



MORNING STAR

ROSLYN HARDY
HOLCOMB

Loose Id

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Roslyn Hardy Holcomb



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About this Title

Genre: Multicultural Erotic Contemporary

Driven and ambitious, Andi McFadden has wanted to be a television producer for as long as she can remember. She was fortunate enough to be mentored by one of the most powerful producers in Hollywood, and after paying her dues she's now the producer of her own show. Just before accepting the new position she had what she thought would be a one-night stand with Harley Joseph, one of the hottest actors in town. Now she discovers there's been a last-minute change and he's been cast as the star of her new show.

Harley uses his considerable sensual talents to seduce Andi back into his bed, but because of their working relationship she insists that they keep their relationship a secret. However, it's almost impossible to keep their passion concealed in the close confines of a busy production studio, and they have several close calls. Meanwhile Andi discovers that she's not Harley's only secret.

Can their fragile relationship with stand the business, or it will it crumble...along with her career?

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable.*

Chapter One

How thou art fallen from heaven O day-star, son of the morning! Isaiah
14:12

Andi locked eyes across a crowded room with what had to be the most fuckable man in the entire Western Hemisphere and had to struggle to look away. She knew it was a damnable cliché, but the attraction was just that instantaneous. Of course, she wasn't the only woman to have that reaction. After all, the blond stallion she was exchanging heated glances with was Harley Joseph, one of the hottest actors in town. Every woman there wanted a piece of that, and she'd never been one to join a queue. Though there was something about this one that made her question her long-standing policy. However, in a roomful of starlets and other hotties-of-the-week, she didn't have a chance of attracting his attention in the first place. She took another sip of her champagne and tried to think about something else. Attendance at the annual Christmas bash thrown by her boss, Myron, was mandatory, and she had looked forward to the opportunity to let down her hair a bit and have some fun. His wife, Bunny Ellison, was an avaricious bitch, a puma in pearls, but Andi had to give credit where it was due—she threw a helluva party.

She glanced at Harley again, panicking a bit when she realized he was headed her way. It had been a long time since she'd been so strongly attracted to a man. If the way he was cutting a smooth swath through the crowd was any indication, he felt the same magnetic lure she did. That was more than a little bit scary. Harley Joseph had a reputation as a player extraordinaire. She was no slouch, but he was totally out of her league. He moved like a professional

dancer or the wiliest athlete. Even in the mad crush of the party, it seemed that the crowd just parted for him with minimal effort on his part.

When he finally reached her side, he just stared down at her for a long, intense moment. Feeling light-headed, Andi realized she'd stopped breathing as she fell into those peridot green depths. She inhaled, trying to regain her bearings; instead she got a lungful of his tangy scent, which only increased her arousal. His lips moved into a slow smile, drawing her attention to the sensuous curve of his full bottom lip. Andi felt chills up her spine when he followed that smile with a low chuckle. God, the man was almost inhumanly sexy! She could tell from the long muscles displayed by his expertly tailored Prada tuxedo that he was physically active, tall, with an athletic build. He had a thick head of the type of overlong, tousled blond hair every male actor in town spent thousands of dollars to achieve with the latest celebrity hairstylist—but somehow she suspected that his was natural. It looked as though he simply could not be bothered to have it cut and styled on a regular basis. There was something incredibly appealing about a man who made sure that his tuxedo fit to a tee, yet didn't really give a damn what his hair looked like.

His lips were moving again, and Andi realized he had asked a question. Like a gauche schoolgirl, she was forced to ask him to repeat it. His smile widened; he obviously realized why she was so distracted. He repeated the question for her.

“Who are you, and why has Myron been hiding you from me?” He paused for a moment, stroking his chin. “Actually, scratch the second part of that question.” He made an encompassing gesture toward her. “I think the answer is obvious.”

Andi shook her head and was unable to resist giving him her best smile. “He doesn't hide me anywhere. I'm a writer on one of his shows.”

“Well, hell. All the writers I know are potbellied old farts with red noses from too many three-martini lunches. Myron's been trying to get me down there forever. If I'd had any idea he had writers like you hanging around...”

"I've been known to enjoy a martini or two myself, but despite the season, I don't think my nose has turned red yet."

Harley smiled again. "I guess I need to grow some manners and introduce myself. I'm Harley Joseph. And you are?"

Andi nodded. "Yes, I recognized you from Myron's pilot a few years back. Too bad that show wasn't picked up. I think it would've been a winner."

"No, I'm not exactly mourning that. I don't think I'd particularly like doing television again. I got enough of that doing soaps, and you still haven't told me your name." He raised an inquiring brow.

Andi was stunned to hear herself giggle. Where the hell had that come from? She wasn't exactly the giggling type. *No more Veuve for you, girl.* She scolded herself sternly as she extended her hand to Harley. "Andi McFadden. I'm Myron's protégé and the assistant producer of *High School Blues*."

Harley lowered his head, raising her hand to his lips. Andi gasped as a shudder coursed through her body when he stroked his full bottom lip across her palm. She bit off another exclamation as he raised his eyes to meet her own. Their bright color had deepened to an almost emerald green, and he made no attempt to hide the desire shimmering in their depths. He moved in closer, and she realized that he intended to kiss her right there in the crowded room. Though tempted to throw caution to the wind, she had enough presence of mind to realize that drawing attention to themselves was not a good idea, and suggested that they step into the study.

She was immediately glad that she had, because the minute they entered the empty room, Harley pulled her into his body and lowered his lips to meet her own. Harley was an expert kisser, and she felt his growl before he covered her mouth with his, sucking strongly on her tongue. She blinked, then gasped in response as pure heat surged from her lips straight to her clit. She'd never been so aroused in her life. Her response couldn't be denied, and she practically launched herself at him, trying to get as close as possible to the thick erection that promised the relief she sought. Before she knew what had

happened, she found herself pinned against the mahogany-paneled wall, one leg raised to Harley's hip as he alternated between nipping and laving her neck. She could feel the heaviness of his arousal against her thigh and couldn't resist the urge to rub against it. The only things keeping him from being inside her at that very moment were his trousers and a pair of very thin and very wet panties. She realized that they wouldn't be a barrier for long when she felt him shifting her skirt even farther up her hips while fumbling for her panties. Andi reached for Harley's hands; even in her severely aroused state she knew this wasn't a good idea.

Harley raised his head from her neck, his face flushed and his voice so guttural with arousal, she could barely understand him. "What's wrong, babe?"

Andi made a gesture toward the room and grabbed her glasses, knocked askew during the tempestuous kiss. "I can't believe you're asking that. We're in Myron's study, for Pete's sake!" She lowered her leg, attempting to move away from him. He tightened his arm around her waist, preserving the contact.

"I locked the door when we came in here."

Andi rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Harley, I don't make a habit of having sex in my boss's study!"

"Is that all? Ah hell. Myron won't mind. We're good friends. Besides, that old boy's been around."

Despite the difficulty presented by the difference in their heights, Andi forcefully extricated herself from his arms and moved away a safe distance. "Myron might not care, but I do."

Harley took a moment to absorb that statement and paused, wiping his hands over his face. "Okay, now that the blood has returned to my brain, I'm capable of seeing your point." He moved in closer and whispered, his voice a low and husky timbre, "Andi, do you want to be with me tonight?"

Andi's eyes widened, and she bought some time to think by readjusting her glasses. "I don't usually—"

Harley placed two fingers across her lips, shaking his head. "I don't care about what you usually do. The only thing I want to know right now is: do you want to be with me tonight? Because I sure as hell want to be with you."

Andi slowly nodded, unable to resist such a sensuous request.

Harley took her hand, raising it to his lips again before tucking it against his body as he raised his eyes heavenward. "Thank God. I really hate like hell to take cold showers this time of year."

Andi found herself giggling again. Then, before she even had time for self-recrimination and doubt, he had maneuvered them out of the insanely crowded house and into his disreputably battered Jeep. The trip to her house wasn't particularly long, but she couldn't keep her hands off him for the relatively short trip. She explored the throbbing length of his cock through the lightweight wool of his tuxedo, squeezing her legs together in anticipation of feeling that thickness thrusting deep inside her. At each traffic light he grabbed her face and devoured her mouth again and again, until finally he pulled her hands away from his body.

"If you don't stop right now, you're going to find yourself getting the fucking of your life right here on the 101."

Andi wasn't necessarily opposed to the idea. In fact, only the very real possibility of arrest compelled her to keep her hands to herself. She stayed on her side of the car until they reached her condo in Echo Park.

"You know, you might want to consider moving back to civilization," Harley mused as he helped her out of his Jeep.

"What can I say? I'm just an urban pioneer. Besides, unlike the talent, I can't afford West Hollywood." She took his hand and led him up the stairs to her third-story condo. Even before the door closed, she was back in his arms, her legs wrapped around his waist.

Harley raised his head with a gasp. "The bedroom, Andi?"

Andi gazed back at him, her mind in a fog. "Huh?"

“The bedroom. Where's your bedroom, babe?”

Andi gestured in the general direction of her bedroom, and he moved that way, her legs still wrapped firmly around him. As he walked, his erection rubbed against her clitoris, and she groaned aloud. She'd never been this close to coming just from making out. Then she realized that Harley was growling something against the side of her neck.

“You feel so good, so soft, so hot.”

He tossed her down on the queen-size bed and quickly ripped off his tuxedo, tossing it to the floor with a casualness that belied its obscene price. He moved down onto the bed beside her and made short work of removing her diminutive blue velvet skirt and white silk chiffon halter top. His teeth clenched, and he shuddered against her as he moved his hand beneath her silk panties and felt her wetness. Knowing that she was as excited as he was seemed to push him even closer to the edge. Her breasts were swollen and throbbed under his mouth as he slipped one puffy areola between his lips. He sucked strongly, pushing her nipple against the roof of his mouth. Andi gasped in response to the heat that coursed over her body.

“I can't wait to get inside you. I just want to feel you hot and wet and tight, wrapped around me. I know it's going to be so good when I feel you come.”

Andi bit off a scream when he punctuated that statement by moving his hand between her legs and thrusting a finger deep inside, while flicking her clitoris with his thumb. Andi ground against his hand, clamping her soaking-wet pussy down on his finger, begging for more. As though he could read her mind, he gave it to her, adding another finger and then a third.

“God, I love being finger-fucked,” she said as she rode his hand, mindless, unable to think of anything but the pleasure that was just out of her reach. Then it hit her, crashing over in waves of ecstasy. She pressed her face into the curve of his neck, almost screaming out loud as wave after wave of release flowed through her. She bit down on a tendon as the pleasure peaked.

He spread her legs as far apart as they would go, looking down at her wet slit almost reverently. Too aroused to be embarrassed at being so open and exposed, Andi arched her back, reveling in his heated look.

“You're beautiful,” he said with a groan.

Andi delighted in his perusal. She reached for his hard cock, wrapping her hand around the thick length, pulling him toward her urgently. He complied, sliding the engorged mushroom head against her slick juices. Suddenly he raised his head. “Shit. Andi, please tell me you've got some condoms.”

Andi reached over and opened a drawer in her bedside table. She reached inside and drew out a strip of foil-wrapped condoms.

Harley raised his eyes heavenward in thanks, then removed one of the latex sheaths and slid it over his penis. He moved closer between Andi's thighs, his erection just teasing the lips of her pussy. She shifted her hips, taking herself closer, and he moved in, gingerly at first. Then, with a second thrust, he filled her.

“I can't believe it. It's better than I'd even imagined,” he said in a guttural tone.

Andi cried out her pleasure beneath him, arching her back as he slammed into her again and again. The thick girth of his penis stretched and filled her in a way she'd never experienced before. It brought her clit into unrelenting contact with the base of his cock. The constant stimulation to her already aroused body was almost more than she could stand. Each time he thrust, his body demanding more and more from her, she cried out. She couldn't catch her breath, couldn't think, she was so totally caught up in the rapture brought by the feel of his flesh sliding against hers, so close to coming, all her nerve endings were on fire. She looked up at him. The tendons stood out in his neck from exertion, the muscles in his arms stood in relief against his tanned skin as they tightened in anticipation of release. She could feel his response to each movement as their bodies slid together again and again. Compelled by a force they couldn't control, they strained together toward satisfaction. As she

shuddered through another orgasm, her slick wetness tightened on his cock, pulling him more deeply into her hot depths and triggering his release. He pounded into her one more time before collapsing on top of her with a harsh groan.

Chapter Two

Two months later

Andi rushed into Myron's office. Uncustomarily late, she was breathless from her mad dash down the long corridors of the production offices. Myron Ellison, executive producer of *High School Blues*, had called this meeting. As usual, she'd forgotten to recharge her BlackBerry and only found out about it minutes ago.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Myron. I didn't know about this meeting until a little while ago." She stopped short when she realized that he wasn't alone. A man had his back to her as he studied Myron's trophy case. The case ran the length of one wall and held an impressive display of Emmys, Golden Globes, and other lesser-known awards. The back of that shaggy blond head was as familiar to her as her own face. What in the name of all living hell was he doing here? She took a deep breath, forcing calm on herself as she recalled that Myron and Harley were friends. He was probably just there visiting.

Myron made a dismissive gesture. "Don't worry about it, Andi. It was a last-minute thing. We didn't close the deal until late last night. I want you to meet the star of our new pilot. Harley"—he gestured toward the man at the trophy case—"meet your new show runner."

For a minute Andi thought she was going to faint. She couldn't hear anything except for a loud roaring in her ears, and her vision grayed around the edges. She thought that she might welcome the relief that losing consciousness would provide. Anything had to be better than discovering that

she'd be working with the man she'd had a one-night stand with a couple of months before.

Harley turned, an incandescent grin splitting his beautifully sculpted face. He took the hand she'd automatically extended. "So happy to meet my new boss."

Andi took a deep breath and murmured a greeting of her own. "Myron, I thought we'd decided to use Phillip Jameson for the pilot."

"Yes, but Harley was always my first choice. I just didn't think I could get the overpriced bastard. That pit bull he has for an agent had me by the short hairs," Myron said in his customary grouching fashion.

Harley gave her a pointed look. "Are you saying that you don't want to work with me?"

"Of course not." Andi lied without batting a lash. "I'm delighted to have an actor of your caliber." His quick grin at her unintentional double entendre made her want to grit her teeth in annoyance. "I'm just surprised by such a key cast change at the last moment. I'm sure you'll be amazing in the role." That wasn't a lie. Harley had built quite a reputation making indie films. She'd seen all of them, and he had a way of... Damn, she couldn't come up with a word. *Underacting* was the closest she could come to describing what he did. Directors always said that they had no idea what they'd captured until they saw his performance on the screen. It was incredibly subtle and looked so natural that it kept viewers riveted in their seats watching him. He reminded her of Clint Eastwood, whose mere presence in a scene drew attention like a magnet. He had a way of conveying emotion that all the carpet-chewing theatrics other actors might employ couldn't come close to matching. She was actually surprised that he had agreed to do a television series, and had no doubt that Myron was paying through the nose for him. She really didn't want to see the budget. She stared at her boss. If she ran screaming from the room, they would think she was insane, but the idea had its appeal at that moment.

“Oh I see. Well, I hope we don't have to adjust the budget too much,” she said crisply, amazed that she had the presence of mind to even think about money.

Apparently her response was the right one, because Myron threw back his head on a guffaw of laughter. “A woman after my own heart. Trust me, the budget will be adjusted to accommodate for Harley's exorbitant salary.”

Andi forced herself to meet Harley's eyes. As she'd expected, they brimmed with laughter. Damn him. He was amused by this absolute disaster.

The rest of the morning went by in a blur. They discussed scripts and shooting schedules. Harley had a film to do in the summer, but it was little more than a cameo, so their calendar shouldn't be unduly affected. Neither man looked at her strangely or commented on any odd behavior, so Andi had to assume that she behaved in a more or less normal manner. She could only attribute it to conditioning; her brain had checked out the moment she'd walked into the room.

Just when Andi didn't think she could endure another second without descending into madness, it was over. Myron ended the meeting in time for lunch. He invited her to join them in the meal, but in a total violation of protocol that would have been completely out of the question before that moment, Andi pleaded a previous engagement. Under normal circumstances she would have done almost anything for some face time with her boss, but if she had to sit through lunch with that man, nothing could've prevented the fit of hysterics she had just barely held at bay.

* * * * *

“Okay, Imma need you to stop screaming like that. Presumably you don't want Minx down here.” Several hours later, Tree, Andi's best friend, was still trying to calm her.

Andi cut off in midwail. The prospect of her mother showing up at her friend's condo was too awful to contemplate. She lifted her empty glass. "You have any more vodka?"

Tree shook her elegant, closely shorn head. "No. You know I don't keep much hard liquor, and you already drank most of the wine."

Andi lowered her head to the leather-covered bar. "I've got to work with him, Tree. I had a one-night stand, and now I have to see him every day for who knows how long."

Tree shrugged. "Who knows? The pilot might not get picked up," she said philosophically.

Andi shook her head. "I should be so lucky. Myron said this one is a sure thing. He loves the pilot I wrote. He's been doing this for almost forty years. He knows a winner when he sees one."

Tree poured herself a glass of wine from the dregs of Andi's binge and joined her friend at the bar. "Well, if the tabloids are to be believed, Harley's been around. And around. Dude probably has a one-night stand every day. I'm sure it's no big deal to him."

Andi's breath hitched in her throat. Tree was probably right, but it pained her to think of herself as just another link on the man's chain of fools. She still thought of their night together more often than was healthy. It sucked to be reminded that what for her was a mind-blowing experience was nothing more than another cat in the dark for him. She took a deep breath. "Yeah, but it's still awkward as hell. The man will be working for me."

"In this town I'm sure it happens all the time. You didn't tell me Myron was letting you produce this one by yourself."

"Yeah, he said I'd done such a good job as assistant producer on *Blues* that I'd proven myself ready. He'll still be XP, but yeah, it's my show."

“Wow. That's absolutely fabulous news. God knows you earned it. I don't think I've seen you more than five times this past year, and you live across the fucking hall!”

“Hey, it's not like you don't have a full schedule your damned self,” Andi said. Tree was a high-fashion designer with her own line. She refused to live in New York full-time and had business interests and apartments on both coasts.

“You really can't back out now, can you?”

“No. That's not even an option. As you pointed out, I worked too damned hard for this. I'm not going back to second chair if I can help it. Besides, I think you're right. I doubt Harley even remembers. There was a lot of champagne flowing that night.” She tried not to think about the puckish gleam of amusement she'd seen glimmering in his bright green eyes most of the meeting. He knew she was uncomfortable, and had enjoyed every minute of it.

“Besides, you're the producer. Aren't you entitled to a little casting-couch action?”

“I would never do something so unethical,” Andi sniffed.

“Yeah, well, maybe it's time you tried it.”

* * * * *

“Hey, anybody here?” Harley stood in the middle of the living room of his West Hollywood loft.

“I'm here.” Smith, one of his roommates, came out of the kitchen. “How did the meeting with the big guy go?”

Harley struggled to contain the grin that insisted on spreading across his face. He shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it casually over the back of the long sectional sofa. “Remember the girl I told you I met a couple of months ago?”

“You mean Andi? The sexiest, most gorgeous, intelligent, funny, witty, sexiest, and did I mention sexiest, woman you've ever met?” Smith recited in a monotonous voice. “I vaguely recall you mentioning her.”

Harley laughed. "I know I haven't been that bad..."

"Worse. I stopped listening days ago. Alex and Fuchsia started a pool..." he drawled in his Texas accent. Well, at least Harley *thought* Smith was a he. There were times when he wasn't so sure. Smith was tall and lanky, but with an elegant bone structure and a full mouth that looked amazingly feminine. The spiky shag he wore could have gone either way as well. Even his clothing rendered no clues; the jeans and flowing shirts he favored were amazingly gender neutral. They'd lived together for over a year, and Harley still didn't know—and it wasn't exactly the type of question that could be asked, especially after such a lengthy time.

"A pool?" Harley asked. Apparently he had been putting it down a bit heavily after all.

"Yeah, we were betting that you'd have moved her in by now. But with you getting called back home last week, that was pretty much derailed. Now that you're back in town, we're starting a new pool."

Harley paused. He really didn't want to think about his family just then. It was clear that his father wasn't long for this world, and even more apparent that his family still wasn't comfortable around him. Though not unexpected, it still hurt.

He thought over what Smith had just said, stunned to realize that the notion of living with Andi didn't immediately make him want to run for the hills. Actually the idea was kind of...nice. He'd never lived with a woman before—well, except Fuchsia—but she was just a kid and hardly counted. Andi would keep him on his toes; that was for damned sure. He grinned again; he'd enjoyed the hell out of every minute of her discomfort at that meeting.

"Anyway. You know I met with Ellison this morning. Well, guess who's going to be producing my new show?"

"Uh, would that be Andi?" Smith said with the wry humor that made Harley genuinely like him.

“Yes, it would be Andi, smart-ass.” He punched Smith in the shoulder.

Smith winced in mock pain. “Okay, how the hell did you pull that off?” He turned back toward the kitchen when a timer went off. “I’ve got to get back in there. You hungry?”

“Sure.” Harley followed Smith into Harley’s state-of-the-art kitchen. Like everything else in the expensive loft, it was top-of-the-line. The kitchen brimmed over with commercial-grade stainless steel appliances, custom concrete countertops, and oxblood red cabinets. It had always seemed a bit cold to him, but then he didn’t cook and didn’t particularly care what the kitchen looked like. He opened a refrigerator large enough to house a whole steer—and with Smith doing most of the cooking, it probably had. He withdrew a bottle of water and offered one to Smith, who took it before moving over to the oven to remove what looked and smelled like his signature enchiladas. “Okay, so tell me again how you arranged for your ladylove to be working with you on the show.”

Harley took a long swallow from his water bottle. “I didn’t. I told you she worked for Myron Ellison.”

“I know. And you and Myron are buds from way back. Are you telling me you didn’t call in a favor or two?” Smith asked while industriously dishing up one of the huge enchiladas.

Harley leaned against the counter. “Nope, didn’t say a word.” He continued after Smith gave him a knowing look, “Not saying I wouldn’t have, but hell, I didn’t get a chance. I was gone all last week.”

Smith handed him a plate with an enchilada and a small side salad loaded with the radishes and avocados that he knew Harley preferred. Harley placed the plate on the small table that occupied the breakfast nook and went over to the sink to wash up. By the time he’d finished, Smith had joined him at the table. Harley tucked into the cheesy dish with enthusiasm. His lunch with Myron had mainly been about business, and he’d been so focused on talking about the show, he hadn’t really touched his meal. Smith was an excellent

cook, and Harley enjoyed the enchilada immensely. Once his initial hunger had been sated, he sat back and resumed the conversation.

"You should have seen the look on her face when she walked into Myron's office."

"I take it she wasn't happy to see you."

"That's the understatement from hell. I have a more-than-sneaking suspicion that old girl doesn't want to have anything to do with me," Harley said.

Smith gave him an old-fashioned look. "Unless I totally misunderstood our previous nine thousand conversations about the young lady in question, she already did you. And then some."

"Yep, but I didn't work for her then," Harley said with a sigh.

Smith shrugged and resumed eating. Harley watched in amazement, still stunned by the amount of food his friend consumed.

"Oh well. That's that," Smith said.

"What do you mean?" Harley frowned. Suddenly losing his appetite for the rest of his meal, he stood and began clearing the table.

"Well, I mean, if she doesn't want to have anything to do with you, there's not a helluva lot you can do about it. I mean, you're hardly the type of guy to chase a woman or anything. Usually they're after you."

"I'm not?" he asked as he scraped plates into the garbage disposal. The high-efficiency appliance hummed like a well-tuned jet engine, and Harley had no doubt that it would dispose of a human body with the same quiet efficiency as it did the remains of their dinner.

"Well, you never have been before," Smith said.

"There's a first time for everything," Harley said, rinsing the plates and placing them in the dishwasher. He thought about the way Andi had looked that morning rushing into Myron's office. Her heart-shaped face had glowed with energy and vitality—or at least it had until she realized he had signed on.

Then she looked more than a little bit seasick. She'd recovered quickly, though. It was obvious that her delicate frame housed an absolute iron will, and he admired that. He always felt as though he'd been gut-punched when she turned those round smoky brown eyes on him. That's what had drawn his attention at the Christmas party. One look at those eyes standing out against the rich golden brown hue of her complexion and he'd been a goner. Until this morning he'd almost convinced himself that he'd imagined her effect on him, but just one look at her had confirmed all that effect and more. Her tortoiseshell glasses coordinated with the camel pantsuit she wore, and brought her eyes out even more. The night he'd met her he'd wondered if she wore the glasses as a prop. It was quite fashionable to wear them as an accessory, but it had quickly become apparent that she was in fact very nearsighted. Her face had a sweet innocence about it, the sensuality of her nature only revealed in her delicious bottom lip, highlighted even more succulently by a slight underbite. Her petite body was undeniably sexy with some surprisingly lush curves. He remembered his shock in Myron's study when he'd finally got her into his arms and realized just how luscious her delectable little frame was. Now it was all he could do to think of anything else.

"So what are you going to do?" Smith asked, turning to face him.

"Huh?"

Smith gave him a pitying look. "Man, you've got it bad. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to woo her," Harley said firmly.

"Woo her?" Smith's whole face contorted into a frown. "Do you even know how?"

"Nope, but I'm sure there's got to be a book or two on the subject."

"Well, I must say, old son, you do keep things interesting around here."

* * * * *

"Okay, we're going to have to kill the cat."

Button, one of Andi's screenwriters for the new show, looked up at her in surprise.

"What? I mean, why? It's foreshadowing and gives insight to the character."

Andi shuffled the pages of the script and notes the girl had submitted. Button had been hired as a staff writer after they'd bought several of her *High School Blues* spec scripts. Though brilliant, she was very inexperienced. Hence the cat. Andi shared a knowing look with Willow. Of the staff of six writers, Willow had worked on the most shows and was very experienced. Andi really didn't understand why she had never got a show in her own right. Myron had hired her away from another studio, and Andi suspected that he had plans to rectify that oversight.

"Button, do you have any idea what an animal wrangler costs? Not to mention the cat itself and the certification that the animal isn't hurt in any way. And we're very limited in the number of hours we can use an animal as well. It's worse than working with kids."

"But the episode is called 'Cat's Cradle,'" Button said earnestly. Her broad face contorted into a frown.

"Yeah, but it's about people abandoning babies at a hospital. We don't need a literal cat for that. Totally not worth it. We don't use live props for character development. It's our job to develop characters, not Fluffy's. No animals, unless we're doing a remake of *Baretta*."

Button gave her a blank look. "*Baretta*?"

