, and I get to collect clothes. Wanna trade?”

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Her words pierced the bubble of my brief giddiness. God, did everyone think I collected men the same way one would collect stamps? Annoyance simmered and threatened to boil over. Even if that was true, why should I be judged for it?

She placed her hand on my thigh. "I'm sorry, Em. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I don't think you playing the field is wrong."

"Don't you?" Bitterness oozed out of me, and I couldn't keep it inside any longer. "You, Miss Straight-Laced-to-the-end, don't think I acted slutty?"

She paled and looked away. "God, no, Emily." Her voice trembled a bit, and I wanted to kick myself. "Why would you ever believe that? First of all, you're my friend, and, second, if men can do it, why not us?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Would I do anything right these days? "Sorry, Becks, I didn't mean to take this out on you."

"This? What happened on your date exactly?"

I swirled the wine and focused on its reddish hues as I rehashed last night's events.

"That bastard!" Becky refilled our almost empty glasses. "Evan has to be out of his freaking mind."

"And you haven't heard the worst of it." I continued telling her about how the night ended.

"Blake said that? God, he's such a jerk."

"Yeah, well, this goes to show I shouldn't come up with any plans from now on. They always backfire."

Becky got up and paced the living room. Moments later, she stopped, and her hesitant gaze swept over my face. "In all honesty, there are some exonerating facts."

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back on the couch's pillow. "I know. That's what's more annoying. But he jumped to conclusions and didn't even wait for me to explain. Yes, we've been dating for only a month, but doesn't he know me at all? No matter the nature of our relationship, he all but called me a whore, Becks."

My heart clenched even more painfully at the sympathy etched on her features. I realized I was worthy of pity, but having someone else confirm my opinion sucked.

"Yes, he overreacted and spoke without thinking." Becky's calm, logical tone soothed some of my anxiety. "But did you stop to think why?"

"No. During my fight with Blake, the lip lock Evan forced on me was too fresh for me to think straight." And afterwards, my damn insecurities resurfaced. I'd spent most of the night tossing and turning in my bed, reproaches playing in my head in an endless loop.

When I opened my eyes, I found Becky staring at me. I shrugged, but I'm sure I didn't fool her into believing I didn't give a damn. "What's the point anyway?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I think he's crazy jealous of every man that comes within a foot of you. And the only logical reason is that he's in love with you."

I snorted. "Yeah, right. You can't love someone you don't respect." And that stung. It wasn't bad enough Blake didn't love me; he thought I was trash.

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Becky rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on. He doesn't really believe all the stuff he said about you."

"You seem so sure."

She held her ground. "I am, because if he did, he wouldn't be with you now, would he?"

I opened my mouth to respond and snapped it shut. Becky's assessment rang true. No matter how much Blake lusted after me, he wouldn't get involved with me if he thought I would act so bitchy. He would have spent a few nights with me, sure, but then he'd have been on his way.

"From what you tell me, Blake was livid. How would you feel if you found him kissing someone else, and while he was escorting you no less?"

The image of Blake's arms around another woman, his lips fused to hers in a passionate kiss poisoned my mind. My stomach knotted. I swallowed to moisten my suddenly dry mouth. "That's different. I have feelings for him. He doesn't. The horrible way he treated me was because of hurt male pride."

"According to you." She picked up the cordless phone. "Call him."

I blinked. "What?"

"Call him and say you need to meet tomorrow and discuss what happened, where your relationship is going yadda, yadda, yadda. You'll hear his side, and he'll hear yours. By the end of your conversation, you'll know how he feels for you and you'll be able to decide whether you want to keep seeing him or not."

"He was the one who acted like an ass. He should be the one to call me." If he had a right to his male pride, I had a right to my female one.

Becky raised an eyebrow. "So, you'll let your ego get in the way of you finding out if Blake loves you?"

The thought had crossed my mind, but then again, throughout our whirlwind courtship, Blake had been the one to chase me. He set his ego aside and put himself out there, even though I did everything in my power to discourage him. Now, I could do no less.

I narrowed my eyes at my friend. When Becky made me sound immature and came out being the logical one, I was tempted to hate her. I set my glass on the coffee table. "Give me the phone."

A part of me praying he wouldn't pick up, I dialed his cell. With each ring, my heart beat faster. *Stop it.* I focused on Becky's face to calm myself. This was a simple phone call, dammit, not a marriage proposal.

"Yes?"

I licked my lips and hoped he wouldn't realize my pulse pounded in my throat. "Hi, Blake. It's Emily."

An ill-omened pause followed, one that had my lungs seizing. Blake didn't strike me as the pouting type, so his silence could only mean one thing: he was really mad. Before I had a chance to get myself worked up about who had the right to be mad, he spoke.

"Emily, hi."

His uneasiness carried through the phone line, and I tightened my hold on the phone until I feared it'd break. Becky nudged me and mouthed "talk."

I squared my shoulders, even though the action was partly wasted since Blake couldn't see me. "We should talk. Can we meet tomorrow afternoon?"

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Polite, brief, to the point. I was proud of myself.

Another pregnant pause followed, one that almost pushed me to tell him not to bother, I got the message. My nervousness scaled to Mt. Everest heights when seconds ticked by and the only sound was Blake's light breathing.

"I have a thing," he said flatly.

A thing.

Prickles of foreboding crawled down my spine. I pressed my lips together. No, I wouldn't judge him by Evan's standards. I knew Blake. In the—albeit short—time we dated, he had been nothing but honest. He deserved my trust. His thing probably had something to do with work, and he didn't want to bore me with details about depositions and character witnesses, things I picked up from watching Law and Order.

And I should stop over-thinking a simple word.

"But we can meet the day after. I'd already had something in mind since it's Valentine's Day."

My heart fluttered at his words. His tone may not have been very warm, but what mattered to me was he'd thought of how we would spend Valentine's Day when I had all but forgotten. A huge smile broke on my face, and Becky mirrored it.

"Yes, I'd like that."

"Good. I could come by your apartment around six."

"Okay, I'll see you the day after tomorrow at six." I wanted to say more, anything to maintain this feeble connection between us and keep listening to his voice, but I couldn't think of something else to say.

"Goodnight, Emily."

"Goodnight, Blake."

I lingered a moment longer on the line. Blake did too. Frustrated with myself for not saying more and with him for acting so cool, I hung up.

"So I take it will you talk things out?" Becky asked after awhile, her frustration evident in her tone.

"We agreed to go out on Valentine's Day." I let out a sigh of resignation. "At least if we break up, it'll be a sort of 'take that' statement to love."

"You won't break up. Blake loves you."

I nodded, but one thing prevailed in my mind: not once did Blake call me kitten.

Chapter Twenty

Cupid was sleeping on the job this year.

I had a heap of evidence to back me up. The morning started auspiciously enough. The sun shone, the bus came on time, my students surprisingly created little to no mayhem during class—in other words, my personal version of heaven.

Everything came crushing down when Becky slipped inside the teachers' lounge and sat down in a chair. She didn't greet me, didn't speak at all, just sat staring at the opposite wall as if she were the only person on the planet. Misery shadowed her face in a way I'd never seen before, and I fought to act natural.

"Becks?"

She didn't answer me.

Normal could go to hell. I got up and kneeled in front of her. "Becky, honey, what is it? What happened?"

"Steve...he broke up with me." Her words were just above a whisper.

Shit. I took her hands into mine. "Want to tell me about it?" I asked and tried to rub away their iciness.

She glanced over my shoulder at the other members of the faculty in the lounge. "N-not here."

"Okay. When school's over, we'll go to my place, I'll whip us up something to eat, and we'll talk about what happened."

Becky nodded but remained silent. The bell rang, and she drew in a deep, shaky breath. God, I could see myself in her shoes, and going through the rest of the day with the knowledge Blake had broken up with me hanging over my head would be torture. The fact I might have to do exactly that in a couple of days tied my stomach into a Gordian knot.

I squeezed her hands. "Don't think about anything right now. Focus on your students and the class and afterwards we can bawl up together, okay?"

Becky's eyes already glistened with unshed tears. She stared at the ceiling and blinked. Finally, she squeezed my hands back and nodded, and I knew she'd make it through the day without giving the students or the other teachers something to talk about.

The situation seemed bizarre to me, and, walking back to class, I realized why. Ever since Becky and I became friends almost a year ago, she'd been the one to dish out advice and help me through crisis after crisis. Now for the first time, it was up to me to help her, and I wanted to give her back some of the support she'd shown me.

For the next few hours, she never left my thoughts. Once or twice, I passed by her classroom to check on her through the door's window. Cool and collected, she even smiled a few times at what a student said. My admiration for her grew.

At the last bell, though, I went to pick her up and could sense she was on the verge of falling apart. I helped her gather her stuff and cursed an inward blue streak that I'd been forced to sell my car last week after all. No way would I let Becky get behind the wheel in her condition.

We reached her red Miata, and it took her two minutes to find the car keys. I patted her shoulder. "Becks, why don't I drive?"

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“Okay.” In an excellent imitation of R2D2, she handed me her keys and got in the passenger’s seat.

I gripped the wheel tight, the way I wanted to grip Steve’s neck and drove to my place in the fastest velocity red lights, the speed limit and San Francisco afternoon traffic allowed. Inside my apartment, I sat Becky down on a chair in my minuscule breakfast nook.

I poured her a glass of wine and started cooking us some pasta. “What happened?”

“About a month ago I started going to belly-dancing classes.” Her voice was hesitant, as if she still wasn’t sure whether to tell me the story or not.

I almost dropped the pot. Becky? Belly-dancing lessons? That was the equivalent of Holland moonlighting as Eminem on the weekends. Nevertheless, I said nothing and busied myself with filling the pot with water and turning on the stove.

“I saw a pamphlet at my gym and signed up on an impulse. I didn’t mention the classes to you because I felt awkward. I mean, what if I was a total klutz? Besides, I hardly thought I’d keep going after the first few times. The whole thing was too close to what my sister, Shana, used to do for a living.”

I added salt and turned around until the water boiled. “Why wouldn’t you go to all the classes?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t expect to enjoy belly-dancing. I figured the thrill of doing something new would fade soon, and I’d drop out. Told myself I did it to try to understand why Shana stripped. But I fell in love with it. When I danced, I felt alive, sexy, free.”

I gave her a reassuring smile. “That’s great.”

Becky snorted and glanced away. “My teacher said I was pretty good, and I thought why not treat Steve to a private show?” She took in a deep breath. “So I rented an appropriate costume and practiced a certain piece. Last week, I sat Steve down and told him I had a surprise for him. So I danced, and the more the song progressed I kinda...took my clothes off.”

Both eyebrows shot up to my hairline. Afraid Becky might take my silence the wrong way, I asked, “The full monty?”

“Yeah...talk about out of character, huh? For some reason, I *wanted* to do it. It felt right, you know?”

I hummed my acquiescence. The water boiled behind me, and I tossed the pasta in.

“Nothing clued me in something was off. Steve seemed to...appreciate my dancing, and afterwards he spent the whole night proving to me just how much.”

I didn’t need to see her face. The wistful tone said it all. I gripped the ladle hard and stirred. And waited.

“We went out only once after that. Steve acted a bit distant, but when I asked him, he said some problems came up at work.” A dry, reproaching chuckle sounded behind me. “I guess I should’ve questioned him more, huh? Anyway, yesterday and the day before, he wouldn’t answer my calls. This morning, I finally reached him. He snapped at me, and I asked if something was wrong. He—” Her voice hitched. “He told me he didn’t want to see me anymore. He thought I was

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a...*slut*. Steve actually called me that because of a simple belly-dance/strip show for my own boyfriend—can you believe that?”

I turned the stove off and turned to reply. The sight of her tear-stained face hit me hard. If I had heard her cry, I would’ve hugged her through it, but Becky did everything low-key.

Bastard. *He* wasn’t good enough for my friend, not the other way around. Damn, did we both have bad taste in men or what?

I gritted my teeth and sat next to her. “Becks, you’re a wonderful person—a good friend, patient with everyone, reliable, and you never judge anyone. The fact you belly dance or took your clothes off for your boyfriend doesn’t mean you’re a slut. It means Steve’s an ass for even thinking that, let alone breaking up with you.”

She sniffed. “He said you can take the girl out of Las Vegas, but you can’t take Las Vegas out of the girl.”

I muttered a curse and hugged her tight through her sobs. God, how could men be so dense and cruel?

“You’re not your sister.” I pulled back to peer into her eyes. “You don’t dance for a living, nor have you ever taken money for sex. You paid for college waiting tables, so Steve can kiss my ass because he’s not good enough to kiss yours.”

Becky’s laughter was filled with tears. “And he’s good enough to kiss yours?”

I laughed, too, glad I managed to make her smile with my silliness. “Yeah, well you know what I mean.”

I patted her arm. “Now you just sit there and I’ll bring the pasta. I bet you haven’t eaten a thing all day.”

Her stomach growled, and we both snickered.

Becky scrunched her nose. “That doesn’t mean anything. It’s the power of persuasion.”

“Uh-uh.”

She didn’t say a lot while we ate. On the contrary, my mouth ran a mile a minute—when it wasn’t full—in my attempt to keep her mind occupied with other stuff. I didn’t want her thinking about that stuck-up ex of hers.

I remembered her saying Steve was “The One,” and my heart stuttered. Yet I suspected this had more to do with hurt pride than a broken heart. Not once had Becky said she loved Steve and she couldn’t live without him.

I took our plates to the sink. “How about a nap?”

Becky’s eyes were already drifting shut. “No, really, I’m not tired. I should go home.”

I sent her a pointed look and helped her up. “What you should do is go lie down in my bed.”

I tucked her in and closed the door behind me. Becky may be sleepy, but I could outlast the Energizer bunny. Fury for how Steve had treated my friend fused with my anger for the way Evan had acted the other night. I breathed in and out, trying to avoid the volcanic eruption I could see coming.

Homework. Yeah, I could distract myself with work. Setting the coffee machine for two cups, I laid my students’ notebooks on the kitchen table. That was where Becky found me a couple of hours later. She helped herself from the fresh pot of coffee and sat opposite me, leafing through a notebook.

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I put my red pen down and closed the one in front of me. "How are you?"

She glanced up at me, sadness swimming in her gray eyes. With her ebony hair reaching the middle of her back and her clear, creamy complexion creating a striking contrast, Becky was a sight to look at. Add her curvy figure—curvy, not plump the way mine was—and I had no trouble picturing her in a showgirl outfit. She'd be a hit.

Her attractiveness didn't make her one, though, and I hated Steve for using her looks and her past to label her so callously.

She sipped at her coffee before answering. "I'm okay I guess. It was just the shock, you know? I overcome my greatest fear and I'm labeled a slut. He didn't even have the guts to tell me in person."

"Bastard," we said at the same time and broke into laughter.

"I'll say it again and again until you believe me. He's not right, Becks. He's got a screwed-up head and a stick up his ass. Don't let him get to you."

A sad smile broke on her face, one she was quick to hide behind her mug. I knew from personal experience nothing I did or said would drill my words in her head. Becky had to overcome her fear on her own; I could just stand by her.

All I wanna do is have some fun played in the distance—Becky's ringtone. She didn't get up to answer her cell.

I tapped my pen against the table. "Aren't you going to get that?"

"No. I don't want to talk to anyone right now, and if it's something important, they'll call back."

"Do you think maybe it's him?"

Becky leveled a hard stare at me, and even though I realized it wasn't really meant for me, I still assumed a defensive stance. "I don't care if it's him or not. Steve's as good as dead to me, Em."

Wow. Coming from Becky who never said anything she couldn't back up, that was a serious statement.

"No chance you'll forgive him?"

She shook her head. "Not a chance in hell. I guess that says something, doesn't it? What were your words—if I'd loved Evan, I would've considered forgiving him?" I nodded. "Well, I must've never loved Steve either, or if I did, his behavior killed my feelings."

I tapped the pen against the table. "That could be anger talking. Maybe you'll think differently tomorrow."

"Nuh-uh. You know me, Em, have I ever changed my mind about something once I'm sure?"

I shook my head. Her hand trembled a bit as she placed the half-empty mug on the table. Becky's unaffected façade didn't convince me one bit.

"If you say so." My diplomatic reply was what Becky needed right now, not me second-guessing her further. "What do you say we watch a movie? I could prepare some popcorn."

Becky remained silent, so I continued. "I'm in the mood for some Gerard Butler, oh, or Pierce."

She slapped her palms on the table and got up. "I'm in the mood to go out."

"What?"

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Becky paced the kitchen. "I need to go somewhere, see people. If I stay in, I'll think about Steve and how pathetic my life is right now."

"It's not pathetic. Getting rid of a man of Steve's ilk is a good, not a bad, thing."

"I didn't get rid of him; *he* got rid of *me*." She sifted her hands through her hair. "Whatever. Look, Em, when you're feeling down, you want to stay in, curl up in bed, and wallow. I want to party myself to exhaustion until I can't think." She stopped going back and forth. "So are you game?"

Something told me the night wouldn't end well, and I'd have to keep a vigilant eye on Becky. "Are you sure?" She narrowed her eyes. "Okay, okay. I'm in." I glanced at the time. Almost eight thirty on a school night. Great.

"I'll borrow some of your clothes to wear because if I go home and change, I'll take too long." Becky voiced and solved my worries all in one sentence.

I let out a deep sigh. "Just what I wanted. To see that my clothes fit you better."

Becky slapped my arm when she passed by me. "Ya know... I'm not even going to try telling you you're curvy, not fat."

And the Pyramids were round.

I trailed after her. "No, you're just a good friend."

In the car, I gave Becky a sidelong glance. Even dressed in a knee-length check skirt and a black shirt with modest neckline, she would cause more than a few heads turn. Despite how much I loved her, green ribbons of jealousy squeezed my heart.

Becky could be dressed in a sack and still be desirable.

No wonder drab Steve had broken up with her. Now that the initial shock and fury had passed, I had no doubts he feared he couldn't keep a woman like Becky.

Smart man.

We went inside, and I breathed out a relieved sigh. Since it was a Tuesday night, the club wasn't brimming with people. I hated feeling I was one of many small sardines packed in an airtight can. Still, there were enough customers for us to blend in. We sat at the bar; I ordered my Appletini and Becky a strawberry Margarita.

All of a sudden, Becky covered her face with her hands and groaned. "Shit."

"What happened?"

"I just remembered my sister's wedding is less than two months away. Dammit, I really counted on that sleaze ball Steve to be there with me."

I winced. I wouldn't trade places with Becky even if they paid me. "You're right, that sucks."

"Sucks is a light word for having to attend your sister's wedding to your ex-boyfriend dateless."

Double ouch. I squeezed her arm. "Hey, you still have time to find someone."

She made a disbelieving sound in the back of her throat. "Yeah, I'll meet a sexy, interesting guy, and spring my sister's hoopla in Vegas on him. I'm sure my imaginary boyfriend will be thrilled, Em." Becky drained her drink and hopped off her stool. "Let's dance."

Grabbing my hand before I had a chance to refuse, she dragged me to the dance floor. The fast beat drumming from the speakers seemed to be just what

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my friend needed. She swayed this way and that, her hands up in the air in complete abandon, eyes closed half of the time. By the end of the third song, Becky was breathless whereas I hadn't broken a sweat. She collapsed on the bar stool and waived the bartender over to order a second Margarita. Turning to face me, she started to speak but froze, her gaze fixated on something over my shoulder.

"Shit." Two times in less than an hour had to be a bad omen.

"What?" I half turned to see the earth-shattering thing that had captured Becky's attention.

"Don't." Alarm flashed through me at the steely tone in which she delivered the single word.

"Becks, stop being silly," I said trying to shake off the uncomfortable feeling. "Is something wrong?"

"No matter what I tell you, don't glance back, okay?" I nodded. "Blake is here." The impulsive happiness that streaked through me was short-lived.

"He's with another woman."

Chapter Twenty-One

Impossible.

Denial surged inside me with volcanic force and, despite Becky's instructions, I whirled around.

The world came to a forceful stop; the clank of beer bottles and glasses disappeared, even the upbeat music faded into the background until it became a distant humming. I could hear nothing but the slow thumps of my dying heart. I wanted to look away, I needed to, but I couldn't tear my eyes from the couple.

Couple.

The word sliced through me with surgical precision. Were they a couple? The answer was painfully obvious. The beautiful blonde fawned over Blake with a familiarity that suggested this was far from their first date. At least he was consistent; he preferred blondes, the cynical thought tore out another piece of my soul.

At the moment, he sat half turned away from me, so I could only glimpse his profile—a small blessing since I didn't think I could bear it if he gazed at her the way he'd gazed at me up until two days ago.

Had he been sleeping with her while he'd slept with me?

My stomach lurched at the possibility. *Hell, who am I kidding... It's a fact.*

She leaned toward him, her fingers painting intricate patterns on his arm. They were deep in conversation, but she ate him up with her eyes. The way her gaze fell to his mouth every few seconds revealed she wanted nothing more than to taste it. I buried deep down the urge to scratch her eyes out. It didn't suit me to react the way a jealous, cheated—what, *girlfriend* would? My tornado of thoughts died out in an instant.

Apparently, Blake didn't think of me as his girlfriend.

I'd always considered the phrase, "*Something cracked inside her*," to be a sappy exaggeration, but nothing could describe my current state better. If I entertained any lingering doubts I loved Blake, they were gone now. Seeing him with another woman hurt so much I had to struggle to pull air into my lungs.

Blake glanced my way, and my dazed stare met his. Our connection held for one, two aching moments, and then his guilty gaze forfeited the battle. Everything came rushing back at this final loss of even the smallest of contacts: the carefree laughter and buzzing of conversation, the slight reek of smoke, the way my fingernails dug deep into my palm, the resulting pain proving the depth of his betrayal.

I looked away, too, into Becky's sympathetic eyes. She squeezed my hand, and her soothing voice washed over me. "We don't know why he's here or who the woman is. Don't jump to conclusions, Em."

I snorted, disgusted with myself for making the same mistake twice. "Why not? I had no trouble jumping into bed with him." I attacked my napkin with vengeance, ripping the innocent paper into tiny pieces, the way I couldn't rip the blonde's perfect, shiny hair. "Yeah, they're cousins, that's why she's shoving her breasts in his face. If she could, she'd straddle him where they sit. Trust me, Becky, I know how a man caught with his pants down looks."

"Em...."

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A fat tear escaped from the corner of my eye, one I was quick to wipe away. I raised my hand, silencing her next words. If she even hinted Blake was no Evan, my hard-won control would slip, and all my bottled-up emotions would pour out. How could I want him to come over and explain, fix everything, and at the same time wish with every shard of my heart he didn't draw near me? I rubbed the heel of my hand across my chest, but nothing could fill the gaping hole Blake's unfaithfulness had plowed.

I sucked in a rough breath. "Don't. It's okay. I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop. I knew it would even though you told me it would work out. I just...."

"You didn't expect this from him."

I gave her a jerky nod. "With his fancy words and his outbursts of jealousy...." An ugly chuckle escaped my lips. "What a hypocrite. At least I was honest about seeing other people. I didn't lie and go behind his back."

I sipped at my Appletini to soothe my parched throat and ended up drinking the entire cocktail.

"He keeps looking your way."

"Let him look his fill because I'll be damned if I ever step into the same room with him again."

"Em, don't say that. You might work things out."

God, had my words sounded so hollow earlier in the afternoon when I said them to Becky? Talk about bad advice coming back to bite you in the ass.

"You love him, don't you?"

My lips tilted in a mocking smile. "A load of good that did me. A relationship can't be based on one person's feelings, Becks. If tonight doesn't tell you loud and clear I'm the only one who invested any feelings, I can't imagine what will."

"I'm sorry to intrude, but your friend is right," the man sitting next to Becky cut in so unexpectedly, for a second I thought it was the voice of logic. "From what I've heard, the bloke over there is an arse and deserves a kick in the balls."

Heat suffused my face. Great. A perfect stranger was now privy to my mess of a personal life. Maybe I should climb up on the wooden bar and strip. Give this night an appropriate ending.

"Did anyone ask you for your opinion?" Becky's irritated question didn't deter him.

Ignoring her jibe, he stood and came to stand between us. "I apologize if I put you on the spot. I couldn't help but overhear." His soothing tone, one used to talk to someone on the verge of a nervous breakdown, should have insulted me, but after taking a quick stock of my emotional state, I acknowledged his sharp assessment.

I sent him a weak smile. "That's okay. I've been known to be nosy, too, so I guess it's fair payback."

He chuckled and gave me his hand. "Colin. And I really am sorry."

"Emily. And somehow I don't think you're *that* sorry."

"Becky," my friend chirped, but Colin just nodded in her direction, and then turned his startling cobalt blue eyes to me again.

"You're British." Yep, that was the smartest thing I thought to say.

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In the past, his thousand-watt smile would have had the butterflies in my belly spring to life even in the dimmed lighting of the club. “Yes. I’m getting my PhD in the States. Only been here for a few months, so I haven’t had the time to shed my incriminating accent.”

Despite my bruised psyche, I let out a choked laugh. Colin had this flirty attitude I always found attractive in a guy even if he didn’t mean anything by it. He glanced Blake’s way and leaned to murmur in my ear. “For whatever it’s worth, your friend is right. The bloke hasn’t taken his eyes off you.”

What a consolation prize. “Yeah, Blake wants something only when he can’t have it.”

“Then why don’t we give him a taste of his own medicine?”

“What do you,” Colin grabbed my hand and pulled me off the bar stool, “mean?”

“Dance with me. I bet he’ll go bonkers.”

I shook my head. “I’m not interested in getting a reaction out of him. I just want to leave.”

“No, you can’t.” Becky jumped in. “Come on, Em, are you going to let him drive you away? Stay and show him he’s not that important to you, even if that’s not true.”

Easy for you to say. I can’t overcome Blake’s betrayal the way you put Steve’s horrid behavior behind you. Unlike you, I love Blake. I almost voiced my thoughts I was so upset. But I didn’t want to bring up the topic again. Or act like a bitch.

“She’s right. Let’s go.” Colin drew me forward, but I held my ground.

“Look, this is all very noble of you, but—”

He flashed me that killer smile again. “Nobility has nothing to do with it. I’ve wanted to dance with you ever since you walked in.”

Hey, I’m human. How could I *not* be flattered? And so soon after Blake’s indirect rebuff? The chance he was lying just so I’d feel better didn’t diminish my pleasure.

Colin took advantage of my momentary pause and guided me to the dance floor. Too tired to object again, I followed his lead. Once there, Colin pulled me toward him, too close for the fast song booming from the speakers. His hand fell intimately on my hip, and he set the slow pace we danced in. Our bodies glided on the dance floor, moving as one.

In the b.B.—before Blake—era, I would’ve definitely gotten in the mood, my temperature would’ve spiked. I would have enjoyed being in an attractive man’s arms, sensed the air around us thicken with the sensual promise of things to come. Now though, my mind wandered, and I went through the moves on autopilot, the temptation to pretend I was dancing with Blake riding me hard.

Worried about Becky, I glanced toward the bar. She sat sipping at her Margarita, chatting it up with the bartender. Relieved, I let my gaze wander. Right to Blake’s table. I flinched at the seething anger in his eyes. Damn him! He had no right to be angry.

Colin twirled us around again and again until I forgot about everything. “Don’t pay him any attention. Just try to have some fun. It’ll be the worst kind of revenge.”

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I nodded, even though paying Blake back didn't hold any interest for me.

The sultry, Latin tempo of the next song aided and abetted Colin. He brought our bodies closer together, pushing his thigh between mine. I froze, my hands flying to his shoulders to safeguard the minuscule distance left. The bump and grind was too intimate for me to do with Colin, whom I'd known for less than an hour.

Swaying to the rhythm, I pulled back a bit. Colin must've read the uneasiness in my face because he winked and spun me around. When he drew me back into his embrace, his palms landed low on my hips, almost cupping my ass. Okay, maybe he didn't get the drift after all.

His head lowered, and to anyone watching from afar, it would seem he was kissing me.

"Get ready." His low, warning tone had the hair on my arms rising.

Shit. I didn't even have time to panic.

"May I cut in?" Blake's voice boomed from behind me, pulsing with tightly controlled fury.

I glanced at him over my shoulder, shivers dancing down my back, heat gathering low in my belly, all for the arrogant cheating bastard I should reserve no more than loathing. If only life was that simple.

"May he cut in, luv?"

Blake's expression darkened with Colin's question. Damn, but the Brit had really gotten into character.

"It's okay, Colin. I know him." I cheered myself because my voice came out steady even though every molecule in my body quivered.

Colin stepped back and extended his hand. "Colin Durham."

I shook my head. English men and their penchant for manners. I thought that had died along with Mr. Darcy.

"Blake Edwards."

Colin nodded once and returned to the bar. My gaze tracked his retreat until he sat down, a desperate attempt to postpone looking at the man before me for a few seconds more.

We stood in the middle of the dance floor, neither of us moving, two adversaries staring each other down, waiting to see who would break first. Blake's eyes blazed with a tumult of emotions I refused to identify.

He'd made his own bed, and this blonde would only be caught dead in it again.

After a few heartbeats, he placed his hands on my waist with a possessive familiarity that forced me to clench my teeth, and he pulled me toward him. The symbolism of the act didn't escape me. Yes, he yielded first, but I was the one who ultimately went to him, not the other way around. His touch branded me through the leather fabric of my pants, and I cursed my traitorous body for responding to him. I kept my hands at my sides; I'd be damned if I touched him willingly. Staring at the top button of his white shirt, I went through tomorrow's school schedule in my head.

First period, we had math. I'd teach my students how to differentiate measurements: pint, cup, and teaspoon. For second period, I had put together a small play about the four seasons and—

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“You’re awfully quiet. Am I such poor company compared to your friend?”

My gaze snapped to his at his biting tone. “I don’t have anything to say to you, Blake.” I shrugged. “What’s the point?”

His fingers flexed on my waist, and he yanked me flush against him, driving all air out of my lungs in a soft whoosh. “So you can date every man in San Francisco, but I have to be faithful?” he growled, his scotch-scented breath sweeping over my face like a hurricane.

I snaked my hands between us and tried to push myself away to no avail. “I never lied or went out with Rhett behind your back.” *Or after I started dating you.* “Let. Go. Of. Me.”

His hold on me tightened. “You won’t get away so easy. What’s the matter, Emily? You can dish it out, but you can’t take it?”

The blood in my veins boiled. “I was straight with you from the beginning. I didn’t go around throwing hints left and right that I wanted an exclusive relationship only to sneak off to date other people.”

“Why do you care what I do? Weren’t you the one who didn’t want to get serious?”

I would cross Golden Gate Bridge naked before I gave him the satisfaction of knowing he’d gotten under my skin regardless of my intentions.

“I don’t put up with dishonesty. Shouldn’t you go back to your...*thing*?” I peered toward their table.

Empty.

Everything inside me withered. I should’ve known Blake wouldn’t dance with someone else while his date watched.

I’d been reduced to the other woman.

Rage helped me break free from his hold. “Of course...you waited for her to go to the bathroom. What’s the matter, Blake? Forgot to tell her you’re not exclusive?”

I opened my mouth to rant some more and froze. What was I doing? I’d told myself I wouldn’t cause a scene. Shaking my head, I walked away, not waiting for him to answer. Or I would have walked away, if Blake hadn’t grabbed my arm and whirled me to face him.

“It’s not what you think. This...Leah and I aren’t dating. We haven’t—”

“Everything all right?” Colin’s voice sounded from behind me, his words laced with the promise of retribution if I said no.

I peered at Colin over my shoulder. “Yes, thank you.”

He hooked a thumb in his waist. “Are you sure? Seems to me the bloke here—”

“Blake,” he thundered. God, I was the bone lying between two rabid dogs.

Colin gave a careless shrug. “Bloke, Blake, it’s all the same to me. Have you had enough, luv?”

Will I ever have enough? “Yes, to be honest I have.” I sent Blake a pointed look, and he finally released me. “Go back to your table, Blake. FYI, it’s not polite to fool around with another woman while you’re on a date.”

A light pink hue tinted his cheeks, from anger or shame I couldn’t be sure and didn’t care. I walked away from him, the sound of my name fading under the loud music.

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Colin's hand at the small of my back was a welcome support. Right now, I'd take it wherever I could get it.

A few feet from the bar, Blake grasped my hand and squeezed. "Emily, you're overreacting. Let me explain."

"The way you let me explain before you jumped to conclusions the other night?"

Regret flickered in his eyes right before he rubbed a hand across his face. Both of us had gone out of our way to ruin what was between us and now...now it was too late to rectify the damage.

There was nothing left to build on.

Weariness weighed heavily on my shoulders. I couldn't fight anymore. I'd been fighting one thing or another since the moment we met.

I took in a deep breath and faced him. "It doesn't matter, Blake. Whatever the reason for our misunderstanding," I waved toward the table his date occupied, "I'm done."

His nostrils flared. "And I have no say in this?"

I crossed my arms over my breasts. "Fine, explain."

"I hardly think this is the place to talk."

Yeah, right. As if I'd risk meeting him somewhere where we'd be alone, and he could weave his magic on me. Seduce me into forgetting about everything but the rapture found in his arms.

I may be naïve, but I wasn't stupid.

"You can say what you have to say now, or not say it at all."

He didn't seem very regretful now. "Everything has to be your way, doesn't it?" Blake glared at me.

I didn't answer. Any other alternative would have dire consequences for me, so I couldn't be fair. Life was never fair anyway.

"Can I at least talk to you in private?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"Colin would you excuse us?" Colin walked away with a slight nod. "Knock yourself out."

"Leah and I are partners at the firm."

That I had no trouble believing. She looked the part of savvy corporate lawyer. A little too well for my liking.

"Lately, we've been working on a case together, and I got to know her better."

Sourness grew in the pit of my stomach. A wealth of meaning could be hidden in those words—or not. "I hope you're not going for the we-came-here-to-talk-business angle, because that explanation won't cut it."

Blake narrowed his eyes but didn't take the bait. "No, I'm not. Leah's shown she's interested in me, and after what happened the other night, I was angry at you."

"So you decided to pay me back by lying to me?" I couldn't keep the bitterness from my voice. I hated how he kept using her name at every turn, making her real instead of a faceless woman that didn't matter to him. God, despite my big talk, did I really want him to explain in a way I could forgive him?

"Damn it, Emily, I was jealous."

I could hear how uncomfortable he felt, but I wasn't sure I should believe him at this point.

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"If what you say was true, then why hide this from me?" I hid myself behind his dishonesty, unwilling to admit it was his going out with another woman that cut me deep and not his lie.

He forked his fingers through his jet-black hair and pulled at the strands. "Because I'm crazy ab—"

"Blake, there you are."

We both turned at the sound of the silky voice to find Blake's date standing a foot from us. Shit, how tall was she? My gaze flew down to her shoes and, to my dismay, she wore flats, which meant she was at least five-eight. She reminded me of that blonde elfin princess in the *Lord of the Rings*.

She fits Blake better than I do in so many ways.

He cleared his throat. "Leah."

The husky timbre twisted the dagger lodged in my heart. He could switch on the charm no matter who was in the receiving end. I held no illusions anymore that I was different than any other woman to him.

"You were gone when I got back from the ladies' room, and then I spotted you talking." She had this way about her, a talent some women possess to whine but still stay charming. Bitch.

"Hello, I'm Emily Stone." I stuck out my hand, and she took it with grace and not a touch of discomfort. "I teach Blake's sister. We ran into each other and got to talking. I'm sorry for keeping him from you."

The words wedged in my throat, but they had to be said. No matter how much I disliked her, I was the intruder. The explanation did nothing to appease her. Leah—ugh, even her name sounded sophisticated—sidled next to Blake and put her arm around his. *Back off*, the silent message came through loud and clear, but it was unnecessary. I didn't have what it took to fight her for the place nor did I want to.

"Leah Bedingfield." She gave me a bright smile, one that warned me to be wary. "Don't worry about it. The night is still young."

Translation: I'm going home with him. You should look into buying a cat.

I wanted to rub in her face the fact I'd spent numerous nights with Blake myself, and that she should be the one to back off, but the man in question had made it crystal clear I didn't have that right.

You give too much, more than the other person asks of you, and then you get all pissy when they don't hold up their end. Evan's words slammed into me with such force I took a step back.

Did I do that to Blake?

My eyes searched the floor rapidly while I came to the dreadful realization I did. Blake had done everything I asked of him, and then when I wanted more, I blamed him for not giving it to me.

God, what a bitch....

Blake's rumbled words reached my ears, but my brain was too busy to process them. I looked up into his face and cringed at the compassion in his eyes. Of course he would find me pathetic, a little girl that didn't know what she wanted and got mad at the world when things didn't go her way.

"If you'll excuse me, I need to get back to my friend." I pushed the words out past numb lips. "It was nice seeing you, Blake."

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I didn't wait for a reply. My legs couldn't carry me away fast enough, with shame burning a hole in my stomach. And I claimed to love Blake? How ridiculous.

I didn't know what love was.

With my hand over my mouth, I smothered a sob and managed to reach Becky. I didn't know if she understood my unintelligible ramblings, but before I realized it, she was pulling up the curb outside my apartment building.

"Will you be okay?" Becky's voice filtered through the thick, London fog in my mind.

I pulled a deep breath into my lungs. "Eventually. I have to be. See you tomorrow."

I didn't dare a glance at her face because I'd crumble even at the smallest sign of sympathy. I got into my apartment and, closing the door behind me, sank to the floor, the way an anchor sinks in the coldest, darkest depths of an ocean. I certainly hit rock bottom.

Why did I always have to be the one that didn't matter? Why couldn't anyone care about me above all else? A trembling sob caught in my throat, and I pressed my palms against my eyes. I wouldn't cry. I wouldn't.

But it was a losing battle. Nothing could stop the tears from coming. Pulling my knees up, I buried my face in my lap and wept for everything I'd lost tonight. The fragile hope of a happy future.

And the worst part of it was I had only myself to blame.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The forlorn expression etched on his face broke my heart. He'd been so excited yesterday when he waved me goodbye, chirping *I'll take you star-walking tomorrow*. Damn winter weather.

"I'm sorry, Matthew."

"Maybe if we wait a little the clouds will go away." His persistence was a bittersweet gift. I finally got him interested in something and we couldn't go through with it.

"Honey, we checked the weather online on your dad's laptop, remember? The sky will clear enough for us to observe the stars in a couple of days."

Matthew gave me a slow nod and moved away from his bedroom window, his shoulders slumped. Sitting on the bed, he let out a small sigh. The poor kid had stared out of every window in the apartment in hopes he could see the stars from a different angle.

Even though I'd seen today's forecast, I'd hoped they might have miscalculated. I didn't want to cancel our stargazing session and find out later it wasn't necessary. Why couldn't the damn meteorologists be wrong this time? They certainly tended to be wrong if it meant I'd get drenched for not carrying an umbrella on a sunny-all-day-long day and run into a cute guy while resembling a bedraggled cat.

I sat down next to him, my mood not doing any better. I tried to take in the changes in his bedroom, the CARS and Batman posters on the walls, the cute knick-knacks lining the shelves, the stuffed dog in one corner—most of it compliments of Robert's and my trip to IKEA—but that didn't help any.

It'd been a few days since my break-up with Blake, and nothing managed to put a smile on my face. However busy I kept myself, I couldn't chase the sadness away. Worse, it wasn't just sadness. A part of me was missing, the part that bloomed when Blake was around.

Stay focused. This is about Matthew.

I ran my fingers through my hair—that desperately needed washing, and searched for something to cheer him up. "What do you say we have a pre-star-watching session?"

Matthew's eyebrows furrowed. "Meaning?"

"I've downloaded maps of the sky from the internet. We could go through them and mark which stars we'll be able to see this time of year, so we'll know what to look for when the sky clears."

He bit his lip. "I guess we could do that."

For the next hour, we sat on his bed, looking at the North Star, the Big and the Little Dipper, Orion. We even focused on stars unseen with a naked eye.

"Do you want to know the myth about the Big and the Little Dipper?" I asked when I realized Matthew's interest was waning.

"Myth?" He munched on the remaining piece of sandwich on his plate. The kid had actually managed not to drop a single crumb on the bed, while my side was in desperate need of cleaning.

"Yeah, it's a story, a fairy tale about why their outline reminds people of a bear."

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Matthew narrowed his eyes. "They don't remind me of one."

"Okay, let me tell the story, and then I'll show you again. A long time ago," I adopted my fairy-tale telling voice, "Zeus, the king of the Greek gods wanted a mortal woman to be his servant."

"Why?"

He was a lying, cheating skirt-chaser that just wouldn't quit. In other words, a man. "Because she was a very good cook."

Matthew nodded, acknowledging the wisdom of Zeus's actions.

"Anyway, the woman, Callisto, refused him again and again, but Zeus's wife Hera got upset when she found out regardless."

"She was hurt her husband didn't like her cooking," Matthew cut in matter-of-factly.

I ruffled his hair. "Yes. So because she was angry, she turned Callisto into a bear." Matthew's gasp brought a smile to my face. "One day, Callisto's son, Arcas, wandered through the woods, a gun in his hands. He was searching for something to hunt and kill so he could take the meat back to his family and feed them. About to give up, he stumbled upon a big bear. Thrilled, he aimed, but before he fired, Zeus saw from where he sat high on Mt. Olympus that Arcas was about to shoot his own mother. So he took them both in the sky and turned them into stars."

Matthew said nothing, mulling over the story no doubt. At least, he found it interesting.

"Do you have a flashlight, kiddo?"

"Yes."

"Go get it for me."

While I waited for him to retrieve it, I took out a piece of paper and punched small holes in it. Matthew came back and handed me the flashlight. I covered the lens with the piece of paper and tied my hair band around the flashlight to secure it in place.

"Turn off the lights." Matthew bolted up to do my bidding. "Ready?" I pointed the flashlight upward and turned it on.

"Awesome." Matthew didn't say anything else, but his awed tone spoke for itself.

"Do you want to hold it?" I asked after a few moments and he was more than happy to. "Now see these stars here? On their own, they look like a dipper, the kind of spoon you'd use to pour soup in a plate, but if you take into consideration the rest of the stars, this resembles a tail. See?" I trailed my finger pointing at the dots on the ceiling.

"Uh-huh." Matthew switched it on and off a couple of times, and then left it on. He was quiet for a few seconds. "My mom really liked stars."

I sucked in a breath. That was the first time I heard Matthew talk about his mom. I trudged a dangerous path here.

"I shouldn't talk about it I guess."

I squeezed his hand. "You can talk about anything you want. What we say in your bedroom stays in your bedroom, 'kay?"

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“Okay. She used to come and sleep with me because she said she could see the stars better from my room.” The words tumbled out. “She even had a song. Star light, star bright...the first star I see tonight...I don’t remember the rest.”

“I wish I may, I wish I might, have the thing I wish tonight.” It was a wonder I kept my voice from breaking.

“That’s it! You know it too?”

“Yes.” I hugged him, thankful for the dim lighting. I didn’t want to have to explain my teary eyes. Matthew needed his mom the way he needed his next breath, but for some reason he refused to show it.

“Do you think maybe Zeus turned my mommy into a star too? How can I save her if he did?”

The anxiety lacing his voice pushed me to hug him tighter. “No, your mommy is alright. This was a story, remember?”

“So she’ll come back? She said she’ll come back.” His desperation washed over me until it almost became my own.

“I’m sure she will. She loves you too much not to.” At least I hoped so, for Matthew’s sake.

“How do you know?”

“It’s impossible not to love you.” I started to tickle Matthew. Giggles erupted in the room in a matter of seconds and lightened the mood.

In less than an hour, Matthew was out cold. I tucked him in and tip-toed out of the room. The apartment was eerily quiet, the kind of quiet it got at night that created the illusion you were the last person on earth.

“I am Legend,” I muttered to myself when I entered the living room.

“What was that?” I jumped at the sound of Robert’s voice. The plates slipped from my hands and smashed into pieces on the floor. It was no longer quiet, that was for sure.

I turned around to find him behind me, nursing a glass of scotch. “Dammit. You scared me.” His eyes widened slightly, and my abrupt tone registered. I’d been irritable for days because I hadn’t slept for days. Memories of my time with Blake plagued my dreams. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I guess I’m a bit jumpy.” I leaned down to pick up the mess, and he followed me.

“Don’t worry about it. I should be the one to apologize. I tend to sneak up on people. It’s unusual for a guy, I know.”

We carried the broken plates to the kitchen and put them in the garbage can. Back in the living room, Robert picked up his drink again and swirled the amber liquid. His gaze focused on me with an intensity that bordered on predatory. I rubbed my arms to chase away the chill his attitude gave me. An irrational reaction, but I couldn’t help myself. After the Blake incident, I didn’t trust myself to read men.

“I’m real sorry I scared you.”

I pasted a fake smile on my face. “That’s okay.” Not. “Matthew’s fast asleep. We didn’t get to see any stars tonight after all. Too cloudy.” I turned to the front door, the day’s activities catching up with me. If only I were in bed already....

“Care to stay and have a drink with me?” Robert sounded close to me, and, suddenly, I felt like he breathed down my neck—literally and figuratively. My instincts to flee flared to life, and I had to control myself to keep my pace steady

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and not run out of there. Taking a deep breath, I pushed my panic down. Robert wasn't dangerous; he was just being polite.

"Thank you, but I'm really tired." I tossed the candid excuse over my shoulder.

"Does that mean another time you might say yes?"

"To be honest, Robert, no. For one, you're my employer, and I think we should keep our relationship strictly professional. Late-night drinks would only blur the lines."