Andi sighed. Sometimes it was hard to deal with writers who weren't as big a TV geek as she was, but anyone writing television shows should know the classics. Not knowing *Baretta* was like not knowing *Columbo*. Come to think of it, Button probably didn't know that show either. She waved a dismissive hand at the girl. "Sorry. Before your time. Just remember, there's a reason the Cosbys never got Rudy a dog." Andi paused. If the girl didn't know *The Cosby Show*, she'd have no choice but to fire her on the spot.

Button's namesake black eyes gleamed with intelligence as she processed the lesson and protested no further. Andi smiled inwardly, confident that she'd made the right decision when she chose Button for the show. *The Shelter* would hit the coveted eighteen-to-thirty-five demographic hard. Much as she hated to admit it, Myron was right. The addition of Harley Joseph would expand their base into other age groups as well. The state of her sanity notwithstanding, hiring him was a masterstroke. Also, emo was big with the young demographic, and it was Button's specialty. She had written some of the best spec scripts *Blues* had ever had; enough that, as was typical in that situation, they'd hired her as a staff writer.

She looked over at Willow next. "Love your script. In fact, if I hadn't already written the pilot, I'd definitely use 'Arms.'"

"Thanks, Andi." She raised one perfectly arched brow that had been colored to match the golden brown hues of her riotously curly hair. The contrast with her silky, dark skin was arresting. "Tell me something, though. Why are we writing so many scripts? No one's even bought the pilot yet."

Andi nodded. Yep, having the old hand aboard would definitely help her school the newbies on TV craft. Of the six writers, three were under the age of thirty, which made sense, considering the demographics of the show, but it meant she'd spend a lot of time teaching them. With any luck, Willow could help in that capacity. The woman was also well-known as a script doctor, which would typically be one of Andi's jobs. She was happy at the prospect of delegating that little slice of hell to someone else as well.

"You're right, Willow. First, Myron is confident that this one will sell, and sell for thirteen right out of the box."

"Really?" The immaculate brows rose again. Willow had been around long enough to know Myron's reputation. Still, trying to predict which pilots would sell was a lot like trying to read the future in the guts of a chicken by the light of the full moon. The likelihood of success was more or less the same. There were far too many unforeseen and unknowable variables. There was absolutely

no rationale behind it, and no real way to predict it. Willow obviously knew this.

"Yeah, I know. Most crash and burn, but *Blues* has been around for a long time, so we're getting a good lead-in. And we've got Harley Joseph." She nodded as all the writers gave her a stunned look.

"Wow, when did that happen?" Willow asked.

"Last week," Andi said, trying not to let her own trepidation seep into her voice. "He had that sleeper hit last year, and getting him for the show is a tremendous coup for us." And would probably cost a grip. Myron still hadn't sent her the revised budget. That was probably not a good sign. "Plus we don't know where this is going to go. More networks are experimenting with different premiere dates. There's no big fall launching season anymore. The schedules are all over the place. We might not have the whole summer to shoot. We've got to be ready to start shooting almost immediately. Once someone buys us in May, we've got to be ready to go in June."

She looked around the spacious script room, which was dominated by a large conference table. Other than Myron's office and the studios, it was the largest room in the building. She'd insisted on a round table because it facilitated the free flow of ideas necessary for writing as a committee, though a lot of work went on in her office as well, with various writers on her couch or floor bouncing ideas off her. She tried to maintain an informal atmosphere, and the writers seemed to appreciate that.

"Blake and James, I liked your stories as well. I do have one concern—"

"No cats," James interrupted with a laugh.

"No. No cats. I think you've been around long enough to know better than that." She smiled and addressed the table at large. "Look, folks, our basic concept is pretty treacherous."

"Interesting choice of words," Blake murmured under his breath, but she heard him. Blake had been with the studio longer than anyone in the room.

Rumor had it that he'd made a major scene with Myron when Andi was given her own show. She didn't really know why Myron had bypassed him. Her assistant, Ronni, said it was because he didn't really understand television, but Andi hadn't worked with him enough to know. She'd hoped his resentment wouldn't be directed toward her, but she could see that she'd been too optimistic.

"Yes, Blake, it is an interesting choice, and here's why. We've got a guy running a teen shelter. All in all, he's a pretty amazing dude, and if we're not careful, this could turn into a cross between *Full House* and *Dawson's Creek* in less than a heartbeat." She sighed inwardly at Button's blank expression. "Google them." She looked around the table at all the writers who were nodding, and thankfully no one looked offended except Blake. That really wasn't about her, and there wasn't a whole helluva lot she could do about it. "Remember, nobody wants to watch a saint every week. It's boring. Randall's got some interesting flaws; he might even have substance-abuse issues. Certainly he can be an absolute asshole at times, and we can't forget that. We've got to keep it sharp, modern, and fresh. The dialogue has got to be off the charts. Especially between Randall and the teacher."

"Yeah. Am I right in assuming that Randall and Mrs. Walsh will be getting it on?" James asked.

"Eventually. With any luck, we can string it out over several seasons. That should really appeal to our thirtysomethings." She picked up her notes on his script. "That's why having them get together this season is out of the question." Teaching TV craft was a crucial part of her job, but sometimes it could be wearing. Writers just wanted to write good scripts. They didn't want to think about demographics and Q scores, but it certainly helped if they were savvy enough to write around those issues. The ones who made show runner were just that savvy.

She pulled a DVD out of her bag and held it up so everyone could see it. "I want everyone who hasn't seen *The Philadelphia Story* to see it immediately. It's

one of the best examples you'll ever see of the type of witty banter I want going on between Randall and Walsh." She picked up another DVD. "*The Lion in Winter*. Another excellent example of the type of dialogue I'm talking about." She glanced down at her watch. "As a matter of fact, let's watch it this afternoon after lunch."

"*The Philadelphia Story*?" Blake scoffed. "I thought you wanted modern and fresh. That movie's got to be sixty years old."

"Almost seventy. Good dialogue has no expiration date. If we even get close to what Stewart and Barry did in that movie, Myron will need a new trophy case."

Chapter Three

“Hey, boss lady.”

Andi looked up from her desk as Harley walked into her trailer. “Hello, Harley. What are you doing here? We don't start shooting the pilot until next week.”

“Yeah, I know.” He held out a large, beautifully wrapped package to her. “I just stopped by to bring you this.”

Andi stood up to take the gift from his hands, clearing a space on her desk for the bulky package. She studied it dubiously. It wasn't the right size for jewelry or anything like that, thank goodness, but just what the hell was it? The gold and white embossed paper shimmered under the fluorescent light as she contemplated the correct response. “Why are you giving me a gift, Harley? It isn't my birthday or anything.”

Harley propped up against the side of her desk. “Can't a man give his boss a small token? That's what's wrong with America today. Nobody appreciates the old-fashioned values, like sucking up.”

“Sucking up? That'll be the day,” Andi murmured as she pulled the wrapping off the package. She used her letter opener to rip the box open, then sat down, shocked by what it revealed. Shit. It was the complete boxed set of *Homicide: Life on the Street*—one of the greatest television shows ever. Andi struggled to overcome her speechlessness and was finally able to say, “What an amazing gift.” Men had given her dozens of presents over the years, but no one had ever given her a TV series before. How had he known? She realized she'd asked the question out loud, because he responded.

Harley gestured toward one long wall of her trailer. It was covered, almost from the floor to the ceiling with DVDs, mainly of television shows, but there were some movies represented there as well. Some might assume that it was simply a hazard of her job, and they would be right, but Andi had to admit she was a television geek and had been almost from birth. Harley was simply the first man to understand that she would value DVDs over flowers—even over diamonds. Damn him.

“It's kind of hard to miss your affinity for all things television-related. I thought if anyone on earth would appreciate the ultimate Fontana and Levinson masterpiece, it would be you. Besides, I just had these lying around collecting dust.”

Andi doubted that. From previous conversations she knew he loved the show as much as she did, and would unlikely to relinquish his only set. He'd deliberately gone to the trouble of purchasing the DVDs just for her. Now the question was, why? Before she could figure out a way to ask that question, Harley took his leave of her. Damn, she couldn't even accuse him of ulterior motives. The man hadn't so much as asked for a kiss.

Andi looked up from her gift as her door opened again almost as soon as Harley walked out. She had a moment of excitement as she thought he'd returned, only to be disappointed to realize it was Lainie Ellison, Myron's daughter. The girl's platinum blonde layered bob was as distinctive as it was out of place on someone with such an olive complexion. She was accompanied, as she typically was, by her two closest friends, Jordan and Pippin Bruckett. Jordan was two years older, but the girls looked so much alike, they were often mistaken for twins. Pippin had taken to putting highlights in her pitch-black shoulder-length bob, but they both had the same tall, almost painfully thin frames and light gray eyes that were eerily large in their long faces. Andi had always thought they bore an odd resemblance to a pair of ring-tailed lemurs. A pair of ring-tailed lemurs that hadn't eaten in a very long time.

Lainie bounced into the room with her typical boundless energy. Her tiny frame made even smaller by endless diets, Lainie was the poster child for young starlets—or she would've been if her parents had ever consented to the breast implants about which she constantly complained.

“Andi, you've got to help me,” she said in a rush.

Andi, still distracted by Harley's gift, moved from behind her desk and leaned on the front of it, primarily to conceal her present from prying eyes. Jordan and Pippin spent a lot of time on the *Blues* set, and she didn't need any rumors about Harley. “What is it, Lainie?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Daddy's going to cancel *Blues*.”

Andi frowned. “We've all known that for months.” Why was the girl bringing it up now?

Lainie flopped down on the love seat that occupied the other end of the trailer. Her companions each perched on an arm of the love seat. “You don't understand. The network isn't canceling it. *Daddy* is.”

“Right. You didn't know that?”

“Of course not. He let me think that it had been canceled. I didn't know different until just this morning.”

Andi pursed her lips. “I'm sorry for the misunderstanding, Lainie. We've always known that Myron would cancel the show after four years. After all, most people are only in high school for that long.” She shrugged. “You guys will graduate this season; then it's off to college.”

“If that's the case, why won't he just do *Blues: The College Years*?”

Gossip notwithstanding, Lainie was no dummy. “Have you asked your father that?” She had no qualms about throwing Myron under a bus. This really wasn't any of her business, and she didn't understand why the girl had come to her.

“Yes, and you know what he said?”

Andi was sure she didn't want to know, but she shook her head in the negative anyway.

"He wants me to go to college!" She wailed, as though it were the worst thing in the world, while her two friends looked on sympathetically.

Andi fondled her BlackBerry, which occupied a permanent place in her left jacket pocket. She'd hoped that Myron hadn't been so frank, but everyone knew that the show was being terminated for that reason. "Uh, that is what most people do when they graduate high school, Lainie."

"I don't want to go to school. I like being an actress and being the star of my own show. It's all I've ever wanted to do."

Andi took her time walking back around her desk, wanting some distance between herself and the girls. She casually removed the package and set it under the credenza behind her. None of them seemed to notice. Typical teen self-absorption. She resumed her seat. "Well, there's no law that says you have to be in an Ellison production."

"You mean I should, like, go to auditions?"

"It has been done," Andi said drily.

Lainie's full mouth took on a mutinous look. "I shouldn't have to do that." Her friends nodded in agreement and in unison. Okay, they were even creepier than usual. "Daddy can just put me in one of his shows. You could put me in *The Shelter*."

Oh yeah, that's just what she needed: Lainie and what she suspected was going to be a very difficult Harley on the same show. She had managed Lainie very successfully in the past, but Harley was an unknown quantity. The two of them together were an Excedrin headache just waiting to happen. Fortunately she had a good excuse. "You know it's a spin-off, Lainie. Your character wouldn't fit in, and the mood is totally different from *Blues* as well."

The girl nodded. She'd been around television her entire life and understood the nature of a spin-off better than many producers. "Then you've got to talk Daddy into keeping my show. Or starting a new one for me."

"What? Myron's hardly going to listen to me. Have you asked your mom to do it?"

Lainie released a melodramatic sigh and sank back on the cushions in what could only be described as a Victorian swoon. "Of course I have. She agrees with him. Mommy never agrees with Daddy, and the first time she does, it's about shipping me across the country! Can you believe they want me to go to Smith or Barnard?"

The bastards! Oh the humanity, Andi sniped inwardly but knew better than to share her thoughts with the girl.

"I don't know anyone there. They'll make fun of me. Besides, I don't want to go to school."

"Well, it looks like your parents want you to go. And if I know Myron, he's going to have his way. Why don't you think about it? You can major in drama, and it's not like you'll be there that long. You're a good student; you can probably finish in a few years and be back here before you even need a new wardrobe."

"He just wants to get me away from my friends."

Andi didn't necessarily think that was a bad idea. Some of the girl's friends were more than a bit wild. Especially the two accompanying her today.

"Lainie, that's probably not true. You'll be back here so often for holidays and breaks and such. You'll still have your friends."

The girl seemed to be considering what she said. "Daddy promised me another show after I finish school."

"Lainie, do you want to be an actor?"

She straightened in her seat. "I think so. It's the only thing I've done. I like being famous and having fabulous clothes. So yeah, I guess so."

That didn't sound convincing. Being famous and being an actor were two different things. "You've been on the show since you were fourteen. You're nineteen now. I agree with your dad. I think you need to check out other things as well."

Lainie's voice rose to a shriek. "I can't believe you won't help me. Daddy likes you so much. He'd listen to you. I thought you were my friend. But you're only interested in keeping your job and getting ahead."

"I do want to keep my job, but you have to keep in mind that this is really none of my business. Your parents have made a decision. I think it's a good one, but you're an adult. Legally you could just walk away."

"Walk away? Walk away and do what? Wait tables until I get my big break?"

"Thousands of actors have done it. It's almost an initiation rite."

"Well, leave me out of *that* sorority. There's got to be a way to get Daddy to change his mind. I've just got to figure it out," Lainie said in a determined voice.

Andi shook her head as the girl flounced out of her office. Lainie was strong-willed and spoiled, but usually she did exactly what her parents told her to do. Andi wondered if they knew Lainie's complacency was at an end.

Chapter Four

Three months later

The script hit the wall above her head with a soft *thump*. Andi continued working as the yellow pages fluttered to the floor like so many canary feathers. Or maybe it was goldenrod. At this point in the shooting schedule, she had lost track of what script revision they were on. She continued staring at her computer screen, hoping that if she ignored him, Harley would just leave her trailer without the fight he'd been spoiling for all day. The bastard had proven to be quite the temperamental star.

A bellow followed the paper fusillade. "Have you seen the crap they've written this time?"

Andi glanced at the bright pages littering her desk. Canary, it was definitely canary, indicating that this was only the second script revision of the week. She squeezed the back of her neck, trying to ease the tension of the instant headache that began there every time she had to discuss scripts with Harley. Lately it had become a daily occurrence. Her job as producer of the hit television show included handling prima donnas like Joseph. Production jobs were difficult to come by, especially for people fresh out of UCLA film school. She'd got lucky when Myron Ellison chose to mentor her. Damned if she'd let Joseph's precious ass screw this up for her. She stiffened her spine as she swiveled in her office chair. She wasn't about to foul up this plum assignment—even if dealing with actors sometimes made her feel like the world's most overpaid babysitter.

“What's wrong with the script? I thought Willow and Button did a brilliant job with it.”

Harley snorted. “Well, the first problem is that we have a goddamned script writer named Button! She's just a freaking kid.”

Andi ignored the comment. She'd heard his snide commentary about their young scriptwriter before. She stood up. Experience told her that Harley was about to unleash one of his tantrums, and she needed every advantage she could get. Not that she had much in the way of physical stature. At only a few inches over five feet she didn't stand a chance against Harley's height, but every little bit helped.

Harley continued his rant. “It's the goddamned kiss! You know damned well it's out of character.”

Andi squeezed the back of her neck again. She decided to try logic. It had never worked before, but what the hell. “Harley, Randall is in his midthirties. Laci is a young, beautiful girl who is madly infatuated with him. Any man would be tempted.”

“Not Randall.” Harley began to pace, considerably limited by the diminutive dimensions of her office. “I know the guy's got his issues, but he'd never be tempted to sleep with one of the kids.”

Andi shook her head. “I think he would be. I mean, he doesn't go through with it, but I think it's perfectly in line with what we know about this guy. He's an antihero, remember?”

Harley stopped pacing and moved in closer, almost pinning her against the desk. “Antihero, yes. Pedophile, hell no. Look, Andi, I've been playing this guy for months. I think I know what he'd do.”

“Have you forgotten that I wrote the pilot? I practically created the guy.” Actually Myron had come up with the concept, but he hadn't written a single line. As executive producer, that was his prerogative. “I know him better than anyone. And I believe that any heterosexual male would be tempted by a

young, beautiful girl, even if he is the director of the teen shelter where she's a resident."

His upper lip curled as he moved in even closer, deliberately trying to use his superior height and size to intimidate her. "Well, from where I'm standing, I'm not convinced you know a helluva lot about men!"

Andi clenched her jaw. She was not going to be drawn into a discussion of their history. Rather than rip a strip off his hide as she'd like, she decided to try to placate him. "Harley, it's only a kiss, and a fairly chaste one at that."

"One that's seen by one of the other kids and is totally out of character," Harley growled.

Andi squinted up at him. "You know, for a guy who hates this 'goddamned' show so much, you certainly are fighting for the integrity of the character. You threaten to quit every week and then try to kill yourself doing all kinds of crazy stunts so we have to write you out. Why do you care?"

"I don't want out, but that doesn't mean I want my name associated with crap either. As long as I'm the star of this piece of shit, I want it to be the best piece of shit it can be." He rubbed his forehead. "Now back to the subject at hand. What the hell are we going to do about this?"

Andi threw her hands into the air with a heavy sigh. "Harley, the kiss stays. It's going to send the ratings sky-high. Every teenage girl out there who has the hots for you is going to be imagining herself in Laci's shoes. It'll be great for the ratings."

"Jesus, you sound just like Myron. Are you sure he didn't have himself cloned?" He shook his head. "Look, forget about it, okay? I'll do the damned kiss." He leaned over her, his face mere inches from hers forcing her to lock eyes with his piercing green stare. "Are you ready to talk about more important things yet?"

Andi frowned, confused by the sudden subject change. Dude was a living, breathing testament to the perils of ADHD. "What?" she asked with a blank

stare. How the hell was she supposed to keep up with a hyperactive, egotistical TV star and his damned stream-of-consciousness conversation?

Harley's eyes danced merrily as his lips curved up in a sensuous smile. "More important things, Andi. You know, things left unfinished from last Christmas. I seem to remember a certain elf gave me a fabulous Christmas present." He spread his hands, seemingly contrite. "Call me greedy, but I can't help wanting more."

Andi moved again. "Harley, nothing can come of that. I'm the producer here—your boss—and I certainly am not going to ruin my career by sleeping with an actor on this show," she explained in what she hoped was a reasonable tone. She gave him a dismissive look. "I'm sure there are plenty of other women willing to fill in."

Harley shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not, but I'm a man of very specific tastes."

"I know you heard what I said." Andi shook her head, suddenly losing her taste for verbal combat. "I mean it, Harley. There can't be anything more between us."

Harley gave her a slow, lazy grin as he slid past her to the door of the trailer. "I know what you said, but is that what you meant?" He stepped out of the trailer.

Andi slowly sank into the plush cushions of her love seat. Good grief. That guy was going to drive her insane. She'd thought he'd totally forgotten about that Christmas party. He hadn't so much as mentioned it before today. It wasn't like he didn't have plenty of women to console himself with. She struggled to choke back the little jolt of happiness that came from knowing he hadn't forgotten her. On the other hand, she couldn't imagine anything more frightening. She had worked with Harley for months and knew he never let anything go unless it suited him to do so. She couldn't even begin to fathom his motives.

She only knew she regretted last Christmas and her uncustomary overindulgence in champagne. She couldn't blame the wine, though. She hadn't been drunk. She'd simply wanted that man from the first moment she'd laid eyes on him, and unfortunately that hadn't changed in the months she'd been working with him. If anything, the need, the aching need to be in his arms again only intensified each day. It was kind of unsettling though to discover that, far from forgetting what had happened, Harley had simply been biding his time. Or maybe he'd just hit a lull in his dating schedule and decided to aim for some convenient, low-hanging fruit. This put a totally different complexion on the small gifts he'd been giving her from time to time. They were never intimate or personal—more DVDs, a really cool book on TV production. But now she was left to wonder. Was Harley Joseph *courting* her? The old-fashioned word left a bad taste in her mouth. Just thinking about it was enough to give her heart palpitations, but she couldn't imagine what else he could be up to.

Andi put her head down on her desk; her whole body throbbed in response to the memories of that night with Harley. She could almost smell his tangy scent blended with her own and the sweet musk of lovemaking. Every time she saw him it triggered yet another memory. But somehow she had to forget. They had made love three more times that night, and he'd left the next morning without any promise to call. She respected that and hadn't expected anything more from a one-night stand. She ignored the soft voice in the back of her head that reminded her that she'd felt just a twinge of annoyance at not having heard from him. Andi could still hardly believe that the one time she'd indulged in a one-night stand, it had turned out this way. The man worked for her, for God's sake. Okay, so technically he worked for Myron, but this was her show, she was the show runner, and damned if she'd be derailed by her clit. She squeezed her thighs together as a particularly delicious memory of Harley's attention to that little nerve bundle seared through her mind. There was nothing else for it; she needed to get laid in the worst way. And definitely not by Harley, she told her wayward body insistently. She looked down at the canary

yellow script that still littered her floor, knowing that despite her protests, Harley was right; the scene didn't work, and they would have to do rewrites. She exhaled heavily through her teeth. Maybe she could flag getting laid in her BlackBerry, but she was pretty sure it wasn't happening until the season was over.

Harley stood outside Andi's trailer. He released a deep breath that came out as a sigh from the depths of his soul. What was it about that woman that got under his skin? Made him forget everything but wanting—no, *needing*—to have her again and again. His breath caught on another sizzle of arousal as he recalled a moment when their bodies rocked and slid together, when neither could stop the heedless rush into ecstasy. Still, he couldn't fathom it. Andi was a beautiful woman. Those soft brown eyes looked right through him, into his soul, like she knew him on a level he'd never encountered before. And much as he hated to admit it, meeting a woman who didn't take any bullshit off him was invigorating. Made him want to capture that impudent mouth of hers and never let go.

He hadn't intended to mention their Christmas encounter, and he'd definitely had no intention of coming on so strong. For some reason, despite all her bravado, he made the lady skittish; so he'd been biding his time, trying to woo her as best he could. It had pissed him off to realize she didn't even have a clue as to what he was doing. So he'd resorted to the direct approach out of pure frustration. Now he was more annoyed than ever. The usual round of dates with assorted women didn't appeal to him at all. Not when he compared them to Andi. His hands were clenched in frustration, and he deliberately relaxed them as he strolled toward his motor home. He wasn't giving up, and he wouldn't spend another second trying to figure out why.

Chapter Five

Andi gritted her teeth, every muscle trembled from exertion as she ignored the bead of sweat making a slow journey down her spine. Her abdominal muscles screamed for mercy as she struggled not to arch her back. Her body formed a perfect V as she balanced herself on nothing but her bottom. She held the position for ten counts of ten.

“For goodness' sake, Ondria. You did the hundred better when you were a child. What on earth is that?”

Andi closed her eyes, tuning out her mother's voice as she slowly lowered her legs and upper body back to the platform of the Pilates Cadillac.

“Good evening, Mother. How lovely to see you,” she said, proud that only a tiny bit of sarcasm seeped into her tone.

“I've told you not to call me that.”

Andi sat up, taking the ice-cold bottle of water her mother offered. “Sorry, I forgot.” They'd been having this argument for what seemed like most of her life. Her mother insisted on being called by her first name, and Andi had complied, at least until she'd started school and realized that she was the only kid who was on a first-name basis with a parent. After that she'd begun calling her “Mother.” It was odd enough that she didn't have a father—no point in compounding the matter. She unscrewed the cap and took a long swallow, studying her mother the whole time. Given the life she'd lived, Minx McFadden should have looked like Gollum's long-dead older sister. Yet somehow she had managed to avoid any visible ravages of time. Of course, she'd always been strict about fitness and diet. That, and the judicious use of some of the best plastic surgeons in town, kept her in top form. Over the years a few people had

even mistaken her for Andi's sister. Unfortunately, now that she was dealing with the craziness that was Harley Joseph on a regular basis, that number was likely to increase exponentially. Minx had a long mane of coal black, well-tended dreadlocks. The hairstyle accentuated the feline contours of her face, especially her luminous golden brown eyes, which still had the same exotic slant they'd had in her youth. The smooth sienna-toned contours of her face remained unlined as well. Minx moved with a catlike grace that was probably attributable to years of dance training. It was her trademark, and Andi suspected that after years of emphasizing her catlike looks, it had become second nature to her.

"Did you just leave the studio?" Minx pointed to the large digital clock that hung opposite the Pilates apparatus. It was nearly midnight.

Andi took another sip of water and leaned against one of the four upright wooden posts of the apparatus. The Pilates Cadillac, despite its luxurious name, looked like nothing so much as a mildly modified hospital bed. Not surprising, considering it had initially been used to rehabilitate injured soldiers. "I've been here almost an hour. Thought I'd get my workout in before heading home. I just popped off the 101 at Santa Monica on my way back from Burbank."

Minx's face moved in what would've been a frown had her forehead not been full of Botox. "You know I don't like you driving around this late at night. It's too dangerous."

"Mother, I'm an adult woman. I know how to take care of myself. Besides, you should talk. What are you doing here this late?"

"Don't call me that," Minx said almost absentmindedly, as though she'd protested the use of her title for so long now that it had become a reflex. She continued. "I had some urgent paperwork that couldn't wait. Quarterly taxes are due." Minx made a moue of distaste, but Andi knew that her mother loved every aspect of owning one of the hottest fitness centers in town. L.A. Body was on top and had been for more than a decade: an almost unheard-of record in a

town where most businesses were discarded before the tags had even come off. Andi had always thought the place looked more like a corporate boardroom than a fitness center. Then again perhaps that was the point. Though there was plenty of glass and chrome, there were also elegant touches of navy blue leather in club chairs and ottomans. The exotic Brazilian hardwoods were literally priceless. Andi still couldn't believe that her notoriously thrifty mother had actually forked over the money for such a luxury item, but then she had always been willing to invest when she knew she had a sure thing. Minx wanted to appeal to LA's true power base, and for the most part that wasn't the talent. The studio executives and their wives had the real money in the company town, and Minx was savvy enough to know it. Appearance was everything, but results were what kept her client roster full. Minx stayed ahead of the trends, but she always adhered to core fitness principles that worked and kept her clients coming back.

"Darling, those hours are killing you," Minx said.