He took a step toward me. "And the other reason?"

I put on my coat, something to keep my hands from visibly trembling. "I can't do complicated right now." That was the vaguest I could be without sounding rude.

"Fair enough."

His answer didn't quite satisfy me. I'd have preferred for him to say there was nothing romantic in his offer, but he understood where I came from. At least he refrained from pushing the subject. I said good night as fast as humanly possible and left Robert and his unsettling behavior behind.

Matthew and his mom were on my mind during the bus ride home. The more I spent time with him, the less convinced I became his mom had abandoned him. Not just because he was a cute, easy-to-love kid.

Matthew'd had a good upbringing so far. Besides, a) A child whose parents neglected him and left him to fend for himself wouldn't have been so hurt at his mom's disappearance, but would've shrugged it off with more ease. b) I could see a hunger in Matthew's eyes for something missing from his life, something he used to have. c) He soaked up the attention I lavished him with in a way that urged me to think that in his mind I was a replacement until his mom returned to take care of him again.

But then why would she leave her child behind? I could understand if she just wanted to divorce Robert. Maybe she stopped loving him, the snoop inside me whispered. Or maybe it was the other way around. I knew I couldn't stand it if I were married to Blake, and he stopped—

I bit my lip and pushed the front door of my apartment building open. God, I had to stop thinking about Blake in any scenario, let alone imagine my life if I were his wife. That was ridiculous. I shook my head and exited the elevator. I'd only known Blake for less than three months and our...thing was anything but serious.

Then why did I feel dead inside?

When does living turn into simply existing? I wondered walking into my apartment. I headed toward my living room window to stare out into the pitch-blackness of the starless sky. The crux of the matter was: I could let my grief overwhelm me, let days go by meaninglessly, or I could grit my teeth and fight my way to the other end of the tunnel. I didn't want to keep going the way I had since we broke up.

Yes, I loved Blake, and a part of me would always miss him, mourn for him, but the only person who would be with me my entire life was me. My mother had passed on to me this wisdom a few days before she died, unwilling to stay on the drugs, stay in this world, and be in so much pain.

I want you to live your life, not die with me. You're a strong woman, and

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you'll keep going, Emmy. One way or another. It doesn't mean you don't love me, sweetheart.

I breathed in through the heartache and bittersweet memories. If only I believed in me and saw me for the strong person my mom did, I could do this.

Stubbornness steeled my spine, and I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I would do this. I would work towards accepting the inevitable when it came to Blake.

“Some things are meant to be. And some things aren't.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

The mellow notes drifted in the air in between chatter, a subtle yet necessary background noise that soothed my troubled spirit.

"You haven't listened to a word I've said, have you?" I turned guilty eyes toward Cade, but he continued. "On the ride here, you barely paid any attention to what I told you. And when you did, you replied in one-syllable words."

And now I was doing it again. "I'm sorry, I got distracted." My smile was forced and too wide. "You were saying?"

Cade threw his napkin on the table. "What's going on, Emily? Ever since we talked on the phone, you've sounded funny, but I chalked the whole thing up to my usual paranoia. Now you're here and you're not. Dinner with a zombie would've been livelier."

Ouch. No one could accuse Cade of sugarcoating things. Not that my behavior surprised me. That was how the entire week had passed. I couldn't muster up enthusiasm about anything or anyone, and only tried to where my students were concerned. Becky suggested a couple of times I talk to her, but I was too embarrassed over the way I'd acted to get it off my chest. My best friend was the logical, always-doing-the-right-thing type. She wouldn't understand how I felt.

And I felt I had screwed up completely.

Cade let out a sigh of frustration. "Talk to me, cuz. You know you can tell me anything."

What was I supposed to say to him? *I'm a twenty-three year-old woman reacting like a ten year-old child?*

"Come on, Cade. You're a guy. There are some things a woman can't tell a man even if he is family." I gave him a playful wink and hoped he didn't see through my act.

"So it's about a guy. Did you have a fight with this Blake character or something?" My cousin delivered the question in what I supposed was his cop voice, all deliberate and intent, cutting through the BS.

I fought not to squirm in my cheap, two-inch heels. "Or something. Look, let's just drop it, Cade, okay? I'm sure I'm overreacting anyway. You know how women tend to blow things out of proportion."

Cade narrowed his eyes, and I doubted he believed me. At any rate, he respected my wishes and changed the subject. In turn, I gave it my best shot to act more cheerful. I tried to smile at Cade's jokes and ask about my aunt, his job. I tried to enjoy the chicken and pasta with a delicious white sauce I'd ordered.

I don't think I did better than someone whose cat had just died.

The charade got to me after a while. I was half way through my plate when I reached my limit. "Excuse me, Cade. I'm going to the ladies' room."

I got up and walked to the back of the restaurant with slow and even steps, afraid Cade would pick up on my need to run away from him. I was rifling through my purse when an unforgiving hand clamped around my arm and rooted me on the spot. With a gasp, I raised my purse as a weapon and half turned to peer at the offender.

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“Surprised to see me?” Blake asked before I had a chance to say anything—not that I had any misconceptions I’d be able to get out anything coherent. *Surprised* was an understatement for my current state.

I swallowed past the lump of trepidation in my throat and managed a shaky nod. His tie hung loose around his neck, enough to give him some breathing space I guess. His hair stood up at awkward angles the way it did when he would sift his fingers through the jet-black locks. I’d never seen him so out of sorts in public.

“Well, it’s only fair I get to surprise you too,” he continued. “Imagine my shock when I saw you with yet another man mere days after you left me high and dry for no apparent reason.”

Shame and anger unfurled in my stomach and brought a wave of heat to my cheeks. How could he push me to so contradictory emotions with just a few words? I took in a deep, calming breath, reminded myself most of the blame lay on my shoulders, and turned to face him.

“Blake, trust me, breaking up was the best thing for both of us.”

His hand on my arm tightened almost to the point of pain. He pulled me closer to him. “Why don’t you let me decide what’s best for me?” His breath tinged with the acrid smell of scotch fanned my face.

I swept my tongue across my lower lip and darted nervous glances around us. If Cade noticed what was going on...No, I didn’t even want to guess what would happen.

“Blake, you’re not yourself. You...you’re drunk.”

He let out a hard, unforgiving chuckle, and then leaned down until we stood nose to nose. “I’m not drunk, I’m crazy. You drove me crazy, and it’s time we settled this.”

He scanned the area behind me for a moment until his eyes lit up. “Come with me.”

His grip on my arm didn’t leave me any choice but to trail after him. I almost stumbled trying to keep up with his big strides. When I regained my balance, Blake pushed me inside a dark room. He closed the door behind him and locked it, the sound ominous. Too stunned to react, I didn’t move away from him, didn’t put a few feet of safety between us.

It would have been a wasted effort anyway—Mars wasn’t a safe enough distance from Blake.

Roughly, he twirled me around until my back hit the door. His hands landed against the hard wood on either side of my body, effectively caging me in.

Blake said nothing. I said nothing.

My heart beat a crazy cadence in my chest while anticipation rose inside me with the force of a tidal wave. I couldn’t see him clearly yet I could sense his fury. A sliver of moonlight saved our surroundings from complete darkness, giving the setting an intimate, private ambiance even with the sound of waiters and customers passing outside the door.

“Why can’t one man be enough for you?” His words lashed at my soul.

“Why can’t one woman be enough for you?”

He gripped my waist. “This isn’t about me. You know it isn’t.”

“Do I?”

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"You damn well do know. You're the one who called all the shots from the beginning, and I was a fool to let you get away with it. Things will change from now on."

"Things *have* changed, Blake. We're not together anymore." I tried to free myself from his burning touch, but I might as well have been trying to escape a boa. The more I twisted, the more Blake closed in around me.

"Are you sleeping with him?"

My mouth fell open. "What?"

"The guy you're here with. Have you slept with him already?"

"No!" I pushed him away with all my strength. He didn't move an inch.

"Do you scream for him the way you did for me?" Blake's velvet soft murmur caressed my ear. "Do you come hard for him, too, beg him for more?" He nipped my earlobe, and my breathing quickened. I fought to keep my brain from shutting down.

I should be furious, not a step from throwing caution to the wind and melting in his arms. "Damn you, I said—"

"Does he know that if he kisses you right here," he leaned down and suckled the tender spot where neck meets shoulder, "you go wild?" Blake tortured my flesh, suckling and biting.

Self-preservation reared its head and forced me to move away from his ravenous lips. "Stop. What I do is none of your business," I said trying to sound firm in a breathless voice.

"Why not? I'm a nice guy, remember? Maybe I want to give my replacement a few tips." His rough voice rasped across my senses, belying the playful meaning of his words, and a shiver had the hairs on my arms rising. "By the way, do you realize all your men look like me?"

"What?"

Blake caught my chin in his hand. "The Brit at the club, the guy out there, they're both tall and dark-haired, perfect little copies. Tell me, kitten, do they measure up or do you close your eyes and think of me to get off?"

An outraged gasp spilled from my lips. "You—"

"No, don't answer." His fingers slid to cup my cheek, then around to cradle my neck. "I won't believe you anyway."

His marauding kiss stole my response. Stole my anger. Stole my sanity. Blake let out a hungry sound when his tongue stabbed inside my mouth to sweep every nook and cranny. Unrelenting, he tasted me with an intensity that bordered on desperation and a portion of fury that I was afraid would boil over.

I whimpered, caught in the eye of the storm. Love and pride played tug-of-war inside me. Being with him, kissing him brought me a sense of belonging so great it threatened to break me into a thousand pieces because I knew the feeling didn't go both ways.

Blake broke the connection, his eyes blazing. "Damn you!"

His lips came down on mine, but this time in a gentle, enticing, full of promises sweep. "Damn you, kiss me back," he breathed out against my mouth and managed to sound both menacing and pleading.

Blake sealed my lips again, and the wall of my resistance crumbled to the ground. He rumbled, a deep, satisfied hum when I tasted him back, devouring his

flavor, getting my fix now, while I could, and leaving all worries for later. In some small corner of my mind, I knew I'd regret this, but nothing mattered more now than being in Blake's arms again.

I had no idea how long we kissed; I could only count levels of arousal not minutes, whilst it grew from craving to carnal desperation, crashing against the last tatters of my self-control the way angry waves erode the rocks on a beach.

In dire need of oxygen, I finally tore my mouth away. I struggled to pull air into my lungs—surely there had to be some in the room, yet I couldn't find any. My breathless gasps bounced off the walls of the small room, evidence of how easily Blake got to me, whereas he didn't sound affected at all. Standing in front of me, dwarfing me with his six feet of wonder, he was silent as a stone.

Hurt pride urged me to compose myself. Unseeing, my eyes searched for something to concentrate on the opposite wall, anything to anchor me until I came back to my senses.

Blake trailed scorching lips down my neck, and then up again to my ear. "God, I love it when you let go." He turned his attention back to my mouth.

The confident, smug tone irked my brain cells into life. "What about you, Blake? Mmm?" I put a stop to the playful sweeps of his lips. "Your *Leah's* blonde too. Do you think of me when you're inside her? Is she the perfect arm candy for corporate functions but just lies motionless, a good, little doll while you fuck her?" I nipped his lower lip in retaliation, the image of him on top of another woman making my eyes sting.

If he couldn't love me as I loved him, then he could at least ache as I ached.

Tension rolled off him. In retrospect, I should have known better than to bait a hungry panther, but no matter how much I told myself I was a lot responsible for Blake's actions, it still hurt to think of him with that striking, flawless society girl—something I would never be.

"Does she—"

Blake swallowed my cutting question, his angry tongue plundering my mouth. It seemed I had driven him past the point of caring if I wanted him to kiss me or not. Ravenous, he ate at my lips, his ragged exhales puffing against my cheek, searing the soft skin with their heat. Not that I'd have objected. I kissed him back, biting his lips and licking the sting away.

I matched his anger, his madness, his hunger to a T.

Moaning, I sucked his tongue in my mouth and caressed it with my own. With a vicious yank, he tore free the straps of my halter dress. The fabric got caught between us for a second, but Blake pulled it down and enfolded my lace-covered breasts with his palms, molding them to his pleasure—and mine. My nipples hardened at his touch, even more so when he swept his thumbs over the sensitive peaks. A low, tortured whimper escaped from my throat, and I arched my upper body closer to him.

The sound must have triggered something inside him. He pushed the cups down, freeing my breasts, and raised me off my feet. Next thing I knew, his mouth closed around my nipple. Oh, God...It felt as if he was trying to enclose the whole globe in the wet, hot cavern.

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I banged my head at the door, but the pain did nothing to lessen the pleasure that arrowed from my breast straight to my womb. Blake's tongue tortured the aching bud, and my hold on his shoulders tightened.

I wanted to voice my thoughts. *Stop, we're in a public restaurant. Someone from the staff might knock at the door any minute now.* "Blake!"

He didn't acknowledge my cry in any way, no. Blake just trailed one hand down my thigh and bent my knee so I would wrap my leg around his waist. A good student, I did the same thing with my other leg. His hard erection pushed against my wet folds, and instinctively, I rubbed against him like a cat in heat, even though too many layers of clothes lay between us. I needed release and soon. There were no doubts now, no second thoughts in my head. I just wanted Blake.

I wanted to brand him, prove to him he was mine, so no other woman would ever make him feel so desperate. So horny.

Reading my mind, he retraced the path his hand had taken only this time under my dress. At the last minute, he detoured and cupped my butt. His fingers sank lower, inched forward until he touched my dripping pussy. My body vibrated in carnal need when he swept them across my opening, plastering the wet silk on my flesh, all the while continuing to feast on my breast. Just a bit more pressure, and I'd come.

Since forming sentences was a thing of the past, I writhed in Blake's arms and buried my hands in his soft locks to convey my distress. He refused to read my body language. Frustrated beyond reason, I pulled at his hair and raised his head. Before he had time to object, or say anything for that matter, I kissed him long and hard.

Showed him how I wanted him to take me, how I wanted to take him. Until nothing stood between us, not people, not money, not even half-truths.

His low, primitive roar increased my feverish frenzy. I'd never wanted to mesh with another person the way I did at this moment. Blake pushed my panties to the side and entered me to the hilt in one forceful thrust. Our mutual groans met one another much as our bodies did. Sizzling bolts of lust streaked through me at the invasion.

There was nothing gentle about the way Blake pistoned in and out of me, or the way I bucked to receive him. A mating—*our* mating—couldn't be gentle and polite, easy and pleasant. It was a fierce battle of wills and souls and bodies, where pleasure swamped our senses until I thought I'd drown in it, and everything faded away, leaving the other person, my adversary and ally, my only focal point.

My orgasm didn't build. I was already ready to come when Blake drove inside me, but I continued to soar over the peak, unwilling to let go, too hooked on the journey to want the destination. When this ended, I'd... No, I wouldn't think about that. I lost myself in the moment, convulsing around his cock again and again, reveling in his heavy grunts.

He couldn't say anything now, question my loyalty. My love.

His grip on my waist tightened. In the next moment, his whole body tensed. One heartbeat, two... Blake cried out in my ear and came inside me, and I could no longer keep my orgasm at bay. I trembled and jerked, a leaf facing a cold, strong wind, and had to cling to Blake for support. My eyes drifted shut as

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pleasure slowly ebbed and left me in a state of satiated drowsiness. I sagged against him, my head falling on his shoulder.

Air tore in and out of our lungs at neck-breaking pace. His heart beat at the same wild rhythm as mine against my chest. We both composed ourselves with each passing second, until silence reigned once again in the room.

"God, I love this, kitten." Blake's seductive murmur fanned my hair.

Not I love *you*. Bile rose in my throat. He hadn't even bothered to say my name.

Can he remember what it is?

Doubts sliced through the post-orgasmic haze in my brain. A shiver rocked me from head to toe. Was that why he had a nickname for me? So he wouldn't cry out the wrong name?

Shut the hell up! Blake isn't like that.

I trampled my insecurities, refusing to go down the same path. Still, I needed some distance to think and prepare myself for Blake's next words.

"Blake, I need to...stand," I stammered, all too cognizant of the intimate connection we still shared.

"Um, yes, sorry." An equal amount of unease laced his voice. He withdrew from inside me and helped me to stand.

Realization crashed into me with the same force my climax had, and pushed all other thoughts from my mind.

"Oh my God. You didn't wear a condom."

"Shit." Blake paused. "I'm clean. I get tested regularly even though I don't sleep around and I always practice safe sex." The words sounded strained.

Granted, I realized that wasn't a jibe at me, but the words still hurt. "I've never had sex without a condom either." My wooden reply hung in the air between us. "And I'm on the pill."

The small sigh of relief was a gunshot to my ears. "So how are we time wise? Safe?"

The hope in his voice couldn't be mistaken, another obvious sign he wanted to run for the hills at the thought of getting me pregnant. Okay, so I wasn't exactly jumping in joy at the prospect, but I wouldn't mind a lot.

I bit my lip and busied myself with pulling my bra into place, assuming that was possible. *There you go again, giving more than the other person wants to give in return, Em.* "Yeah, we're okay. You don't have to worry about a thing."

His hand landed on my arm, yet I jumped at the soft contact. "I do worry." Blake tugged at his hair. "I'm sorry. In the future, we'll be more careful."

"We don't have a future." I glanced away.

His voice iced over. "What did you say?"

"We're bad for each other. Can't you see that? Look at us, one moment bickering, the other going at it in a busy restaurant's supply room. Is that what I am to you, Blake? Just a quickie against the wall?"

"I won't let you do this again, Emily. And this is the last time I come after you." Blake refused to answer my question.

I rolled my eyes. "We just happened to be having dinner at the same restaurant, Blake. You didn't come after me."

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He was quiet for a couple of seconds. "I told you that you wouldn't be the one calling all the shots anymore."

When he repeated the same thing, I had this strange moment of clarity.

"When did *I* have my way? I told you I wouldn't go out with you, yet in the end I did. I promised myself I wouldn't sleep with you and ended up in your bed on the first date. And I vowed not to...."

"You vowed not to do what?"

"Nothing. Forget I said anything." I turned my back to him to right my dress. I wouldn't admit to falling in love with him now. *Not ever*, the thought crossed my mind while I tied the knot of my dress at the back of my neck.

He came toward me until his chest whispered against my back. "You decide now, once and for all, whether or not you want to be with me. Only me."

I turned around and crossed my arms across my breasts. "Issuing an ultimatum?"

Blake hooked his thumb in his belt. "I guess I am." Macho arrogance oozed out of him.

If someone up there indeed watched over us—God, Fate, or some other supreme being—they were laughing their asses off now. Blake delivered to me the one thing I wanted on a silver platter in the only way I'd refuse.

"Why should I say yes, Blake? Give me a reason," I pleaded, my heart in my throat. *Say you love me.*

He took a deep breath for the both of us, because I couldn't get my lungs to work.

"I won't share you."

His words slapped me, but at least I had my answer. If I had the courage to ask the question I feared so much, then I sure as hell had the courage to walk away from him. I went on my tiptoes and brushed a soft kiss on his cheek.

"Goodbye, Blake."

Such finality held in one single word... Yet I had to say it aloud so I could believe it. No matter what mistakes I'd made in the past, I was ready to commit and I wouldn't settle for anything less.

The Emily of a few months ago would've choked on the word. Taken one look into the green depths of his eyes and caved. Settled with whatever crumbs of attention the man she loved was willing to throw at her only to end up losing pieces of her soul along the way.

Now I knew I was better than that. Stronger.

I turned around and picked up my discarded purse. Regret weighed on me while I unlocked the door, but I didn't let it deter me. I didn't even give Blake a backward glance, just walked out of the room with my head held high.

As swan songs went, ours wouldn't even reach the Top Fifty.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“So are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

I looked up from the silk scarf I was checking out into Becky’s insightful eyes. I shrugged. “Nothing new. I’m just trying to move on, that’s all.”

Loath to confess to Becky what happened, I went back to rifling through scarves. If I rehashed my last meeting with Blake, I was afraid pain would resurface and overwhelm me. Maybe in a couple of days I could open my heart to her and talk about it with some modicum of detachment.

“How much is this?” I asked the vendor.

“Fifteen bucks.” She came toward me. “If you buy another one, I’ll give you the second one half price.”

I gazed at the selection in front of me. The patterns and colors definitely caught my eye, but even though a shopping therapy was in order, I didn’t have the bank account to back it up.

“Thanks, I’ll take only this one.”

I’d just dropped my wallet back in my purse when my cell rang. I glanced at the screen. My heart skipped a few beats, and then compensated by doing a Marathon.

Blake’s home number.

My hand trembled when I answered. “Hello?”

“Miss Stone?” Amanda’s voice doused my rising enthusiasm like a bucket of Arctic Ocean water. I closed my eyes in resignation.

If only it was Blake and he told me he loved me... I’d tell him I loved him back and explain everything to him, about Rhett, about Evan, everything... But of course, he didn’t call. Not now and not since I last saw him a week ago. He let me walk out of his life without so much as a peep. A fact that convinced me better than anything Blake couldn’t have deep feelings for me. I pressed my palm against my mouth to muffle any escaping sounds of distress.

“Amanda, hi,” I replied after a moment, trying to sound happy to hear her. Becky’s eyes widened, and she mouthed, “Blake’s sister?” I nodded.

“Why haven’t you come by at all?”

Even though I was used to children asking me direct, more often than not uncomfortable, questions, this one threw me for a loop. Yeah, the trait definitely ran in the family.

“I asked Blake, and he said you had things to do, but you can’t be busy on the weekend, can you? Nobody is.”

Blake and his *things*. Ugh.

I pushed past the hurt the mention of her brother’s name caused. “No, I’m not exactly busy. I’m out with a friend.” I hoped that information would discourage whatever Amanda had planned.

“Oh.”

Disappointment colored her voice, and I felt lower than scum. I was very fond of the little girl, and she was reaching out to me at a period in her life in which she was fragile.

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“Will that take long? It’s so sunny today I thought maybe we could go to the zoo.”

Damn, she sounded so hopeful I would take her. “No, I’m about done...but what does your brother say?” The odds Blake would encourage this little outing were as good as San Francisco never suffering another earthquake again.

Amanda stayed silent for a second. “I asked him to take me, but he said no.”

I sighed. “Well, honey—”

“But if you go with me, I’m sure he’ll say yes. He always says yes to you.”

I held back a snort. Blake would go through the roof if I showed up on his doorstep and suggested we all go to the zoo. Let’s pretend to be a happy, little family, yes? He’d slam the door to my face.

I’d be damned if I touched the part about Blake always saying yes to me.

“Please, Miss Stone.”

“Amanda, I’d love to, but—”

“Cool, I’ll tell Blake you’ll be here soon. Bye.” The sneaky, little girl hung up before I had the chance to say otherwise.

“Shit. Shitshitshitshitshit.”