Andi snorted a laugh. "If I wasn't dead before, completing this workout would have done me in." She held up one of her mother's coveted "prescriptions," which listed her customized workout regimen. "If I did half of this, I wouldn't be able to move in the morning."

Minx studied the list, chewing on her nail in a habit that she would never let a client observe. "Perhaps I was a bit overzealous, but you've been slacking off lately. I told you that once you hit thirty, playtime is over. You have to get serious about your body, or you'll end up looking like death warmed over. In this town, you can't afford to let yourself go. Once your looks are gone, they're gone. You'll have to spend a fortune with surgeons to try to get them back, but that only goes so far."

Andi rolled her eyes. The petite frame she had inherited from her mother did show added pounds unforgivingly. Fortunately she'd always enjoyed working out, and as long as she maintained her routine she could avoid dieting. Nothing, however, would ever match her mother's discipline. No doubt

Minx would have little trouble slipping into those fabulous costumes she'd worn as a blaxploitation-era movie actress. Not that Minx would be caught dead in anything so dated these days, though she certainly enjoyed the cachet of having attained cult status in certain circles. Huge backlit posters of movie stills from those years were posted all over the club. Andi studied one that showed Minx in a pair of low-rider pants with a low-cut, midriff-baring top. The bright, almost garish colors of her outfit contrasted nicely with the ankle-length, snow-white mink coat she was wearing, and provided a great backdrop for a gun that was only slightly smaller than her Afro. Minx was fond of saying that the concave belly so ably displayed in those photos had sold a thousand gym memberships, and the fact that she still had it had probably sold a thousand more.

"Mother, I think you forget sometimes, I'm behind the scenes. Nobody cares what I look like," Andi said reasonably.

"Darling, no matter what a woman does, her looks *always* matter. Haven't you learned anything from being my daughter? You could end world hunger and lead the first colonization of Pluto, and somebody will comment on your chipped nail polish, or worse, your saddlebags."

This was an old argument that Andi wasn't willing to engage in tonight, so she just made a noncommittal sound and drank more water.

"So what kept you there so late tonight?" Minx asked, concern slipping into her voice.

"Take a wild guess." Andi groaned out loud as her mother moved behind her and began one of her patented neck rubs.

"Harley Joseph?" Andi nodded. "You know, if he weren't such a delicious piece of ass, I'd have a hard time overlooking what a dickhead he is. Of course, if you'd taken my advice..."

"Mother, sleeping with the man is hardly the solution to this problem." Andi lowered her head. Minx could read her face as though it were charted on MapQuest. Minx didn't know about her previous encounter with Harley, and

Andi'd prefer to keep it that way. Her mother would be much too delighted to discover that she'd had a one-night stand.

"Maybe not," Minx mused, continuing her ministrations. "But at least you wouldn't come here tied up in knots every night if he was breaking it off for you from time to time."

Andi closed her eyes, determined to remain calm as Minx did her best to provoke her. "Okay, for one thing, I'd prefer it if you'd try not to sound like Lil' Kim when you talk about my sex life."

"Oh, if I were talking like Lil' Kim, it would go like this." And Minx went off into a riff of multisyllabic profanities that would have been bleeped on even the most hard-core urban radio station.

"Second..." Andi continued, as though her mother had not spoken. She'd certainly heard worse from Minx and knew things would go much better if she simply ignored her. "I'd really prefer that you not talk about my sex life."

"Easy enough, considering you don't have one. You used to do much better before you had your own show. You'd at least get a little piece from time to time. Now..." Minx's eyes narrowed as she looked down at Andi. "When was the last time you had some?"

Andi returned her mother's look and refused to answer. If only she knew. Suddenly, in a fit of madness, she was tempted to tell her about the one-night stand just to shut her up, but that would just give her mother something else to goad her about.

When Andi refused to answer, Minx nodded knowingly. "That's exactly my point. You know, I've been seeing this cute Australian boy. I think he'd be just your type"

Andi pinched her nose between her thumb and forefinger. Had it really reached the point that her mother was trying to hook her up with one of her boy toys? The notion of sharing one of her mother's men made her more than a bit queasy, but she knew better than to protest too loudly. Minx wasn't beyond

setting up an all-too-embarrassing tryst. Andi shrugged in what she hoped was a nonchalant manner. "Really, Mother, I don't have the time. Besides, I'm kinda burned out on Aussies these days." She added in a deliberately blasé tone, "Anything less than Hugh Jackman is a bit of a letdown."

Minx pursed her lips, giving Andi a considering look. "That could be arranged, you know. I've always fancied Wolverine myself."

"Mother! He's married." Andi tried not to sound too scandalized. Her mother did draw the line at married men. Didn't she?

"Okay, you've got a point. I'll keep an eye out for you, just the same."

Andi inhaled deeply through her nose, enjoying the grapefruit scent her mother always diffused throughout the center. What was she supposed to say? Thank you? She finally settled on a noncommittal response. "You do that, Mother."

* * * * *

Andi eased her car into her assigned parking spot at the Ellison Productions lot. Despite the early hour, she was feeling somewhat optimistic. At least she was until she noticed Mallery, the head makeup artist, pacing in front of her parking space, obviously waiting for her. Andi grabbed her bag, then stepped out of the car.

"What is it, Mallery?" she asked, looking up at the frantically pacing redhead, who puffed on her cigarette as though it were life support. Given the hours they worked, it probably was.

Mallery ran her hands over her bizarrely coiffed hair. Today it was pulled up into a melodramatic faux-hawk, one of Mallery's more conservative designs. "Have you seen him?" she asked.

Andi didn't have to guess who the temperamental artist meant. "Harley? No, I just got here." She asked the follow-up question, though she really didn't want to know. When working with Harley, things going wrong was a matter of course.

“What's wrong?”

Mallery flung her cadaverously skinny arms out melodramatically. “He's got two black eyes, Andi. Two fucking black eyes. What the hell am I supposed to do about that?”

Andi closed her eyes briefly. At least it wasn't a broken bone. This time. He'd just got out of his cast from a parachute accident at the beginning of the summer. The broken ankle had been easily concealed, but this... Mallery's question was a valid one. Harley was in practically every scene in the show, and they had some crucial emotional stuff to shoot today. His character was supposed to discover that one of the show's stars was self-mutilating. It was heavy-duty stuff, and she had worked her ass off writing it. Everyone said it was bound to lead to an Emmy nomination. That is, if they could actually shoot the goddamned thing.

She stormed into the makeup trailer and stopped short. Mallery's statement that Harley had two black eyes didn't come close to describing the damage he had managed to do to himself this time. Despite her vow to not let him get to her, Andi could all but feel her blood pressure rise with each beat of her heart. The black eyes were like exclamation points in a face that looked as though it had been scraped with a Microplane. Or at least the right side did. For the left side they'd apparently switched to a tenderizer mallet. It was a misshapen, vividly colored mess of bruises and swelling and was nearly unrecognizable as belonging on a human face.

Harley swiveled around in the makeup chair to face the bank of mirrors. He studied his battered countenance for a moment, then smirked at her. “Damn, boss lady, never thought you'd ever be struck speechless.” He sounded almost pleased with himself as he gingerly placed an ice pack on the left side of his face.

“It's not like you haven't been trying long enough,” Andi muttered under her breath. “I really don't want to ask this, but what happened to your face?” she asked, joining him at the makeup mirror.

He swiveled the chair back around to face her. "Street luge accident."

"You mean there are still people out there crazy enough to street luge? I would've thought they'd all be dead by now. The attrition rate must be pretty high."

Harley smirked. "If you think my face looks bad, you should see the rest of my body." He paused, a brow raised over one bright green eye made even more prominent by the discoloration around it. "That invitation still stands, you know."

Andi rolled her eyes, taking in the presence of Mallery, her assistant, two production assistants, one of Harley's costars, and two people she didn't recognize but assumed were more of Harley's usual entourage.

"Tempting though the thought of sleeping with a half-dead man might be, I must pass on your so-generous offer. Harley, we only have to get through seven more episodes this season. Couldn't you wait until after that to kill yourself?" Something about his expression made her pause. He looked almost despondent, but before she could be sure she wasn't imagining things, he put back on his usual blithe demeanor. Considering the condition of his face, the change had to have taken considerable effort.

"I told you, it was freak accident. I've taken that hill a thousand times and never wiped out before."

"Street luge *is* a freak accident. Only a total head case would go hurtling down a hill headfirst," Andi said.

"Feet-first."

"What?" she snapped at him. Immediately realizing her error, she took a deep breath, trying to calm down. Yelling at Harley was a fruitless exercise, and she really needed all her energy to think. Her left hand automatically went to her jacket pocket, where she fondled her phone over and over again while pacing restlessly in the small space.

"Luge is feet-first," Harley advised helpfully. "You go headfirst in skeleton," he said, switching the ice pack to the right side of his face.

Her response to that bit of inanity was knocked right out her mind as she studied him more closely. "Good grief, Harley, you didn't break your nose again!"

He reached up to gingerly touch his damaged proboscis. "Fraid so."

"You might have to get it fixed this time. I've never understood why you didn't before." Harley's broken noses were legendary. Despite her dismay at the repeated injury, the crookedness of it was the only thing that saved him from being too beautiful.

"Did. The surgeon did a great job too. I just broke it again. Not much point in going back."

"How many times does that make?" Andi could feel her blood pressure rising once again.

"I dunno. I lost count when it got to double digits."

Andi took another calming breath. This was just too stupid for words. Maybe she really should take up yoga. Or heavy drinking. She needed something to get through this. Myron wouldn't want to hear about how his asshole of a star had screwed up the production schedule. She got paid, and very well too, to deal with asshole stars. She called the production assistant over to her. All too aware that hundreds of thousands of dollars were at stake here, she continued pacing, the PA following along like an eager cocker spaniel. With her large, dark eyes and russet-colored hair, she resembled one too. "Get Taylor in here, could you?" Andi asked the assistant as a germ of an idea formed in her brain. She consulted the schedule again. Damned if this might not actually work.

Chapter Six

Andi stood next to Taylor, the show's director, as they finished the final scene on that week's production schedule. Mallery had worked a true miracle with makeup, and Harley looked almost human. With shadowy lighting, they'd compensated for what couldn't be covered, which suited the episode's dark subject matter. Some of the camera angles were a bit odd, but she thought they would add to the discordant atmosphere as well. They had run long; it was after ten, and they were working with a skeleton crew. With so few people there, the cavernous production studio echoed hollowly. The industrial-sized lights played tic-tac-toe with the gridwork across the ten-foot-high ceiling, while cables snaked along the concrete floor below, lying in wait for an unwary step. The air-conditioning system struggled valiantly to compensate for the heat generated by the lights, and was only marginally successful. Andi had to give Harley credit; it was obvious he was in a lot of pain, but he hadn't murmured a word of protest. He wasn't on his game and had uncharacteristically flubbed some lines, but he didn't so much as blink when Taylor asked for another take, and had even apologized for his mistake.

Andi winced as Harley stumbled against one of the chairs on the set. The man was clearly exhausted, and everyone sighed with relief when Taylor finally declared a wrap. Despite her own misgivings, Andi rushed to Harley's side when he slumped in the chair. "Are you okay?"

"I'm pretty sure I'll feel better than this two weeks after I'm dead," Harley murmured through his battered lips.

Andi resented that she almost felt guilty for putting him through this. After all, he was the one who... She cut off the thought when he closed his eyes

and leaned his head against the chair's high back. A young girl she'd seen in the makeup trailer earlier rushed to his side.

"Are you ready for me to take you home, Harley?" she asked, her high-pitched voice oozing with concern.

Instantly all sympathy Andi had been feeling for Harley fled. "Seriously, Harley, is this one even old enough to drive?" Andi gave the girl a once-over. With the combination of milky white skin, a slash of magenta lipstick, and hair that wouldn't have been out of place on a flamingo, the girl would have stood out in any environment even without her schoolgirl-meets-GI Jane attire. Andi wondered how the girl even walked in her platform combat boots.

Harley opened his eyes so that a bare sliver of green shone through. "This is Fuchsia, my driver." He glanced down at the inside of his right wrist, where he wore his watch faceup. "Fuchsia, don't you and Alexander have to go to work? I hadn't realized we'd gone so long."

Andi glanced over at the young man who looked only slightly older than Fuchsia. He had been hanging around the shoot all day. Harley was always surrounded by followers, sort of like Fagin with a flock of meth-eating Artful Dodgers. Speculation ran rampant on the set. Rumor had it that he was sleeping with all of them, while others alleged that some of them were his kids. Who knew any of them actually had jobs? She tuned back into the conversation.

"Why don't you guys take my car, and I'll have my boss lady take me home?" she heard him tell his...his people.

Wait, when had that happened? "Harley, I never said I'd take you home."

The brows went up again. "Surely you know I'm not capable of driving. I know you don't want to be responsible for my untimely death."

Now *that* was an idea. "I can order a car for you."

"At this hour? We'd have to wait forever, and frankly, I'm sore as hell and would rather not wait around all night for a chauffeur, if you don't mind."

Andi didn't bother to argue any further. She'd never been to his house, but she'd heard he had a huge loft over in West Hollywood off Santa Monica somewhere. La Cienega? It was quite a bit out of the way from her own home in Echo Park, where she was meeting a friend for late supper. But since when had Harley ever been convenient?

* * * * *

Andi stood in the doorway of Harley's apartment. The high ceilings, stained concrete floors, and exposed ductwork were all it had in common with what she'd thought of loft living. The floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked a breathtaking view of the city, while the modern furniture added a sophistication and elegance she hadn't expected. Somehow she still got the feeling that the lavish appointments were more role-playing, but why she felt that way she couldn't say.

Harley followed her into the apartment. The limp he'd had all day was now even more pronounced by exhaustion. "I would give you the nickel tour, but frankly I'm too goddamned tired." He limped over to the bar, where he poured himself a soft drink from the minifridge. He offered her one, and when she declined, he sank into one of the leather club chairs that flanked the bar.

"That's odd," he murmured almost to himself.

"What?" Andi asked, taking a seat on the mile-long leather sofa opposite Harley's chair.

"No one's here. Usually there's someone home. Strange, the place is so quiet."

"You have roommates?" Andi asked, surprised. Harley was very well compensated as the star of a hit show. The loft, while pricey, hardly cost more than his per-episode price. She did the budget, and she knew that he made a little less than a million dollars per episode.

He shrugged, then winced as the motion clearly pained him. "I guess you could call them that."

Andi pursed her lips. Hangers-on, then. She remembered that someone had told her that Harley had people coming in and out of his house at all hours. Accustomed though she was to needy actors and their sycophants, she'd never suspected that the people lived with him, though.

"Look, I've got to get going. Thank God tomorrow's Friday and you'll have the weekend to recover from this. We'll have next week's scripts messengered to you by Saturday."

He didn't open his eyes. "See, here's the thing. I don't think I can get undressed. Normally I'd just sleep in my clothes." He gestured toward the dark, overdyed jeans and deceptively casual jade green button-up shirt he wore. The outfit was Prada, or she'd miss her guess. Except for the Chuck Taylors on his feet, of course.

Just to torture him, she mused, "Well, I guess I could just cut you out of that shirt."

His eyes sprung open in abject horror. "Don't joke about shit like that. Some things are sacred."

"Jeez, Harley, they're just clothes."

"Says the woman who never leaves the house in anything less than Geechee Couture." He gave her his own calculating once-over. "I'll eat this shirt if that pantsuit cost less than three large."

Andi pursed her lips, resisting the urge to look down at the camel and black ensemble.

"Tree Tolbert is my best friend. I don't pay retail."

Harley reached out to finger the cuff of her jacket. Tree called it an origami finish. The heavy cotton had been pleated to form crisp lines. The designer was legendary for precise tailoring and elegant silhouettes. Andi would have worn her clothes even if they hadn't been friends, though she was grateful for the discount.

"The woman is a fucking magician. She can even make a Gidget like you look taller. When is she coming out with a men's line?"

Andi exhaled heavily through her nose. Harley liked to annoy her by disparaging her height, or lack thereof. "I have no idea. I'll ask next time I see her."

"So are you going to help me get undressed?"

Andi briefly wondered who had helped him dress? Fuchsia, the Pink wannabe? She had to concede that it would be very uncomfortable to sleep in those jeans, tailored as they were to fit his sleek frame. She stood up with a resigned sigh. "Okay, let's get started. I have a dinner date this evening."

Harley stood without saying another word. Getting him to the bedroom took some awkward maneuvers. He was slim but surprisingly heavy. Fortunately she was strong from years of Pilates, and his bedroom was only a few feet off the living room. The room had the same sophisticated feel as the living room, its rich chocolate browns accented with surprising jolts of pear green. The room was warm and restful in a way that the living room was not. Anchored by a leather wing-back bed the size of a small yacht, it was an invitation to relax. Most surprising was the wall of built-in bookcases that faced the bed. She suspected that Harley would rather die than actually be seen with a book, but it was clear that a decorator hadn't arranged the shelves. They weren't artfully arranged by color with objets d'art and blank space to set them off. The floor-to-ceiling shelves were stacked, and in some cases double-stacked, haphazardly with no regard to type or appearance. Harry Potter nestled comfortably next to David McCullough. In just a glance she took in everything from Brandon Massey to Sebastian Junger, but she stopped in the middle of the room, startled, when she realized that some of the well-thumbed literature was in Latin and others in Greek. She'd taken just enough of both languages to recognize that though most of the titles were secular classics, others were religious tomes. Harley and religion? Just who was this guy? She wondered if he realized how much of his true personality was revealed just by

his book collection. He probably wouldn't allow another soul to cross the threshold if he did.

Andi helped him sit down on the edge of the bed and watched as he began unbuttoning his shirt, relieved to see that he wore a T-shirt underneath. The soft cotton could not conceal the scrapes and abrasions that covered almost all of his back, though. Fearing that she might cause him greater pain, Andi gritted her teeth as she gingerly helped him remove the shirt. She couldn't stop the memories of watching him do much the same thing that night almost a year ago. His hands moved down to unbuckle his belt. The long fingers made quick work of unfastening his jeans, and he groaned out loud when he lifted his body off the bed to slide the jeans over his narrow hips.

Andi struggled not to stare at his legs; they were long and bulged with the type of long, ropy muscles that were not made in a gym. She folded the jeans over the chair that sat to the right of the bed, while he lay back on the snowy white comforter that contrasted sharply with the coal black cotton of his snug boxer briefs. He still had his eyes closed, and Andi took a moment to study his reclining form. She gave the bulge at the front of his briefs an appreciative glance. She knew firsthand that he had plenty and knew how to use it. Remembering how completely he had filled her set her nerve endings ablaze. It left Andi short of breath and more than just a little bit wet. Once wasn't enough, and she'd never have another chance. He really was, as her mother said, a nice piece of ass. Andi sighed heavily; too bad he was totally off-limits. Damn Myron and his capricious casting decisions. If he'd given her any warning at all that Harley was a candidate for the show, she never would have made such a crucial mistake. Apparently the sigh got his attention, because when she looked at his face again he was studying her intently. It was obvious from his expression that he knew exactly what she was thinking, and she moved away from the bed. Even so, she wasn't prepared for what he said next.

“Kiss me.”

Andi paused in midstep. Had he actually asked—no, told—her to kiss him?

Harley continued, his eyes locked with hers. “Hey, it's not like I can do anything more. If you think my face looks bad, you should see my ass.”

Andi tried not to remember the attractiveness of that particular part of his anatomy; she was having a hard enough time not staring at his package.

“Come on. I went above and beyond for Ellison Productions today. The very least I deserve is a kiss.”

“You wouldn't have had to go above and beyond if you weren't stupid enough to slide down a mountain on your face.”

“Fine, you don't have to kiss me,” he said with a pout, somehow managing to cast himself in the role of the aggrieved party.

Andi paused next to the bed; she had to admit to herself that she did want to kiss him. Despite being unbelievably annoyed with the man, she couldn't help feeling bad for him. He really was in a great deal of pain. Some impulse drove her to comfort him, even though she knew it was a bad idea. Of course, comforting him wasn't her only motivation. Even looking as though he'd been on the receiving end of the ass whupping of his life, Harley still sent the blood rushing straight to her clit. Before she could talk herself out of it, she leaned down and softly kissed him, being careful of his battered lips. Neither of them breathed for a moment, and she couldn't make herself move, even when he grasped the back of her head, drawing her closer into his embrace. Before she knew it, the kiss intensified, his tongue penetrated her mouth, a velvety invasion that left her head spinning.

The kiss continued as Harley pulled her down until she sprawled over him on the bed. Totally engulfed in the reality of being in his arms again, she returned the kiss with interest, stroking her tongue along the roof of his mouth, delighting in the delicious shiver that she felt lace through him. His hands came up to palm her backside, slowly grinding her pelvis against his growing erection. He groaned in reaction to the movement, then did it again

and again. She took his full bottom lip between hers, sucking on it before following up with another kiss. Slowly, as though from miles away, a voice penetrated her dulled consciousness. She sprang off the bed as though it had been set on fire just as the light footsteps halted outside his open bedroom door.

“Sorry, man. Didn't know you had company.”

Andi looked at the intruder who, she assumed, was yet another one of Harley's hangers-on.

Harley sat up slowly, as though pained by his efforts. “Hey, Smith.” He greeted the lanky brunet. Andi still wasn't sure if the intruder was male or female; the androgynous haircut and casual jeans and flowing white cotton shirt gave no indication one way or another.

Harley introduced them to one another. “Smith is my stylist.”

Andi raised her brows. She knew a lot of actors, and certainly most of them acted as though they couldn't leave the house unless their stylist had picked out their attire, but she didn't know anyone who lived with his stylist. Old boy clearly had some issues. Damn, she'd had a close call.

“Nice meeting you, uh, Smith. I've got to get going. See you on Monday, Harley.” And she dashed out of the apartment, thanking all the gods for her lucky escape.

Chapter Seven

Andi looked over the wrought-iron railing to the street scene below. Minx had bought the four-story stucco building more than a decade ago, long before the gentrification of Echo Park began. Seriously, that woman sniffed out profit like a truffle-seeking pig. After extensive renovations, the building was worth a fortune. Andi and Tree had bought in when Minx divided it into condos. Minx had kept the penthouse, which occupied the entire top floor, and had sold the remaining six apartments at a tidy profit. Tree had invited Andi over to dinner, and now they sat on the terrace enjoying a glass of after-dinner wine and people watching—always fascinating in the bohemian community. The view of the lake and the Angelus Temple across from it was stunning. Andi was still bummed over that year's Lotus Festival. The lotuses, which had once been the largest collection in the country, had all mysteriously died. Andi had attended the festival every July for the past ten years and missed their pink and white beauty and amazing fragrance.

"I just don't know how much more of him I can take." Andi leaned back in the chaise longue on their shared third-floor terrace. They each had a terrace on opposite sides of the building, but since hers faced the tiny parking lot, and Tree's faced the street, they usually spent their time on this one.

"Pardon me if I misunderstood, but I thought you said you'd taken the boy seven ways to Sunday," Tree returned with a dry chuckle.

"Don't make me regret telling you about it."

"You probably wouldn't have if Myron hadn't hired him for the show. I had to replace a perfectly good BlackBerry you broke with your screeching. 'I can't believe he did this to me,'" Tree cried in a dead-on imitation of Andi's panicked

phone call the day Myron had told her she would be working with the man with whom she'd had a one-night stand only months before. "I didn't sound that bad," Andi scoffed at her friend. Tree was slightly over six feet tall, hence her nickname. Closely cropped hair accentuated her high cheekbones and burnished ebony skin. Despite her height and what should have been a masculine haircut, she was an incredibly feminine woman, with a lush mouth and wide-set hazel eyes highlighted by her rich complexion. Unlike many designers, Tree favored bright colors and especially white. Today she was dressed from head to toe in two shades of that color: ivory trousers and a creamy white turtleneck.

"Worse. Judging by the amount of vodka I had to pour into you to bring you down, I would've been better off using a tranquilizer gun."

Andi winced remembering the bitch of a hangover she'd entertained the next day. Of course, had she known what a pain in the ass Harley would be, she would've begged to be shot with real bullets. Myron had argued, rightly of course (the man was uncanny when it came to money), that Harley would elevate their rather pedestrian teen show into a sure hit. *High School Blues* was winding down; the spin-off show was exactly what they needed, and it had to be something adults would watch. Harley had a sterling reputation as an indie-film prodigy. He gave their show real street cred. She certainly couldn't tell Myron that the man who was poised to make him millions was her former lover. Myron wouldn't have cared anyway; his own dance card was far from clean.

"Tree, I tell you almost everything that goes on in my life. I would've told you about it eventually. But what do I do now? I kissed him, and if one of his... Hell, what should I call them? If one of his *people* hadn't come in, I would've been naked and horizontal so fast, I'd probably have rug burn on my ass."

Tree frowned, only briefly marring her immaculately manicured brows. "Now that's a visual I didn't need. What's up with his *people* anyway? He still got folk with him everywhere he goes?"

"Pretty much. Get this; they live with him!" Andi said, still unwilling to deal with the weirdness of that. It just didn't fit. Harley certainly had his fair share of the neuroses that plagued every actor she knew, but he just didn't come across as being particularly needy. And certainly not desperate enough to have an entourage living in his house.

Tree rolled her eyes heavenward. "Actors!" She waved an elegant hand. "I still don't see the problem, though. So he needs an entourage to constantly reassure him of how great he is. Don't they all?"

"That's not the problem, and I don't know. There's something about Harley. I'm not sure why he has those people, but I don't think it's for his ego."

"Whatever." Another dismissive gesture. "He wants you. You want him. Dude is a—"

"Fine piece of ass," Andi interrupted. "Yeah, Mother already mentioned that."

Tree choked off a sharp bark of laughter. "That damned Minx. She never fails to amaze me." She chuckled again but cut it off after a moment, her eyes widening in disbelief. "You mean you told her..."

"That I had a one-night stand? Of course not. She would have been so proud, she'd have it put on a T-shirt."

Tree laughed again as she nodded in agreement. "Didn't anyone explain to your mother that casual sex is a no-no in the age of AIDS?"

"Oh, Mother is no fool. She's always preaching about being careful, but she believes there's nothing wrong with freely expressing your sexuality. According to her, men have tricked women into missing out on one of life's greatest pleasures because their pitiful egos can't handle a sexually confident woman."

Tree nodded. She'd heard all this before. "And what do you think?"

"I think there's some validity to what she says, but I've never been comfortable just sexing whoever made my clit move." She shrugged. "Call me

old-fashioned, but I've always needed more. Besides, being illegitimate makes me more than a bit wary of the lure of casual sex."

"At least it did until you met Harley."

"It was strange; that's never happened to me before. I took one look at him and couldn't wait to get naked." Andi sighed.

"I still don't understand why you're fighting so hard. You've never been uptight about sex before. Or at least not this uptight."

"The man works for me. Why is it so hard to understand why that's a problem? I'm the show runner. Do you know how many black show runners there are in this town?"

"Probably about as many as there are black designers with their own lines in New York," Tree returned drily.

Andi conceded the point. Tree understood better than most the expectations she labored under. "I bet I could count them all on one hand. If I get a reputation for screwing around with the talent, there will be even fewer. They'll use me as an excuse not to hire another black woman for the next millennium. You know how it goes. I'm not just the show runner; I'm the *black* show runner. Even worse, I'm the black *female* show runner." Andi gestured toward her friend. "I don't have to tell you the consequences of any fuckup I make. You're dealing with the same shit. More than that, he could charge me with sexual harassment. If the cast or crew found out, morale would suffer. And the unions would be all over my ass too. You have no idea how many of those I have to deal with on one freaking show."

Tree closed her eyes with a delicate shudder. "Okay, okay. Don't even talk to me about unions. Nobody can touch those garment workers in New York." They frequently commiserated over their similar union woes. "And I get the racial shit too. You know I deal with that foolishness on the regular."

Andi poured another glass of wine before returning to a reclining position on the lounge looking up at the tile roof of the building. It was the one thing

Minx hadn't had to replace when she renovated. Apparently tile roofs could survive anything, including LA's frequent earthquakes. These were at least a half-century old and had weathered to varying shades from rusty reds to a lovely biscuit color. Andi particularly enjoyed the way their weathered tones warmed up the new salmon-colored stucco on the building.

"Seriously, no shit, Andi, what do you want to do?"

"Seriously?" Andi met Tree's unwavering gaze. "I want to fuck him until we lose all cognitive function."

Tree pursed her lips, giving Andi a considering look. "Well, that is a goal."

* * * * *

"Harley, I'm not in the mood for any crap from you today."

Harley stood in the middle of her trailer, facing her desk. His arms hung casually by his sides. Somehow he managed to be a portrait of innocence, or he would have been if she hadn't spotted that week's script in his hand.

"What, boss lady? Can't I just come by to say good morning to you? I haven't seen you in almost two weeks." He approached her desk. "I'd almost think you've been avoiding me, but I know you're not that kind of coward."

Andi looked up at him. Most of the swelling on his face had gone down, leaving him with some pretty vivid bruises. But the scrapes were rapidly healing and most of the scabs had already fallen off. The bruising around his eyes had faded to a vivid mélange of colors, but with his natty attire and deliberately messy haircut, he managed to look rather rakish. And that too annoyed the hell out of her.

"You still look like you've been dragged down Santa Monica Boulevard face-first. And get a haircut. That's the worst case of bed head I've ever seen."

Harley raked his fingers through his perfectly highlighted shaggy locks. They obediently fell back into place the moment he released them, turning into a golden halo that made him look as though he had his own personal spotlight.

"A haircut? Do you have any idea how much it costs to look this bad? It's damned expensive to look like you don't give a damn. Alex says it's an art form."

"Alex?"

"You met him. Alex, my hairdresser. He was here last week."

"Let me guess. He lives with you too."

Harley shrugged without answering her question. Instead he hit her with his own. "What's got you in such a mood? You've been so pissy, you've got the entire crew walking on eggshells. Tennessee threatened to quit, she said you'd been so awful to her."

Tennessee was the ingenue on the show, a bright young thing who had herself seriously overrated. In true diva fashion she went by one name and threatened to quit anytime she had fewer lines than her costars. Andi couldn't recall saying anything to the girl. Then again it had been a long week. "I don't have to be in a mood to point out pathetically stereotypical behavior. An actor with an entourage is just so clichéd." She couldn't keep the aggravation out of her voice. It was a major disappointment.

Harley responded with a melodramatic wince, designed for effect. "Wow, below the belt. Usually you don't go for blood until much later in the day. Yep. Definitely in a mood, and I think I know what's bothering my boss lady." He adroitly stepped around her desk until he stood mere inches from where she sat.

Andi leaned back in her chair but remained seated. Standing up would hardly help the situation, and she was determined to keep him from guessing how easily he could fluster her. "Please be so kind as to enlighten me. What has put me in this mythical mood of which you speak?"

Harley crossed his arms and looked down at her smugly. "Sexual frustration."

Andi sucked in a deep breath. "Sexual frustration? Why on earth would you think that?"

"A few more minutes in my bed and we would've been naked. If you weren't disappointed, I sure as hell was when Smith came in."

"Speaking of Smith, is he a he or a she?" Andi tried to change the subject. She hated being so easy. It wasn't like he didn't already know, but she still hated it.

Harley frowned. "Damned if I know. Does it matter?"

"Not particularly. I was just curious."

Harley leaned forward. "Back to that sexual-frustration thing..."

"I had a dinner date that evening, remember? How do you know I didn't get any frustration I might have had taken care of then?"

The playful demeanor dropped as Harley's eyes narrowed and pinned her with laserlike intensity. "Did you?"

"A lady never tells," Andi retorted with a flippancy she didn't feel. Harley was damned scary when he got intense. Thank goodness it didn't happen often.

"Stop teasing me," Harley said beneath his breath. Before she could even think, he pulled her out of the seat and into his embrace.

This was a totally new mood. Andi had never seen him like this, and a shiver of desire laced down her spine. Against her will she tilted her head to the side as his lips slid along her neck. His teeth nipped at the cord of her throat, and Andi purred, squeezing her thighs together at the heated moisture that pooled there. One of his hands sought out her sleekly muscled thighs beneath the short skirt of her suit.

"Your legs have been driving me crazy all day. Never wear pants again."

Andi murmured her agreement with his order as he slipped two fingers beneath the band of her panties. She spread her legs to give him access to her aching pussy. He was right; she was frustrated. Her juices flooded his hand as he slipped his fingers inside.

Harley knelt between her legs. Rucking her skirt up above her waist, he ripped her panties off and buried his face between her quivering thighs. The velvety slickness of his tongue stroked her clit, and when he took the little nerve bundle between his lips and tugged gently, her legs gave way, and she sank back into her desk chair. He followed her ruthlessly, refusing to relinquish her for a moment. A third finger followed the first two, and he continued to lave her clitoris. She could feel it swelling and straining upward under his ministrations. He spread her legs apart until they were resting on the arms of her chair, leaving her totally open and exposed to his gaze.

“Beautiful,” he whispered reverently before he dived in again. She grasped his head, pressing him against her as he licked her throbbing slit in broad strokes again and again. He seemed to hit every nerve ending, and she raised her butt off the chair, desperate to get as much of that tongue as possible. He began alternating between long licks and probing her wet, pulsing opening with his tongue. When he took her clit between his lips again, swirling it with urgent delicacy, Andi thought she'd lose her mind. Forgetting where she was, and even who she was, she cried out as ecstasy descended. Her whole body arched and pulsed with waves of pleasure so intense, she hoped they'd never end. They gradually diminished, leaving her so weak, she could do nothing but collapse in her chair.

Harley remained crouched between her legs, rubbing his face against the soft skin of her inner thighs. “Don't tell me again that we can't be together.”

“Harley...” Andi gasped as his tongue scraped across her still-overly sensitive clit. Oh God, if he started on her again, she would die. “Okay, but no one can know.” Damn. She couldn't deny him anything.

“What?” Harley gave her a startled glance.

“Have you forgotten there are seven other actors on this show, plus a crew of more than seventy? How do you think they'll react if they find out we're sleeping together?”

Harley took a delicate nip out of her thigh. “Okay...for now.”

“And we'll just keep it casual, okay?”

“What do you mean?” He raised a brow in query.

“I mean, it's not a relationship. It's just two people who enjoy each other. Keep it simple, okay?”

Harley's brow lowered as he gave her a cool, assessing look. “Monogamous.”

“What?” Andi asked. Her brain was not exactly firing on all cylinders at the moment.

“Monogamous—it means nobody else is fucking—”

“I know what monogamous means! Fine. Monogamous.”

Harley nodded again. “Right.”

He rose up and parted his lips over hers in a deep, openmouthed kiss. Her scent and flavor mixed with his and flooded her senses. Wait. Her scent. She pulled away reluctantly.

“You need to use the facilities.” She nodded her head toward her small bathroom.

“Why?” he murmured, taking soft bites at her mouth and sucking on her bottom lip.

Andi took a deep breath, which was a mistake: the aroma only intensified her arousal and clouded her thinking further. She struggled to remember why he needed to stop kissing her.

“You smell like—” She stopped as heat flooded her face. Damnit, she refused to be embarrassed by this.

“Your pussy?” His tongue tangled with hers, then followed the contours of her mouth in a velvet stroke.

Andi pushed at him harder. Another moment and she'd be begging him to fuck her. “You can't go back on set smelling like that.”

“Why not? No one will know it's yours.” He lowered his head again, kissing her until she wanted nothing more than to forget about anything but being with him. Just when she was ready to do that, he stood and slowly backed out of her trailer.

* * * * *

Andi was struggling to focus on her work when Ronni came into her office. She turned around to face her young assistant.

“Hello, Andi. You got a second?” She continued at Andi's nod. “I wanted to talk to you about the new catering contract.” She took a seat in the chair that faced Andi's desk.

“What catering contract?” Andi asked, confused and still more than a bit disconcerted by her encounter with Harley. He was right; no one would know whom he'd been with, and for some reason that bothered her too. But the thought of him walking around with her scent on him was viciously arousing, almost as if she'd marked him as her exclusive territory. Right, that would be the day. She struggled to focus on what Ronni was saying.

“You know, you told me to get some quotes from vendors to see—Hey, are you okay?”

Andi frowned, wondering what the girl had noticed. Unlike Harley, she'd freshened up in the washroom after he left, and was sure she'd left no evidence of their encounter. She'd even sprayed air freshener to eradicate the possibility of any lingering odors. “Yes, I'm fine. Why do you ask?”

Ronni shrugged. “No particular reason. You just looked a little distracted. I saw Harley a few minutes ago, and he looked like the cat who ate the—” Comprehension dawned on Ronni's face, and she gave Andi a secretive smile. “Anyway, I've got the bids on the catering contract, if you want to see them.”

“No problem, if there's nothing extreme in there, just pick the one that seems most reasonable.”

Ronni nodded. “Uh, and I wanted to tell you there are a lot of rumors on the set.”

Andi leaned forward at her desk. *Oh shit. How could it have got out so quickly?* “Rumors?”

“Yeah, everybody's saying you're sleeping with Myron and that's why you got this big promotion.”

Andi had to strangle a sigh of relief. “Oh. Where do you think it's coming from?”

Ronni confirmed Andi's suspicions. “Blake. He's really pissed, and he wants your job.”

Andi nodded. “That's what I suspected as well.”

Ronni raised her chin and gave her a narrow-eyed look. “You want me to pull his coat?”

Andi considered it for a moment. Ronni was her secret weapon, but from a tactical standpoint, she was best used sparingly. She could probably muzzle Blake, but that would give the man and his lies an importance he didn't deserve. She shook her head.

“Nah, let it ride. No point in boosting his ego by confronting him about it. If anyone asks, definitely tell them the rumor isn't true, but let Blake have his fun. He's a good writer, and I want to keep him if I can. Ignoring him is probably best.”

Ronni laughed. “Being ignored is going to drive him nuts.”

“Exactly,” Andi said with a smug smile of her own.

“Oh I forgot. Harley told me to give this to you,” Ronni said, pulling a small package out of her jacket pocket.

Andi reached out to take the package that was wrapped in the same paper as his previous gifts. With a casualness she didn't feel, she started to slip the package into her desk drawer, then realized that if she hid it, it would only increase Ronni's suspicions. What the hell was he thinking, anyway? The man

clearly didn't understand the meaning of the word "discretion." She looked up into Ronni's inquiring gaze.

"Harley's taking the notion of sucking up to the boss too far," she murmured, unable to maintain her anger with him. She unwrapped the package, relieved that once again he hadn't sent her anything incriminating like expensive jewelry. The box contained an iPod. She took it out of the box and clicked it on. For a moment she hesitated, fearing that he'd filled it with love songs. Of course, she should've known better. Harley was too unconventional for that. She removed the iPod from the docking station on her desk and slipped the new one into place, then clicked on a song grinning when the distinctive notes of the *Barney Miller* theme song wailed out.

Ronni laughed with her. "Is it all theme songs?"

Andi nodded as she clicked through *M*A*S*H*, *Night Court*, and even *Hill Street Blues*. It was like a TV-show musical time capsule, and she loved it. Damnit, he was doing all the right things. If he'd sent her diamonds, she could've shoved them back in his face and told him to kiss her ass. But what could she do about a man who gave her...theme songs?

* * * * *

Andi stood on the periphery of the show set. They were shooting a scene she and her staff had rewritten several times. They just couldn't seem to get it right, and if the frustration on the director's face was any indication, they might have to do it again. She drifted farther back. Maybe if he couldn't find her, Taylor wouldn't insist on yet another rewrite. She was unbelievably tired, and just the thought of digging into the scene again was more than she could bear. It was a crowd scene, and that meant that there were a lot more people in the studio than usual, and the blocking was more complex as well. Taylor had requested an additional camera; he wanted to get the scene in one long shot. Andi had seen his storyboard, and the idea was brilliant, but the execution was damned near impossible. It seemed every actor had missed his mark at one time or another, engendering a frustrated "*Cut!*" from the director. The crew

was totally focused on getting it right this time so they wouldn't have to go even longer. They were working with an unusually high level of intensity. Andi felt her shoulders tighten when Taylor said, "Action," and she, like everyone else, followed the action closely.

Harley hadn't been on the set all day—he wasn't part of the shooting schedule—but when she felt a warm presence behind her, she knew immediately that it was him. His tangy, spicy scent enveloped her, and she struggled not to lean back against him. Then suddenly she felt a hand on her bottom. She stood up straight as she gasped. She couldn't believe he'd be bold enough to try that here, in front of her entire crew. She immediately shifted to move away and turned her head to hiss at him over her shoulder.

"Have you lost your mind?" His only answer was an enigmatic grin. The hand didn't move. Andi turned to move again, only to realize that she couldn't do it without attracting the attention of all the people surrounding them.

"Come on, boss lady," her erstwhile molester murmured. "If you just stand still, nobody will ever notice."

Andi tried to move again, then stopped, panicked, when one of the grips gave her a curious glance. Behind her, Harley moved in closer, wedging her against a wall on one side and the crowded room on the other. Just as she realized he had her trapped, she felt his hand on the naked flesh of her thigh. "Thanks for wearing a skirt," he said, his voice too soft to be heard beyond her ears.

She felt her skirt bunched into a ball, and looked nervously around the room. In the brightly lit studio, no one was paying the least attention. The complexity of the scene had everyone totally fixated on their jobs. Somewhat behind the crowd and turned as they were, no one could see what was going on—at least she hoped they couldn't. Her entire backside was saved from total exposure by only a thin pair of panties. Just when she thought Harley'd had enough of teasing her, his hand moved up and began kneading the firm flesh of her buttock again. Andi squeezed her legs together, unwilling to admit that she

was more turned on than she'd ever been in her life. Being caught was a distinct possibility, and the thought made her shiver in anticipation. Her pussy throbbed with eagerness, longing to be filled and stretched by his hard cock. The roughness of his fingers against her smooth skin set off all her nerve endings. She couldn't believe this was happening. Harley was fondling her in public, in front of her entire crew and what seemed like every Ellison Productions employee, and she was enjoying the hell out of it.

She moved closer to him to better conceal his ministrations. Apparently he interpreted the move as consent, because his fingers slipped between her thighs. She instinctively tightened her legs. This was absolute insanity. Damned if she would consent to it. Rather than resisting, Harley just waited, his hand trapped. Emboldened by the quiver her body had given, he managed to slip his fingers up just a bit farther. She squeaked in shock, pressing her legs together to stop him. The pressure only locked his fingers where they were, nestled to either side of the warm mound beneath the cover of her panties. Then they moved. Andi stood still, incapable of breathing, surprised to find that her heart was still beating, as he began to stroke her slowly over the silky smoothness of her panties.

For a moment she thought her legs would give way under her. The functioning part of her brain demanded that she stop him. Instead she spread her legs farther. Now he had full access. She shivered in anticipation of what he'd do next, but he paused, as though surprised by her reaction. She heard him give a low, delighted chuckle before he slid his hand up to one ass cheek. He pinched her rounded bottom. The tiny burst of pain only turned her on more. She'd kill him if he stopped now. For one crazy second she considered turning around and forcing the issue. Fortunately the hand returned to its previous position. Andi gritted her teeth to keep from gasping out loud. She glanced at her coworkers, amazed that they seemed oblivious to what was going on. Harley's fingers stroked more insistently over her increasingly wet mound; she couldn't stop squirming against him as the ripples of pleasure

centered on her clit and then spread outward. The thrill of it left her so wet, she could feel the moisture on her upper thighs, her breathing became more erratic with each touch. The thrill, the anticipation, was driving her out of her mind. Would he..., Oh God yes, he did. One finger and then the next slipped under the elastic of her panties. She sucked in a breath. Surely someone heard the groans that came from deep inside as one talented finger parted the silken lips of her pussy? She glanced around furtively, but everyone was totally absorbed in the action on the set. How could they not notice, and what would she do if they did? Her body gave mute testimony to her excitement with the streaming wetness that had to be coating his fingers.

Harley was standing close enough behind her that she could feel the tremors in his body, the rising scent of his own arousal. It was gratifying to know that he was as turned on as she was. Now the stroking fingers became more insistent, though they didn't move any faster. Again and again he stroked her, from her clit to her weeping opening. Andi wondered if she'd be able to stand much more of this. Every cell, every nerve ending in her body, was focused on those few centimeters of flesh that were totally dominated by his hand. Just when she thought she couldn't take any more, she felt the barest tip of his finger slipping between the lips of her pussy, teasing them gently. Andi began to pant, spreading her legs even farther. Taking her movement as the consent that it was, he thrust his finger in deeper, parting her opening and slipping eagerly inside. Andi had to close her eyes; otherwise she would've have screamed in ecstasy, betraying their actions to everyone. All she could think about was getting him as deep inside her as possible.

Suddenly he was there. Another finger joined the first, stretching her as they plunged in and out in a steady rhythm that drove her to the brink of madness. His thumb circled against her clit, and she could hear as well as feel the sound of her increasing passion. The fingers went deeper, sinking in to the base as he curled his fingers against the sensitive nerves of her G-spot. Again and again he stroked, ever more insistently. Andi could hardly stand now. Her

legs shook involuntarily as the waves of release began. As though sensing her impending orgasm, Harley slipped a third finger inside her and she exploded; the additional stimulation was all it took to send her over the edge, but he didn't stop. He continued pressing into her, harder and harder, until a second, even stronger release left her leaning against him for support. With a final lingering touch, he moved his hand from beneath her panties and smoothed her skirt back into place.

Gradually sensation returned to her legs, and she became aware of the room, and all the people around her once again. She glanced over her shoulder at Harley. She wasn't embarrassed. She refused to be embarrassed. She was surprised to find him flushed and red-faced as he gave her an appraising look, followed by a slow, approving smile.

"You are full of surprises, aren't you?" he said.

"You started it," Andi said, almost immediately wincing at the childishness of her words.

He gave her a bemused look. "Yeah, but I didn't expect you to let me finish it."

His breath hissed out between his teeth as she delicately traced one rounded fingernail down the fly of his jeans. "You can hardly expect a girl to turn down what you were offering," she said in a voice that was vintage Jackée. "Maybe I'll return the favor sometime." She turned and walked away without giving him so much as a glance over her shoulder.

Harley stood and watched her artful departure. He couldn't have moved at that moment if all the hounds of hell were after him. He should've known she wouldn't respond in a predictable manner. He'd never been much of an exhibitionist, at least, not any more than any other actor, but the prospect of being caught had sent his heat register right off the charts. The feel of her, knowing that she wanted him and was just as excited as he was. It was all he

could do not to throw her up against the wall and pound into her right in front of everybody. He'd never felt so...so primal in his life.

At that moment the director wrapped the scene. As though released from a spell, the crew began moving around again. He shook his head, then grinned. If nothing else, Andi would never bore him.

Chapter Eight

Andi fumbled her BlackBerry, swearing when she heard it crash to the floor. Turning on the lamp, she winced from the brightness of the light as she searched for the offending gadget. Finally locating it, she answered the phone, wondering why the hell Harley was calling her at six on a Sunday morning.

“Do you have any boots?”

Andi covered her eyes. “Are you trying to tell me that in addition to your assorted personality disorders and exhibitionist tendencies you also have a shoe fetish? That's great. I can't get enough of the kinky.” She glanced over at her closet, but before she could answer his question, he continued.

“I mean any boots not made by Messieurs Choo, Louboutin, or Zanotti.”

Andi had to laugh at that comment. Amazing that he knew her, or at least her shopping habits, so well. “Uh, that would be no.”

“That's what I thought,” he said.

Andi frowned. Why was he calling at this hour to inquire about footwear, and what was that strange rattling sound in the background?

“Look, I want you to go somewhere with me today.”

Andi groaned into the phone. After the week she'd just had, she had no intention of going anywhere today.

“Can I come up?” Harley asked.

“Come up? Where the hell are you?”

“I'm in the parking lot downstairs. I brought breakfast,” he offered helpfully.

Damn. He really did know her. A good breakfast would go a long way toward ameliorating her irritation at being awakened at this hour on her one off day a week. She walked over to her bedroom window and looked out. Harley sat in the driver's seat of his Jeep. He looked up and waved at her.

"Sure, come on up. I rarely refuse breakfast." She hung up the phone and dashed for the bathroom. Damned if she'd let him see her in ratty, old pajamas and with morning breath. And no, she wouldn't take the time to wonder why she felt that way.

* * * * *

By the time Harley made it up to her third-floor apartment, Andi had brushed her teeth and taken her hair down from the twists she wore to bed. Now attired in a pair of dark-wash jeans and a tank top, she answered the doorbell when it rang. She opened it to admit Harley, who in addition to carrying bags from her favorite bakery down the street, also had several bags that seemed to be holding shoe boxes.

She gave the bags a dubious look. "You know I was just kidding about that shoe-fetish thing, right?"

"You should be so lucky." Harley put the bags down on a chair in the living room and then followed her into the dining room, where he placed the bakery bag on the table. Andi walked into the kitchen and returned with plates and flatware while Harley removed coffee cups from one bag and pastries from another.

Andi placed two of the bagel sandwiches on his plate and put the third on her own. Dude was really good; the sandwich was filled with smoked salmon with loads of cream cheese and chives. She sat down at the table and took an appreciative sip of coffee. She held the beverage in her mouth, letting its deliciousness seep into her taste buds. The bakery had unbelievably good coffee. Almost good enough to eclipse their indescribably delicious baked

goods. She finally swallowed, so she could ask him what the hell he was doing here.

“Did you say you wanted me to go somewhere with you?”

Harley nodded as he chewed on an absurdly large bite of his sandwich. Apparently he was hungry.

Andi's brows raised in inquiry. “Do I need to point out to you that one of us is a ridiculously famous TV star with a hit show? You can't go anywhere without being noticed, and we are trying to keep our re...lationship quiet.” Andi stumbled over the word.

Harley wiped his mouth with his napkin, then took a sip of his coffee. Clearly appreciating it as much as she did.

“No one will notice us.”

“You mean there's somewhere on the planet where you're not recognized? For the love of God, don't tell the boss; he's spent a fortune promoting the show.”

Harley laughed at her comment. “You ever go hiking?”

“Now why would I want to do that when I've got a perfectly good car?”

“Yeah, well, sometimes I like to hike over in the Santa Monicas. It's really close to the city and gets crazy crowded, but I know some of the more remote trails, and I guarantee we won't see another soul.”

“Remote trails. Won't see a soul. Why does this sound like an episode of *CSI*? I don't know anything about hiking.”

“Despite my crazy-ass-white-boy tendencies”—he smirked at her, letting her know that he knew that she had called him that a time or two—“I've pretty much purged the urge to become a serial killer. Except for when I'm dealing with writers too young to remember *The A-Team*.”

Andi gave him a horrified glance. “*The A-Team*? Are you serious?”

“What's wrong with *The A-Team*? Beats the hell out of reality television, for sure. I was more than a bit fond of Murdock.”

“Yeah, I can see the resemblance.”

Harley laughed. “Look, are you going with me or not? I promise it'll be an easy hike. We'll take a picnic and make a day of it.” He gestured toward the pile of bags in the other room. “I brought you some boots.”

“How did you know my size?”

“I asked Ronni. I bought several pairs. Hiking boots are funny. Fit is absolutely crucial, or you'll regret it. It's not a good idea to hike in a new pair, but this one will be so easy, it shouldn't be a big deal.”

Andi stared at him. Despite her misgivings—and she had more than a few—she wanted to go with him. She hadn't been to the Santa Monicas since she was a kid and they took field trips there from school. Minx was hardly an outdoorswoman, and Andi didn't know anyone who was. Something about being in the wilderness with Harley appealed to her. It was becoming clear that everything about Harley appealed to her. Okay, except maybe *The A-Team*. So she wasn't surprised to find herself agreeing to go off into her own personal episode of *CSI* with him.

* * * * *

Harley glanced over his shoulder to check on Andi's progress. To his amazement she was keeping up quite nicely. He didn't know why that surprised him; Andi seemed to do everything well. It wasn't a difficult trail, and he was going at a moderate pace in deference to her inexperience. Still, she was carrying a ten-pound pack; only a fool went into the woods without provisions and new boots. She was her usual snarky self, of course, but he had to admire her grit. She was a game one for sure, and he looked forward to taking her on more excursions like this. He wondered how she'd feel about real mountain climbing. It struck him that he'd never wanted to take a woman with him when he went out hiking. Usually he was desperate for solitude and couldn't be bothered with anyone else. The only person he'd done any hiking with was his best friend, Bryan Spencer. Unfortunately, the rock star hadn't been around all

that much since they'd met the previous spring when Bryan and his band, StormCrow recorded the theme song for *The Shelter*. His friend had been through a lot since then, and had been out of touch for most of the summer. Bryan liked the Santa Monicas as much as he did, but they'd only had a couple opportunities to explore the area. More than anything he wanted to share this, one of his favorite places on earth, with Andi. Besides, she was a good hiker. She didn't chatter incessantly. They rarely talked at all unless they stopped to enjoy the scenery or an animal sighting.

"I would take you over to Solstice Falls. It's breathtaking, but it's the only waterfall here that has water year-round," he said, knowing she'd understand that the falls were too popular to risk visiting. "Besides, the place where I'm taking you has a pretty little creek running through it most of the year. This early in the fall it should have water. Either way, the canyon is breathtaking. And there are hardly any mountain lions," he added as an aside.