I turned my back to Becky’s questioning gaze and rubbed my forehead. How did I always end up in these messes? No way would Blake allow me to take Amanda to the zoo without him tagging along, and I couldn’t survive a day by his side pretending nothing was wrong and acting all civil. Granted, I was determined not to resume our...whatever, but my powers of avoidance had their limits.

It’s too early.

And why did I automatically assume Blake wanted to? Any moment now, he’d call to cancel on me.

I stared down at my cell willing it to—what? At this point, I didn’t know which was worse, Blake rejecting me or not. “I hate my life.”

“What happened?”

“The usual. The worst thing that could happen did. I have to go by Blake’s and take Amanda to the zoo.”

“What? Why?”

“Because Blake wouldn’t take her.” I sighed, frustration bubbling inside me because I knew I’d go through with this in the end. “I can’t let her down. She’s hardly asked for anything after her parents died, Becks. She’s a kid, and she misses her mom.” We walked across Alemany flea market to where Becky had parked her car.

Becky gave me a sidelong, concerned gaze. “You can’t take her mother’s place.”

“Of course not, and I don’t want to, but I can try to give her moments of happiness.”

I fortified my defenses on the ride to Blake’s. Sooner than I wanted to, I stood outside the beautiful, two-story house, my finger poised over the bell. There was no point in avoiding the inevitable. I took a deep breath, but before I had a chance to ring the bell, the door swung open, and I jumped back in surprise.

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The hopeful-to-catch-a-glimpse-of-Blake part of me gave an internal sigh of disappointment. Apparently, I didn't need to shield myself against the sight of him. Mrs. Dunlop stood at the door, granting me a brief reprieve.

"Hello, Emily." Her smile was polite yet I could see in her eyes she disapproved of my being here.

Did she think I was using Amanda to get Blake back? Oh no... Was that what he thought too? I squared my shoulders. "Amanda called me to ask if I could take her to the zoo."

"Yes, Blake informed me." She stepped aside so I could walk inside. "Amanda's almost ready, if you would wait a minute or two."

I gave her a strained smile. "Sure."

"You can wait in the living room."

The fact I needed permission to do that hurt. A week ago, I had the go-ahead to roam the entire house. Pushing the sting aside, I nodded and took her suggestion.

No sound greeted me during my trek down the hallway, so much so, I had the urge to tiptoe my way to the living room. The sudden realization it had to be quiet because Blake wasn't here sucker-punched me. I should have suspected this. Why would he want to see me? Still, his absence left a bittersweet taste in my mouth, and I sat gingerly at the edge of the plush couch, the sensation of being an interloper churning my stomach.

In the distance, I could hear Amanda's chatter and Mrs. Dunlop's calm voice interjecting every now and then. The light bulb in my head went on, and I pulled out my cell.

"Hey, Becks. How do you feel about joining Amanda and me?"

"Mmm, I don't know. Will you tell me what's bothering you?"

I gave out a mock gasp. "I have to bribe you to come with? And here I thought you were my best friend."

"Nope, you can't guilt me into it."

I scrunched my nose. "Fine. I'll give you the low-down, missy. You know, I had an idea. Perhaps you could ask Robert if it'd be alright for us to take Matthew to the zoo, too, and meet us there."

"Sure, no problem."

"Okay, bye."

I snapped my cell shut just when Amanda tornadoed into the room.

"I'm ready," she said in a singsong voice and jumped up and down, all but landing in my lap.

"Great. Did you say goodbye to your brother?" Okay, I admit that was sneaky. Shoot me.

"He's not here. Work came up, and he had to go."

I just bet it had. Whatever. Fine by me. I should thank him for giving me another reason to add to my why-not-to-date-Blake list. I was already on page two.

"Let's go then."

We hopped off the metro and almost ran to the zoo entrance, Amanda's enthusiasm rubbing off on me. The moment Matthew spotted me, his face lit up.

He hugged my waist. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

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I laughed. "You're very welcome, Matthew. There's someone I want you to meet." I unglued him from my body and waved towards Amanda. "This is a friend of mine. Her name's Amanda."

The way kids sized up each other always amused me. Especially when one was a boy and the other a girl. Amanda gripped my jeans as if she needed something to hold onto.

"Hi." Reluctance colored her voice.

"Hello. I'm Matthew." The man of the group didn't wait for me to introduce him, but took matters into his own hands. He almost went on his tiptoes, he stood so straight, trying to appear taller. I bit back a smile at Matthew's antics. At least, they hadn't hated each other from the first.

Amanda wrinkled her button nose, and then proceeded to ignore him and focus on Becky who had approached us too.

"So, is everyone present and accounted for?" my friend asked with a smile.

"Yep. Let's go in." I just hoped our good moods sustained us through this long day.

Since today was sunny and relatively warm, kids and their parents flooded the zoo like snails after a bout of rain. We had to wait in line for twenty minutes, but finally entered the magical world of animals. I sensed Amanda's restraint by the way she held my hand tight.

"Let's go there." Her eyes shone with banked excitement.

Matthew let out a disgruntled sound. "Monkeys... Let's go see the lions."

"We're going to see both." Becky diffused the situation. "Monkeys are closer, so we'll visit their cage first."

Amanda smirked at Matthew and doubled her pace. "They're so cute. Look how that one swings from the tree. And its tail..."

I smiled. Amanda had never acted so thrilled over anything. That mattered more to me than whether or not Blake thought I was using her to get back in his good graces.

"Okay, let's move on." I needed something to distract me from the dangerous thoughts of Blake. Besides, Matthew had begun to get restless.

The animals captivated both kids. From eagles to panthers, and dolphins to wolves, Matthew and Amanda shrieked and chirped the entire way. The real fun started when they spotted a stand selling cotton candy and begged us to buy each of them one. Becky and I exchanged a resigned glance. We knew what cotton candy and small children amounted to—spending ten minutes cleaning them up afterwards.

Amanda went through her fanny pack. "I have money."

"Me too." Matthew rifled through his pockets. The times when he vacillated about eating candy against his dad's wishes were long gone. I can't say I felt guilty. Robert's decree for Matthew—a kid for Christ's sake—not to eat candy except on a special occasion bordered on sadistic if you asked me.

"That's not necessary," Becky said. "I'm buying."

We left the stand and headed to the nearest cafe for a cup of energy-boosting java while Matthew and Amanda finished their treat and played nearby.

"So will you finally tell me what's going on? This past week you've played the clam to perfection. You kept everything inside."

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I took a sip of my latte. "I ran into Blake at the restaurant where I was having dinner with Cade."

"And?"

"He got mad because he thought I was on a date."

Becky rolled her eyes. "You know...you're sure acting like a couple, doing identical things and all. Did he at least grovel when you set him straight?"

I glanced away. "I didn't tell him Cade's my cousin."

"Why not? Dammit, Em, I don't understand why not just come clean with him and be done with it. Do you take some kind of perverse pleasure in letting him think you're this man-eater?"

Because Blake didn't love me, and I could live with that if I believed he didn't know the real me. "I didn't have time."

Becky raised an eyebrow.

I banged my mug on the table. "He dragged me to a supply room, and we had sex, okay?"

She stayed quiet. Shit.

I rubbed my eyes. "I'm sorry, Becky, I didn't mean to snap at you. You're not to blame for my poor judgment."

She glanced at me warily. "Why was it poor judgment?"

"Because sex didn't change anything. Blake still doesn't love me, and I can't stay with him knowing that."

"My opinion you're wrong hasn't changed either."

I chuckled. "You weren't there, Becks. You didn't hear the things he said about me. He thinks...." I shook my head, Blake's words choking me. I couldn't repeat them. "Doesn't matter. Trust me, Blake and I have no future together."

She leaned forward and squeezed my hand. "I'm sorry, Em."

I shrugged. "It's okay. I'll survive."

"Will you?" Her gaze was too discerning for my peace of mind.

"I'm not saying I'll bounce back and start dating in a day, but I'll get there."

Becky smiled at me. "Good. Besides, there are scores of men in San Francisco for you to dazzle."

"No, no more carefree relationships for me. I know what I want now. I'll just choose better next time."

Matthew and Amanda raced over to us. "Can we go on the train? Please, please, please?"

I ruffled Matthew's sandy blond hair. "We have to check and see if it's running."

We'd just finished paying for our coffees when Amanda asked me to take her to the restroom. On our way out, a woman blocked the corridor.

"Excuse me." I waited for her to step aside.

She looked straight into my eyes, in the way long lost acquaintances do. "You think you know him, don't you?"

"I'm sorry, you must have me confused with someone else." I lowered my head and tried to move past her anyway, but the corridor was too narrow.

The strange woman put her hand against the wall, completely blocking my way, and leaned into my face. "He seems nice and charming now, the perfect

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man, doesn't he?" She glanced down at Amanda, who held my hand in a tight grip. She lowered her voice. "When you find out how he really is, it'll be too late."

"What—"

Footsteps sounded behind her, and the woman backed away. "You'll be sorry you ever wanted to take my place." She fled before I had the chance to ask her for an explanation, her warning echoing in my ears.

We walked outside, but the sunrays did nothing to warm me. The chill her words caused lingered since I couldn't stop replaying what she said in my mind. The woman hadn't appeared crazy. In fact, she was quite pretty, with blond hair flowing past her shoulders and big, blue, filled-with-distress eyes.

Who could she be?

I almost stumbled as I concluded she had to be an ex-girlfriend of Blake's. She had looked at Amanda like she recognized her, hadn't she?

A crazed, jealous ex. That I could believe and relate to on some level. Granted, I wouldn't go to these lengths, traipsing after Blake's flavor of the hour and threatening her, but I understood where she came from.

I knew from personal experience breaking up with Blake took its toll on a woman.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Blake still hadn't returned home when I dropped off Amanda. Not that I kept tabs on him or anything, but I wasn't used to being disappointed in him. I wanted to pretend I didn't care, but I did. Shaking my head, I breathed deeply and ruffled Amanda's hair.

I smiled at her. "See you tomorrow at school, okay?"

"Yes, Miss Stone."

Mrs. Dunlop nodded at my direction and closed the door. I sighed and stared at the door for a moment, all the while repeating to myself it was actually a blessing I didn't encounter Blake.

Everyone said the best way to move on was to make a clean break from a relationship. I'd done that with Evan, and it worked like a charm, right? Everything would be fine this time around too. *Yes, but Evan didn't have a reason to come by the school*, the little devil on my left shoulder whispered. Dammit, the thought of potentially running into Blake every day would be torture.

A torture a lot less excruciating than sharing his bed knowing he only wanted my body.

That alternative and Amanda's glowing face, evidence of the great time she had, convinced me a small amount of heartache on my part wasn't such a big sacrifice.

I trudged back to Becky's car. Spending almost the entire Sunday with two hellions had caught up with me. Granted, I loved kids, but I was surrounded eight hours a day, five days a week by them. I saved the weekends for some grownup time.

"The lions were cool, but the zebras were pretty too. Do you think Dad'll let me have an iguana for a pet?" Matthew talked a mile a minute on the drive to his home. Yeah, Robert would be very excited with that prospect.

"Look, Miss Stone." He raised his voice when we passed by a park. "The sky is clear tonight. I bet we can see *all* the stars. Will you stay until it's completely dark?"

I closed my eyes in resignation. I should have guessed something of the sort would happen. I was the poster girl for Murphy's Law three months in a row after all.

God, all I wanted was to go home and sleep. How was I supposed to endure even one hour of showing Matthew star after star and be cheerful about it on top?

"Tomorrow will be better, Matthew. I don't have any of my star maps or my notes with me."

"Please, Miss Stone. Just for a while, and we can do the real thing tomorrow."

Kids don't know a polite brush-off when they heard one, I tried to remind myself. But it was hard, man, was it hard not to wail against the injustice of it all. I was a step away from screaming my head off.

The next person who would challenge my patience would be sorry. How many things could go wrong in someone's life in such a small amount of time? I dug my nails in my palms. *Get a grip. Your parody of a life isn't Matthew's fault.*

"Okay, I guess we can see a couple tonight."

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“Yay! Thank you, Miss Stone.”

Becky next to me just shook her head. I knew she thought I was a glutton for punishment, but that’s just the way I am.

She glanced my way. “I’d ask you to stay with me so we could go to work tomorrow together, but I’m going to spend the night at my aunt’s because I have to take her to the hospital for a check-up first thing in the morning.”

“That’s okay.”

“Unless you want me to give you the key?”

“No, thanks, Becks. I won’t be too long.”

The sun had already set, and the sky turned that deep purplish color it did right before night fell. By the time we reached Matthew and Becky’s apartment building and Matthew told his dad all about our day at the zoo, we’d be able to observe more than a few stars.

Matthew dozed off on the way, and I was tempted to follow his lead, but we were only a couple of blocks away. With his energy rejuvenated, he burst into the apartment building and hurried to press the elevator button.

“Dad, Dad, it was great.” The moment Robert opened their door Matthew’s shout broke the silence of the apartment floor. He threw his jacket on the floor and ran down the corridor.

“Matthew, what have I told you?” Robert followed after him. His voice was low, but not even a kid could misread the veiled accusation. I could only imagine the thunderous expression on his face.

Matthew froze, and then hurried to pick up the discarded garment with the frantic speed of a scared little mouse. “I’m sorry.”

The whole thing felt like a scene out of a bad surreal play.

“And no running.”

“Yes, Dad.” This time, he walked away with slow measured steps, his shoulders hunched.

Robert turned to me and smiled. “Hello, Emily. It’s always good to see you.”

“Likewise, Robert.” *Or should I say Dr. Jekyll?*

“Would you care to come in and have a cup of coffee?”

I blinked rapidly at his velvety tone. Talk about a mood swing. “Actually, I am staying because I promised Matthew we’d do a bit of stargazing tonight. No coffee for me, though, thanks.” I sent him a strained smile. “It’s almost seven, and if I have some now, I won’t sleep all night.”

“Very well. As long as you stay.”

I brushed past him deeper into the apartment, his strange words echoing in my mind, but I put them aside. Robert was weird, I knew that already, so why dwell on that fact now?

Matthew had already changed into his home clothes and slippers and paced up and down his bedroom waiting for me. The anticipation lighting his face was enough to wipe away most of my weariness. “Why don’t we fix you something to eat until it’s time?”

“You don’t have to do that.” Robert spoke from behind me.

I jumped at his nearness and hoped he hadn’t noticed. His face betrayed nothing—something I’d come to expect. “It’s no trouble. Besides, I feel a bit guilty because he didn’t have a proper lunch.”

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“That’s more my fault than yours. I should’ve thought of that when Becky called and asked if you could take him to the zoo. Matthew, go wash your hands.” When the child was far enough from us, Robert sifted his fingers through his hair and pulled tight. “My wife would’ve made sure he ate something before leaving. I just gave him money. I’m lousy at this, aren’t I?”

I raised my hand to pat his shoulder, but I stopped myself. For some reason, the action didn’t feel right. “Don’t beat yourself up. That could have happened to anyone. Besides, being a single parent takes some getting used to.”

Robert smiled. “Thank you. You always have something nice to say, Emily.”

I swallowed tightly. He’d called me Emily before, but this time my name on his lips sounded too intimate. I glanced away from him and played with my watch so I’d have something to do.

In the kitchen, for the first time since I started tutoring his son, Robert didn’t leave me alone with Matthew. He lingered at the door, watching me prepare a ham and cheese sandwich and add a bit of lettuce despite the boy’s low disapproving groan. Next came something every kid needed in abundance. Milk. When I took the bottle out of the fridge, I almost dropped it.

Dammit, that was all I needed... To break another thing of this household.

While Matthew ate, he narrated our day to his dad, but he acted somewhat less enthusiastic than twenty minutes ago. I interjected a few times to help him along, though I did it half-heartedly.

Thank God darkness fell, and none too soon if you asked me. Matthew and I retreated to his bedroom and took our places in front of the window.

“One more thing,” I whispered and produced a bag of jellybeans from my bag. “Every self-respecting stargazer has to be properly equipped with totally bad for you, delicious junk food.”

Matthew’s eyes rivaled the North Star in brightness. “You’re way cool, Miss Stone.”

I winked at him and pulled out a chair for him to stand on. “Hit the lights.” He did it in a flash and was back to kneel on the chair. “Okay, so do you see right there?” I pointed with my finger. “That’s the Big Dipper.”

Matthew squinted. “No, it’s not. The one you showed me with the flashlight was different.”

“Well, that’s because some stars are less bright than the rest, and we need a telescope to see them better.”

“Oh.”

“Okay, see there?” I added to squash his disappointment. “That’s the North Star.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And do you see the really bright star on the right that looks like a belt? That’s Orion.”

“Cooooool.”

I took that as an invitation and narrated the story of Orion the hunter. Being a boy, Matthew loved it, asking questions and noting this and that.

“Okay, that’s it for tonight.” I pulled him off the chair. “Go brush your teeth, and I’ll tuck you in.”

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True to my word, I kissed him good night and carefully closed his bedroom door behind me. In hopes I could slip out without running into Robert, I hurried to get my coat. At the end of the hallway, though, the door to my right opened. My hand flew to my throat, and I barely held back a cry.

Robert was cast in shadows. Near darkness spilled from the room behind him. For a second, I failed to recognize him. He didn't seem to notice my distress, even though my heart thumped so loud he should have heard it.

Damn, damn, damn. "Oh, I was just leaving." My attempt at a smile fell short.

"Are you sure I can't tempt you into staying to share a drink with me?"

I gritted my teeth so hard I had no doubt I'd need a dentist's appointment to replace the enamel. "I'll pass, thanks."

I had taken all of two steps when his hand closed around my arm with the stifling pressure of a band of steel. Next thing I knew, Robert had my back against the wall, his large frame looming over me thwarting any chance at escape.

"I'm sick of this little game of yours." His breath smelled of alcohol and did nothing to help the bile rising in my throat. His eyes glittered with a malice I'd never detected before. I wouldn't get out of whatever this was easily.

"What game?" I tried to keep my voice from wavering.

"You're playing hard to get when we both know you're not." His anger showed more with each word, and I silently coached myself not to panic.

An ugly sneer twisted his face. Robert trailed a finger down my cheek. I pushed his hand away and tried to regulate my ragged breathing, feigning a control I didn't possess. Maybe if he realized I was firm in my rejection, he'd back down.

He narrowed his eyes, and my own anger came to the surface. I'd given him no reason to think I felt even a bit attracted to him.

What was it with men this past month? First Evan manhandled me, and now Robert.

"I'm not playing. I told you I'm not interested." I shoved him back, and for a precious moment, he retreated, giving me the opportunity to step away from the wall. I hurried toward the larger space of the living room where I wouldn't feel like a cornered animal, but before I got there, he grabbed me by the hair and yanked me back against him. Prickles of pain seared my head, and I cried out. Raising my hands, I tried to dislodge the strands from his grasp, but he only pulled tighter.

"Where do you think you're going? I'm not done with you yet."

Chapter Twenty-Six

This couldn't be Robert.

No trace of the previous fondness, no friendliness whatsoever laced his voice. He sounded vicious, and what was more frightening, determined. The hard length of his erection pressed against the small of my back, leaving no room to wonder about his intentions. Not that I was wondering... Every woman can sense when someone threatens that feminine core in her. It must be nature's way to compensate for our disadvantage in strength.

"Robert, please let me go." If playing the helpless little female got me free, so be it. *You are helpless*, a little voice whispered, but I refused to fall back into that hole of self-doubt. "This is all a misunderstanding."

"No misunderstanding, sweetheart. I understand your kind perfectly." He shoved me through the open door into his bedroom. Dread slithered along my veins, and I staggered forward.

The door's soft snick might as well be the bang of a cage closing. I wanted to scream, but everything inside had come to a stop. More darkness fell, threatening to smother me. My eyes darted left and right trying to locate some kind of weapon, yet I knew I was too shell-shocked to use one anyway. Robert's arm closed around my waist from behind trapping both of mine in the process. His other arm crawled down my thigh and up again, inside my skirt this time.

I twisted and turned, frantic to escape before he reached his goal, and grabbed his hand. "Stop!"

But Robert didn't care. He shook off my grip and cupped my sex possessively. Shivers skittered down my spine when he rubbed the heel of his palm against me. His mouth latched onto the side of my neck, and he suckled my skin hungrily. My stomach cramped, and I took a deep breath to get rid of the awful sensation. Robert's scent, strong and citrusy, mixed with sweat filled my nostrils—a scent I'd never forget. I wanted to throw up.

Tears stung the back of my eyes yet I refused to let them fall, because if I did, I'd lose the tenuous hold I had on my control. God, this couldn't be happening... I knew Robert. Apparently, not well enough though. Anger started to simmer in my blood. One too many bad things had happened to me in the last few months, and I wouldn't add rape to the list. Adrenaline pumped through my system preparing my defenses. I only needed one moment, the right one to strike back.

"You smell so good." Robert groaned against my skin, his breath dirtying me.

He moved us forward, near the bed. Panic surged inside me. If I ended up on my back, I had little hope of being able to escape with his weight anchoring me down. Right moment or not, I raised my knee as high as I could, and slammed my foot down, my two-inch heel crushing his bare instep. He snarled. His hold loosened enough for me to turn and jam my elbow in his rib cage hard. I heard an oomph just before his hands fell away from me completely.

Take that, you bastard.

I whirled around to hit him again and run like hell, but Robert backhanded me in the face, the sound cracking in the silence of the room. The force of the blow slammed me back, but the bed cut my fall short.

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Stars flashed before my eyes blinding me. Still, I scrambled to get up.

"You bitch!" Robert wrapped his meaty hand around my neck and pushed me back down. For a moment, the thought that I was going to die hurt more than my eye, and I couldn't breathe. With his free hand, he yanked first one, and then my other shoe off and dropped them on the floor. "No heels for you. Although I would've enjoyed fucking a little slut wearing nothing but shoes." His sneer hung in the air between us, an omen of bad things to come.

Using his hold on my neck, he pushed me higher on the bed. Desperate for air, I struggled to free myself but only managed to scratch him. Robert growled and slapped me, not too hard this time, thank God. I don't think I could've sustained a blow like the previous one and stay conscious.

He grabbed the edge of my shirt and, even with one hand, ripped it open the way he would wrapping paper. Groaning, Robert squeezed my lace-covered breast, and I fought not to gag. The blood trickling inside my mouth didn't help.

At least he hadn't tied me up. Desperation threatened to choke me more than his hold around my neck. What good were my free hands, when Robert must weigh two hundred pounds and could slap me unconscious with no effort on his part?

If your attacker has immobilized you, use your head, Cade's coaching from his self-defense course resonated in my mind.

Robert's mouth replaced his hand on my neck, turning a bad situation worse. His tongue slithered from my collarbone to my chin sending goose bumps all over my skin. I turned my face away when his lips would have settled on mine, and he snarled his displeasure. "You like playing the stuck-up bitch, don't you? Let's see how you act after I've fucked you a few times."

Air whooshed out of my lungs at the image those words evoked. He shoved his hand inside my bra, and the intimate flesh on flesh sensation, one I never wanted to share with this man, forced the gears in my head to spin at full speed.

"Robert, wait. Please, it doesn't have to happen this way." I hoped my voice sounded sincere. Prayed Robert was insane enough to believe I'd have sex with him.

He stilled above me but didn't draw back. "What?"

I could feel his probing gaze on my face. I licked my lower lip. Even though he couldn't be able to see anything except shapes and shadows, my heart stuttered.

"I mean...you're right. I want this too."

Be stupid, be arrogant enough.

A few wrenching heartbeats passed before he let out a knowing chuckle, one I instantly wanted to shove back down his throat and let him choke on.

His hand on my waist flexed, and he bunched up my skirt. "I know your kind. Same as my ex. The moment you smell money, you bat your eyelashes and flirt, but you keep your distance. You want me to force you to spread your legs so you can pretend you didn't ask for it afterwards."

I tried to focus on his words and block out what his hand was doing down there.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I love the thrill of the game," he hissed in my ear right before he stuck his tongue in.

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For heaven's sake, the man actually thought I enjoyed this? I shivered, all my energy focused on not screaming my head off and thrashing around to get away from his pawing hands and his ravenous mouth.

He must have assumed my reaction was one of pleasure because he squeezed my breast and rubbed his thumb over my nipple. "And I'll bet you want me to be rough, don't you, baby?"

"Yes. I love taking it rough. And I love giving it, too." Hoping I sounded seductive enough, I kissed him.

His marauding tongue pushed past my lips and took possession of my mouth. I inhaled deeply and kissed him back. Passive wouldn't get me his trust. His hungry groan rumbled through me, and he devoured me. I closed my eyes and thought about my next move, and not what I would have to do to get there.

I said a silent prayer he was dazed enough with lust and tangled my leg around his, flipping him over. Robert tensed. Afraid he'd hit me again, I was fast to soothe whatever worry he had. I suckled his neck while my fingers were busy unbuttoning his shirt.

His hands buried in my hair, and he held me against him. "Yeah, baby, that's the spirit. Work for it."

I gritted my teeth and pushed down my anger. I'd use whatever he said to fuel my determination to get away unscathed. This was one bad thing I wouldn't let happen to me.

I wouldn't be afraid to take my fate into my own hands.

I kissed my way down his torso and unbuckled his belt. I pushed his zipper down, and my mouth turned dry. Do or die time. I raised myself on my knees above him, cupped his erection through his boxers, and squeezed. Hard.

I hope to God that makes you impotent, asshole.

"Aargh." Robert roared and pushed up to free himself, his arm raised to punch me.

This round, though, I acted faster than him. I drew up a fist and hit him low on his throat. Robert choked and coughed, and instead of grabbing me, reached for his throat. The need to get away vibrated through me, giving me the energy to jump off the bed and run for the door. Debilitating as the hit may be, I knew I had only a minute, maybe two, before Robert ran after me. And this time, I wouldn't be able to escape from his clutches.

Robert's curses echoed in the distance during my race through the living room. I slipped and fell, pain piercing through me when my knees hit the floor. I struggled to get up and kept going. My eyes fell on my purse and, in a haze, I grabbed it and turned the knob of the front door. Locked.

Keychain. Keychain. Keychain.

The memory of Robert locking up and hanging the thing on the coat rack slammed into me. Breathless, I grabbed the keychain and unlocked the door with trembling hands. The moment I stepped on the doormat, I heard an angry roar behind me. Too close. Face red, eyes burning with the promise of retribution, Robert ran toward me.

I whimpered and blinked back tears. No, if he caught me, I was dead. He wouldn't stop at rape now. I grabbed the door and slammed it closed. I turned the key, and the whole doorframe vibrated with a loud bang. I fell back on my ass. My

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lungs worked overtime, and I sat there for a few seconds and stared at the only thing shielding me from Robert's wrath.

Get up. Run. I heard the commands over the loud buzzing in my ears, but I couldn't follow them just yet. My gaze was glued on the door. I'd gotten away.

Finally, I scrambled to my feet and stumbled to the elevator. I pressed the button again and again, but the damn thing just took forever to come.

"Becky's not home. Becky's not home," I muttered.

I was about to give up and go for the stairs when the doors slid open and I burst inside the empty cart. Leaning against the wall, I wrapped my arms around my midriff. If only the shudders would stay at bay for a little while longer... Until I was safely away.

I half expected to find Robert standing before me when the elevator reached the ground floor, but it seemed that Fate thought I'd had enough for one night. I hurried out of the building and crossed the street, faltering when I stepped on something sharp. I didn't stop, I couldn't. Limping, I reached the minimart, where the cashier and customers could see me through the glass window and would provide a modicum of safety. Robert wouldn't dare attack me when I'd have witnesses.

I hoped.

A man passed in front of me, and he looked me over, his brows furrowing. I stared down to find my shirt hanging open. I pulled at the ends, but I couldn't close it without buttons. Tears streamed, finally free, down my cheeks as I grabbed my cell out of my purse.

I took in a shuddering breath when the only man I could trust to be there for me answered, his soothing voice washing over me.

"Emily?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Are you okay?”

“You should see the other guy.” I winked at him and winced. Damn, I kept forgetting about my black eye.

Cade’s chuckle ended in a grimace. He came to kneel next to the couch I lay on. “Don’t joke. Not about this. God, Em,” he rubbed a hand across his face, “I don’t think I’ll ever forget the helplessness I felt until I reached you.”

In truth, I was perversely grateful I had to wait for him to come. Though I wanted to get far away from that place, the wait gave me a chance to have a mini breakdown before pulling myself together and confronting Cade with a blotchy yet semi-serene face. Yes, I had every right to cry and tremble and ramble and curse, but I didn’t want to do any of those things in front of my cousin. The frantic tone of his voice over the phone line pierced through my own fear and gave me a pretty good idea what he’d do if he saw me in bad shape. He was liable to storm inside Robert’s apartment and beat the hell out of him—or worse. A miniature shudder swept through me at the thought of his name.

Cade tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. His lips flattened into a thin line as he stared at me. His gaze locked on my swollen eye, and then slid lower to my split lip. I could sense the rage brewing inside him again. Yep, he would’ve killed Robert if he’d gone after him.

I grasped his palm and held it against my cheek. “Hey, I’m okay.”

Hard eyes settled on my face. “But what if you didn’t manage to escape? Do you know how close you—” Cade abruptly stood and paced the living room. He sifted his fingers through his hair and pulled. “Shit. Instead of comforting you, I’m sitting here scaring you even more. I’m a great help, aren’t I?”

With stiff limbs, I got up and laid a hand on his shoulder. “You helped me more than you know, Cade. If you hadn’t insisted I take that self-defense course, Robert would have raped me.” He went rigid. “It was your voice in my head that talked me through it. If things were different, I probably *would* have frozen. I damn sure wouldn’t have fought back or thought to trick him.”

Cade turned around and hugged me, not for the first time since he pulled up in front of the minimart and drove me to the hospital. Even though the hug hurt, I didn’t pull away because I needed him to hold me as much as he did. His snigger rumbled through me. “Well, I never thought I’d see the day when you’d come up with a great plan.”

I pulled back a bit and narrowed my eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Ever since you were a kid, you’ve concocted all these way out there plans—plans that never panned out, I’d like to add—and I was left to clean up your mess.”

I slapped his arm. He really was bad at this comforting stuff. “You’re crazy.”

Cade raised an eyebrow. “The summer you stayed with us and wanted to raise money selling lemonade to pay for room and board?” He mimicked in a girly voice. “And you tried to convince Mr. Burrows to give you the lemons saying in return you’d hand him over thirty percent of the profits?”

“It was a perfectly reasonable plan,” I said through gritted teeth. Good thing he had no idea about my New Year’s Resolution.

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"You were ten. You didn't know how to put together a good baloney sandwich let alone lemonade." He smirked. "I still can't believe you charmed him into giving you two pounds of lemons to start you off."

A satisfied smile broke on my face. "I told him I was a girl scout and had produced gallons of the stuff back home."

He flicked my nose. "I rest my case. I bet you were a terror even in diapers." His face turned serious. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay with you?"

I rolled my eyes. "Cade, it's almost three a.m. Go home and get some sleep."

His gaze bore into mine, and I fortified the armor of confidence I'd built around my emotions. "Em, you were attacked mere hours ago. You shouldn't stay alone. Why won't you come to sleep over at my place for tonight?"

"I'll be fine." I gave him the same reply I did the first time he suggested I spend the night with him. It was important to me to go through this on my own. I wanted to prove to myself I was strong enough to do it.

Cade sighed. "Stubborn as a mule. I swear you didn't get that from our side of the family."

A snort escaped before I could stop myself. "Sure, cuz, you're very easygoing. That's the first thing all your ex girlfriends say about you."

He walked toward the front door but didn't take the bait. "Promise me you'll be careful. Don't open the door for anyone."

"I'm not stupid, Cade."

He swung around, frustration twisting his features. "I don't understand why you don't want to press charges against him."

"You know very well that it'd be his word against mine. Robert's a high-profile CEO at an advertising company. I'm a nobody. And since he didn't rape me, I can't prove he was the one who attacked me. There were no witnesses, no physical evidence, no—"

"We have his DNA under your fingernails." I sensed my cousin's need to shake me to reason.

I gave him a sad smile. "I worked for him, Cade. His lawyer would claim I scratched him by accident while I was in his home. And I'm sure they'll try to portray me like a greedy slut who was after his money or something." I shook my head. "No, I won't risk that."

Cade sighed. "Please think about it, okay? That's all I ask. You're upset now, you don't have a clear head."

"I promise I'll think about what you said." I hoped the placating lie did its job. Opening the door, I rose on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "Thank you for rescuing me."

He cupped my face. "You rescued yourself, Emily. Don't ever forget that."

I blinked back the tears his words brought to my eyes. If I started crying, he'd camp out in my living room. So I smiled instead. "I did, didn't I?"

"Call me in the morning, okay?"

"Sure. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, kiddo." Cade gave me one last piercing look before he left.

I closed the door behind me and leaned against it. The small apartment took on vast, universe-like proportions in my eyes. A sudden chill swept through me, and I rubbed my arms to chase it away. With Cade gone, I didn't have anything to

distract me from my simmering panic. Hell, why had I refused to stay with him again?

Because you can't depend on other people to get you through a crisis all your life.

Too many shadows crept around the room, but even though I wanted to turn all the lights on, it wouldn't help. Racing to my bedroom, I pulled out my baseball bat. I took one look at the bed and hurried out of there. No way could I sleep on a bed—at least not tonight.

God, I'd give half my shoes for a glass of warm milk or maybe a cup of hot cocoa, but I didn't have the energy to prepare either, so I lay back on the couch instead and hugged the bat tight. I watched seconds tick by on the Betty Boop clock, however to me, time had stopped back when Robert attacked me.

I must've slept through the night, but it wasn't the restful kind. Images of Robert standing in front of me, or running after me, flashed in my mind. I jumped up a few times, certain I could feel him lying over me, his weight pushing me down on the couch, his hands on my body. The fact I had been too drained to take a shower didn't help either. Robert's stench lingered on me, another physical reminder of the horrific incident.

At six thirty, I forced myself to get up and hop in the shower. Ha! As if I could hop... Every muscle in my body vibrated with pain now that adrenaline wasn't pumping in my blood, nevertheless soreness didn't deter me.

I had to get clean.

The hot water pelted my body. I scrubbed and scrubbed, trying to make my skin forget Robert's touch. By the time I finished, I was red from neck to toe, with a few bluish marks in between, compliments of last night. I toweled off the steam on the mirror and winced at the sight of my reflection. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't show up at school in the shape I was in. God, I looked like a boxer who just got up after a KO. I tentatively touched the bruised area under my left eye and winced. I'd never been a beauty, but at least no one could have mistaken me for the beast.

"Oh, shut up."

A few scrapes and bruises were nothing. So what if I could play the raccoon in the next Disney movie? I basically came out unscathed from a very dangerous situation. If Becky were here, she'd use her stern voice to tell me that as much as I rationalized the events of last night, I needed something to keep my mind off what might have been, therefore I focused on my hurt vanity.

Getting into a fresh pair of lounging pants and a T-shirt had never been such an ordeal before. The hot shower had somewhat loosened my muscles, yet it still took me a good five minutes. My teeth rattled, and the shivers returned, so I donned a cardigan.

I had to call the school to let them know I wouldn't be coming this week, but that could wait. A caffeine boost, that was my top priority at the moment. I stared at the coffee drip in the pot, the motion lulling me into a brain coma. A shiver ran down my spine, and I pulled at the edges of the cardigan.

I dragged a deep breath into my lungs, the coffee's heady aroma hitting my nostrils. *You smell so good*, Robert's words echoed in my head, and I stumbled backwards. The shivers intensified. A tear escaped from the corner of my eyes. I

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closed them and counted to ten. Dammit, I wouldn't let him win. This was *my* home, *my* life. I wouldn't let Robert affect any part of it more than he already had. With determined strides, I pulled out a mug and poured some coffee into it.

If I could defeat the man, then I could definitely defeat his memory.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Stay somewhere where I can see you.”

I bit back the first snarky reply that came to mind, afraid Cade would drive away without letting me go through with this. “Really, Cade, I’m not going undercover into some drug lord’s lair. I just want to satisfy my curiosity.”

“Over Robert Davis’s ex-wife.”

I blinked innocently. “So?”

Cade muttered something under his breath. “So you don’t know what kind of person she is. What if she’s still in contact with him?”

“She’s not. He rarely spoke of her.” Unless he wanted to look the poor, abandoned husband so I’d feel sorry for him. That I fell for it with such ease stung.

“Stay somewhere where I can see you.” I hate it when someone repeats what they just said to me like I’m too stupid to get it the first time around.

“Okay, officer.” If I didn’t agree, he wouldn’t let me out of the car, and I desperately needed some answers. I had to know why Andrea Burton—former Mrs. Davis—left her seven-year-old son in the hands of a monster.

“To think I mocked Mr. Burrows.” Cade’s grumble echoed in the car just before I closed the door. I shook my head. Saving a child didn’t even begin to compare to making lemonade.

Trepidation churning in my stomach, I pushed myself to cross the street to *Bo’s Diner*, the place Matthew’s mom worked. Cade’s gaze burned a hole in my back, and I smiled. As much as I whined about him wrapping me up in cotton for the past week, his concern warmed my heart. Sure, Becky had come over every day too and pampered me to death, but right now, I needed to believe not all men were like Robert.

The establishment before me didn’t scream fancy, but it wasn’t a hole either. Clean checked curtains framed the lower section of the windows and even the pavement outside looked cleaner than most. When I pushed inside the door, the smell of burgers and French fries assailed me. Zeroing in on an empty table near a window, I sat down.

Three waitresses worked the tables. I sent out a silent prayer one of them was Andrea. I wouldn’t be able to persuade Cade I needed to come back if she didn’t have a shift. Damn, if only I could have found out her name on my own... I wouldn’t have asked him to track her down for me using police resources. Now I was stuck with a babysitter. Not to mention I felt guilty about him having to snoop around in police records.

I’m baking him a really big apple pie when I find the time.

“Good afternoon. What will it be?” The blonde waitress’s voice jerked me into awareness. How the hell didn’t I see her approach me? Maybe Cade was right. I wasn’t cut out for this Dick Tracy stuff.

“Um....” I picked up the menu and skimmed the contents. “A chocolate milkshake.”

She wrote my order down on her pad. “That’s it?”

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Even though the smells in the air tempted me, my stomach wouldn't hold anything down. "Yeah." I glanced at her face, and then my gaze dropped on her nametag.

Veronica.

Crap. I should've known finding Andrea wouldn't be so easy.

The waitress walked away leaving me to ponder my next move. If only I could will Andrea to appear... I wrung a paper napkin and gazed around the diner. Fat lot of good that would do since I'd never seen her picture.

No matter the difficulties, I would find her—I had to. Matthew was too important to leave him to be raised by a sick person, even if said person had a biological right to do so. The days I spent sitting around in my apartment gave me time to think, question every strange incident between Robert and his son I'd witnessed while I tutored Matthew.

I wasn't happy with the conclusion I'd reached.

The waitress—Veronica—neared my table and placed a tall glass in front of me, the dark chocolate content tempting me to have a sip. I ignored its siren song and caught Veronica's arm before she strolled away. "Excuse me. Is Andrea working right now?"

The woman chewed her gum and snapped a pink bubble, remaining silent, as if my question had to do with quantum physics, and she needed to think it over before answering. She really did play the role of the ditzy blonde waitress to perfection.

Okay, so I'm always pissy when I'm frustrated.

"You a friend of hers?" She snapped her gum again.

"An acquaintance. We have some common interests I want to talk to her about."

Veronica pinned me with an assessing stare. I mustn't have passed her test because without taking her eyes off me she shouted, "Hey, Bo, someone here is asking questions about Andrea."

Damn. Not so ditzy after all.

Things weren't going according to plan. Hell, I almost heard my obituary in the background, and it began with Cade's *I told you so*. I glanced over my shoulder to see if he could see me from his car, and then gulped down some milkshake to soothe my dry throat. At any other time, I'd have hummed in pleasure, the milkshake was so good, but with Godzilla's threat hanging over my head, the smooth creamy flavor almost went unnoticed. I should probably have focused on how to get out of there in one piece. Another example I wasn't cut out for undercover work, even if it was puddle deep.

A man wearing a stained white apron came to stand by my table. Bo I presumed. "You want to know about Andrea?"

He wiped his hands on a towel. Beefy threatening hands. They reminded me too much of—I could feel their steely grip around my neck, holding me down, choking me. Perspiration popped on my forehead. I struggled to pull air into my lungs.

His eyes narrowed. "Well?"

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I pushed away the stifling cocoon of fear the memory of that night wrapped me in and cleared my throat. “Yes, I’d like to speak to her if that’s not too much trouble.” I tried for a non-threatening smile.

In his early forties, Bo couldn’t be Andrea’s dad, yet his fatherly behavior got to me, and I squirmed in my seat. “Why?”

Not a man of many words Bo. “I have something important I need to talk to her about. Her son,” I added when his expression remained closed, and information wasn’t forthcoming.

I’d take emotion any day over the maelstrom of fury that transformed his face. A red hue mantled his cheekbones, his eyes blazed—I swear, even his nostrils flared reminding me of a bull right before it attacked. “Her ex sent you, didn’t he?” Bo grabbed my arm and pulled me to my feet. I must have gone airborne for a minute. “Well, you can get the hell out of my place and tell that bastard he won’t win.”

“No, wait. He didn’t send me, I swear.” Despite my earnest words, Bo continued to drag me toward the exit. I placed my hand against the door before he could open it to throw me to the curb. Clean as the surface may appear, I didn’t want to end up on it. “Listen, I just want to ask her why she left her son with that monster.”

Bo’s eyes widened somewhat, but he didn’t let go. A few seconds ticked by while he took a good look at me. “Well, hell, why didn’t you just say so?”

At least I’d convinced someone of my noble reasons.

“Excuse me for not wanting to air her dirty laundry,” I said in a flippant tone and pulled my arm free from his slackened hold. “Now can you tell me if she’s working?”

I rubbed the place where he gripped me, and Bo’s eyes zeroed in on the motion. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Yes, he did, but he hadn’t. My skin crawled, and I wanted to brush away the feel of his hand. “Don’t worry, you didn’t hurt me.”

Bo nodded. “Andrea took the day off, but maybe she’s home. She lives in the small apartment over the diner. Just go up the stairs at the side of the building.” He pushed the door open for me, and I glanced across the street. Cade had gotten out of his Camaro and leaned against the hood, a casual pose to any onlooker. I knew better. He was ready to pounce.

I shook my head to let him know I was okay and turned to Bo. “Thanks, but I didn’t pay for the milkshake.” I opened my purse to do just that, but Bo stopped me.

“It’s on the house. An apology.”

“Thank you.” I smiled at him. Bo wanted only to protect Andrea, something I could never hold against him.

I signaled Cade I was going round the building and hoped it would keep him from bursting into Andrea’s apartment in all his gun-toting glory. The stairs creaked and squeaked at my wake, but they looked sturdy enough. I clenched my hand around the baluster. Now that I had almost reached my goal, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to meet Andrea.

What if she really had abandoned her son? What if she hated the father so much she didn’t want anything to do with Matthew?

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When I reached the landing, I paused. Cade's words that I shouldn't get involved more in this mess swirled in my mind ominously. No, I was already deep up to my neck in this. Squaring my shoulders, I knocked on the green door.

Green meant go after all, right?

The door flew open. I don't know who was more surprised—me or the woman before me.

"You."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Her eyes narrowed, contempt filling their cobalt depths. She kept a firm hand on the doorknob, as if she contemplated slamming the door to my face. “What do you want?”

The woman from the zoo.

I opened my mouth to reply, but nothing would come out. My mind was too busy processing this. Relief she wasn’t an ex of Blake’s surged inside me. Guilt I’d been so quick to condemn him—yes, he had given me reason to doubt him, but hell, I wasn’t exactly a saint. And lastly a kernel of hope. She wouldn’t have followed us around at the zoo if she didn’t care for her son, would she?

“You’re Andrea Burton?” I swallowed tightly. With my luck, she’d turn out to be a zealous P.I. or a friend of Andrea’s.

She gave me a tight, all teeth smile. “In the flesh. Are you Robert’s lapbitch now, doing all his pesky errands?” Her gaze raked over me from head to toe. “Can’t say I’m surprised. He always did go for the naïve, sweet little things.”

The comment cut me deep because Andrea had pegged the situation more than accurately. I’d fallen for Robert’s woe-is-me act and even though I hadn’t seen him under a romantic light, I’d sympathized with his phony plight.

“Robert didn’t send me. I...” The anger boiling inside me took my voice away, but I pushed it down. “I worked for him, tutored Matthew because he had trouble following school.”

Concern washed over her face for a moment, and then disappeared. “What, you decided to sleep with the boss?” Andrea tsked. She wanted to start a fight no matter what I said.

Andrea wasn’t to blame for my mistakes, I repeated to myself. I sucked in a deep calming breath. “No, the boss decided to sleep with me, whether I wanted to or not. Can I please come in? This isn’t something I feel comfortable discussing—even less standing out here.”

She hesitated for a moment, and then pushed the door wide open. “What the hell... It’s not like I have anything left to lose.”

I walked inside the apartment and relief swept over me that she didn’t bury a knife in my back. Considering what Andrea believed about me, I wouldn’t put it past her—or hold it against her. Much anyway.

I clenched the straps of my purse and took the few steps toward the worn, brown couch. The beige walls failed to conceal how small the apartment really was, not to mention the color depressed me. Yet the place was clean with a flowery scent hanging in the air. Knick-knacks and pictures graced the walls, evidence of Andrea’s effort to turn the small place into a home. And she’d succeeded.