He glanced over his shoulder to watch in amusement as Andi stopped dead in her tracks.

"Mountain lions?"

"Just one." He turned around to face her.

"Just one?" She resumed walking.

"And several of his offspring."

She stopped again. "Goddamnit, Harley. It's one thing to be a *CSI* episode. *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* is a whole 'nother story."

"I've hiked up here for years and never saw any mountain lions. It pays to be careful, but I think most of this area is too well traveled for them."

He wanted to laugh at the way she glared at him, but he knew if he did, she'd be back down the mountain in a heartbeat. So he restrained his laughter and began hiking again. After a few moments he heard her sigh and her footsteps resumed behind him.

"Glad to see you have confidence in my skills as an outdoorsman," he said over his shoulder.

"Nope, you're lots bigger. Any self-respecting mountain lion would eat you first," she said.

This time he didn't even try to stop laughing. Yeah, he was definitely going to keep this one. Whether she wanted to be kept or not.

* * * * *

Andi followed behind Harley up the mountain, glad he couldn't see her, because nothing would remove the smile from her face. Even though he could drive her absolutely insane with little apparent effort on his part, she had to admit that being with Harley made her happy. So happy she was literally following him up a mountain. She couldn't really complain about that. The soft autumn air surrounded them with the sounds of birds and other wildlife. Tree would be absolutely blown away when she found out about it. True to his word, they hadn't seen another soul. Despite being just minutes away from the madness that was LA, out here it felt as though they were the only people on earth. Distracted by her thoughts, Andi stumbled a bit over a root. Harley immediately stopped and rushed back to her side.

"Are you okay?" He took her arm and placed one hand on her hip to steady her.

"I'm fine," she said, once again astonished by his amazing reflexes.

"It's not much farther. You're probably getting tired. We can rest here for a minute, if you want." He frowned his concern.

"No, seriously. I'm fine. I just wasn't paying attention and didn't see the root."

The frown deepened. "You've got to be careful, lady. Even with those boots on it's damned easy to twist your ankle or knee. I'd probably be able to get you down, but it wouldn't be a pleasant experience for either of us." He handed her his Dromedary bag. "Here, drink a little water. It'll give you energy."

Andi took a couple of swallows from the bag and handed it back to him. “Really, Harley. I’m not hurt.” Despite her protests, it wasn’t until she flexed each foot in turn to show him she’d sustained no injury that the frown finally left his face and he started walking again.

Andi followed again, and this time her smile was a full grin. She’d dated a lot over the years, but Harley was the first man who’d ever tried to take care of her. They’d all been courteous and kind—she wouldn’t tolerate anything less—but his solicitous concern was new. Much to her surprise, she was discovering that she liked it. She suspected that her self-sufficient attitude had led the other men to believe she preferred to take care of herself. And that was correct, at least as far as it went, but still, chivalry was nice too. She was also coming to realize that she’d made a tactical error with him. Or at least it was an error if she really wanted him to leave her alone. Far from being put off by her acid tongue like most men, Harley actually seemed to enjoy it.

Hiking, being such a physical exercise, left her head clear, and her thoughts were free to wander. Sometimes into territory she really didn’t want to consider. She had to acknowledge that she really liked Harley, far more than was sensible. It would be all too easy to fall in love with him if she weren’t careful, but then she had always been very, very careful. Despite his attentive manner toward her, he was a first-class hound, and she would do well to remember that, but meanwhile there was nothing wrong with enjoying what he had to offer.

When they reached the summit, Andi could only gasp at the vista laid out before them. As a native Californian, she had a tendency to take the beauty of the state for granted, but the horseshoe canyon with the tiny stream running through it reminded her of just how breathtaking the state could be. The rust brown stone was sparsely covered with patchy areas of scrub brush. The scrub oaks contorted by the wild Santa Ana winds stood as sentinels over the majestic beauty. From this height the stream glittered in the sunlight like a stroke of metallic paint from a master artist. They stood looking down for what

seemed like forever, simply absorbing the sight before them. Finally, unable to ignore their hunger pains any longer, they perched on a huge boulder to enjoy their lunch.

Andi was surprised when he pulled out a lovely loaf of crusty bread along with a mouthwatering chunk of stilton. Having hiked up a mountain with a ten-pound pack on her back, she could appreciate the plastic bottles that contained what turned out to be an excellent Syrah. They munched away in silence, neither wanting to disturb the tranquility of this moment.

"I can see now why you love it here so much," Andi finally said. "It's absolutely gorgeous."

"When I come up here, I'm just a man. Free. Sometimes, though, it reminds me of things I'd be better off forgetting."

Andi stared at him, wondering what he meant. It wasn't like Harley to be so oblique. Most times he was all too direct. Finally she gave in to the temptation and asked for an explanation.

"A long time ago, I was someone else. I mean, not literally, but I had to go through some major changes, even though I didn't want to, but now, I feel it was probably worth it."

"Probably worth it? I don't know. Now is pretty good. You're rich, famous. There are millions who would love to be in your shoes."

His smile was poignant and more than a bit sad. "There is that."

When he said nothing more, Andi prompted him. "You want to talk about it?"

Harley sighed. "Really, there's not a whole lot to talk about, but I'll tell you about it...someday." Then he smiled and reached out to her. "Come here." Andi settled against him on the sun-warmed boulder. Her body delighted in the close proximity to his, and she shivered when he traced her nape with his lips.

"You always smell so good. Like citrus...and honey...and woman. My woman," he murmured against her skin.

Andi sighed and snuggled in closer, too content to protest his last statement. Right now, for this moment, she was his woman. For however long it lasted. She could feel his heavy erection against her hips, and she knew if they hadn't been in such a completely public place, they would've made love. She sighed as she opened her mouth to his slowly descending lips. Yep, the hike up the mountain had so been worth it.

* * * * *

Harley slowly lowered Andi down onto her bed. As desperate as he'd been to get down that mountain and right where they were now, that sense of urgency had passed. Now he took his time, immersing himself in everything that made Andi who she was. Her scent. The feel of her. Her taste. Oh God, her taste. He couldn't get enough, returning again and again to feast on her succulent mouth. His tongue seeking out the deepest recesses as his hands memorized every centimeter of her silky brown skin. He looked down into her topaz brown eyes, their sensuality and smokiness intensified by passion. They closed again as he pinched one ripe nipple and lowered his mouth to taste her. He felt a moment of panic. Would he ever get enough? She filled his senses and touched his soul in a way he'd never expected to experience. So much so, he almost felt bewitched. He felt her shudder beneath him as his fingers found the silken heat of her pussy. She gasped his name as he stroked her clit again and again, bringing her ever closer to release.

Her enchanting aroma grew stronger with her arousal, inciting him to complete the embrace, but despite the temptation, he resisted. He needed to wait just a little bit longer. Her cries were like the most powerful drug in the world, and he couldn't get enough. He wanted to make her come, wanted to pleasure her so that no other man would ever be able to satisfy her. He slid down her body; his tongue traveled over the firm muscles of her torso. Andi shifted her legs against his; the feel of her silken skin sliding against his own was almost his undoing. He closed his eyes to her sultry beauty and took a deep breath to slow his headlong rush into completion.

Her legs fell open beneath his questing hands, and he rubbed his face against the soft flesh of one sleek thigh and then the other, as his lungs filled with her sweet scent. He used the tip of his tongue to seek out her clitoris. He rolled it slightly with his tongue, delighting in the little kittenish moans that rose from her throat in response. He did it again and then captured the distended form between his lips. His mouth opened until it covered the entirety of her pussy, and he slowly slipped his tongue from her clit down the length of her opening. Laving her with the broad flat of his tongue as though he would never stop. The purrs turned into groans as her head thrashed on the pile of pillows. He repeated the gesture until he simply couldn't take any more. Spreading her legs farther, he rose up on his forearms and looked down at the stunning beauty beneath him. Her skin glowed from her arousal; her mouth swollen and pouting like her breasts from the force of his kisses. Her hair formed a wild frame for the vibrant sensuality of her face.

With a guttural groan he brought their bodies together, thrusting in balls-deep in one stroke. She cried out beneath him, the walls of her pussy contracting as though she were already experiencing orgasm. For a moment he wasn't sure he could last for another stroke, but he gritted his teeth and withdrew, only to slam into her again. Andi arched her hips to meet him on each stroke, and it became harder and harder to withdraw, until finally he just grabbed her hips in both hands and ground against her. Trying to get as deep inside her as possible as the base of his cock ground against her clitoris. Andi cried out as her pussy contracted even more tightly on his throbbing penis, and she came, shaking and shuddering, her legs holding him so strongly, he thought he'd probably have marks the next day.

Having watched the miracle that was her completion, Harley held on to his sanity by the thinnest of threads. One stroke and then another. He couldn't get enough of her and knew he never would. His mind couldn't process anything but totally immersing himself in her. He pulled her as close as he could as he slammed into her with a final guttural groan. His orgasm left him almost totally

incapable of further movement, as his left calf, strained from the hike earlier, suddenly cramped up. He collapsed on the bed beside her and reached down to grab the offending muscle. Realizing almost immediately what had happened, Andi sat up and began kneading his calf.

“Are you okay?” she asked. Even her frown of concern was not enough to remove the just-fucked look from her face. Harley felt a smug pride in knowing he'd put that look there.

Thankfully his calf unclenched almost immediately under her strong fingers, and she lay down beside him again. Bereft from the loss of contact, he pulled her over until she was sprawled on top of him. Crinkly tendrils of her hair drifted across his face and tickled his nose. He ran his hands through its fluffy softness, realizing that it was much like her: despite its rough appearance, it was actually unbelievably soft. It reminded him of his favorite down pillows.

As they drifted off to sleep, he was swept with awareness that this woman with her sharp tongue and tender eyes had eased into his heart, his very soul, and his life would never be the same.

Chapter Nine

"You look like hell, man."

"So I've been told." Harley looked across the table at Myron,. "You'd think I'd never had an accident before, the way people are acting."

"These days your accidents can shut down production for days. Thank God Andi was smart enough to work around it." Myron took another bite of his massive porterhouse steak. Harley didn't understand it; the man had invested a fortune into building a huge house, but he practically lived at Mastro's. So much so that he had his own table, like the Sopranos, only a helluva lot more expensive, though only slightly less deadly. "Shutting down production won't hurt you much, but you can't fuck over your craft people like that. Unlike you, they're not making millions of dollars a year. If you don't work, they don't work, and they don't get paid. And speaking of Andi..."

Harley coughed as his club soda went down wrong. "Who's speaking of Andi?"

"Don't fuck with me, Harley. You've been chasing her since you got here. I'm just amazed she let you catch her."

Harley continued coughing, primarily to give himself time to regroup. He should've known that Myron would know. Andi was going to be pissed. "How long have you known?" He sipped on his club soda, studying Myron over his glass.

Myron's eyes narrowed. "Does it matter?" he asked, giving Harley his undivided attention. The steak, which cost more than most people's monthly grocery bill, was forgotten.

Pinned under his friend's suddenly hawklike gaze, Harley shifted uneasily in his chair. "I just hope you're not pissed that I did a little poaching there."

Myron's brows lowered over his deep-set eyes, giving him a menacing stare that made him look more like one of the most powerful men in Hollywood than his usual affable expression. "Poaching? What the hell are you talking about?"

Harley glanced up at the elaborately coffered ceiling, anything to get from under that penetrating glare. For a Friday evening, the restaurant wasn't particularly crowded. Myron's corner table glowed under the light of an elaborately cut crystal chandelier. The exotic hardwoods and rich textures were subtle indicators of the wealth of its patrons. Harley always enjoyed his meals here, but for some reason never came with anyone but Myron. They'd had some great times at this table; so now why did he suddenly feel like a horny teenager caught by Father Robert looking at porn? Myron was hardly without sin in his damned self.

Oh well, the best defense was a good offense. "Why are you so pissed that I'm seeing Andi? What's the big deal? Surely you're not concerned because she's my boss? I don't give a damn, and I doubt anyone else does."

Myron waved a dismissive hand. "That's not it."

"Well, I know you're not jealous. We've shared before."

"Of course I'm not jealous," Myron blustered, color rising under his swarthy complexion. "She's not my girlfriend, you idiot. She's my daughter."

Harley closed his eyes. He couldn't believe that after years of dodging overtures from Myron's daughter Lainie, he'd managed to get involved with one of his daughters anyway. His eyes sprang open. "Wait a minute. You're her father. Why is it that I suspect that *she* doesn't know that?" She knew how close they were. Surely she would've told him.

"Because she doesn't." Myron ran both hands through his thick gunmetal gray hair. Despite the color, he didn't really look his age. He'd gone gray in his twenties. The contrast with his swarthy complexion was striking, and

apparently irresistible to women. Of course, the fact that he was rich as all hell didn't hurt his chances with the fairer sex. "It's complicated."

"No shit. Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

"Until now I hadn't realized it was any of your business."

"Man, how long have we been friends? You know practically everything about me, and you hide the fact that you have another child from me?" Harley gritted out his frustration, but Myron didn't seem to hear him. The softness of his expression and the dreaminess in his eyes indicated that he'd drifted back in time.

"Her mother is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," Myron said with a sigh.

It was odd hearing his friend sound like a love-struck teenager. Harley decided he never wanted to hear that tone in his voice again.

"I met her back when she was on one of my shows."

"Which one?" Harley asked.

Myron pinched his nose. "Hell, I don't remember. Probably a cop show. That's all I did when I first started out. Minx wasn't a regular, but she was already pretty well-known for those black action movies."

"Wait a minute." Harley's mind churned with all this new information. "McFadden. Minx McFadden?" Harley got a visual of a gun-toting, kick-ass diva with an Afro the size of Kansas. In one memorable scene, she'd cut a guy's heart out and mailed it to his wife. Harley had attended a party where the host had shown her movies as a kind of hip backdrop. Urban seventies chic was new and modern, or so he'd been told. Last he'd heard, Quentin Tarantino was even shopping a script featuring her. "Minx McFadden is Andi's mother? And she doesn't know you're her father? How the fuck did this happen?"

Myron had the grace to look ashamed. "I told you, it's complicated."

Harley studied his friend. He'd never seen the man this discomfited. He'd known him for nearly ten years and never caught wind that he had another

child. How had he kept such a thing a secret for more than thirty years? That was a lifetime in a town that thrived on gossip. How had tabloids missed this?

"I fucked up. I fucked up bad."

Harley raised his hands in query, his own vanilla bean lobster tails forgotten. "And? You fuck up on all of them. You never could keep it in your pants."

Myron shook his head vigorously. The waiter approached and discreetly brought him another martini. Harley waved away a refill of his own club soda. "It wasn't like that. Minx was probably the love of my life."

"What?" Harley put both hands to his forehead, suddenly afraid that his head would either fall off or explode with all these new revelations. In all the years he'd known Myron, he'd never so much as suggested that he even knew what the hell love was. A bigger poon-hound had never lived. When the hell had he ever been in love?

"We were young. I was already married to Bunny. I met Minx and... Well, I told you. I lost my mind."

"So what the hell happened? Last time I heard, you were still married to Bunny."

"I told Minx I would leave Bunny. Then I chickened out, and she took off for New York. A few years later she was back, and she had Andi. She was still pissed that I had lied. To tell the truth, I didn't really blame her, but she wouldn't let me see the kid. At first I didn't fight her on it. Minx always had a hot temper, but I figured she had to calm down eventually. I thought maybe if I let her have her way, she'd give in and maybe even start seeing me again. I was dumb as hell and thought I could have my cake and eat it too."

"You still wanted to see her?"

"I'd see her now if she would have me. I told you, I love her," Myron insisted.

"Damn." Harley lowered his hands, still staring at his friend in amazement. "What about Bunny?"

"It was a money thing. Bunny had connections and opened plenty of doors for me. You know her. She would've taken everything I had."

Harley nodded in agreement with that sentiment. Bunny was a cutthroat in cashmere. "Okay, so what happened? Andi's what, thirty? Why haven't you told her, and how the hell did she end up working for you?"

"I eventually realized that Minx wouldn't change her mind, and I knew it would be a court thing. Bunny would find out..."

"Man, if Bunny doesn't know about you by now..." Harley scoffed.

"Bunny and I have an understanding, but we weren't there yet back then. Besides, I think I was ashamed that I'd fucked up like that. So I just let it ride."

"And working for you?" Harley shook his head to clear it. These Byzantine connections were blowing his mind.

"I set up a mentoring program at UCLA. That's where she went to film school. I insisted that Minx let me pay for her school, and she enrolled in my program. I pretty much hire everyone who comes out of my program."

"Jesus." Harley looked down at his lobster. He'd been hungry when he ordered, but now... He took a big gulp of his club soda. "I'm telling you, old man, only you could take a nice, simple extramarital affair and turn it into a Greek tragedy. Complete with a family tree that looks like the fucking interstate system."

"What can I say? It's a gift." Myron shook his head mournfully, his dark deep-set eyes giving him a bit of a hangdog look. Then, almost as if it had never happened, his woeful expression switched off, and he gave Harley another menacing glare. "Andi's my daughter, and you're going to stop seeing her."

"Hell no," Harley said, surprised that he didn't even have to think about his response. No matter who her daddy was, he wasn't giving Andi up anytime

soon. He'd spent months fighting to get her back in his bed, and he'd take on anyone, including one of his best friends, to keep her there.

"It's not up for debate. I don't want you seeing my daughter," Myron stated flatly. "*Either* of my daughters," he finished emphatically.

Harley had always suspected that Myron knew about Lainie's overtures toward him. They'd never discussed it, but he'd always assumed that his friend knew he was too smart to even think about going there. Apparently he was wrong. "You know goddamned well I wouldn't touch Lainie with a ten-foot pole." When Myron didn't respond, Harley continued staring at him. "Are you trying to say I'm not good enough for your daughter? Isn't that just a bit hypocritical?"

"Of course it is. I'm a hound, everybody knows it, but no way in hell am I going to sit by while another hound takes advantage of my daughter." Myron shook his head. "She's such a smart girl. I can't believe she got involved with a player like you. Especially with you on the show. I thought she was too professional for that."

"Apparently *you* weren't too professional for that," Harley said.

"Touché." Myron nodded his head in assent.

"And just for your information, we got together before the show. At your Christmas party, to be exact," he continued, no longer caring about the wisdom of disclosing the information.

"Jesus Christ."

"I'm not going to stop seeing her. I can't." Harley was surprised by the panic he felt. Usually he'd rather break a limb than get entangled in family drama. In fact, he could recall actually doing so on at least one occasion, but the alternative, breaking up with Andi, was out of the question.

"What the hell do you mean, you can't?" Myron roared. "You know she's nothing but a piece of ass to you..."

Harley leaned across the table, his face mere inches from Myron's. It took everything he had to resist the urge to knock the hell out of his friend. "Shut the fuck up," he said through clenched teeth. "You don't know what the hell you're talking about."

Myron leaned back defensively. "What the hell's wrong with you?" Harley didn't answer, just continued to glare at him. "You're not going to tell me you're in love..." His mouth dropped open as realization dawned. "Jesus Christ, this is too fucked-up."

Harley smirked, then relaxed back into his chair. "You really ought to stop saying that, being Jewish and all. It's bad enough you have a Christmas party."

"Who better to call on the son of God than one of his chosen people? As for the party, can you imagine Bunny missing a chance to show off that goddamned mausoleum? A gift-wrapping room, for Christ's sake," Myron muttered.

Harley had heard all this before. What had started out as a "modest" twenty-thousand-square-foot home had more than doubled in size as Bunny kept adding features she had to have. Harley had once considered moving a couple of extra families into the house just to see how long it would take them to discover their guests, but with the show's schedule, he hadn't had an opportunity.

Myron continued studying him, as though he was taking his measure. "You're really in love with her?" A grin was Harley's only answer. "Does she know?"

"Of course not. You think I want the shit kicked out of me? She'd think it was some kind of line and beat my ass. She's convinced I'm a player."

"You *are* a fucking player." Myron snorted around another sip of his martini.

Harley nodded at the hovering waiter. "Yeah, but there comes a time when every player has to stop playing," he said softly. The waiter cleared their table

and brought Harley another club soda, while Myron waved away a third martini.

Myron lowered his voice, and Harley had to strain to hear it; odd that the man could be menacing as hell even when he whispered. "You hurt her, and you can kiss your ass good-bye."

Harley nodded. Myron didn't make idle threats, and he had the means at his disposal to see them through. "Understood." He went back to the previous conversation. "You've got to tell her."

"Hell no," Myron said, unconsciously mimicking Harley's response. "I can't do that."

"Look, old man, you're playing with fire. You've got her working for you. That's some seriously fucked-up shit. She's bound to find out. And when she does, she'll know that I know too."

"How? You worked in the soaps too long. Shit like this doesn't just come up out of the blue. Nobody knows about this but me and Minx, and both of us have our own reasons for keeping it quiet," Myron said with a mulish expression.

Harley closed his eyes as he contemplated the many ways this situation could blow up in his face. It had disaster written all over it. It would be smart to get the hell out while the getting was good. But that was so not going to happen. Until tonight he hadn't really put his feelings for Andi into words. That he wanted her back in his bed was a given, but it wasn't until he realized that he hadn't so much as thought of another woman since his first night in her bed that he knew this one was different. Contrary to popular belief, he had had a few serious relationships. They'd all been lovely ladies, and he'd even loved a couple of them. But none of those relationships had hit him like this. Andi was suspicious of his motives, and rightfully so; his reputation—even without the parts that were greatly exaggerated—was still pretty unsavory. He wasn't ashamed, and he'd never mistreated anyone, but Andi was too savvy to get involved with a player. As if that wasn't bad enough, now he had to deal with

this Gordian knot her parents had made of her family ties. Even worse, he'd been made a coconspirator in their insanity.

Harley gave Myron an exasperated look. Myron stared back at him, his chin jutting out at a determined angle. Harley knew that expression; in fact, he saw it practically every day on Andi's face. Now that he knew she was Myron's daughter, he wondered how he hadn't noticed the resemblance before. And it wasn't just physical; Andi had definitely inherited her determined nature from her father. Nothing he could say was going to change the man's mind. He just hoped like hell that Myron was right, but suspected that his friend had made a very rare miscalculation.

* * * * *

Andi yawned as she turned the corner into the parking lot for Ellison Productions, stopping dead in the middle of the parking lot when she saw most of her staff clustered on the sidewalk in front of her parking space, waiting for her. She dropped her head to the steering wheel of her beloved Cabriolet, resisting the urge to just kick the vehicle in reverse and get the hell out of there. The flame-colored vehicle had been a gift from Minx when she graduated film school, and she planned to drive it until one of them died. She raised her head from the steering wheel to look at her crew again. They seemed to just be milling around. This was getting to be a habit, and an expensive one at that. What the hell had Harley done now? She hadn't seen him in a couple of days. She knew he was busy doing promo; she'd been busy too, but she'd assumed she'd see him this past weekend. Andi shook her head firmly. This is not a relationship, girl, she coached herself. No sense in putting yourself out there like that. Harley is not the relationship kind, and you know it. You'll see him when you see him.

She stepped out of her car and was immediately surrounded by her staff. It was then that she realized that several of them were in tears. Even at his worst, Harley had never driven anyone to tears before. "What's going on, guys?" she asked the group.

Ronni rushed to her side. "Lainie's been kidnapped," she said. Her usually crisp demeanor was shaken, and her eyes were suspiciously red, though there were no tears. It would've been beneath her dignity to cry at the office. Almost everyone on the set knew and loved Lainie. Many had worked with her on *Blues*, and some had even been around long enough to remember her as a youngster, toddling along behind her father on the sets of his various shows. She'd become something of a studio mascot when she was barely old enough to talk.

"What?" Andi stared at them. She took a deep breath. "Are you sure this isn't some kind of a joke?" She looked around. "Where's Harley?" The question wasn't a non sequitur. Harley was a legendary practical jokester.

"Jeez, boss lady, do you really think I'm that big of an asshole? Myron's my bud. I wouldn't fuck with him about his kid," Harley drawled laconically.

Andi turned around. She hadn't heard Harley approach from behind her. "You filled in his pool."

"Hey, we needed a basketball court." He shrugged. "Besides, he didn't notice for weeks. Wasn't much of a joke, really. Bunny didn't take it well, though. She never had much of a sense of humor."

Andi gave him an exasperated look. "Do you mean someone really has kidnapped Lainie?"

"Myron's assistant, Darren, called me a while ago. I'm surprised he didn't call you."

Andi pulled her phone out of her jacket pocket. Damn, she'd forgotten to charge the thing. It boggled her mind that people called the damned things smartphones. If they were so freaking smart, why couldn't they charge themselves? Ronni encouraged her to get a backup, but if she couldn't keep one charged, how could she take care of two of the damned things? She raised the hand still holding the BlackBerry to her forehead. She'd done that so often there was a worn place on the bottom of the electronic device. Ronni took it out of her hand and replaced it with another one.

"What's this?" Andi asked.

"Your backup BlackBerry."

"I have a backup BlackBerry?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ronni replied.

"Don't call me ma'am," Andi said automatically. "How long have I had a backup BlackBerry?"

"About six months. I didn't get a chance to switch them last night, or you wouldn't have had a dead one this morning."

Andi stared at the young woman for a long moment. Ronni's efficiency never ceased to amaze her. Lainie knew that the girl had come from a troubled family and grinding poverty. She'd made it out of a tough neighborhood and had graduated at the top of her class. She was driven, hardworking, and uncannily smart. Without Ronni, her job would be damned near impossible.

Turning back to her staff who still clustered around her, she asked, "Has anyone talked to Myron?"

Ronni shook her head. "I guess he's still at the Taj." Myron's wife had dubbed their home the Château, but one of the staff (probably Harley) had nicknamed it the Taj Mahal. The name had stuck, though everyone wondered which of his mistresses Myron planned to have buried there with him.

"Okay, so what's happening on the *Blues* set?" Andi asked. They shared a production studio with the other show. During pilot season, there could be as many as five shows shooting there, but right now there were only two.

"They've shut down. Lainie's the star, plus they're all freaked out. I don't think they can do much," Ronni said.

Andi shoved the phone back in her pocket, where she worried it like rosary beads. "We're going to go ahead and shoot today." Everyone looked at her in surprise, even Harley, who was surprisingly nonchalant considering the circumstances. "I know Myron. He's losing a fortune if *Blues* is shut down. That can't be helped, but there's no reason for us to shut down too. Come on,

everybody. We've got a show to do." She pointed to Harley, who leaned casually against the building. "You, I'd like to see in my trailer." Harley raised his brows but followed her willingly enough.

Andi walked into her trailer, tossing her bag and jacket on the small love seat. Other than her diploma and some stills from the *Blues* set, she'd never bothered to decorate her office, so the walls were still stark white, and her desk was a somewhat battered one she'd inherited when she first started working there five years before. She stood in front of it, her arms crossed.

"What's going on?"

Harley raised his brows in inquiry. "What do you mean?"

Andi took a deep breath, taking in his appearance. Even in a pair of deliberately distressed cargo pants and a StormCrow T-shirt that looked suspiciously well tailored, he was devastatingly attractive. "You don't seem particularly concerned about Lainie."

Harley shrugged. "That would be because I'm not. You know what a brat she is. She's probably pissed because *Blues* is getting canceled."

"Lainie's a little spoiled—" She broke off at his derisive expression. "Okay, a lot spoiled, but she was always a trooper with me. Besides, I can't imagine that she'd put her parents through this." For a brief moment she thought about the disturbing conversation she'd had with the girl in her office. Lainie had seemed uncharacteristically single-minded, but the girl had always had a penchant for the dramatic. She wouldn't do something like this. Would she? Andi shook her head to dismiss the thought as Harley continued.

"She was a trooper with you because you scare the hell out of her, just like you do everyone around here. And she's got some kind of hero-worship thing going with you, but that kid will do anything to get her way."

"Says a man who's an expert at getting his own way." Andi pursed her lips. She scared people? That was news to her, and certainly hadn't had any impact on Harley.

"I'm not usually a bitch about it."

"Oh really? Couldn't have proved it by me," Andi snapped back.

"Trust me, I've got nothing on that kid."

"Having worked with both of you, I can say, let me be the judge of that," Andi said.

"You have no idea; probably because you're the wrong sex."

"The wrong sex... What does that have to do with any...? Harley, you didn't!" Suddenly it was hard to breathe. She'd kill him!

Harley looked puzzled. "Didn't what?"

"Sleep with Lainie," Andi screeched.

"Jesus, no, but that didn't keep her from trying. She started chasing me when she was fifteen or sixteen." His perfectly groomed brows came down as he frowned at her. "Just what the hell do you think I am? She's just a kid. Even if I were willing to ruin my relationship with Myron, I'm sure not willing to go to jail for a piece of ass."

Andi released the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. He sounded...hurt. She hadn't realized she had the power to hurt him. They'd been exchanging barbs for months, and she'd never fazed him. Then again, she'd never accused him of sleeping with a kid before. That was a far cry from her usual vain-actor comments.

"How was I supposed to know?" She hated the defensiveness in her voice. He was only in his midthirties, and Lainie wasn't much younger than all those kids he hung around with. What if the rumors were true? Well, if his reaction to the comments about Lainie was anything to go by, they weren't. So what the hell was he doing with them, then? She wanted to ask him about them, but before she could work up the nerve, the moment was lost.

Harley's nostrils flared, and he looked as though he was about to lose his temper, but he stopped and seemed to make a conscious effort to gather himself. He walked over to her instead. Cradling her face in both his hands, he

leaned forward. "You don't know me at all, do you, boss lady?" Somehow he managed to make the words "boss lady," which usually annoyed her, into an endearment. His lips crossed hers on a whisper, and she automatically rose up on tiptoe to deepen the kiss.

Chapter Ten

They sprang apart when a sharp knock sounded at the door. By the time the door opened to admit Ronni, Harley was standing on the other side of the room with his back to her, feigning interest in the studio stills she had hanging over her desk.

Ronni had been with her for a while. Fresh out of film school, she had a lean and hungry look that reminded Andi of herself. Though she suspected that Ronni would keep any suspicions to herself, she still didn't want to risk it or put her staff in an awkward position. The girl didn't stay long after alerting Harley that Taylor was ready for him.

"That was too damned close. No more touching on the set," Andi said.

Harley turned and gave her a speaking glance. Apparently he didn't think her comment was worthy of a response, because he changed the subject.

"Are you going out to Myron's tonight?"

Andi nodded. "I thought I'd at least call, but won't the cops or the FBI or somebody be there?"

"Yeah, Darren said they were there, but Myron's my bud. I thought I'd at least pop in. Do you want to come with me?"

Andi frowned. "Do you think that's a good idea? We're supposed to be a secret, remember?"

"Myron knows about us."

"What?" Andi screeched.

"That old dude doesn't miss a trick. I don't know why you thought he wouldn't find out about us," Harley said.

"When did you find out?"

"When I had dinner with him Friday night."

"I'm amazed I still have a job." Andi sighed.

"Come on, you know Myron better than that. Like I said, as long as you don't go over budget, he really doesn't care how you run this show." Harley glanced down at his watch. "Look, I've got to get to makeup if Taylor's already calling for me. Tell you what, why don't you ride over to the Taj with me after we're done here? Ronni can take your car home, and you'll have a good hour to chew my ass then, okay?" And just like that he was out the door.

Andi gritted her teeth with frustration. Why in the hell had she ever listened to the man? Okay, to be honest, she hadn't exactly been thinking with her brain at the time, but still. That did it. Tonight would be the perfect opportunity to end it with him. Ignoring her wayward body, which insisted it would be better if she waited until he had at least broken her off a little bit just one more time, she remained resolute. Harley had to go, and that was final.

* * * * *

The drive to Myron and Bunny's was a tense one. Once Harley explained what had gone down at the dinner he had with their boss, she could've kicked herself. She knew Myron; of course he knew everything that went on at his studio. The man hadn't got to the top of the Hollywood game by not knowing his business. She must have been in some lust-fueled haze to think otherwise.

"I told you it was no big deal." Harley broke the silence while navigating through the early-evening traffic. Despite the high emotion on the set, they'd managed to get through that day's shooting schedule with uncanny alacrity. There were none of the usual temper tantrums and one-upping that typified a day on the set. Even Taylor, who was usually a fanatical perfectionist, had done most of the scenes in one take. When they made mistakes, he just waved his hand and said he'd work it out in editing. Maybe

everyone was just emotionally exhausted and wanted to go home. She could appreciate that sentiment. It certainly applied to her.

"What did he say?"

Harley shrugged, and Andi suspected he wasn't being particularly forthright.

"I told you," he replied irritably. "As long as you stick to the budget, Myron doesn't give a shit who you sleep with. He's been around his damned self. That being the case, can we stop sneaking around like a couple of horny teenagers afraid of curfew?"

Andi frowned. What he said jibed pretty much with what she had thought Myron would say. So why did she feel that Harley wasn't telling her everything? "Even if Myron doesn't care, I doubt very seriously that everybody else would feel the same way. There's seventy or eighty people involved here, and I'm not going to disrupt this whole show over a piece of ass." She sucked in a sudden breath, bracing her arm against the side of his Jeep as he swerved across two lanes of traffic to pull into a restaurant parking lot.

"What did you just say to me?" he asked in a tone so soft, she had to strain to hear him. Why was it that she suspected that wasn't a good sign? She'd seen Harley in a rage plenty of times, but she'd always suspected that he was playing a part. This cold, incisive anger was more representative of his true feelings, and thus far more frightening than a thousand hissy fits.

Andi took a deep breath. "Okay, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, but you know this isn't serious. Why pretend otherwise?"

Harley stared back at her. If ever anyone needed proof he was bat-shit crazy, the fact that he'd willingly got involved with Andi McFadden was it. With her richly toned skin glowing in the fading light and her free-form Afro forming a delicate headdress, she reminded him of some ancient goddess come to life. The conservative lines of her coral pink pantsuit stood in stark contrast with

the urban-chic lines of her hair, while her jade green glasses—*How many pairs did she have, anyway?*—emphasized the smoky topaz hue of her eyes. Every time he looked into them it was like she saw who he really was, and accepted him. With Andi, he didn't have to pretend. He could just be himself, and that was good enough. He'd never had that with anyone before. Had never trusted anyone enough to let them see him for who he was. For some reason, having her continually chew his ass actually felt good. Despite the neurotic way she insisted on hiding their relationship, being with her felt good. No way in hell, though, was he going to keep letting her treat him like a dirty little secret.

He continued studying her, deliberately trying to make her uncomfortable. He knew he'd achieved his goal when she began to shift uneasily in her seat. "I'm not a piece of ass," he said, still not raising his voice.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," Andi said. "But it's not like we're trying to have a relationship or anything. We'll have some good times, and then..."

"You're making a helluva assumption here. Why don't you think we could have a relationship?"

Now it was her turn to stare; though if her open mouth was any indication, he might have struck her speechless. "Oh come on, Harley. You're like the biggest man slut in Hollywood. A different woman every week. Everybody knows that."

"Don't believe everything you see. I've actually been fairly circumspect in my love life," Harley said defensively.

"Really? What about Kiki Langlois?"

Harley shrugged. "Everybody has to date Kiki. I think it's the law. You mean you haven't gone out with her?"

Andi snorted her nonresponse.

"I'm sure she'll have an opening this spring." He glanced down at his watch. They should've been at Myron's fifteen minutes ago. Darren had said

they weren't supposed to have any visitors, but Myron and Bunny had told the FBI that Andi and he were practically family. He wondered if Bunny knew just how true that statement was. What a fucking mess, and it was only getting worse.

"Look, Andi, there's more to this than just fucking. I know it, and so do you. I get where you're coming from about people being pissed. I don't agree, but we do have some prima donnas on the set, so I'll let it go. But I won't let you get away with pretending it's something casual."

"Then what is it, Harley? An extended one-night stand?"

"It wasn't a one-night stand."

"What are you talking about? I never would've heard from you again if you hadn't been hired for the show," Andi said.

"That's not true."

"Then why didn't you call?"

Harley sucked in a deep breath; he could tell from her stunned expression that she hadn't meant to say that. He had planned to call her but had been called back to Cincinnati because of his father's illness. There was so much about him she didn't know, and this was hardly the place for those type revelations, so he took the coward's way out.

"How was I supposed to know you wanted me to?"

Andi shrugged a delicate shoulder and gave him one of those fuck-you glances that went straight to his groin.

"Hey, I'm not the one who's trying to make this more than it is. I didn't care one way or another."

"Liar." He grinned, realizing that he was right. She really did give a damn. Little fraud. "You never would've brought it up if you didn't care. It bothered you that I didn't call. Admit it."

"I'll do no such thing." She nodded toward the illuminated clock on his dashboard. It was well past eight o'clock.

Harley gritted his teeth as he shifted the car into reverse. He'd not get her that close to admitting the truth again anytime soon.

* * * * *

Andi didn't know what she'd expected when she saw Bunny Ellison for the first time since the kidnapping. The woman's discreetly highlighted blonde hair was usually immaculately coiffed by her live-in hairdresser. Andi had never seen her in anything other than an elegant St. John ensemble, tailored to show off her petite frame. She'd wondered more than once if Myron had bought the company, Bunny seemed to be such a fan. Tonight the woman was hardly recognizable. Her hair looked as though chickens had roosted in it. Were those gray roots? Despite years of diligent upkeep by the best plastic surgeons in town, she seemed to have aged twenty years. And she was wearing a caftan that would house three women the same size. Andi embraced her and then Myron. His deep-set eyes were even more sunken than usual, and he looked...shattered. It was the only word Andi could come up with to describe the man's demeanor. She knew that Harley believed Lainie had faked her kidnapping, but clearly her parents thought otherwise.

Andi really wished they hadn't been seated in the study, as Harley kept giving her covert glances, letting her know that he too recalled what had almost happened here. Despite its designation as Myron's study, the room didn't suit her boss at all. While designed to be impressive, the gilt-edged Louis XIV—or was it XV? Andi frowned. She never could keep her Louis straight. Either way the furniture was too ostentatious for Myron's comfort. Unlike his office at the studio, this study had very little of Myron's personality. Bunny was a smart woman; she had to have done it on purpose. Andi's mind wandered again to the night Harley pinned her to the mahogany-paneled wall. Mainly to take her mind off those prurient thoughts, she started asking questions.

“Bunny, do the police have any leads or know anything?”

Bunny leaned forward in the love seat, shaking her head numbly. “They say she left the set last evening. Said she had a date and seemed really excited.

Thing is, she hadn't said anything to me about going out, and she usually tells me everything. I didn't know anything was wrong until her driver told me that she told him she didn't need him last night. Lainie has poor night vision; we don't let her drive at night." She put her hands up over her face, and her shoulders shook as she began to sob. Harley took a handkerchief out of his jacket pocket and handed it to her. Bunny mumbled a soft thank-you and wiped at her eyes. "Then we got that horrid letter," she continued once she'd collected herself.

"Letter?" Andi asked. She didn't know why she was surprised there would be a ransom note. How else would they know the girl had been kidnapped? Clearly she'd been listening to Harley too much.

"Yes." Myron spoke up from the bar, where he was pouring drinks. "They asked for a million dollars." He walked over to where Harley and Andi were seated, and handed them each a soft drink. "The police said they probably aren't professionals," he said as he sat down on the love seat next to his still-weeping wife. He placed their drinks on the coffee table and took her hand in his.

Harley took a long sip of his soda. "What makes them say that?" he asked Myron.

"Do you know my net worth?"

Harley laughed grimly. "Guess that is a point. From that perspective, a million isn't a helluva lot to ask for."

Andi took a sip of her soda. Myron probably kept that much in petty cash.

"The police seem confident that we'll get Lainie back," Myron continued, still looking at his wife, who seemed to have got herself under control.

Andi leaned forward toward Bunny. "Is there anything we can do to help?" She glanced at Myron. "Do you guys need anything?"

Myron shook his head. "No, I think everything is under control here; at least as much as it's going to be for a while." He gave her a pointed look, and

Andi realized he wanted to know what was going on with the show but didn't want to upset Bunny by asking. She assured him that production was on schedule. The visit eventually wound down, and she and Harley were soon back in his Jeep on their way back to her home. As Harley pulled into the tiny parking lot and parked in one of the coveted guest spots she saw that her own car was parked in her assigned space. She hoped no one else had company tonight. There was only room for two guest vehicles at a time, and parking on the street was risky at best. Despite constant complaints, Minx refused to pay to have additional parking spots installed.

She glanced at Harley. "Do you want to come up for a drink?"

Harley gave her a long look. "Are you asking me to spend the night?"

Andi gritted her teeth. "Yes, Harley. I'm asking you to spend the night."

"With sex?"

"No, to play bid whist. Oh, for God's sake!" Andi opened the door, then blinked as Harley somehow managed to be there before she got out. Dude was much faster than he looked.

"Sorry, sorry. I just don't want there to be any confusion."

"Yes, Harley, I'd like you to spend the night." He looked at her expectantly. "With sex," she found herself practically shouting. "And if by some miracle I manage to not gouge out your brain with a grapefruit spoon, I might not even kick you out of bed afterward."

She forced herself to ignore the brilliant grin that broke out over his face as he held up an arm, as though escorting her into an elegant ball. "Thank you, boss lady."

Chapter Eleven

Andi fell back on the bed with Harley feverishly following her down. She tugged at his shirt, nearly out of her mind with the need to feel his bare skin again. His mouth came down to hers, and she gasped, so hot, she was surprised that their skin didn't sizzle on contact.

There, she finally got his shirt off. She splayed her hands over the muscular contours of his back, loving the feel of each sinew as his lips scorched a path along the cords of her neck. Every muscle tautened when he took a bite right where her neck and shoulder met. *God, that feels so good.* She didn't realize she'd said it out loud until he responded.

"I'm gonna make you feel even better, sweet lady." Harley groaned as he suddenly stood up. He made short work of removing the rest of his clothes, tossing them on the floor in a manner that made a joke of his alleged clothing obsession.

Andi sat up to enjoy the view; she knew he stayed in shape more through sports than time in the gym, and his body showed it. His slim form rippled with long, lean muscle, and he had more than his fair share of scars from various injuries. She wondered in particular about one fine line that started on his left hip and then disappeared in his sparse blond pubic bush. Apparently she stared too long, because he looked up from where he was removing her shoes.

"Knife fight in Kinshasa."

Her brows rose. The thing was, he was probably telling the truth. After years of living in a town where everybody had a game to run and worked overtime trying to impress, it was disconcerting to deal with someone who really didn't give a damn. At least, not about impressing others.

Before she completed that thought, her trousers had joined his on the floor. He sat down on the edge of the bed and let his eyes travel over her body. She squirmed under the scrutiny, almost unbearably turned on by the way those feverishly bright eyes lingered over every curve, triggering a pool of wetness between her legs. She ached to feel his cock plunging deep inside. She reached for him, impatient to feel his body against hers. He pulled away, reaching out instead to slip a questing finger between her legs, seeking the slippery folds hidden within.

Andi's legs fell open as she collapsed on the bed, giving herself up to the pleasure to be found under his hands. Another finger joined the first one as he pressed the lips of her pussy apart, then slipped a finger inside. Andi ground her clit against him, desperate for deeper contact, and he quickly gave her what she needed, stroking her clit with soft motions of his thumb. When he slipped a second finger inside her weeping channel, her clit elongated, stretching to press even harder against his thumb. The pleasure thrummed through Andi, bringing her closer, then closer, until suddenly, just when she thought she would die if she didn't come, it all just snapped, pole-vaulting her into a blinding orgasm.

Harley pulled away, and almost before she could miss him, she heard her bedside table drawer open. It was almost too much of effort to open her eyes, but when she did, she was arrested by the sight of him unrolling a condom over the large, mushroom-shaped head of his penis. She smiled as she realized it was a cherry-flavored one she'd got in a variety pack a while ago. She'd always liked the flavor and thought she could make Harley like it too.

She sat up, brushing his hands away, and undertook the task herself. The velvety feel of his heavily veined cock was erotic itself, and she took her time sheathing it in the latex. When she lowered her mouth to encircle the head, he fell back on the bed, swearing under his breath. She bobbed her head up and down as she gradually slipped the condom over his turgid length. She couldn't get enough of the feel of him under her tongue and applied greater pressure as

feeling his pleasure turned her on more and more. She slipped her mouth off his cock and gave his balls the same treatment; gently loving them with her tongue as he squirmed beneath her in delight. So totally wrapped up in the scent, the feel, and the taste of him, it was all she could do not to come again when she looked up and saw his face. His head was canted back in a severe angle, the veins in his neck stood out in stark relief against his flushed skin.

“Fuck me. For the love of God, stop playing and just fuck me.”

As though compelled by a force outside herself, Andi immediately complied, slipping his cock into soaking-wet pussy. She slammed down in one motion, gasping with pleasure from the impossibly stretched feeling that placed her clit right against his pubic bone. Harley tossed his head back and forth on the linens; apparently having lost the ability to speak any further, he groaned and growled in guttural gasps.

Andi raised and lowered herself, pistoning down on his cock with increasing speed, thankful that years of Pilates had given her the leg strength to maintain the position. Her second orgasm was just out of reach, and she strained toward it, mindless now to anything but the coil of ecstasy that tightened again and again with each downward motion of her body. Harley suddenly grabbed her hips, grinding his pelvis into hers in a way that was bound to leave marks tomorrow, but she didn't care, because his movements brought her tantalizingly closer.

Then he flipped her over, putting her on the bottom and spreading her legs so far apart that her thighs pressed into her collarbones. She was at his mercy now, and he took full advantage, slamming into her again and again like a man who had gone mad with lust. Andi held on, loving every stroke, as she strove for her own pleasure. He slipped one hand under her hips and slid the other one between their straining bodies.

“Give it to me, boss lady,” he growled against her neck. And just like that she came so hard, she had black spots behind her tightly clenched eyelids. He

followed almost immediately, shouting his pleasure as his semen pulsed into the condom.

* * * * *

When Andi came back to herself, she was amazed to discover the room was still standing. She glanced over at Harley, who looked as dazed as she felt. The laughter started as a small giggle but wouldn't be contained, and before she knew it, it was a full-fledged guffaw. Harley's eyes narrowed as he gave her a questioning look.

"I guess Tree is right. I am too goal-oriented." Harley only looked more confused, so she shared with him the conversation she'd had with her friend and her goal of fucking him until they both lost cognitive function. His laughter joined hers, and they both lay back on the horribly mussed bed until they could only giggle helplessly. Harley eventually mustered the strength to wander into the adjoining bathroom, and shortly thereafter, Andi heard the toilet flush and running water. She groped around on her bedside table for her glasses, then looked at the clock, reassured that she hadn't been out of it for all that long. She felt languid and didn't want to move at all, but had to get up to use the toilet. Quickly giving up on the tangled mess of clothing on the floor, she slipped on a robe that had been lying on a chair beside her bed.

Harley stood in the doorway of her bathroom, clad only in a pair of navy blue boxer briefs. "I don't suppose you have anything to eat?"

Andi stared at him, but an answering growl from her stomach reminded her that they'd forgotten to eat dinner. She went over the sparse contents of her refrigerator in her mind. She hadn't been to the market in a while, and Tree, who could sometimes be persuaded to do it for her, was back in New York.

"I think I have a little pancetta. Maybe I can scare up some pasta carbonara."

Harley's expression brightened. "Bacon and egg spaghetti? I'm all in."

“Okay, give me a few minutes.” She brushed past him on her way to the bathroom, pausing to exchange a brief kiss.

“That was fantastic, boss lady. If you cook like you—” He yelped as she gave him a sharp elbow to the ribs.

Moments later she exited the bathroom and stopped at her dresser to pull on a fresh pair of underwear and some soft rose pink lounging pajamas. Without thinking, she also exchanged her jade green eyeglasses for a pair of deep burgundy ones to coordinate with her outfit. While she was gone, he had put on the cargo pants and T-shirt he'd been wearing when they arrived at her house, but had left his feet bare. They stood out against the dark walnut of her hardwood floor.

Harley joined her at the bureau, looking down at the small armoire where her collection of eyeglasses was housed. It looked like a freestanding jewelry box, but instead of jewelry it held dozens of pairs of eyeglasses lying in individual plush-velvet-lined drawers. He stared at it in amazement.

“Good grief, you really do coordinate your glasses with your clothes. And I thought I had it bad.”

Andi closed the armoire, somewhat embarrassed. “It started as a joke, okay. Tree gave me the armoire because I had a hard time keeping up with my glasses. Once I had it, I pretty much had to fill it up.”

“Oh yeah, that makes perfectly good sense.” He moved past her to open the cabinet again. “This is really nice. I don't think I've ever seen anything like it. How many pairs do you have, anyway?”

“Tree had it custom built. I probably have about a hundred pairs, but I've never counted.” She closed the cabinet again. “Let's go eat.”

Harley followed her into the kitchen, and in short order, they had begun cooking. She diced the pancetta while Harley put a pot of water on to boil for the pasta. They worked easily together, despite the undersized dimensions of her kitchen. Her mother hadn't enlarged any of the living space in the building,

as the Historical Society had very strict codes, so the kitchen remained small. Apparently previous generations hadn't required stadium-sized kitchens. Andi had upgraded her unit to include stainless steel appliances and hardwood floors. The warm yellow paint and natural maple cabinets made the room cheerful and bright, but it was still a one-cook kitchen. The narrow confines meant that they brushed against one another frequently, and neither could resist the soft kisses that went back and forth. While she fried the pancetta, Harley whisked up the eggs. Andi was delighted to find a bit of only slightly wilted radicchio and a chunk of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, which would make a great salad. Before long they were seated with steaming bowls of pasta before them and large glasses of San Pellegrino water. The dining room was larger than the kitchen, and Andi particularly loved the large farmhouse table she'd found at a flea market several years ago. She didn't entertain much, but when she did, having a table that could seat eight made for some pleasant meals.

Andi watched in amazement as Harley's bowl of pasta rapidly disappeared. *He must have an incredible metabolism.* She looked down at her significantly smaller portion, which was all the carbohydrates she dared to eat, since, unlike him, she wasn't willing to go careening down a mountain on her face to burn them off. Of course, his extra foot of height didn't hurt either.

Harley laughed at her comment about his appetite. "I've always been a big eater. My nickname in college was '7-Eleven' because I was constantly in there buying snacks. My friends swore I had the munchies, but I never did drugs."

She gestured toward his water glass. "Odd to meet someone in the industry who doesn't do drugs or alcohol. At least it is before they go to rehab."

He shrugged. "I dunno. I guess I've got issues, but since the seminary, I can't stand not to be in control."

Andi stared at her water glass in consternation. "This stuff packs a helluva kick. I could've sworn you said seminary."

He continued laughing. "I did say seminary. I entered when I was sixteen. I'd wanted to be a priest since I was a kid."

Andi topped off their water glasses. "A Catholic priest?" she asked, still wondered if this was one of Harley's legendary pranks.

"Why does everyone respond that way when I tell them this?"

"Probably because you're one of the most unpriestlike people I've ever met."

"And just how many priests do you know?"

"Besides you?"

Harley nodded.

"That would be none," Andi conceded. "Touché, but damn..."

And just like that he shut down. His face shuttered, and those expressive green eyes were suddenly as flat as unpolished stones. "People change."

"What happened, Harley?" she asked gently.

He laughed, and for a moment he looked just like his old jocular self. "I can't believe you're even asking. Isn't it obvious? I blew the whole thing off. Do you have any idea what a pain in the ass and assorted other body parts celibacy is?"

Andi might have believed him, but his eyes still had all the animation of a lump of coal. Harley was a good actor, but his eyes told the truth of the pain he felt. "Tell me the truth. Why did you leave the seminary?"

"How do you know I didn't blow it off, just like I said?"

"Because despite your most diligent efforts to appear otherwise, you're not a blow-it-off kind of guy. You hate the show and everything about it, but I've never seen anybody fight so hard for a show's integrity," Andi said, confident in her knowledge of his character. Harley was complicated and deliberately worked to throw people off with that shallow actor facade. Oh, he could be just as self-absorbed and needy as anybody else in town, but for the most part it was just a front. It felt good to finally have a grasp on who this man really was.

“Seriously? There are quite a few people on *The Shelter* set alone who would say otherwise,” he said.

“Maybe they’re not as perceptive as I am. Come on, Harley. Gimme.”

The sun-etched lines around his eyes crinkled as he smiled. “Gimme? Did you just say gimme?”

“Yes, I did. Tell me.” Andi wouldn’t let him break eye contact. If she hadn’t been watching so closely, she would’ve missed the transformation. She almost wished she had; the pain that stared back at her was tough to witness.

Harley took a long drink of his water and stared back at her, his eyes unfocused, and Andi knew he wasn’t really seeing her. He stood up and began clearing the table. When she rose to assist him, he gestured for her to remain seated. The open floor plan between the two rooms allowed her to watch his ministrations. He rinsed the plates and methodically placed them in the dishwasher with a precision generally reserved for spent nuclear-fuel rods. Andi waited impatiently for what she thought must be a helluva story. He washed the pots they’d used by hand in a similar fashion, and it wasn’t until he’d put them back into the cabinet that he leaned against the soapstone counter and began speaking so softly, she almost missed his first words.