This pitiful excuse for an apartment was more of a home than Robert’s big one, with all its shiny Inox appliances and expensive furniture.

Andrea didn’t sit on the couch next to me nor in the armchair. She leaned against the opposite wall and glared. “I’d offer you some coffee, but that would imply I want or welcome your presence in my home. Say what you have to say and get the hell out.”

Wow, talk about direct. How did this woman survive beside a manipulative man as Robert? Oh yeah, she didn't.

"Your—" I cleared my throat. "Robert tried to rape me a few days ago."

"Poor, little baby. Is this where I'm supposed to hug you and tell you everything's going to be fine?" Andrea pushed herself off the wall, her body tense. "Nobody was there to hold *me* and tell me it'd get better every time Robert raped me, and then promptly turned his back to me to fall asleep. Nobody wiped *my* tears and told me I didn't deserve the beatings because I said something my lord and master misinterpreted. So excuse me if your confession doesn't make my heart grow fonder. You got away. I didn't."

Her voice vibrated with fury. I, on the other hand, vibrated with shock and disgust. My experience was too fresh not to put myself in Andrea's shoes. I felt to my bone the pain and humiliation behind her words. Ashamed to look at her, I glanced away.

"Yeah, go right ahead. I figured you'd react this way."

The recrimination forced my gaze to search for hers.

She snorted. "That's what his *friends* did each time they spotted a bruise—they looked away. They ignored my nervousness, my panic whenever Robert would get upset over insignificant things—the salt missing from the table at a dinner party or the napkins not being folded correctly."

"I'm—"

"Sorry? Don't be. I don't want your pity," she snapped and came to stand in front of me. "And if you think now you can cry on my shoulder while we share sob stories, you won't get your wish. I'm through feeling sorry for myself. I just want my son back."

Andrea's face contorted at the mention of her son, and a vise wrapped around my heart.

"Matthew misses you so much."

Her eyes lit up, the hope in them filling me with shame because I'd thought she abandoned him. I should've known better.

"He does?" Her voice quivered, and she collapsed in the armchair. "I was afraid... I was afraid he'd hate me for leaving him." Andrea closed her eyes, shutting me off. "I wanted to take him with me, I did, but Robert threatened to kill me if I left him. When he caught me sneaking out of the house while he was supposed to be on a business trip...." She swallowed tightly, and even though I'd just met her, I wanted to ease her pain, to wrap my arms around her and tell her she would be all right. Yet it'd be too little too late, but more importantly, it would be a lie. I didn't know if Andrea would get her son back.

She placed her hand over her heart, a heart I'd bet good money was racing. "I drew a gun on him when he tried to grab me."

I sucked in a small breath but refrained from asking questions. She needed to get what happened off her chest.

"So then he told me I could go, but Matt would stay with him." She chuckled, the ugly sound grating my ears. "I couldn't very well take Matt while pointing a gun at his father and the bastard knew that. Besides, he'd already wrestled all the money I'd saved up from me. How would I support both Matt and myself with no money?"

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The pain lacing her voice was too much for me. I couldn't let her hurt this way any longer. "You couldn't. You did the right thing."

She opened her eyes, her gaze shadowed with guilt and anguish. "Did I? I left my baby with a beast because I wasn't strong enough to fight him. It wasn't a decision; it was an act of cowardice."

Sadness threatened to smother me. "And where would you have gone? A shelter? You know Robert would have used it against you at the custody hearing. He would've said you put your son in danger and therefore are not to be trusted. And what if you hadn't found a job? He'd have said you put a little boy through an ordeal when he could've been living in splendor with his father. He'd call you selfish and unfit." I squeezed her hand. "Instead, you put Matthew's needs first and prepared yourself for when you claimed your parental rights. You have a job, an apartment, a boss that will take off the head of anyone who'll even look at you the wrong way. You're set."

A small smile broke on her face. I breathed a bit easier.

"Bo can be a bit intense."

I snorted. "Try cavemanish. I was afraid he'd drag me out the diner by my hair."

Andrea's smile widened, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She refused to cry because she needed to appear strong. Been there, done that, had the scarred heart to prove it.

"Yeah, he's overprotective. Nobody has ever cared if I got hurt or not." She shrugged. "I guess God's making up for all the previous times." She tried to sound casual, but I could see how much Bo's support mattered to Andrea.

"He's a great friend. You're lucky to have him."

"Yeah, Lady Luck and me, we're like this." She twined her index and middle finger.

I chuckled. The thought Andrea and I were very much alike flashed through my mind. We'd both been hurt by men we trusted and turned bitter. That put an end to my chuckle. Had I turned bitter? Even though I hadn't recognized it at the time, now, after meeting Andrea, it was crystal clear I had. My Resolution to want a man only for fun and sex was the epitome of my cynical view on men. I'd said, *Hey, I see your sex and little to no hearts and roses and raise you to just sex and a thorny bedside manner.*

But all my dishonorable intentions had evaporated the moment I'd ran into Blake—or rather he'd ran into me. Warmth spread inside me at the thought of him. Damn, even the memory of him was enough to improve my mood. How was I going to forget him when I couldn't stop aching for his touch despite almost being raped a few days ago?

Distantly, I became aware of Andrea rising from her seat beside me and gathering her hair up in a ponytail. "I know it's after seven, but do you want a cup of coffee?"

Surprised, I looked up at her. In my normal mode, I'd have given her a smartass comeback, but I still didn't know what to expect from her, so I kept my mouth shut. Besides, she'd just admitted to owning a gun.

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She smiled. "I must've given you quite a scare, haven't I? You seem the kind of person who says the first thing on her mind." She raised her hands, palms out. "I promise the coffee won't be poisoned."

I laughed. "I admit the thought did cross my mind."

"Don't worry. I need a pristine record if I am to get Matt back."

Even though I could see her from over the breakfast nook, her parting shot was too intriguing for me not to follow her. I sat on a stool, the right words to ask her eluding me.

When she turned to place a mug in front of me, it hit me. "You're the woman from the minimart."

Andrea smiled. "You remember me, huh?"

"Well, you did stare at Matthew and I."

"I couldn't bear not seeing my baby, so whenever I could, I lingered close to the apartment hoping to catch a glimpse of him."

Not wanting her to read the sympathy in my face, I took a sip of my coffee. Andrea veered the conversation away from the uncomfortable confession—the last of many today. "The divorce hearing is in a week. His lawyer notified mine that Robert's not willing to give me Matt's custody. As if I had any misconceptions over that one...."

I would have said I was sorry, but the memory of Andrea's previous reaction to this particular expression of sympathy changed my mind. "What are you going to do?"

She turned around to fill the coffee machine with water. "Try to convince the judge I'm the best choice when it comes to Matt's upbringing."

I could hear it in her voice she knew the odds were stacked against her.

Steel came to strengthen her tone. "I may not have Robert's money and connections, but I love Matt. Robert doesn't love anyone but himself. He just wants to punish me for leaving him."

She didn't need to tell me that. I remembered Matthew's bare bedroom. At least, I'd helped the little boy by making his room look less like a corner of a barracks. Had Robert stripped down everything now that I wouldn't be coming?

An image of Matt as he was in the beginning had a shiver crawling down my spine. How did Robert put that fear in his son's eyes? I could only hope he hadn't beaten him.

Sooner or later, though, you know he will. God, no.

"What can I do to help, Andrea?"

Her lips curled into a small smile. "How are you with miracles?"

Even while apprehension tied my insides into a knot, I knew I was about to get myself into trouble. "I could testify he tried to rape me. That way it wouldn't be your word against his."

"Yeah, it'd be yours. Big difference."

"No." I squeezed her hand lying on the counter. "*Our* word against his. We can beat him together, Andrea."

Her face lit up, but before she said anything, a loud banging broke the silence.

"Police. Open the door!"

Andrea turned fearful eyes at me, her face pale and haunted. She pushed off the stool and treated me to a scathing glare.

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“And to think I believed you,” she spat. “What did you do, plant drugs so you could get me arrested?”

“No. I—”

Andrea came to stand in front of me. “Well, you won’t get away with this crap. You’re going to tell them the truth or I swear to God I’ll beat the hell out of you. After all, I learned from the best.”

The frightening thing was I believed her. “I....”

The murdering expression on her face shut me up. This Andrea was even more intimidating than the one that had greeted me at her doorstep. She grabbed my arm, her nails talons that dug into my flesh, and dragged me toward the door. For someone not a lot taller than me she sure was strong.

“You better not pull anything if you value your life.” Andrea’s hiss added to my fear right before she let go of my arm to open.

A furious Cade stood at the other side of the door, his fist poised to knock again. He spared Andrea a glance then focused on me. “Are you okay?”

Hell if I knew. In half an hour, my world had been turned upside down, and not for the first time this week. At this rate, I’d spent Easter vacation recuperating at a mental institution. And white really wasn’t my color.

“I’m okay.” Damn. The croaked words didn’t sound very convincing. I swept my tongue across my dry lips before I gave another shot at reassuring him.

“Who’s she?” Cade nodded towards Andrea.

“*She* is the owner of this apartment, and you have yet to produce a badge.” Andrea placed her hand against the doorframe, barring Cade’s access to said apartment. A symbolic gesture, since we all knew if he wanted to get in, he’d brush past her with little effort.

Cade’s eyes widened slightly. His gaze slid back to Andrea, the only reaction he gave to her words. He reached behind him, and I watched Andrea pull back a bit, her stance defensive. Cade’s nostrils flared, and then with slow moves he picked his badge from his back pocket with two fingers and flipped it open.

“Satisfied?”

“Not for years. What do you want, officer?”

Cade’s lips quirked, and I bit back a smile. Apparently, my cousin had finally met a woman he couldn’t charm. How interesting.

He hooked a thumb in his belt. “I came to check on Emily. She’s been here for quite some time.”

I felt Andrea’s hostility dissipate—at least towards me. She waved my way. “As you can see, I didn’t break her. Emily, please tell your boyfriend you’re emotionally and physically intact. I’ve had my fill of brainless He-men.” Her voice laced with disgust, she walked back into the apartment.

“I’m not her boyfriend,” Cade gritted out. He’d kept a cool head about him even when he’d come to find me waiting for him bruised, battered and shoeless. This unusual fit of anger intrigued me despite my concern over Andrea and Matthew’s situation.

“Whatever.” Andrea sounded weary, and I couldn’t blame her. I knew by personal experience how hard it was to never let your guard down, and ever since I turned up at her doorstep, she’d been in a constant state of turmoil.

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“Andrea, this is all my fault. I should’ve called Cade to let him know I was okay. I’m sorry.”

She raised her hand up as she ambled back to the kitchen. “Don’t worry about it. It’s my day off. Things always go wrong when I just want to sit back and relax.”

Yeah, now I felt all of two inches high. I cleared my throat. “I really meant it when I said I want to testify.”

“What—”

I silenced Cade with a glare over my shoulder.

Andrea sighed. “Are you sure? I’m crazy for saying this since you’d help my case a lot, but this won’t be easy. Robert’s lawyer will argue that you’re a....”

“A slut?” I finished for her. “I bet he’ll try. But even if he succeeds, I’ll feel better knowing I tried to do something to help Matthew.”

Her smile was filled with a mother’s pride. “You really care about him, don’t you?”

“You’ve raised a wonderful, little boy, Andrea. The last thing I want is to leave him in Robert’s care.”

Andrea’s face shuttered, and I sensed echoes of her guilt eating at her. I doubted she would be able to go on with her life if she didn’t get Matthew back.

That thought rattled me on my way back to Cade’s car, after setting up a meeting with Andrea and her lawyer the next day. No person should hold that kind of power over another one, no matter the tie between them. The air lodged in my throat at the suspicion Blake might be that someone to me. And the reality I wasn’t to him added to my nervousness.

No way. He’s just a man, a man that will never be a part of my life.

I’d just secured my seat belt, when Cade turned to me. “Emily....”

A sense of foreboding buzzed under my skin. He glanced away, but not before his worry-filled eyes boosted my unease. “At the hospital, I insisted they do some tests even though you weren’t raped.”

I chuckled, trying to dispel the tension overflowing the small confines of his car. “I know; I was there, remember?”

Cade grunted. “Well, I didn’t tell you the blood work results.” He paused. “Maybe I should’ve. Maybe you wouldn’t have gone out of your way to find this damn project to keep yourself busy.”

Maybe, maybe, maybe. He was driving me crazy. “What results, Cade?”

Flashes of white sterile corridors and that awful hospital smell crashed into my mind. I wrapped my arms around my midriff. God, I knew in my gut the news wouldn’t be good. I let my head fall back against the seat. No, I couldn’t do this again. Once with my mom’s ordeal was enough.

Cade cupped my face. “Look at me, kiddo.” His ominous pause hung in the car to the point I dreaded his next words.

“You’re pregnant.”

Chapter Thirty

Closing the book, I dropped it next to me on the couch and sagged against the cushion. I fervently disagreed with Elizabeth Bishop. A great poet, for sure, but in my opinion, the art of losing was very hard to master. I had the gouges on my heart to prove it.

Too many things had slipped through my fingers in a short period, and losing Blake almost drove me to depression. *You didn't lose all of him*, a small voice whispered in my head, and I caressed my belly. As much as having Blake's child filled my heart with joy, it couldn't replace him being there for me, with me.

Okay, so I was selfish. I wanted it all. Shoot me.

The discarded newspaper on the floor drew my gaze. I didn't need to look at the picture again; it was engraved in my memory, a constant reminder of what I had lost and couldn't have. I sniffed and held back the waterworks for—oh, maybe the twentieth time today. Despite the fact I hated crying, I felt ashamed to burst into tears when other people faced bigger problems yet refused to hide and cower.

AKA Andrea.

What right did I have to my tears just because Blake had already put our relationship behind him and was currently involved with another woman? Big deal, so Leah looked radiant and oh-so-perfect in her Gucci cocktail dress next to the only man I'd ever loved.

"There you go, getting all melodramatic again, Em. No wonder Becky calls you a drama queen."

The doorbell startled me out of my rambling. I glanced at the clock. Who could it be at four p.m. on a Saturday? Becky ate at her parents' on the weekends, and Cade always called before coming. Trepidation had me reaching for the baseball bat I kept close to me this past week. With careful steps, I approached the door and peered through the peephole.

Dammit!

I closed my eyes and rested my forehead against the hard wood. Why of all people did *he* have to show up on my doorstep?

I raced to the mirror and checked my face. The split lip had healed, but the bruise on my eye was still discernible without any makeup. Shit.

"One moment," I shouted and applied some foundation with quick, panicked strokes. The result wasn't perfect. If anyone took a closer look, they would discern a shadow under my eye. Yet on such a short notice, it would have to do.

I could only hope my visitor didn't want to look too close. And why would he? Even if he hadn't issued an ultimatum the last time we met, his actions showed he had no interest in me. Not anymore—if ever.

Taking one deep breath after another, I went back to answer the front door. Plastered smile on my face, I had every intention of lying my ass off about how surprised I was to see him—but in a good way of course. Nevertheless, when I opened the door, I couldn't push the words out of my mouth. I told myself a large amount of oxygen went to my head with all that breathing, yet I knew it was the Blake effect.

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He stood on my bright red welcome mat, handsome as ever in an expensive, gray suit, his green eyes focused on me. My body zinged to life, my temperature rising a few degrees. I wanted to walk into his strong arms and seek the safety I knew he could provide me. I curled my hands into fists to refrain from reaching out and touching him, smoothing a lock of hair from his forehead. God, I could sense myself opening up to him.

Blake didn't help at all. His stare held me prisoner, its intensity upping my body temperature.

Desperate to regain my composure, I glanced away. His tie snagged my gaze, and my mouth turned dry. He'd had on the same one from the Leah picture. Well, that eradicated any...fondness I might have felt.

"You haven't been at school this week."

"No, I haven't." I matched his abrupt tone.

Blake cleared his throat. "Yeah, Mandy was worried about you missing school this week. She's been bugging me for days. It was either cave in and come check on you or lose my mind."

I took a step back, his blow hurting me even though it wasn't a physical one. I gripped the doorframe tight. The other option was to bang his head against the door. I didn't have the money to replace the damage his hard head would do. The fact he would have preferred walking on blazing coals than being here fortified my resolve to dislike him. Yes, I loved him, but I didn't have to like him too.

"It was the flu, nothing serious. Well, you came, you saw, you verified I'm not on my deathbed—mission accomplished. I'd invite you in, but that would imply I want or welcome your presence in my home."

Okay, so I stole Andrea's line. I confess.

Blake gave me a devilish smile. "Don't mind if I do."

He moved forward too fast for me to slam the door in his face. Either I stepped aside and let him pass or I'd end up in his arms. No contest there.

The incarnation of arrogance walked inside my apartment with an air of ownership, pushing my irritation to sky-high levels. Even though I would have preferred not to confront him now—or ever, showing Blake I didn't care about him more than he did about me was something that needed to be done.

That I'd be lying was irrelevant.

I closed the door and turned to find him standing in the middle of the room. I crossed my arms over my chest. "What is this about, Blake?"

Instead of answering me, he surveyed the room as if he had all the time in the world. When he did answer, his blasé tone tempted me to use my bat on him after all. "I told you. Mandy had this crazy notion she's to blame for your absence. Something to do with a monkey biting you, if I recall correctly."

"And I told you I'm fine. So what are you doing barging into my home as if you have a right to?"

Blake tilted his head. "You don't look like someone with the flu."

Why do you care what's wrong with me? The question dangled from my lips, but if I asked, he'd realize his behavior hurt me. Couldn't have that.

The fake smile I'd practiced in front of the mirror just for such an occasion came into play. "Well, I'm not sick anymore. Last time I had a fever was early

yesterday morning, and I've been fine since then." The lie rolled off my tongue with ease.

His eyes narrowed. When I realized he stared at the bruise under my eye, talons of horror clawed at my insides. I pretended to tuck a lock of hair behind my ear to distract him. No, he couldn't have noticed.

"You don't look fine. Something's off."

"Gee, you sure know how to boost a woman's confidence." I hoped I sounded hurt enough.

His hands balled into fists. "I'm not here to boost your confidence. I'm here to get some answers."

I gaped at him. "Excuse me? I took the high way, remember? You have a lot of nerve coming here to demand answers. We're nothing to each other."

Except you're going to have his baby.

"We'll always be something to each other." The reply disarmed me for a heartbeat. I really hated when he seemed to hear my thoughts and counter accordingly.

I snorted. Leah's smiling face while she posed next to him for the society pages made a mockery of his words. "Nice fantasy world you live in there, Blake. Don't let the door hit you on your way out."

I escaped into the kitchen. He wouldn't leave, of course, I couldn't be that lucky, but I desperately needed some time to regroup.

"Nothing for me, thanks," he shouted after me.

"I wasn't going to offer you anything anyway." *Nothing for me, thanks*, I mimicked and poured myself a glass of water. I winced at the childish response. The first signs of Blake-induced insanity were starting to appear.

A wave of sadness washed over me. Even when we'd been strangers, on New Year's Eve, Blake had been nicer. Now, he seemed almost...hostile. I couldn't comprehend his behavior—hot one moment, cold the next.

Placing the glass on the counter, I wiped my damp palms against my sweats. Past experience should've taught me I couldn't read Blake with the ease he read me. No, I'd play it safe and believe he'd just showed up because he wanted to placate Amanda's ruffled feathers. Any other reaction he might have during our chat was born out of his extreme arrogance. He probably thought I should moon after him like Leah.

Shit. Was Leah mooning after him?

Annoyed with myself for caring one way or the other, I stormed back outside.

"What's with the bat?" Blake swung the baseball bat softly.

I froze, all fury seeping out of me to be replaced by panic. Despite his casual stance, I could see the wheels in his head turning.

Shit. *Think, think, think*. "I lent it to my cousin and must've forgotten to put it back when he returned it." Approaching him with a calmness I didn't feel, I took the damning evidence of my current emotional state off his hands. "I'll just put this out of the way, and then come back to show you to the door."

I was shaking and in no condition to continue sparring with him with the reminder of what—*whom*—I needed protection from in plain sight. I rushed to the safety of my bedroom, all the while telling myself nothing had happened. After hiding the bat in the recesses of my closet, I leaned against the door. Just

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one moment to draw up my defenses. I couldn't let Blake get to me anymore. I placed a protective hand over my belly. Too much was at stake.

Afraid of what else he might discover in my absence, I rushed back out. I rounded the corner, but my trek was cut short by his hard frame. Bouncing backwards at the collision, I lost my balance. I had no doubt I would have landed on my butt, if two strong arms hadn't clamped around me.

Blake's arms. Warm. Familiar. Around me.

Leah's image floated away and became a distant blur, taking the sting of betrayal with it. A thousand things I wanted to say flitted through my mind, but not one sentence stayed long enough for me to form. Parting my lips and hoping something intelligent would come out of my mouth, I breathed in deep. His spicy, Blake scent wrapped around me as strongly—if not more so—as his arms, jolting me into heated awareness. My nipples tightened into hard little points, and a small shiver made its delicious way down my back.

His hands felt good on my waist, right, and at that moment I realized my own had burrowed underneath his jacket to touch his tailored shirt. The warm skin just below the flimsy fabric teased my fingers, luring them to seek a more intimate contact, bombarding my senses with memories of how Blake's chest felt, looked, tasted.

I had no idea how much time I spent in his embrace, but it was too long and not long enough. Hurt and confused, I couldn't handle this situation. No matter how much I enjoyed being held by him after so many days, my heart shouted it was wrong. a) Blake didn't love me, b) I couldn't settle for less, and c) he dated Leah now. For the millionth time it seemed, I had to be strong and do the logical thing.

I was sick of being strong. For once, I wanted someone to stand strong next to me, so I could be the weak one.

"I'm sorry." Granted the collision wasn't my fault, yet I couldn't find something else to say.

I started to pull away. Blake's hands around my waist flexed, and for a second, a blissful second, I thought he'd refuse to let me go. But he didn't. Unreasonable disappointment ebbed and flowed inside me. A small part of me wished he'd fight for me, try to change my mind.

Claim me.

Nevertheless, I had enough sense left to recognize a pipe dream when I saw one. I wanted to blame the wishful thinking on a pregnant woman's raging hormones, but the truth was with Blake I yearned for things I couldn't have. And even though it wasn't his fault, I wanted to kill him for the hot/cold treatment.

"Why weren't you at school this week?"

I batted my eyelashes. "I had the flu." I moved a step back, but, for some reason, Blake pulled me towards him again. "Can you let go of me, please?"

"No. Why did you have a bat next to the door?" The hits just kept on coming.

"I told you."

"I don't believe you," he said through gritted teeth.

I tilted my head. "Tough." I broke free of his hold and tried to push past him, but he blocked my way. I stepped back in an effort to reinstate my personal space.

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The hallway suddenly felt narrow. Too narrow. A closed space where anything could happen, and I wouldn't be able to escape easily.

Blake followed my retreat. My breathing turned tortured, hysteria mere heartbeats away. When my back hit the wall, I swallowed back a scream.

"Blake...please...." I had to get away.

"I'm not leaving until you tell me...."

The loud beating of my heart drowned out the rest of his words. The walls were closing in on me. He towered over my five-two. So close, too close. I blinked and, in Blake's place, stood Robert. Laughing, toying with me, caressing my cheek. I pushed his hand away. A strangled cry escaped my throat. Surprisingly, I only shoved once, and he backed off.

Run. Run. Get away.

Frantic, unsteady steps led me to the living room, and I staggered all the way to the window. In desperate need of some fresh air, I cracked it open. Chills that had nothing to do with the cold, March breeze raced one another up and down my spine.

"Emily, what's wrong?"

Blake's worried voice sounded behind me, and I closed my eyes. I refused to show my underbelly to a man who had rejected me. A man who couldn't even qualify as my friend. Not to mention, my stomach roiled with the possibility he might think what happened was my fault. Promiscuous was my middle name, right? Not to mention there was our child to think about. God, what a mess.

Yeah...bad decisions always come back to bite you in the ass.

I rubbed my forehead. "Nothing's wrong. I just don't want you crowding me."

"You didn't mind before."

His words fired my blood, and I silently thanked him. I whirled around to send him a scornful glare. "I learn from my mistakes. You were the one who told me it was over. You can't just show up and ask for more. Who's stringing along whom now?"

He rubbed a hand across his face, and I almost felt sorry for him. Almost. Because he didn't love me. Almost. Because he'd put an end to us.

"You're right. I apologize. It's just that I'm worried about you. I know you're not telling me something, Emily." He switched gears on me.

My face burned with guilt. I turned to close the window and avoid his too discerning gaze. No, the caring Blake couldn't resurface now. The arrogant ass I could deal with.

I sighed and faced him head on. "Yes, there's something I need to talk to you about, but now's not a good time."

Blake pushed a hand through his dark hair, which seemed to compete with his mood today. "When then?" He spit out the words like they were bullets.

"I don't know. Soon."

"Unacceptable." He advanced toward me, but suddenly stopped and turned his back to me, muttering a low curse. His body almost vibrated with the need to shake me to my senses, the intent had been evident in his face. Fury was quick to surge inside me, and I clenched my teeth. He still wasn't willing to give me even an inch.

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Yet as righteous anger pumped along my veins, his shoulders sagged, and the need to comfort him overrode all else. I'd never seen this man defeated, and the fact I was to blame had guilt gripping my heart in an unyielding vise.

"Blake. I..." I placed a tentative hand on his arm.

Before I realized what had happened, he enfolded me in a tight embrace. Again. How many hugs could a woman endure until she reached her melting point anyway? His beseeching gaze wormed its way under the high wall of my resolve. Blake cupped my cheek and softly swept his thumb over my concealed bruise.

"Who hurt you, kitten?"

Chapter Thirty-One

The endearment I hadn't heard in too long was a low blow. My eyes filled with tears, and I glanced away to collect myself. Afraid the sobs I kept inside with Herculean effort would break free if I tried to breathe, I didn't. The world swirled around me, and I clutched Blake's arms for support.

The next thing my brain registered was that I lay sprawled sideways in Blake's lap. He swept a soothing hand up and down my back, and it felt natural to rest my head on his shoulder.

"Sssh, it's okay, Emily. I've got you now."

The softly spoken words cracked something inside me I didn't know existed, releasing all the bottled up fear and helplessness. I took in a deep, tortured breath and surrendered to the silent tears that clamored to be unleashed. Blake's arms tightened around me, and for the first time since the night Robert attacked me, I felt truly safe.

I didn't care to analyze the hows and the whys, I simply wanted to enjoy the moment for however long it lasted. In the back of my mind, I knew I had to let Blake go. He wasn't mine to lean on. A shiver stole through me, and I burrowed deeper in his hold, desperate to let the warmth of his body seep into me, something to store for later.

When I would be alone again.

The small hiccup I let out was the only indication I'd been crying. Well, okay that, and Blake's wet shirt. I wanted to get up and prove to myself—and Blake—I felt fine, but my limbs were numb, heavy. My eyes stung from all the tears, and keeping them open required too much energy. Energy I no longer possessed. Each effort took me more time. I had to get off Blake's lap and talk to him, but my vision turned unfocused.

Reality dimmed around me, and as I drifted off, I thought I felt Blake laying a gentle kiss on my forehead. "Sleep, sweetheart. I'll keep you safe."

I smiled, even though I had no doubt I imagined the whole thing. Deep love and a touch of worry tinged the softly spoken words. No man had ever cared for me that way, except—

"But you're not Cade." The mumbled words were my last effort to stay awake, and then gave up the struggle.

Darkness greeted me the moment I came to. I blinked rapidly, trying to understand what had happened. My heart jumped when I realized where I was lying. A bed.

Memories of Robert's bedroom crashed into my mind, and a whimper pushed its way past my lips. About to jump up and flee, I was anchored on the bed when an arm fell listlessly on my stomach. Sanity told me it was Blake's, but that didn't muffle the screaming in my head.

I wiggled, frantic to get to the bedside lamp, and the arm around me squeezed me into place. I froze. Stopped breathing. Closed my eyes. A self-imposed blackness was better than one I had no control over.

"Emily, calm down." His roughened by sleep voice washed over me. "I brought you to your bed and fell asleep, too." The explanation fanned my hair, and I realized we were laying side by side, Blake literally a breath away. Warm puffs of

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air caressed my cheek; they came faster with each second that ticked by, almost matching my own.

"You don't understand." I tried to move away.

"But I want to."

His arm, as unforgiving as ever, released me for the short time it took him to turn on the lamp, and then returned to ensure I stayed put. Blessed ribbons of light swept through the room and lifted the weight of my chest.

"Did Rhett hit you?"

Even though I should have known Blake wouldn't wait for me to explain, the question came too unexpected. "No!"

His green eyes searched my face, their intensity unsettling me. "Then who?" He refused to quit his relentless questioning.

"Not one of my boyfriends, that's for sure," I snapped. I glanced away, anxious to put some distance between us.

I didn't need to look at him to know he was angry. Checked fury rolled off him in waves. How much it cost him not to say what was on his mind obvious by the flexing of his fingers against my hip.

Blake surprised me by pulling me towards him. He tucked my head under his chin and waited a few seconds to ask in a low voice, "What happened?"

I drew in a shaky breath. "You know I was tutoring Matthew."

He let out an easy hum in agreement, but I felt his body tensing up.

"Last Sunday, when I took your sister to the zoo, I figured I could bring Matthew with us. His dad gave the okay, and I'm sure Amanda told you we had fun."

"She did. She was very excited about the trip. Hasn't stopped talking about it."

His conversational tone helped me to continue. "I took Matthew home, and he begged me to stay a while longer so we could do a school's project he had on constellations. So I stayed."

Silence greeted my statement, and the ugly thought Blake would say I was asking for it wormed its way inside my brain again. *I'm better off without him if he thinks that. I didn't ask Robert to attack me.*

I clenched my hand on his chest into a fist. "We observed the sky for about an hour until Matthew grew tired. I tucked him in and went to get my coat when...."

Blake grasped my hand and, undoing my fist, he laced our fingers together, his thumb sweeping semi-circles on my skin. "When?"

"Robert appeared out of nowhere, spewing some nonsense about how he was tired of the game I played. I tried to move past him, but he grabbed me and shoved me into his bedroom." Blake's chest underneath me stopped moving. "I fought him. He fought back. No need to tell you who won. He threw me on the bed and started tearing my clothes away."

I closed my eyes. How embarrassing to bear the worst night of my life for the man I loved to see. I swallowed hard. Would he ever look at me the same way? The question twisted my insides into a tight knot, but now that I'd begun, I couldn't stop. I wouldn't stop.

"Still dazed from the punch, I couldn't think straight, but somehow I got it in my head that the only way to escape was to play into his madness. I told him he was right, I'd wanted him, too, but pretended otherwise. The admission stroked

his ego, so he relaxed enough to let me roll us over with me landing on top.” The memory had bile rising in my throat, but I reined in my reaction. This belonged in the past. I’d gotten away. “I kissed him...touched him, and when he thought I was going to... I hit him and ran. And ran. And ran.”

Drained, I hid my face in the crook of Blake’s neck and held him tight as if he could keep the monsters at bay. Blessedly, I had no more tears left. Blake moved, and, for a heart-stopping second, I feared he would push me off him and get out of bed. I prepared myself for his rejection...only it never came. He pulled me fully on top of him and wrapped his arms around me until it was hard for me to breathe. His nostrils fumed against the crown of my head, fast and furious.

“I’m going to kill that bastard.” His voice vibrated with malicious intent, and for the first time since I began telling him what happened, I dared a glance at him.

There was no condemnation in his gaze, just...sorrow. Not something I wanted Blake to ever feel for me, but I resigned myself he couldn’t feel anything else.

“This is all my fault.” His statement had surprised laughter bubbling in my throat.

I pushed myself to my elbows and pursed my lips. “How so?”

He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. “I should’ve been there. I should’ve protected you.”

I’m not yours to protect. And I shouldn’t be in your arms. Slowly, I extricated myself from his embrace and sat next to him, folding my legs underneath me. I gifted him with the strongest smile in my arsenal. “No, you shouldn’t have, Blake. Besides, I handled the situation, didn’t I? I’m fine.”

He half-sat, too, his sharp gaze disconcerting. “Are you? You freaked out in the hallway and would have started screaming just moments ago because you woke up in the dark.”

Damn, the man didn’t miss much.

“Okay, so I *will* be fine. Soon. I don’t need you to babysit me.”

I wanted to move away from him, but stubbornness rooted me to my place.

“Yeah, you don’t need me. You have Cade, after all, right?” His bitterness sucker-punched me even more than the mention of Cade’s name.

I held his gaze. “Cade is my cousin.”

Blake shrugged. “Rhett, then.”

“I broke up with Rhett.” Relief swam in his eyes. Despite my better judgment, I added in a hurry, “A few days before Valentine’s.”

Blake reached out and dragged me back. He cupped my cheek. “And there’s no one else?”

I shook my head. “Too bad you’re with Leah, huh?” I sent him a small smile. Better for me to put reality into words than to hear the admission from his lips.

His hand slid to my neck, and he pulled my head down. “I’m not with Leah,” he muttered thickly against my mouth right before he took possession of it.

Slow, sensuous sweeps wreaked havoc on my senses until I couldn’t remember even one reason I shouldn’t give in. His quick denial wasn’t enough, but too many days had passed since I’d last kissed him. Nothing else mattered. I lost myself in the wet cavern of his mouth. Moaned, when his tongue caressed

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mine and invited it to play and tease back. I closed my arms around his neck and straddled him. I kissed him harder, thirsty for the taste of him, the feel of him...only him.

Blake.

Inquisitive hands slipped under my blouse and were rewarded with my naked breasts. Blake groaned at the contact and cupped the aching mounds, his thumbs flicking my nipples to hardness. The moment the exquisite torture came to an abrupt stop, I whimpered at the loss, but then I realized Blake's fingers moved to the bottom of my blouse and pulled up.

All too willing, I helped him and tossed the garment behind me. Blake didn't pick up where he left off though. His expression was serious, and a muscle ticked in his jaw, probably from the effort to keep his gaze glued to my face and not my breasts.

"Whatever you want, baby. We can go slow." His chest heaving, yet he managed to murmur the words softly.

I want you to rid me of Robert's touch. Reclaim my body. My soul.

This virile man denied himself for my sake. My hunger for him deepened. "What I want is you."

I let my hands trail up and down his torso, and then started to unbutton his shirt. Slowly. I wanted him to burn for me as much as I burned for him. On the third button, Blake took over.

He yanked his shirt open and sent the remaining buttons flying on the bed. "You have me. All of me."

Chapter Thirty-Two

His shirt landed in a ball on the floor, and Blake pulled me back for another heated kiss. He sucked my tongue into his mouth as his hands got busy caressing my ass. He pressed his hard length against me, and my womb clenched with yearning. I needed him inside me now. I rubbed against him, frustrated with the layers of clothes that still separated us.

I snaked my hands between us and attacked his belt and zipper. His skin was hot under my touch, messing with my focus. Blake helped me push my sweats and panties down my legs, and I took advantage to steal kisses whenever I could. Finally as naked as he was, I straddled him and paused. If I let Blake in this time, it'd be forever. Even if things didn't work out, I would never get over him.

No other man would take his place. And that scared me.

"Hey, you're here. With me."

A warm smile teased my lips. He thought he had to bring me back from a bad memory. "I know. And there's no place I'd rather be." I pushed down on his erection.

Blake held my gaze during the slow delicious slide of his cock inside me. His hold on my hips scorched me. Familiar pleasure tingled low in my belly, and my lungs refused to work. I supported myself on his broad chest and moved up and down in a leisurely cadence. I wanted to treasure the moment, prolong it so it would last forever in case this was our final time together. Blake rumbled low, and his eyes promised retribution, but he didn't compel me to hurry.

He let me take him the way I wanted.

I marveled at the control I had, but soon, my body demanded satisfaction. Holding back became a thing of the past. Blake urged me on. With his hands on my hips, he pulled me up, and then pushed me down with force, adding to my momentum. Face flushed, nostrils flaring, the stamp of lust hardened his features.

The slaps of wet flesh against flesh echoed in the room, enhancing the carnality of the act. Blake cupped my ass, playing with it. He drew apart my cheeks and released, letting cool air tease my heated core, stimulating nerve endings I didn't know I possessed. His hand traveled up my back and pushed me down until he crushed my breasts against his hard, sculpted torso.

No other man could make me feel so much and crave even more. Only Blake.

"I love you." The words slipped past my lips, past my defenses, and I didn't care. He may not return the sentiment, but my heart demanded I tell him. Demanded he know he owned it.

His eyes flared into twin green fires, and Blake gripped my neck harder. "It was about damn time." He fused our mouths together.

Too close to the end to decipher what he meant, I drowned in his kiss. I yelped when he flipped us. Moaned as he surged inside me with force. Again and again, he pushed inside my convulsing pussy, spreading insidious pleasure all over my body. Frustrated grunts escaped his throat; the headboard banged against the wall; it was a cacophony of sounds, but somehow it added to the moment.

Blake curled a palm around my damp breast, and tendrils of excitement arrowed down to my sex. He twisted my nipple between his thumb and index

finger and, at the same time, treated my clit to a similar pinch. A powerful, soul-wrenching orgasm shook my body over and over.

I gasped for air. "Blake!"

I bowed off the bed. Blake continued to hammer out short strokes that kept my climax alive and kicking. My inner muscles clenched almost painfully, the pleasure was so great.

He leaned over me and fed me a satisfied hum. Seconds later, he pulsed and came inside me. Our chests heaved one against the other, competing for the most tortured breath. I was amazed Blake had the strength to hold his weight off me. I couldn't move to save my life.

His exhales scorched my cheek. "You're mine."

Every cell in my body sang in agreement, and I shivered. If he had said it in the throes of passion, I could've overlooked the possessiveness. But now, lust was satiated and sanity had returned. Blake meant every word. My heart fluttered. However, I needed more. I'd given him everything. I deserved the whole truth, not half meanings.

"Is that so?"

"Mmm-hmmm..." Obviously he was too satisfied to discern the irony lacing my voice.

"Another notch on your bedpost? Before and after Princess Leah?" I asked matter-of-factly. No more games.

Blake raised his head to peer at me. "You're a notch on my heart. Haven't you realized that by now?"

I tried to swallow, but couldn't. My own heart drummed against my ribcage, and the moment spanned out torturously.

His signature half-grin lit his face. "I love you, Emily. I have since the first moment I met you, since our first kiss on New Year's Eve. I may have stolen a kiss that night, but you stole my heart."

Tears trickled down my cheeks, and he swept them away with his thumbs. I sniffed. "I guess I messed up, huh?"

Blake chuckled. "It's what you do best, kitten. Don't worry, I'll keep you out of trouble."

His expression sobered. "Speaking of which, I didn't use a condom. Again."

The heat that suffused my cheeks had to be visible. Blake's eyebrows furrowed.

"Um, this isn't how I planned to tell you." To be honest, I hadn't planned at all, but I wasn't about to tell *him* that. "I'm..." I cleared my throat. "I'm pregnant."

Surprise streaked across his face, and I cursed the fact I couldn't hide away, tucked under his warm body as I was.

"I didn't—I mean, that night—" Unintelligible explanations tumbled out simultaneously at his ongoing silence. I tried to push him off me.

Blake silenced me with a finger against my lips. "I know it's mine. You don't have to convince me."

Relief brimmed inside me, but then he paused. The ominous silence cloaked me until I almost suffocated. I had a feeling I wouldn't like what he'd say next.

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Blake caressed my cheek, his hand brushing down my neck, to my wildly beating pulse. God, I was trapped and couldn't hold any reaction back from him.

"I admit I would have preferred if we waited a bit to have kids." The bittersweet admission hung in the almost non-existent space between us. "But that's only because I wanted to keep you to myself a while longer."

His reasoning pushed my lungs to working order.

"Besides, I don't know how Amanda will take the news. She's fragile right now and might fear I'll cast her aside, but I don't think she'll have a problem." He kissed my forehead. "She can't stop talking about you."

I scrunched my nose. "I should thank her. She's the reason you bothered to show up at my doorstep, after all."

Blake smirked, pulled back a few inches, and pushed inside me once more. My eyes widened even as renewed desire flowed in me. He was hard again.

"She was merely a good enough excuse. And you have no idea the hell she put me through the time we were apart. Even if I'd wanted to put you out of my mind, I had this incessant PR person in my house, raving about your virtues. It's a wonder I remained sane." He punctuated with another deep thrust.

"You think you're sane?" I moaned and countered his movement. Liquid lust seeped out of me to aid his passage.

"Whenever you allow me to be."

I licked my lips. "So I'm to blame for all your woes?"

Blake smiled, but it wasn't a comforting sight. "Exactly. And now you have to endure your punishment."

I let out a mock sigh of resignation. "If I must...."

"Oh you must. Be a trooper." He pulled out of me and turned me so that I was lying face down. "On your hands and knees." His roughly spoken command had ripples of excitement spreading through my body.

"Good girl." Blake caressed my back when I complied, and then paid homage lower. He cupped my butt, squeezing and releasing, his thumbs burrowing inside the crack. "I love your ass." His awe-filled voice filled me with searing embarrassment and desire all at once.

I liked desire better so I wiggled my butt for him. "Show me."

The air sizzled around us at my challenge. Blake didn't waste any time to prove his admiration. He thrust inside me, burying himself to the hilt. A broken cry was all the reaction I could muster. His hands locked on my hips as he picked an almost punishing pace. In and out, deep plunges, and then shallow, he drove me wild. Even though I tried to push back and meet him, he didn't let me take any initiative. With a menacing roar, his grip on my hips tightened, holding me immobile, a willing victim to whatever he wanted to dish out. I didn't know what to expect next, and anticipation heightened my senses. The scent of him and of sex lingered in the air around us, pushing my arousal higher.

At this angle, Blake hit all the right spots and brought me close to the peak in no time. Just when I was about to come, he stopped, his length buried deep inside me, teasing but not delivering. He covered me with all of his body, his hands coming to rest next to my own.

"Blake, please." He didn't acknowledge my whimpered request.

The Art of Losing

He nuzzled my cheek, swirled his tongue in my ear. His heated whisper caressed the sensitive cove. "Say you're mine."

"What?"

He bit my lobe. "My woman," one hand trailed between my breasts and settled on my belly, "my baby, mine. No one else's. Say it." The barbaric urgency in his voice called forth a primal need to submit. I trembled.

"I'm yours, Blake. Yours for the taking."

He grunted his contentment, and then pushed away only to push back with more fervor. Blake held nothing back as he took me. If his intention was to imprint himself on every part of me, my clenching sex, my heart, my mind, he succeeded. I didn't know where he ended and I began anymore. I just knew I was alive again because he held me in his arms, warmed me with his body, blessed me with his love.

When I came, I buried my face in the pillow to silence my screams of rapture, belatedly remembering my neighbors would be home on a Saturday afternoon and the walls were paper-thin.

Blake pulled me by my hair. "Tsk, ts, ts, Emily. I want to hear your pleasure. Now, I'll have to make you come again."

"Oh God, no."

He chuckled and gave my neck a small bite. "Now, honey, you're going to have me thinking you don't like my lovemaking."

I snorted. "Yeah, as if you'd believe that one even if I said it."

"You do act the insatiable sex kitten around me."

I gasped, but the demands of my body outvoted my outrage when need built deep in my womb again. Blake knew how to draw whatever reaction he wanted from my body. A sneaky hand reached between my thighs and drew circles on my swollen clit. I was so sensitive that within minutes, waves of bliss crashed over me again.

This time, I didn't muffle my cries. I didn't care what the neighbors would think. The only opinion that mattered to me was Blake's. And he loved me.

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Miss Stone, what prompted you to work for Mr. Davis when you were already employed as a school teacher at Merriweather Elementary?"

The lawyer's sharp, vulture eyes zeroed in on my face waiting, searching for a chink in my armor. The glee he'd feel when pouncing on me was palpable. Mr. Rivers's single-minded focus reminded me of Blake's, but instead of lending me warmth, it chilled me to the bone. I swallowed hard, a desperate attempt to moisten my dry mouth. "I took the job because I needed the extra cash."

"Were you saving for a trip to Aspen?" His innocent tone echoed in the sparsely populated courtroom while he strolled up and down.

I kept his gaze. "No, I was short on money."

"Isn't it more accurate to say you were *out* of money? You sold your car because you couldn't afford fixing it, and medical bills were accumulating. If you didn't find a job soon, you'd be buried in debts, isn't that right?"

"Objection. Counselor is asking the witness to speculate." Mr. Guntry, Andrea's lawyer, came to my defense.

"Sustained." The judge's emotionless voice boomed from my left.

Robert's lawyer gave me an all teeth smile. "At the time you met Mr. Davis, you were actively looking for sources of income. Is it possible you considered Mr. Davis himself to be such a source?"

I drummed my fingers against my thigh. "I don't understand what you're saying." Blake's coaching had been drilled into me. *Clarify whenever you're not sure about something.* "Yes, he was my employer."

"What I'm saying is you came across a recently divorced man with considerable means and thought you could take advantage of his fragile emotional state."

A small snort escaped. "Mr. Davis fragile? Please. Pissed off over the fact he lost his trophy wife maybe, but he wasn't in the least sad."

The air suddenly filled with tension. I cursed myself for dropping the dumb blonde act. Now the gloves would definitely come off.

"You didn't know Mr. Davis prior to his divorce to voice an opinion."

"Neither did you, yet you're claiming he took the separation hard." My smile candy-cane sweet, I shot down his argument.