“I already said I went to seminary when I was still a kid. I grew up in Cincinnati. Big traditional Catholic family. My family was very devout, and I attended Catholic schools all my life. I loved God. I loved my faith. Loved knowing there was something bigger than me in the universe. Something that gave all of this order and meaning. I was so excited when I got to be an acolyte. The mysticism, pageantry, and the adoration. More than anything on earth, I wanted to be a priest. Other kids played dress-up; I practiced the Sacraments. My family was thrilled.”

Andi nodded but didn’t speak, for fear that if she interrupted him, she’d never hear the rest of the story. Somehow it wasn’t hard to imagine him as a towheaded little boy studiously playing priest. After all, he pretty much did the same now. His work ethic was part of what made him such a great actor.

"I was a good student, worked hard, and looked forward to someday having my own parish to take care of. To maintain in the faith. Then one day..." He brought a hand up to his forehead, rubbing it hard. "Look, you've heard about the abuse scandals."

Andi took a deep breath.

Seeing her reaction, Harley shook his head. "No, not me. A good friend of mine. I was horrified, of course, and immediately reported it." He choked off a harsh laugh. "You can imagine how *that* went over. You know me, loudmouthed Polish boy. I wouldn't shut up; so they found an excuse to get rid of me. Told my folks I was a druggie, an alcoholic. That I'd even gotten high on the sacramental wine. It was pure bullshit, of course, but my parents believed them. After all, he *was* a bishop. I was just a teenager with a drinking problem."

Andi looked at him, dumbfounded. "Surely now your folks know differently? It's been all over the news—"

He cut her off with a bark of humorless laughter. "Yeah, sure, *now* they believe me," he said with a wry twist of his mouth. "Or at least they say that they do. I guess I just don't quite trust them anymore." He wiped his hands over his face. "My pops—the old man is dying. I went back to Cincinnati to see him right after we met."

"That's why..." Andi started with a sense of relief. He really had planned to call her.

Harley nodded. "That's why I didn't call you. I don't go back regularly. I make everybody uncomfortable. The whole situation messed my head up for a while. I mean, they threw me under the bus once, and it took nearly twenty years and a huge scandal to change their minds. Why didn't they believe me when I was scared and had lost everything I believed in?" He raised his voice on the last sentence, and it echoed with a pain that made her ache. With each sentence, he drew further and further into himself, until his arms were crossed tightly over his midsection, and he looked as though making even the slightest

movement would break him in half. His voice softened to a near whisper. "They welcomed me back to the fold, but it's not a comfortable fit, and I don't think it ever can be again." He raised his hands in a dismissive gesture. "Anyway, after that, I more or less lost any taste I might have later had for booze or drugs. God had always been the only high I ever wanted. Nothing else will ever come close. When you've got no God, you don't need them." Another humorless laugh followed that statement.

Andi stood up; she had no idea what she was going to do, but she had to do something. She walked over to him. At first he resisted her embrace, but she wouldn't be denied, and suddenly, with those lightning-fast reflexes she couldn't get accustomed to, his arms snaked around her, holding on so tightly, she feared she'd never catch her breath again. He pressed his feverish face to the curve of her neck, and Andi held on, rocking him back and forth in her arms as he sobbed out his pain. So softly that she later thought she might have imagined it, he whispered, "They took my God away. They took my family away. Now I've got nothing."

More than anything on earth Andi wanted to say, *Except me*, but fear kept the words locked in her throat. So she just held him tighter, giving him what comfort she could. It probably wasn't enough, but for right now, it was all she could do. All she dared do.

Chapter Twelve

Andi glanced over to where Harley had taken up residence on a corner of her sofa. His laptop computer was propped on the coffee table, and he was apparently quite happily checking his e-mail. She should've realized that he planned to hang out for a while when he went out to his car to bring in a change of clothing and his razor that morning. She wasn't going to spend too much time speculating as to why the man drove around town with a packed suitcase in his car. When she'd inquired about it, he'd simply shrugged and said he never knew when he might decide to make a road trip. Interestingly enough, his "just in case" clothing, a pair of pricey designer jeans and another perfectly tailored T-shirt, was remarkably sharp. She'd watched him come out of the shower, and to her disbelief all he'd done was brush his hair and it fell automatically into that halo effect again. The man must have some type of hair fairy.

She couldn't really complain about him hanging out; after all, he'd awakened her that morning with an absolutely toe-curling bout of lovemaking, followed by some of the best Belgian waffles she'd ever tasted. He'd even gone to the market. Hard as it was to believe, Harley Joseph was actually housebroken. From her end of the small sofa, Andi focused on her own computer. Though she hated to admit it, she was actually enjoying Harley's company. The living room was the largest room in her condo, and it was her favorite. The ancient walnut floors glowed in the light from the bank of windows and French doors leading to her small terrace. The toffee brown walls and off-white furniture were soothing to come home to after the hectic days she spent at the studio. She sighed and looked down at her computer. Her job

didn't stop, not even on the weekend, and she had a lot of e-mail to answer. Ronni sorted through the worst of it, but there was still a lot that required her personal attention. She reached up to take a sip of her tea and jumped when Harley yelled in aggravation, apparently at something he'd just read.

"Damn, I'd forgotten about this," he muttered, running a hand through his hair.

"What is it?"

"*Saturday Night Live*. I'm supposed to be on next week."

"Oh, Harley, I don't know..." Andi pursed her lips. "With this kidnapping thing. I know you think it's bogus, but either way, I don't think it looks good. Have you asked your publicist about it?"

He jabbed an elegant finger at the computer screen. "The e-mail is *from* my publicist. He says I don't want to blow them off again. They'll eat me alive."

"You've blown them off before?"

"As much as possible. I'm not a comedian. I did some in college, and my timing is decent, but it isn't exactly my thing. My publicist says that they'll be supportive if I go. If I'm a no-show again, they'll scuttle my chance at Sexiest Man Alive."

Andi gave him a pointed look over the top of her glasses. "Do you have any idea what Myron has spent on this Sexiest Man Alive campaign?"

"He tells me every day and twice on Sunday. I'd think he's a bit preoccupied at the moment, though. Maybe he won't notice."

"Myron's never too preoccupied to miss money," Andi said.

"Okay, okay, I'm going," he grumbled.

Andi almost laughed out loud when she realized the man was pouting. Even worse, it might be the sexiest expression she'd ever seen on his face. Before she could deliver the snide comment he deserved, he grinned at her.

"How about you come with me?"

“Even ignoring the appalling grammar in that question, do I need to remind you again that we’re...?”

“Yeah, we’re a secret. Hard to forget. But you’re a writer and I’m a pain-in-the-ass, temperamental actor. You’ve told me so yourself. More than once, if I recall. Hurt my feelings too. Wouldn’t surprise anyone if I insist on bringing my own writer along. If you don’t come, I’ll have myself checked into rehab.”

“Rehab,” Andi scoffed. “Everybody knows you don’t even drink.”

“I know, but I already have a sober companion. All the tabloids claim Myron has me contracted under the Aerosmith Rules.”

Andi wondered which of his live-in entourage was designated as his sober companion. “You wouldn’t do that to Myron. Especially right now.”

A demonic gleam brightened his verdant gaze. “You know better than most the lengths I’ll go to get my way. You already made me miss the StormCrow tribute concert.”

“We had to be in Minneapolis for exteriors. You know that schedule is set in concrete and would cost millions to change. There wasn’t a whole helluva lot I could do about it. Trust me, I would’ve done just about anything to shut you the hell up.” Besides go over budget, of course. *The Shelter* was set in Minneapolis, though it was mostly shot in LA. Travel was expensive, so they tried to get all their exteriors done in one trip, but somehow some crucial footage was damaged, and they had to reshoot it.

“Speaking of StormCrow, guess who the musical guest will be.”

Andi gasped. “Seriously? Bryan Spencer is going to be there?” Andi tried not to squeal like a teenager, she really did. She’d had a small crush on the band’s lead singer since they’d exploded onto the music scene more than a decade ago. Meeting him when he’d done the theme song for their show had diminished it somewhat. Dude was more than just a little bit scary, but the thought of being around him could still make her giddy, but she was working on it. He and Harley had quickly become fast friends and spent almost all their

free time together when they happened to be in the same city. He'd even come to they set a few times to visit Harley when they first began shooting the show. Of course, he'd been a major distraction, not just to her, but to most of the young cast as well. She'd been too busy to notice but she hadn't seen him in months. She knew StormCrow was finishing up the world tour that had been postponed when their lead guitarist died of a drug overdose, but even before then he hadn't been around as much.

"Could you *try* to sound a little less like a fifteen-year-old groupie?" Harley gave her a pained look.

Andi suspected that the disgust in his tone was only partially feigned. Imagine that, Harley was jealous. This could be fun. She lowered her head to hide the smile she couldn't contain. Harley continued to pout, and she wanted to laugh out loud. She'd cut out her own tongue before she'd ever tell him that, despite his hotness, Bryan in person was a little intense for her taste. In fact, she'd been somewhat puzzled when he and Harley had become such good friends. Of course now that she'd come to know him she realized that, despite his easygoing demeanor, Harley was actually off the charts on the intensity scale. More and more she was coming to realize that nothing was as it seemed with him; he was always playing a role.

Determined to annoy Harley as much as possible, she asked, "Hey, where's Bryan been all summer? He was practically living on set earlier in the year."

Harley gave her a grim look. "Damned if I know. Since Brody died he started getting into all kinds of trouble. I'm guessing that his manager sent him somewhere to chill out. At least I hope that's what happened. Of course, had I been able to go to the tribute concert we could've hooked up then."

"We've already discussed this. You were needed elsewhere."

"Yeah. I get that boss lady. So, are you coming to New York or not?"

With a long, put-upon sigh, she continued. "I guess I don't have a choice. After all, it is my job to keep my star happy."

"Maybe I don't want you to go after all," he said with a grumpy look.

She punched him in the shoulder. "Ah, come on, Harley. Don't be such a Scrooge."

"Fine." He typed a few rapid strokes on his computer, then closed it and placed it on the coffee table, inadvertently knocking something off the pile of magazines Andi kept there. He leaned forward to pick it up. "Hey, what's this?"

Andi didn't look up from her own computer. "What?"

He waved it in front of her face. "It looks like a screenplay."

That got her attention. "It is. Something I wrote, more as an intellectual exercise than anything."

"*North Star*?" He traced the title on the cover. "What's it about?"

"The Underground Railroad. Tree and I took a tour a few years ago. The stories were fascinating, and I thought it would make an interesting backdrop for an adventure story."

"I've been to some of those sites. It was amazing."

"You, Harley?"

"What, a shallow actor can't be interested in history? Besides, I'm from Ohio. We're chock-full of sites."

She recalled the reading material she'd seen in his room. No, she wasn't surprised that he'd be interested in the Underground Railroad.

"Do you mind if I read it?" he asked.

"No, no. Go ahead."

He stood up, then gestured to ask if she wanted more tea. She shook her head in the negative, and he went into the kitchen, only to return shortly thereafter with a tall glass of water. He resumed his position on the sofa, and pulling an ottoman under his legs, he began to read.

Andi watched him until she forced herself to get up and leave the room. *This is stupid. You're a professional writer, and you're worried about what this*

guy thinks. She had written the screenplay in an inspired daze after her return from a tour of the Underground Railroad sites. It featured a love story between Parker, a white veterinarian who was a stationmaster on the Railroad, and Grace, who was a conductor. Grace lived in a free black community near Parker's home on the Ohio River. She had deliberately kept Parker's character somewhat ambiguous, and there were hints throughout the story that he might be a double agent. The characters were the most complex ones she'd created to date, and it was incredibly frustrating to realize that she was highly unlikely to ever see her story brought to screen. Still thinking about the story, Andi kept herself busy doing some of her usual weekend chores, and even thought of going upstairs to visit her mother, but decided to go for a walk instead. She couldn't relax and enjoy people watching and eventually came back to the house, delighted to see the screenplay lying on the table and Harley apparently engrossed in a basketball game.

With a casualness she didn't feel, she strolled over and picked up the script. "So what did you think?"

"I think it's fucking brilliant. But then, I think that about everything you write. I wish you wrote more scripts for the show. What are you going to do with it?"

"Probably nothing. I told you it was just an intellectual exercise. I've never done anything historical before, and it was a subject I was interested in."

"Have you shown it to Myron?" Harley asked.

"Of course."

"What did he say?"

"That no one's made any money off a slavery story since *Roots*." She couldn't suppress a smile. Myron was so predictable.

Harley's bark of laughter echoed in the apartment. "I'm sure the old man knows what he's talking about, but damn, this is good."

“Yeah, but if Myron, who knows my track record, won't take a chance on me, I doubt anyone else will.”

“The lead, Parker, he sounds like a part I could really get into.”

Andi raised her brows. “Really? That is high praise coming from you. I'm amazed that you'd want to play the heroic type, though. I thought you only liked to do those indie films that don't really tell a story. This is a story, not a character study. I would've thought it was too linear for you. Indie films are—”

“You don't like indies much, do you?” Harley interrupted.

Andi stopped midrant, embarrassed that she'd gone on that way. After all, he specialized in the damned things. “Some of them are fine. Others?” Andi shrugged. “I think somewhere along the way some people forget we're supposed to be storytellers.”

“Well, this is one helluva story. I don't think I've ever heard of any love stories from that era.”

“Yeah, it's weird. There are plenty out there. These people were passionate abolitionists. Anytime you have young people working together for a cause they believe in, they're going to fall in love, or at least lust. Whether it's the French Resistance or the civil rights movement, it's going to happen. I'm sure there are plenty of Tiananmen Square babies running around China. I don't know why anyone would think the Underground Railroad would be any different. Of course there were going to be love stories. It would be strange if there weren't.”

Harley smiled. “It's clear you're really invested in this script. I think you should pitch it to someone else.”

“Like I said, Myron knows me, and if he isn't interested, I doubt anyone else would be either. At least anyone who has enough money to finance it. Historicals are damned expensive. Complex costumes, long shoots, lots of exteriors and sets.” She smiled back at him. “I'm still surprised you're interested in playing a hero.”

"Yeah, but is Parker really a hero? If he is, he's a pretty damned flawed one, and you know I love the flawed heroes. It's the only thing that makes doing the show bearable."

"True, I just couldn't write another story about enslaved black people being rescued by white people, especially when in reality they mostly rescued themselves. *Mississippi Burning* makes me want to shank somebody. Myron said that would be a major problem too. He said slavery stories don't sell, because whites feel guilty and blacks feel ashamed. McConaughey couldn't sell one, and he *was* a white hero. Oprah's was a flop too. Hey, if Oprah can't do it, nobody can."

"So did Parker betray Grace and her family?" Harley asked.

"I don't know."

"What the hell do you mean, you don't know? You wrote the script. How could you not know?"

Andi exhaled a long breath through her nose. "I don't know. When you write characters, they pretty much do what they want, and you just write it down. I have no idea if he did it or not. He didn't tell me."

He stared at her in amazement. "Are you shitting me? That's crazy."

"You can't push it one way or another. I tried both ways, and neither felt right, so I just left it alone."

"I'd always heard that writers are crazier than hell."

Andi shrugged. She'd long ago made her peace with the vagaries of her profession.

"I want this part."

Andi sat down in the large overstuffed wing chair opposite the sofa. "Unless I've missed something crucial, there *is* no part."

"For now."

Chapter Thirteen

Andi looked up as Harley rushed through the paneled door that connected their hotel rooms. They'd got an early flight to New York for his appearance on *Saturday Night Live*. She'd been surprised when he checked them into the Michelangelo, a small boutique hotel. Though luxurious beyond measure, it was hardly the type of place a celebrity went to be seen. Then she realized that the choice was probably a deliberate effort to avoid the paparazzi. The paparazzi scene in New York was nothing like it was in LA, but they still lurked about. Then again, he might have chosen it for its close proximity to the NBC studios. Whatever the reason, she loved the place; it had all the comforts of home, if home included Italian marble bathrooms and huge soaking tubs. Had her self-esteem been more fragile, she might have been perturbed that this suite was larger than her condo. Then again, she supposed it was only fair; a few days' stay here cost more than her mortgage.

For a moment she considered chewing Harley's ass for entering her room without knocking but decided it would be overkill. Besides, she was all but convinced that he liked it, and that would never do. He threw a legal pad down on the table in front of her. "You've got to help me out."

"Rehearsal's over already?" Andi had accompanied him to the first day's rehearsal for the show, but the experience had been unbelievably uncomfortable, so she'd arranged to meet with Tree for a late lunch this afternoon instead. Having never done live television or sketch comedy before, she'd thought it would be exciting to watch the cast and writers develop ideas for the show, but it had been an uncomfortable experience. They were all packed into a tiny conference room, and it was clear from the outset who the

stars were and who didn't have a chance of seeing their bits aired. For Andi, it was an all-too-painful reminder of where she might have been had Myron not taken her under his wing. Getting a job as a television producer was an almost impossible task. Usually she would have had to write and submit endless spec scripts, then wait until a studio liked her writing enough to bring her on as a staff writer. After years of doing that, she would have a shot at running her own show. The likelihood of that happening was probably comparable to hitting the lottery. Myron had been incredibly generous, and watching what her life could've been like made her even more grateful for his largesse.

"You've got to help me write a sketch."

Andi gave him a horrified look. She didn't want to have anything to do with the cannibalistic pitch process on that show. "You mean you really went over there acting like a fool? Harley, you didn't. They're a comedy show; they don't cater to celebrities, no matter how big they are. They use them for *material*."

"Of course not. I'm not an idiot." Harley gritted his teeth, clearly trying to hold on to his patience. "See, there's this girl named Chasdity."

"Isn't there always?" Andi returned drily.

"Are you going to listen or not?"

"Sure, I'll listen to anything pertaining to a girl with the nerve to walk around with that name." And she did, even managing to overcome her disgust over the fact that he had passed Chasdity, a pay-to-play girl, off to his friend Bryan, lead singer for StormCrow, when he'd left LA.

"You mean to tell me she sold that story to the *Naked Truth* about Bryan consorting with hookers, because she was mad they broke up?"

Harley gave her a wounded look. "You mean you read the tabloids?"

"Oh please, that story was everywhere. If it weren't for Lainie being kidnapped, it'd still be on the front page of every tabloid in the country," Andi said.

Harley heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Anyway, I thought it would be fun to give old Chasdity some of her own back. I know what I want to do, but I've never written a script in my life."

"Really?" Andi gave him a sardonic look. "I'll be sure to tell Button and Willow that when we get back home."

"Please. I really need your help."

"Okay, I'll help you write your sketch, but you have to buy lunch for me and Tree. She's on her way over here to pick me up."

* * * * *

"Actually I'm surprised you two can walk and talk in complete sentences," Tree said. "I would've thought you'd still be horizontal."

Harley let out a bark of laughter. They'd only been at the table in Andi's favorite restaurant, Piano Due, for a few minutes, and Andi's friend was already shooting darts at him. Tree was an amazingly blunt person. He could definitely see why they were such good friends. "Where did you two meet, anyway?"

"Tree had this tiny boutique up in Brooklyn—"

"Still have it," Tree interrupted.

"Mother and I come here a few times a year. She has business interests, and I love the shopping," Andi continued.

"Not to mention there's this really cool guy who makes the most fabulous custom glasses for her. I think she's addicted," Tree interrupted again.

Andi gave her friend an exasperated look. "*Anyway*, we found her boutique. I think we bought everything she had and put in orders for tons more. Of course, we had to meet the designer, and after that..."

"My friend failed to mention that her mother generously offered to back me in launching my line."

"Well, she didn't do it on her own. She found investors," Andi clarified.

“Still, there would be no Geechee Couture without Minx McFadden, that's for sure.”

Harley shook his head. “I had no idea Minx was involved with Geechee. By the way, I've always wondered what the name signifies.”

Tree nodded. “You and everyone else on the planet. Geechee is another name for my people, the Gullah of the South Carolina and Georgia low country. The name has African origins, and I used it for my line because I wanted to reclaim it from those who have turned it into some type of slur.”

“Wow, that's interesting. I had no idea,” he said.

“You really don't want to get Tree started talking about Gullah. We could be here all day,” Andi said. “She's really passionate about the subject.”

“I'm proud of the way we've preserved our African heritage and culture...” Tree began.

“See, I told you.”

Harley looked across the table, fascinated to see Andi out of her usual element. Most of their time together was spent at work, and she was usually the consummate professional in that atmosphere. Here, she was relaxed and open in a way he'd never seen before. Tree was a natural foil for her friend. Her flamboyant personality drew Andi out of her more reserved nature. He could understand why they were such good friends. Tree had been ribbing them since they'd arrived, and hadn't let up no matter how many times Andi pleaded for mercy. She contrasted physically with Andi as well. She was nearly as tall as he was and wearing an absolutely fabulous cowl-necked snow-white coat that had to be from her own collection. That reminded him...

“Why haven't you come out with a men's line?” Harley asked, interrupting the banter going back and forth between the friends.

Tree threw back her head and laughed. “I haven't really come across anyone who inspires me.” She tilted her head to one side. “You know, I'd never

really thought about it before, but I think you'd be a fabulous muse for Geechee Male."

Andi interrupted. "You've always used black models, Tree. "You've always said that your cut and colors were more suited to an African American aesthetic."

"And other designers act as though black models don't exist," Tree said derisively.

"There is that," Andi agreed.

Tree tilted her head to the other side. "Still, he's so blond, those cheekbones are to die for, and he's got the whole Tartar thing going. Are you Russian?"

Harley shook his head. He'd been asked this before. "No, Polish."

"Joseph's a Polish name?" Andi asked curiously.

"It was when it was *Jozefowicz*."

"Well, you really look Russian. He'd really look striking in my clothes, and he'd stand out against my other models."

"Would you go with the same brights in a men's line?" Andi asked.

Tree never took her eyes off Harley. "I'm not sure. He'd look damned good in muted, rich shades. I'd have to see."

Harley shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He was accustomed to being scrutinized, of course. As an actor, his body was his instrument. Still, the way Tree looked at him made him feel like a bug on the end of a pin. At any moment she was liable to ask him to strip down to his jocks so she could check out his package. "I guess I should point out the obvious. I have no interest in being anyone's muse. Actually I'm not even sure what a muse does—"

Tree interrupted. "That's just the point: a muse doesn't do. A muse is."

Harley frowned. "Oh yeah, that certainly brings clarity to the subject."

"Hey, you're the one who wanted a men's line," Andi said.

"I said I want to *wear* a men's line. I don't want to be in it. The last thing I want is to be in a magazine trying to look cool or whatever the hell it is models do."

"You mean, other than SMA," Andi said.

"Hey, that's Myron's idea."

"Come on, Harley. You'd give your left nipple to be the Sexiest Man Alive."

Harley pondered that for a moment. "Make it my right. My left nipple is more sensitive."

Andi just rolled her eyes at him and excused herself to go to the ladies' room, leaving him alone with Tree. That was strange, since women usually did that in pairs, but it didn't take long for Tree to get down to the reason she had broken female tradition.

"You know, I'm a Southern good old girl at heart."

"Really?" Harley gave the expensive outfit she was wearing an appraising look.

"Right. I've got an ax handle, and I know how to use it."

Why did everyone assume he'd be the one hurting Andi? She was the one hiding their relationship like he was her mistress or... What was a male mistress called anyway? He knew better than to say anything like that, so he just mildly returned with, "That's comforting to know. I suppose I should be grateful there's no ax on the handle."

"I don't need one."

"Okay, that's taking the badass quotient right over the line."

"Too much?"

"Just a tad," Harley rejoined.

"Hmm," Tree murmured in a reflective tone. "It's been a while since I've made death threats. I'm a little out of practice."

"I understand." Harley nodded his head in a magnanimous manner, as though he received death threats all the time; and of course, these days, he did.

Tree laughed. "Just so you understand where I'm coming from."

"I would never underestimate you, but I thought you wanted me to be your muse."

"Your untimely death would in no way impact your value as a muse."

Harley shook his head.

Andi returned to the table, and Harley pulled his laptop computer out of his bag.

"Okay, ladies, I've fed you two a very expensive lunch; now I've got to get some work done."

Andi raised her brows. "Is that a man purse?"

"And if it is?" Harley said, not in the least embarrassed. He had to carry his stuff around in something.

Andi just shook her head. "They make laptop cases, you know."

Tree stood up the moment the computer came out. "Writing is so not my thing. Especially after those lovely limoncello martinis. So I'll just leave you two to it." And with that, she exited the restaurant.

Andi waved good-bye to her friend, then began reading the notes he'd made about the sketch he wanted to write. Her silence made him nervous at first, but eventually she spoke up.

"See, here's the thing. You have to remember that while you and Bryan and apparently half the male population of LA County knows this girl, the rest of the country hasn't been so fortunate."

Harley nodded, wondering what her point was.

"So the key here is to make fun of her, but do it in a way that's funny to people outside your immediate circle," Andi said.

“Yeah, but if we make it too broad, she might not get it.”

“Not very bright, huh?” Andi raised both brows.

“Actually Chas is pretty savvy, but she really lacks a sense of humor. I tell you, that woman really doesn't like sarcasm.”

“Oh really?” Andi typed frantically on the computer, her bottom lip caught between her teeth as she focused, as though afraid she'd forget her thoughts before she get them down. More than fifteen minutes later, she turned the keyboard so he could see it. “What will she think of this?”

Harley laughed out loud as he read the sketch. “We'll be lucky if she doesn't have a hit taken out on me!”

They continued exchanging ideas, working together in a flurry of energy. Writing with Andi was more fun than Harley had imagined it would be. Despite her distaste for the way he and Bryan had shared their playmate, she immediately took their side in agreeing that Chasdity had taken it too far by going to the tabloid. Before long they had a sketch that lampooned the other woman, but was done in such a way that only those who actually knew the parties involved would understand what they were doing. Keeping the sketch on point yet general enough to be funny to a national audience took some doing, and he had to give Andi full credit.

“Did you always want to be a television writer?” he asked Andi as she passed the computer back to him after they finished the last scene.

“Always. According to my mom, my first sentence was, 'I make TV.' I absolutely adored it. My mother hated it, of course. She wanted me nowhere near the business, but being a writer was better than being an actor, at least as far as she was concerned.”

Harley raised his brows. “Really? What's wrong with being an actor?”

“You have to see it from her perspective, as a black woman in the industry...”

“What are you talking about? She's an icon.”

"In blaxploitation films, and she certainly wasn't an icon thirty years ago. 'Tits and ass' is all she could be. Mother is a classically trained dancer and actor, but that's all she could get. I used to joke with her that at least I'd never have anyone hiring me for jiggle work."

"Are you kidding? Take it from me, boss lady, you've got plenty of jiggle." Her ass had given him so many impure thoughts, he was bound to spend an eternity in purgatory.