The man's eyes flashed with irritation. I glanced at Blake and his mouthed "You're doing great" gave me the strength I needed to continue. I couldn't let Andrea and Matthew down.

"Miss Stone, did you accompany Mr. Davis to a superstore to buy things for his son?"

"Yes, I wanted to give Matthew something to be happy about and decorate his bedroom so it would be more fitting to a kid's needs."

"Did you happen to cook while you were there to tutor Mr. Davis's son?"

"I—I did fix him a sandwich or two, but I...."

The lawyer approached me, his stance intimidating. "And didn't you stop to think an impressionable young boy who needed a mother figure would turn to you and consider you a replacement of sorts?"

The Art of Losing

Had Matthew felt this way? God, that was never my intention. I took a deep breath. “No, I didn’t think what you’re suggesting would happen.”

“Or you wanted it to happen is more like it.” He turned his back at me.

“Objection. He’s badgering the witness.”

Yeah, thanks for nothing, Guntry. I felt utterly alone up on the witness stand, and I couldn’t stop trembling on the inside.

“Sustained. Watch your step, Mr. Rivers.”

The attorney nodded to the judge in silent acknowledgment. “Miss Stone, did you make it a habit to stay until late at Mr. Davis’ apartment?”

“Sometimes I had to, depending on....”

“Let me ask you this.” His tone turned unthreatening again. “In the few weeks you tutored Matthew, what was your opinion of Mr. Davis?”

Heat bled into my cheeks, and I hoped my makeup concealed the slight flush. “My feelings toward him were conflicting.”

“Would you care to elaborate for the court?” The subtle jeer didn’t go unnoticed, and I bristled.

“Ninety percent of the time he was charming, polite, friendly and seemed to care deeply for Matthew. Yet I could sense that—”

He cut me off again. “Thank you, you’ve answered my question.”

Dammit!

I threw Andrea’s lawyer an angry glare, but otherwise held my temper in check. If I didn’t keep my calm, it would only hurt Andrea’s case. I didn’t need to look at Blake to know he seethed. Oddly enough, the reaction relaxed me. I had someone that would move heaven and earth for me. Blake wouldn’t let anyone harm me even if he had to jump out of his seat and grab Robert’s lawyer by his white collar.

I smiled at the thought.

“So by your own admission, Mr. Davis’s past behavior doesn’t warrant your subsequent claim he attacked you on the evening of March 5th.”

“Every criminal has been law abiding at some point in their life, Mr. Rivers, that doesn’t mean they’re innocent.”

The other man gave me the evil eye, obviously displeased by how my answer drilled holes in whatever argument he planned to throw at me next. He smiled nonetheless. “You should have been a lawyer, Miss Stone. You’re wasting your argumentative talents as an educator.”

Andrea’s attorney remained silent—I guess he didn’t want to break his streak. I let out a mental snort. The man was lousy at his job, but I couldn’t blame Andrea. One needed money to have good representation.

“Why should the court believe my client did in fact commit a crime? You say he tried to rape you, he says you were two adults about to have consensual sex.”

“Didn’t you see the pictures, Mr. Rivers? The bruises, the scrapes, the torn clothes? If you share your client’s idea of consensual sex, my condolences to your wife.”

With a satisfied gleam in his eyes, the slimy lawyer turned to the judge. “Your honor, please advise the witness to respond to the questions with more respect.”

“Miss Stone, please choose your words wisely from now on.” The judge’s blank face added to my nervousness. Did he believe Robert or me?

The Art of Losing

I bit my lip. "I apologize, your honor."

Rivers didn't give me time to recover from the reprimand. "Isn't it true you're here testifying today because you want to get back at my client for not succumbing to your blackmail?"

I blinked rapidly, sure I heard him wrong. "Excuse me?"

"Do you deny," he took fast hostile steps and came to stand inches away from me, "you contacted Mr. Davis a few days after the incident and threatened to sue him if he didn't pay you ten thousand dollars?"

Shock held me tongue-tied for a few seconds, until my gaze landed on Robert's smug face. Determination flowed through my veins. I would not let him win.

"And I suppose Mr. Davis didn't think he got his money's worth?" I asked not taking my eyes off him.

"Miss Stone, I have been authorized by my client to inform you that if you want to retract your statement at this time, Mr. Davis will not press charges." The lawyer's offer grated on my nerves.

"I think I'll take my chances, Mr. Rivers. I have a very good lawyer." Who was currently trying very hard not to assault someone. I leveled my hardest stare at the slime ball in front of me. "Your client attacked me. He shoved me into his bedroom, while his seven-year-old son slept down the hall, hit me when I fought back, ripped my clothes, and would've raped me if I hadn't reacted."

"Why shouldn't we believe you hurt yourself on purpose so you could blackmail him?"

I turned to the judge. "So I should've let him rape me to have a stronger case against him?"

He cleared his throat, but my question didn't perturb him. He must hear sob stories similar to mine every day. Besides, I don't think a man can ever understand how helpless a woman feels when she's a victim of such an attack.

"You have no physical evidence of penetration." I clenched my teeth at Rivers's matter-of-fact tone.

"If you say I tried to blackmail Mr. Davis, then why didn't I let him rape me? Wouldn't that be more incriminating, thus forcing him to pay up?"

"No plan is foolproof." His sneer turned my stomach.

Andrea's lawyer finally interjected. "Objection. Miss Stone's character isn't in question. She has adequately stated what happened. There's no reason for this slanderous questioning to continue."

Ya think?

"Your honor, since it's her word against my client's, it's my right to delve into her moral character," my Armani-clad tormentor countered.

"And you have done so to the court's satisfaction, Mr. Rivers. Objection sustained. Is there anything else you would like to ask the witness?"

"No, your honor." His face was etched with frustration.

"You may step down, Miss Stone."

"Your honor, could I be allowed to say something before I step down?" My heart beat a crazy tattoo against my ribs. My testimony didn't reflect what I knew to be the truth, and I refused to let things at that.

The Art of Losing

Slow, agonizing seconds ticked by. “Say what you have to say, Miss Stone, but be quick about it. And remember you’re still under oath.”

I nodded. “Whatever your take on what happened that night, I want it to be absolutely clear that during the time I tutored Matthew, I realized he was unhappy. He had withdrawn into himself. I had to try really hard just to get a smile out of him. In my professional experience as a schoolteacher who deals with children every day and is trained to look past appearances into their fragile psyche, I can assure you that his mother’s absence from his life is only in part to blame for Matthew’s behavior and change in character. Mr. Davis is authoritative to the point of cruelty, emotionally detached from his son, and unfit to raise a child as a single parent.”

I wrung my hands in my lap and swallowed hard. God, please help me say the right thing. “My father left my mother and me when I was very young, so I can tell you from personal experience a child needs both parents in their life. But no father is better than a bad father.”

The silence that fell in the courtroom after my little speech seemed too ominous. On shaky legs, I stepped down from the witness box and heard the judge behind me order a one-hour recess. Still in sleepwalking mode, I found myself amidst the unsettling ruckus of people walking up and down the hallway. I felt lost, uncertain.

Had I ruined everything?

Chapter Thirty-Four

"Hey there, you did great." Blake's voice filtered through, right before a pair of familiar strong arms wrapped around my waist.

I leaned back to rest against his broad chest. "Yeah? If only I could be so sure...." I sighed placing my arms over his.

He kissed the crown of my head. "Baby, if I were that bastard's lawyer I'd be shaking in my boots." Blake's drawled comment was just what I needed. I chuckled.

"He's not man enough to wear boots." I turned around in time to catch the gleam of mischief in his eyes.

"True. Have I mentioned I own a pair? Granted, they're lost somewhere in the back of my closet, but I'm sure I can dig them up."

The playful banter we fell into with so much ease lightened my mood. I touched his arm. "Thank you for being here with me today."

Blake framed my face with his hands. "Don't ever thank me again for something that's my responsibility. I love you. That means whatever you need I provide."

Tears brimmed in my eyes and gathered on my eyelashes. I sniffed and looked away, still unused to someone caring for me, and not the other way around.

Blake leaned down until we were both at eye level. "Hey, what's this?"

"Nothing." I brushed away the wetness, hoping the waterproof mascara did its job and I didn't resemble a clown. "I guess I'm still wired from testifying. Add hormones to the mix...."

He tensed and was quick to sweep a hand across my belly. "Are you okay?"

"We're fine. Don't worry." I added a smile to my words.

"Hey, Blake. Long time no see."

The man who'd spoken had to be about three inches shorter than Blake, his black hair peppered by age.

"John." Blake nodded in that way men have to acknowledge one another. "It's been awhile. How's your wife?"

The smile on his face if possible became wider. "Complaining because I'm not agreeable to early retirement. Crazy woman wants me all to herself."

Blake chuckled. "Imagine that. This is Emily, my fiancée." My lungs ceased to work at the last word.

I gave him a sidelong "what the hell are you talking about" glance. "Pleased to meet you."

John enfolded my hand in his. "The pleasure is all mine. It's about time Blake here settled down."

"Being married to Emily doesn't rank as settling down. Trust me." The mock serious tone of my *fiancé* would get him killed. Well, clubbed on the head at least.

Heat suffused my cheeks. "I can't believe you said that!" I slapped his arm, but caught myself when I spotted the bemused expression on John's face.

"Keep him on his toes, do you? That's good, that's good. Life needs a bit of excitement."

"He's exaggerating, I assure you." I smiled widely, trying not to let my discomfort show.

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"I'm sure you're delightful, Emily." John cleared his throat. "Would you mind if I steal Blake for a minute? There's a case I need to talk to him about."

"Not at all. I'm thirsty anyway. I think I saw a water cooler back there."

Blake's teasing didn't distract me to the degree he wanted, I'm certain. The fact he said I was his fiancée niggled my mind during my quest to soothe my parched throat. My heart beat erratically. Did I want to marry Blake? Granted, I was carrying his child, but the thought he'd proposed for that reason alone had my insides tied into knots.

I refused to settle.

Refreshing water ran down my throat as I bent over the cooler. When I'd drunk to my satisfaction, I straightened, but before I had the time to turn around, someone pushed me against the cooler. Its hard edge dug into my stomach, and I cried out. His large body crowded my smaller one—one part of his anatomy left no doubt about his sex.

I was trapped.

"You're more trouble than you're worth, Emily." Robert's hateful voice washed over me, and any illusions I might've harbored about someone accidentally bumping into me dissolved.

"Let me go."

"Why? I'm having so much fun." I wiggled to get free, but he was stronger than me. "Oh yeah, baby. Keep that up, and I might just come in my pants." I froze at his crude words. "Spoilsport." Robert's whisper fanned my ear.

I let out a whimper. We were in the middle of a busy hallway, and no one could see he was manhandling me? I sagged forward, helplessness sapping my strength.

His lips feathered along my neck. "Giving up so easily? Where's the wild cat I had in my bed—"

A grunting force knocked Robert out of his place and far away from me. Even before I turned, I knew who my savior was.

Blake.

He didn't utter one word—an intelligible one at least, he just cornered Robert against the opposite wall and pummeled him again and again. No questions, no chances for the other man to explain the situation, Blake fell on him with no remorse. Robert tried to push a string of words out, but a punch in the face corrected the situation. The next one knocked the air out of him.

If I'd thought Blake had gone caveman on me before, this show certainly proved me wrong.

Fear soon replaced my gratitude. Blake didn't seem to have any intention of stopping. At this rate, he was going to kill him. I approached them, wincing at the sight of Robert's bloody face, but I couldn't feel sorry for him. He didn't seem to handle himself so well with someone his own size. Satisfaction coursed through my veins at the sight of his fear-filled eyes.

How would he like it now that he was on the receiving end of violence?

Everyone around us had fallen silent and watched the fight with the same morbid curiosity Romans used to watch gladiators battle to the death in the Coliseum. No one stepped in to tear the men apart. Damn vultures.

The Art of Losing

“Blake, please stop.” My plea didn’t appear to register. Dammit, I had to get through to him and past the red haze of fury.

Blake wrapped a hand around Robert’s neck and squeezed. Gurgling, choking sounds came out of the other man’s throat. His eyes bugged out.

“If you ever,” Blake said through gritted teeth, “even so much as *breathe* near her again, I’ll finish what I started here today. Do I make myself clear?”

Robert attempted to nod but just managed to bob his head. He reminded me of the ornamental dogs people have in their cars. Still, Blake didn’t let him go.

“Blake.” He must’ve heard my murmur this time because he turned to stare at me. I almost backed away at the feral anger blazing in his eyes. Black locks fell on his forehead left and right, his nostrils flared, and his features were drawn into a hard mask.

He looked testy as a hungry panther. He looked dangerous. He looked like my knight in shining armor.

Slowly, he withdrew his hand from around Robert’s neck. The other man slid down to the floor, like the worthless heap of cells he was. Blake took me in his arms, lifting me off my feet, his chest heaving against me. He walked away from Robert. I understood why. The other man’s mere presence polluted the air around us. With his hand keeping my head on his shoulder, he held me so tight I almost couldn’t breathe.

“I thought I wouldn’t get to you fast enough.” He spoke so low, the fact I heard him surprised me. His heart continued to pound an erratic rhythm that vibrated through me.

I swept calming circles along his back. “I’m okay.”

“I’m not.” Blake put me down, and the raw emotion in his eyes held me immobile. “I lost it when I saw him touching you, bullying you. All the images from that night crashed into my mind more vividly than I could handle, and I realized how close to losing you I came. I can’t lose you, Emily.”

“You won’t lose me. I’m here.” I touched his chest just above his heart. “And you’re here.” I placed his hand over mine. “Always.”

“Always.” He took my lips in the sweetest kiss in the history of kisses. It’s in the books. Look it up.

“She cost me my son.” Robert had the nerve to wheeze out and ruin the moment.

Blake didn’t even spare him a glance. “No, asshole. You did that all by yourself.”

* * * *

I did cost Robert his son. “Your testimony tilted the scales to Andrea’s favor” were Blake’s exact words. I didn’t care how many death knells I placed on his parental rights’ coffin; I was satisfied I placed even one. I would never forget the look on Andrea’s face after they read the verdict. She didn’t seem to believe she would get her son back; she was so shell-shocked. Laughter mixed with tears, and she enveloped me in a tight hug, thanking me over and over again. She even hugged Cade.

The Art of Losing

The memory pushed me to caress my belly as I lay on Blake's bed, the last sunrays filtering through the drawn curtains. I wouldn't be able to bear it if someone took my child away either, and I hadn't even met him, or her.

"What are you thinking about?" Blake put his hand over mine. Together we could handle anything, but—

"Why did you tell John I'm your fiancée?" I opened my eyes, needing to see his face.

Instead of replying, he turned and rummaged through his bedside drawer. Right, because I wasn't anxious enough to hear what he had to say... My frustration evaporated, though, when he looked at me again. He held a small velvet box in his hands. My heart flipped over in my chest.

Blake opened it. "Will you marry me, Emily?"

The elegant diamond ring that sparkled even in the dim light of his bedroom short-circuited my brain every bit as much as the question. Never in my life had I seen a ring so beautiful.

He cupped my cheek drawing my gaze to his face. "You're hell on my ego, kitten. Don't I even deserve an answer?"

I smiled, but I knew it was a bad effort. "I don't know what to answer you, Blake." His hopeful expression shattered and added to my heartache. I bolted off the bed, unable to look at him while I explained. How *could* I explain? I rubbed my forehead. "Listen, we've known each other for less than four months, and our relationship has been tumultuous at best. I can't base a marriage on that just because we're going to have a baby. I won't." I tried to sound firm and dared a glance at him.

Plopped on his side of the bed, he had his elbows bent to support his upper body. His eyes danced with amusement. "Are you done?"

"You think I'm kidding?" I fumed and placed my hands on my hips. "Think again. You're just asking me to marry you because I got pregnant. Well, you don't have to. Lots of couples have babies and don't get married. Who knows if in a year you won't fall out of love with me? Or if I won't? This is my responsibility and you...." Words escaped me when Blake rose from the bed and came to me, his face cast in hard determination.

"Are you done?"

I nodded. The wise part of my brain cautioned me not to push him more.

"Good. Now *you* listen. I won't deny that I always take responsibility for my actions and this baby," he placed a proprietary hand on my belly, "is no more yours than it is mine. Hell, I was the one who cornered you at the restaurant, so if someone's more to blame, it's me. Yes, other couples don't get married just because a pregnancy threw their plans out the window."

It was a testament of my superhuman effort to remain unfazed that I didn't flinch at his words. The fact he actually defended my case with far better arguments stung. Hearing him list all the things going through my head chilled me to the bone because, for some reason, I nurtured the tiniest bit of hope I was being paranoid. Unable to hold his undecipherable gaze, I glanced out the window. The sunset always saddened me, but now it was worse because I felt something far more important than the day was ending.

The Art of Losing

Blake took my chin between his thumb and index finger and turned me to look at him. “That said, I wouldn’t propose if I didn’t want you to be my wife.”

I snorted, finally finding my voice. “You’re too honorable for anything else.” I broke free of his hold and walked toward the window.

He came to hug me from behind. “I’m glad you think so highly of me, but my intentions aren’t that honorable. I will *never* fall out of love with you. The time we were apart, I felt dead. Nothing mattered. No one. I started functioning again when I saw you walk out of your building.”

Puzzled, I turned to look at him. “What are you talking about? We ran into each other at the restaurant.”

His smile was small and self-deprecating. “No. I was parked outside your apartment and saw you leaving with Cade. I followed you there. You had your own stalker there for awhile, Miss Stone.” He bent so we were face to face. “That’s how crazy I am about you. And if you ever try to leave me and run away, I’ll follow you.”

“I’m not going anywhere. But—”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, but—”

“Do you doubt I love you?”

“No, Blake, but until *when*?” I hurried to finish before he interrupted me again.

His green eyes blazed with emotion. Love. “Until the day I die.” He kissed me long and slow, his tongue sliding in my mouth to tease and arouse. Blake took me on a sensuous, mind-blowing journey that ended all too soon.

“You’re stuck with me, Emily. You can give in now or keep fighting me. I’ll enjoy wearing you down.” He gave me a slow, sinful smile.

A shiver gripped me from head to toe. I knew I shouldn’t doubt his words. And I also knew he had backed up those words with actions. I could depend on him. But isn’t that how all marriages start? With the couple thinking everything will go fine?

“Blake, I don’t want to lose you, but—”

“Do you think I’d ever walk out on you, kitten? Nothing short of death would keep me away from you and our child. I’m not your father.”

His words knocked the air out of me. I searched in my heart and realized he recognized my fear even when I hadn’t. I was afraid of history repeating itself. All the nights my mom had to work to support us, the fact she didn’t have anyone to help her, someone to lean on... I just didn’t believe it could be any other way. But as I peered into Blake’s face, how could I believe anything else?

Everything inside me told me this—we—would last forever.

“You’re right, you’re not my father. And I’m not my mother.” So what if our marriage fell apart? I couldn’t shy away from doing what I wanted just because years from now things might get ugly.

“You won’t have to be. We’ll never break up.”

I draped my arms around his neck. “Yes, Mr. Edwards. I will marry you.”

He chuckled, even though relief erased the worried lines on his face. He really was afraid I’d turn him down. The thought warmed me. “Don’t you think we’re past last names?”

The Art of Losing

“No, I think we’re past love,” I said against his lips and kissed him.

THE END

Excerpt from
The Perfect Man

by

Sarah Dobbs

A Freya's Bower Chick Lit Novel

The Perfect Man

Harriet's neck tingled when John pushed his fingers into her hair, thumb grazing her cheek. A sparkle kiss. She hadn't had a sparkle kiss since Richard. When they finally parted, Harriet rolled her lips inwards, as if to remember the taste. She suddenly found the cream throw thoroughly absorbing. Anything rather than look into those eyes. If she looked up, she couldn't be held responsible for her actions – which would include: tearing off his clothes stripper-style and wrapping her legs around him like a monkey on a tree in a hurricane.

"I've been wanting to do that all week you know? You make me feel giddy. But I wouldn't...God, a salesman tongue-tied. Do you see what you're doing to me?"

Oh I'm not doing anything yet, mate. "What do you mean?"

"I'm just trying to say, I think we could be good together and I wouldn't want to rush things."

Bastard. Now I have to sleep with him.

"Are you sure?"

Harriet got up off the couch and grabbed John's tie. The look in his eyes gave her the confidence to give him the I-Want-You gaze.

"God, you're gorgeous. What are you doing in Manchester?"

She tapped his nose with her finger. "Seducing you."

He laughed. "Well, you belong somewhere glamorous, like Milan or Paris."

"What can I say, I like the rain? And I'm a sucker for tongue-tied salesmen, particularly when I'm responsible for the tying up." She tugged on the tie, thinking of all the other things she could do with it. John stood, towering over her despite her boots. She placed one palm on his chest. Let it run downwards, over his stomach, towards his belt.

Bumpy? Could it be...?

Harriet did it again.

Finally, a man with actual pecs. This should be good.

Harriet's heart raced faster. She'd never had a one-night stand and the logical part of her brain was winking red: *Caution! Situation I will regret imminent.* John could just be saying all the right things. It didn't mean she would ever see him again.

But her body wouldn't listen. And that was part of the thrill. She loosened the silver tie, keeping John's eyes. They seemed to glitter darkly with lust, entranced with her taking command. He seemed confident enough to let her do it all. But Harriet knew it wouldn't be too long before John took over.

For now, she was happy to do the work.

Harriet undid his shirt buttons. She parted the black fabric to reveal a chest that belonged in a music video.

"Jesus."

He raised one eyebrow. "What?"

She looked at him sideways. "Like you don't know." Harriet slipped the shirt off John's powerful shoulders and let it drop to the floor. She took a step back, looked up at John briefly, and raised her own top over her head. That joined

The Perfect Man

John's shirt on the floor. She breathed in nervously as his eyes took in her body. She reached up and unpinned her hair, but the clip snagged. *Coffee Girl's attempt to seduce Model Man? Failed.* She tried to rip it out, without showing how much it hurt.

John reached behind her and freed it easily. He ran the diamante clip over her nose, the centre of her mouth, between her breasts. It gently nicked her bare skin.

"Everyone in that restaurant was looking at you," he murmured. "I can't believe you're here with me."

Knees weakening! Was the guy wearing an ear-piece, getting fed great chat-up, skirt-down lines from his own personal Cupid, or what?

John's fingers found their place in the niche between Harriet's ribs and hips. He guided her towards him, and she suddenly felt intensely shy. She fed herself some lines: *Keep going girl. You can do it. Do it for the pecs!* Biting her lip, she took John's tie and pulled it over her own head. He shook his head and cupped her face in both hands. Again, that perfect kiss. Her nipples hardened, brushing lightly against his smooth chest.

"I'm never going to get these boots off," she whispered.

"You'll have to leave them on then, won't you?"

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