"Hey, I'm no Minx McFadden, but then, who is?" Andi asked on a sharp bark of laughter.

"Your mother is a magnificent woman, but you're no slouch yourself. Why is it that beautiful women always claim to not know that they're beautiful? Like they grew up in a house without mirrors or something. Bottom line is, I certainly wouldn't kick you out of bed."

"That's hardly complimentary," Andi scoffed. "From what I've heard, I doubt you'd kick anyone out of bed."

"I told you that most of the crap you read in the tabloids is just that, crap."

"Have you forgotten that you told me that you and Bryan Spencer shared this Purity character?"

"Chasdity."

"What?"

"Her name was Chasdity."

Andi's eyes lit up. "Oh yeah, I'd forgotten. We can't use her real name in the sketch, so we'll call her Purity instead, that way she'll be sure to know we're gunning for her!"

Harley did a quick Find/Replace to change the character's name. "You know, you might want to consider being a comedy writer. You're really good at this."

Andi shuddered delicately. "I don't think so. Comedy's too brutal for me. I feel badly enough about attacking this poor girl."

Harley rolled his eyes. "You're wasting your sympathy on Chas. Bryan didn't do anything to her. She dumped *him*." He rushed on when Andi seemed to perk up at that information. "*Anyway*, then she dogged him to that tabloid and said his girlfriend was a hooker. That was just malicious and uncalled-for. Look, she knew the score, and certainly nobody should've gotten hurt there, if she hadn't decided to go off message."

"Whatever."

"Well, at least one good thing came of all of this. I don't have to worry about you hooking up with one of my best buds anymore."

Andi gave him a thoughtful look. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Harley looked down at his hands, amazed that he hadn't grown claws. It would be a damned shame if he had to kill Bryan, especially as it seemed that dude had finally found a woman he could get serious about. No way in hell would he lose Andi to him, though. He knew she was mean enough to go out with Bryan just to spite him.

"Hey, what can I say? Dude is so hot, I might be willing to overlook any freakishness. After all, I haven't kicked you to the curb despite your exhibitionist tendencies," she said, casually examining her fingernails.

Harley just stared at her, struck speechless by a sudden urge to suck on her succulent bottom lip for the rest of his life. In a town where everyone chased perfection, a woman who tolerated a physical flaw like an underbite intrigued him. It told him a lot about her character. He knew she was deliberately goading him, but he couldn't contain the anger he felt at the thought of her with another man. Especially when that man was a friend of his. Somehow that anger was manifesting itself in the strongest lust he'd ever felt in his life, and he wanted nothing more than to make love to her. Right now, in the middle of one of New York City's finest restaurants. As if he wasn't already turned on beyond belief, his mind wandered off to earlier that day when she'd

put those naughty lips to excellent use waking him up and making him a very happy man. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and brought himself back into the conversation so he wouldn't pursue that line of thought any further.

"Thanks for helping me. I've got to get back to rehearsals. What are you going to do for the rest of the day?"

He helped Andi slip into a bottle green coat that exactly matched the glasses that framed her smoky eyes. "Same thing I always do when I come to New York. Freeze my ass off. I can't believe I was born here."

"You were born here?"

"Yeah, Minx was in the original cast of *A Chorus Line*. Apparently she met my father here."

Harley took a deep breath, wondering how they'd got on this subject. "Really?" He tried for a neutral comment.

"Yeah, but she won't tell me much more about him. I always thought that someday I'd hunt him down. He was probably in the cast too." Her comment sounded flat, but he could hear the pain in her voice.

Harley was glad she was so focused on buttoning her coat that she couldn't see his face. All the Yale drama training in the world couldn't help him now.

"Anyway," she continued briskly, "the shopping here is stellar. Mother wants me to check on a few things for her. She's got some properties here she's trying to sell, and I'll probably stop by Tree's shop too. She said she has some new stuff she wants me to see."

Harley smiled down at her, still stunned by the brief sideways turn the conversation had taken. He was grateful that she hadn't noticed anything odd in his behavior. Damn Myron and Minx, anyway. How could you not tell your kid who her father was? It wasn't like lying about the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy. This was serious, and there was no way in hell to keep Andi from getting hurt. He gave her a quick embrace. Always conscious of the eyes of the

paparazzi, he restrained himself from kissing her, much as he wanted to. Then she was on her way. Harley sank back into his chair. More and more he was convinced that they needed to tell Andi the truth. He'd brought it up to Myron again, but now with the kidnapping, he could hardly say anything about it, but he was determined to talk to his friend as soon as Lainie got over her temper tantrum and brought her spoiled ass home.

* * * * *

Andi stood in the wings watching Harley's performance on *Saturday Night Live*. She knew he was nervous by the way he kept rubbing the thumb of his left hand. He'd lost the tip in a waterskiing accident a couple of summers ago, and now he stroked it whenever he was uncomfortable. No one in the audience would know, and his performance was flawless. His timing was impeccable, with just enough self-deprecating humor to really connect with the audience.

Even though she'd written the Purity sketch and knew all the punch lines, Harley added a Cary Grant-like flair that made her words much funnier than they actually were. They had aimed for a slapstick-comedy vibe, and with his ad-libs to the audience, he absolutely nailed it. His character's scream of horror when he discovered that his new girlfriend was primarily made of silicone had the audience in stitches. When he came off the stage, he practically vibrated with excitement.

"What did you think?" he asked, his bright eyes glowing in the shadowy light.

"I thought you were brilliant. Didn't you hear the audience? They're going nuts."

He grabbed her and spun her around until they both laughed giddily. She knew if there hadn't been so many onlookers, he would have kissed her. Not for the first time she wished she hadn't imposed such strict regulations on their relationship.

"I know. I know. Live audiences kick ass; they give you so much energy. I'd forgotten how good it felt. Television sucks all the fun out of it."

Andi punched him in the shoulder. "Hey, buddy, television keeps you in those designer duds you're wearing." Harley seldom wore suits, but it was required for the sketch, and the rich sable brown Armani he was wearing made his vivid coloring stand out even more. As usual, the suit had been well tailored to show off his athletic form, and Andi was all but salivating looking at him. They couldn't get back to their hotel soon enough to suit her.

They laughed together again and listened as StormCrow took the stage for their final song of the evening.

"What's wrong with Bryan?" Andi whispered as the band's lead singer began singing. The man looked like walking death, and his voice was almost entirely gone.

"He sounds bad, doesn't he?" Harley whispered back. "He's got a cold, and all this tabloid shit is kicking his ass too."

"Seriously?" Andi pondered that, hardly believing that there was a celebrity alive who wouldn't kill for the type of publicity Bryan had been receiving.

They both fell silent as the lead guitarist joined Bryan, harmonizing on the chorus. His sweet tenor rose to the rafters, in stark contrast to the raspy intensity of Bryan's voice. The song was hauntingly beautiful, and when at the end Bryan leaned into the mike and whispered, "I love you, Callie," Andi reached up to wipe a tear from her eye. Harley's eyes were suspiciously bright as well. He kept saying, "I don't believe it," over and over again. Clearly there was more to this story than she or anyone else had ever suspected.

Chapter Fourteen

Andi checked on the chicken that was roasting in the oven. From the golden brown skin, she could tell it would be ready in just a few more minutes, so she strained the potatoes and began mashing them. She and Harley had been on good terms since their return from New York, and she'd invited him over for dinner.

"I can't believe you're cooking for him."

Andi gave her mother an exasperated look. "I'm hardly slaving away. It's just roast chicken and garlic mashed potatoes. We've been working hard on the show. I thought I'd give him a treat." There was nothing to be gained by mentioning that it wasn't the first time she'd cooked for Harley.

"Yeah, and that's why you've got the whole crew over here feeding them." Minx made a dramatic gesture to indicate the room that was empty but for the two of them. She stood to pour herself another glass of the excellent Syrah Andi had picked up that afternoon. The cooktop where Andi was working was set in a peninsula, open to the dining room. Minx was perched on the other side on one of the bar stools that made for extra seating in the dining room.

"Mother, he'll be here soon." Andi trailed off, hoping Minx would take the hint. Her mother rarely came to her condo; of course, she'd foolishly mentioned the date to her. What else had she expected? Minx was always down for a little drama. She should've known Minx would show up just to get her goat.

Minx gave her an arch look. "Yes, I know. Surely you don't expect me to leave before he arrives? I think it would be a good thing to meet this young man you're spending so much time with."

"For God's sake, Mother. I'm not sixteen! I've been seeing Harley for months now," Andi said, mashing the potatoes with far more vigor than was required for the task.

"And keeping it a secret," Minx interrupted.

"Trust me, that's my idea. Not his." And he never let her forget it.

"So you say," Minx said.

Something about Minx's tone was a bit off, and she looked incredibly grim, but the expression changed so quickly, Andi was convinced that she'd imagined it.

"The man works for me, Mother. It's hardly professional to be—"

"Fucking him."

"Please don't be crude, Mother."

"Don't call me that. I still don't like the idea of you sneaking around..."

Andi dumped the potatoes into a serving bowl. The aroma of garlic and the tang of sour cream rose to her nose. Harley was going to love this dinner. If she could just get rid of her mother. Her doorbell rang, signaling Harley's arrival. Andi placed a damp towel over the potatoes and slipped them into the warming drawer, then hurried over to answer the door. She hesitated, looking over her shoulder at her mother, who was still perched on the bar stool. Silhouetted against the dramatic amber hues of the dining room, Minx glowed like a rare gem. Striking in an all-white pantsuit that displayed her trim figure to perfection, she looked like a walking advertisement for a "Fabulous Fifties" article.

"Mother, if you're going to stay, could you at least play nice?"

Minx gave her daughter an innocent look, or it would've been innocent had her face not had such strongly feline lines. As it was, the predatory gleam in her eyes made her look as though she had just spotted easy prey. "Of course, dear. When have I ever not been nice?"

Andi seriously considered not answering the door after Minx made that statement, but just then the doorbell rang again. Andi took a quick glance in the foyer mirror. She'd pulled her hair back and pinned it at her nape. Her slim white cigarette jeans and bright orange tunic looked fresh, especially accented by the Pucci-style scarf she'd tied around her hairline. To complete the retro look, she'd added a pair of round white-framed glasses. When she let Harley in, she was surprised to see he had a lovely bouquet of white roses that were touched with just the faintest blush of pink. The lilies and gladioli were a pristine snow-white and complemented the roses perfectly. She wondered who had told him that she loved white roses.

"Hello, Harley." She gestured toward her mother, who had just entered the living room. "Please meet my mother, Minx McFadden. Dinner's almost ready. You guys sit down at the table while I find a vase for these."

"Oh, I won't be staying," Minx said to Andi's retreating back. Andi hesitated briefly. So why the hell hadn't she told her that in the first place?

Harley studied Minx impassively. He suspected this encounter probably wouldn't go well. For some reason he never did well with mothers.

Minx crossed her well-toned arms across her chest. "You should know that I wouldn't hesitate to stomp a mud hole in you."

Okay, this was getting ridiculous. Why did everyone act as though Andi was some delicate Victorian lady with a fainting couch? The person most likely to get hurt in their relationship was him. "Yeah, I've seen your movies," Harley returned drily. "Thanks for not cutting my heart out."

Minx threw back her head and laughed. "Postage is too high these days for stunts like that."

"Yeah, you'd probably eat it. Reduce. Reuse. Recycle."

Minx's laughter continued; then she cut it off abruptly. "I like you, but that won't keep me from killing you, if it comes to that." She raised her voice to

Andi, who was still in the kitchen arranging the flowers. "I'm going home, sweetheart. See you two later." Then she left.

Andi came out of the kitchen with the flowers arranged in an antique creamware vase. She placed them on the sideboard and gave Harley a radiant smile.

"Glad to see you're still alive."

"Minx is a man-eater all right, but even she would have a tough time killing me in less than a minute."

Andi waved him toward the small dining room while she went back into the kitchen to return with the food.

"So have you talked to Myron?" she asked Harley, who'd seated himself in one of the clear acrylic chairs that surrounded the dining room table, and was pouring water into the two water glasses she'd set there. "What's going on with Lainie?"

"I haven't seen him since she escaped," Harley said.

Andi shook her head. "Isn't it incredible that she got away from those kidnappers?"

"I don't believe it for one second. I think she realized that this was bigger than she'd thought it would become, and decided to stop playing games."

Andi sighed as she sat down at the table. "I really hope you're wrong."

Harley helped himself to a sizable portion of potatoes. "I'm still amazed you're such a good cook."

"Of course I can cook. I have to eat, you know."

"Hey, plenty of people in this town have their food delivered."

"Yeah, well, I'm not on a diet or anything. Besides, that kind of thing isn't tax deductible for producers the way it is for talent," Andi said.

They continued chatting idly through the meal. Andi became more and more aware of the sexual tension between them. She'd catch him staring at her; the hungry look on his face made the breath catch in her throat. He

helped her clean the kitchen after the meal, ensuring that the task took twice as long as they kept stopping to exchange a kiss or sensuous caress. The kisses they shared increased in intensity until finally he took the dishtowel from her hands and lifted her onto the kitchen counter. She gasped when he slipped between her widespread legs.

“Just as I thought. It's just the right height,” he said as his mouth descended to devour hers. She returned the kiss with interest, sucking on his tongue, bringing deep moans from him in response.

In one motion he pulled her tunic over her head, discarding it on the floor. He pushed her bra up, exposing her swollen breasts with their puffy, slightly darker tips. He bent down and greedily captured one in his mouth, lapping and sucking the warm flesh. Andi's skin was on fire, her breathing just a series of agonized gasps. She tangled her fingers through his hair, tugging it desperately. She groaned against his neck, nearly incoherent with desire, her voice throaty and hoarse with yearning. Harley straightened his stance and offered her one long, drugging kiss and reached down between them, seeking her heat through her jeans. The thick fabric acted as both a barrier and a stimulus to her swollen clit, giving her just enough sensation to leave her desperate for more.

Just when she thought she couldn't take any more, he groaned against her breast and stepped back. He unfastened her jeans and stripped them off her legs with a speed that would have surprised her, had she been capable of coherent thought. He dipped his hand under the elastic of her panties to find her clitoris while continuing his deep, gentle exploration of her mouth. He dipped a finger into her moist folds, bringing slickness to her hardening clit, circling it quickly and gently. Andi gasped at his touch and slowly ground her hips against his hand.

“More.” She struggled to gasp. “Oh God, Harley, I need more.”

Harley removed his hand from inside her panties and disposed of the garment the same way he had her jeans. He brought two fingers up to her lips

and slipped them inside. She locked eyes with him as she took them, deep throating them in a way that made him close his eyes and grit his teeth, the sensuous motion reminding him of the times she'd done the same to his cock. He removed his fingers from her mouth and plunged them back into her tight depths, first one finger and then two, curving them slightly to the front of her vaginal wall to stroke the spongy area of heightened sensitivity, reaching her most tender spot. Andi spread her legs farther, desperate to give him greater access as she ripped his shirt open. She ran her hands up and down his torso, luxuriating in the silken feel of his sparse body hair. She pressed her face against him, flicking each of his sensitive nipples with her tongue, eliciting a string of groans from deep in his chest.

Harley pumped his fingers deep inside her, pressing her G-spot. Andi's breath grew shallow and hot against Harley's chest as he pinned her against the wall, his thumb rubbing her hardening clit with every stroke. He watched her gorgeous face as he finger-fucked her, her head thrown back, her lips swollen from his savage kisses. Her skin glistened and her sweet aroma rose to his nose, heightening his arousal. The walls of her pussy clenched around his fingers as though begging for more. She dug her nails into his shoulders and arched against the wall. Harley knew she was close. The feel of her nails penetrating his flesh intensified his pleasure, and he had to clench his teeth and close his eyes to keep from coming in his pants.

She panted against every thrust. Harley drove his fingers faster, and Andi could feel her climax building from deep within, rolling through every muscle and fiber. She cried out as ripples of ecstasy overcame her. Harley held his palm flat against her fleshy mound, his fingers still while the final tremors of her orgasm subsided. He kept his other arm tight around her waist to support her. He watched the contorted lines of her face relax as she opened her eyes to meet his.

"You know we just got started, right?" Harley gave her a devilish grin.

Andi watched intently as he stripped his shirt off, revealing his sleek, muscular chest and a thin trail of blond, almost white, hair running through his belly button and down into the front of his jeans. Andi licked her lips, growing intoxicated with lust thinking about where that gorgeous trail of hair led. Harley impatiently pushed his jeans and boxers down, stepping out of them, his rigid cock springing free from its constraints. Harley stood stroking his cock for a moment before stepping back between her legs. He kissed her, feeding on the sweetness of her hot, willing mouth. She ran her hands up the muscled flesh of his chest to his shoulders and playfully pushed him back a bit so she could have greater access. Her hands feathered over his chest and stomach until she reached his painfully engorged cock. She engulfed his cock in her soft hand, pumping her fist slowly up and down his turgid length. His cock was slick with precum, making each touch a silken stroke of ecstasy. His hips moved forward in an involuntary rocking motion, seeking more of the pleasure she was eager to give him. He grunted and gently pulled her hand away.

She looked up at him quizzically.

"I'm seconds away from coming, and I only want to do that when I'm deep inside you."

His rigid cock throbbed against her opening, and she ground her hips against him slowly, relishing the sweet friction between them.

"Oh God." Harley gripped her ass roughly, pulling her to the edge of the counter, parting her thighs until she was totally open and vulnerable to him.

He positioned his straining cock at her open pussy. Their eyes locked as he slowly eased inside, allowing her body to stretch around his girth. His arms trembled with the strain of taking it so slowly. Harley sighed as her heat enveloped him, burying himself in her hot, molten core. She cried out, the delicious pain of his piercing fullness taking her by surprise. Andi rocked her hips on him with hypnotizing, agonizing slowness. He suckled and nibbled at her silken breasts hungrily. His pace grew more primal as he heaved against

her. He stared at her sweet face and slid his hands from her hips to her waist, pulling her closer so he could get even deeper. The smokiness of her eyes intensified as he thrust harder and faster, pounding her pussy with greater and greater intensity. Andi was delirious with lust. Her rhythmic cries and the wet, slapping sounds of their frenzied lovemaking filled the small room. The walls of her pussy gripped his pistoning shaft, and her body tightened as another release shattered her.

Andi's head rolled back lazily as he slowed his pace. Her body went limp. She opened her heavy-lidded eyes and stared into his brilliant green ones. He lowered his face to hers, taking her mouth once more. Slowly he worked himself deep inside her, caressing her insides with agonizing restraint, the continued stimulation to her sensitive center sending aftershocks through her body. He ground his body into hers, rocking his hips against her swollen clit. Every thrust forced the air out of her lungs in short, ragged grunts, hot against his neck. Beads of sweat emerged on her golden brown chest and on his brow as he pounded into her, pulling her knees up and pinning them under his chest, forcing his erection deeper into her pussy. He could feel his balls tightening as he lost control; recklessly bucking within her, he released his hot seed, his muffled growl warm against her soft neck. He collapsed against her.

* * * * *

Andi resisted the urge to bang her head against the table. Budget meetings had that effect on her. End-of-the-season budget crises were particularly annoying. They only had two episodes left, and the accountants wanted budget cuts. Like most of the office space at Ellison Productions, the conference room was small. Being closed up there for hours with a half dozen bean counters was really more than anyone should have to endure. She poured another glass of water from the cut-glass pitcher and girded her loins for a third recitation of their deficits. She looked at the clock that hung above the conference table; it was getting late, and she still had no idea where Harley was. He was off the shooting schedule for most of that week, but she hadn't

expected him to simply disappear; besides, they needed him a day early due to rewrites. He'd got into the habit of calling her late in the evenings before bed, but she hadn't heard from him for the past couple of nights. *You don't have papers on him, girl.*

The budget analyst was reciting the numbers once again when Ronni bustled into the room. The door behind her was set into a wall of glass panels. The glass was probably meant to make the room seem larger; instead it just proved to be distracting as everyone who walked past had a tendency to look into the room.

"We found Harley."

Andi stood up, pushing her chair into the wall as she did so. "Great. Can he be here in the morning for reshoots?"

Ronni stood in front of the closed door and answered with a shake of her head. "I'd say not. He's in Oregon."

Andi glanced around, belatedly realizing that they had the undivided attention of everyone in the room. They probably should've had this conversation away from the ears of the number crunchers. No doubt they were calculating the cost of the delay even as she spoke. Given the tight confines of the room, it took her a moment to work her way around the conference table to reach Ronni's side. She turned to the door and led her assistant out into the hallway.

"What's going on?" she asked once they were away from prying ears.

"He's in the hospital."

"What?" Andi's heart dropped.

"From what I was told he was up there kite surfing in the Columbia River Gorge."

Andi closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall. "Kite-surfing?"

"In the Columbia River Gorge."

“Ronni, as much as it pains me to ask this, I suppose I need to know. What exactly is kite-surfing?”

“I thought you'd want to know, ma'am, so I took the liberty of Googling it. Apparently it's a water sport that uses a large kite to pull a rider over the water on a board.”

Without opening her eyes, Andi removed her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Dear God, it's even worse than I thought,” she murmured, almost to herself. “Didn't that boy learn anything when his chute didn't open last summer?”

“Apparently not, ma'am. Broken bones don't seem to faze him all that much. And that broken ankle hardly slowed him down.”

With her eyes still tightly closed, Andi asked the question that made her insides quake with fear. “Will he be okay?”

“Apparently so, but he'll be laid up for a minute.”

“How soon can I be there? Can you make arrangements for me?”

“Already done, boss. You can be there tonight if you get a wiggle on.”

Not for the first time Andi thanked God for her assistant's competence.

Andi glanced down at her watch. It was nearly five o'clock. She tilted her head toward the conference room door.

“Okay, you head back in there. Tell them I can cut two percent, and that's final.” She hesitated for a moment, wishing she'd had a chance to talk this over with Myron, but he'd been out of pocket since Lainie's return. His assistant claimed he'd taken his family on a vacation, but that didn't sound like Myron. As far as she knew, the man hadn't taken a vacation in all the years she'd known him. Then again, his daughter had never been kidnapped before. She thought about his devastated expression when she'd seen him, and shrugged. After that, anything was possible. There wasn't a whole lot she could do about the situation now.

“Go up to three if you absolutely have to, but I'd really prefer two.”

Ronni gave her the grin of a baby shark. “Those guys must have really gotten on your nerves today. Usually you're too compassionate to sic me on them.” Ronni was very petite, even smaller than Andi herself. Her size made her look very young, which she compensated for by wearing very tailored clothing and keeping her dreadlocked hair confined in a crisp updo. Usually she only had to hand someone their ass once before they understood that her tiny form contained a cutting intellect and an even-sharper mouth.

“No doubt Amnesty International will be after my ass, but I've got to find out what's going on with Harley,” Andi said, not really caring what that statement revealed. Never before had any other crisis come before the budget.

“More like PETA,” Ronni said on a bark of laughter. She handed Andi her flight-confirmation information.

Andi took it and stuffed the paper into the pocket of her lightweight linen jacket. “Well, I suppose I'm on my way to Oregon.”

* * * * *

“Jeez, Harley, I thought we'd agreed that you wouldn't kill yourself until after May sweeps.” Try as she might, Andi couldn't keep the tremor out of her voice. Harley looked bad. Really bad. She'd spent a year working around his various injuries, but this went beyond anything she'd seen before.

He made a movement that probably would've been a shrug if both of his shoulders hadn't been taped into immobility.

“Hey, what else do I have to live for? I'm already the Sexiest Man Alive.”

He was lying back on the inclined hospital bed with the soft cotton blanket and sheets pushed down to his waist. He was swaddled in bandages from his shoulders to midway down his upper arms, leaving his forearms free. Something about his expression belied the levity of his tone. There was a look of despair that she'd seen before, and it left her wondering about his reaction.

Suddenly she choked up as she realized it was no joke. Harley really didn't care if he lived or died.

"Come on, boss lady," he continued, apparently having caught sight of the tears welling up in her eyes. "I look a damned sight worse than I actually feel. And look on the bright side—at least I didn't break my nose." He turned his head so she could see his profile and his crooked but amazingly undamaged nose. "You threatened me with death and dismemberment if I did that again, remember?" Andi ignored his attempt at humor. "Come on. One busted collarbone and a couple of broken ribs. The ribs made breathing difficult there for a minute, but once they got me taped up, it was all good. Pretty much everything else is just cosmetic. I'll be able to shoot next week. I promise," he said contritely.

His voice still sounded a bit winded to her ears, but then, she could only imagine how difficult it was to talk with broken ribs. Andi collapsed into one of the visitors' chairs in the stark room. She removed her glasses and wiped the back of her hand over her still-streaming eyes. "Jesus, Harley," she choked out. "Is that what you think this is about? The goddamned shooting schedule?"

A look of puzzlement crossed his battered face. "No?"

"No." She took a deep breath and leaned closer to the bed, placing a hand on one of his well-muscled forearms. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"Suicide?" Harley asked on a bark of laughter.

"Then explain to me why you keep doing this."

"Can't a guy just be out to have a good time? Maybe I'm just accident-prone?"

Andi gave him a frustrated glance. If he hadn't been so banged up already, she didn't think she could've restrained herself from hitting him. Hard. "Just say you don't want to talk about it."

"Fine. I don't want to talk about it." He changed the subject. "Knowing the indomitable Ronni, I expected you here last night."

"I did get here last night, but it was too late to see you."

Harley smirked. "That damned Ronni. Are you sure you didn't have her built over there at Industrial Light and Magic?"

Andi's lips curved into a slight smile. It was a running joke on the set that Ronni wasn't quite human. "Don't ever let her hear you say that. She has a mean streak, and she does payroll."

A weird hush fell over the room. The hum of the equipment was unnaturally loud as they both struggled to find something more to say. An attempt had been made to make the room look like a normal bedroom or maybe even a nice hotel room. The headboard looked like real oak, and the rusts and neutrals were probably supposed to give the room warmth and coziness. But nothing could rid the room of the antiseptic smell shared by all hospitals, or the sterility of the various machines chirping away tunelessly.

"I'm not suicidal," Harley finally said flatly.

"I thought we were changing the subject?"

He exhaled heavily, which seemed to set off a fit of coughing. He crossed his forearms over his chest to brace himself until it subsided. When it was over, his face was even paler than it had been previously, and sweat beaded his forehead. Andi used a tissue from the side table to dab the perspiration away, then poured him a small cup of water. He sipped it thankfully and lay back on the pillows, obviously still in pain.

"Shit. It's time for more painkiller." He reached out and touched Andi's hand from where she'd perched herself on the side of the bed. "Look, I'm not trying to kill myself. It is a mortal sin, after all. At least I still remember that from seminary." He smirked.

"We don't have to talk about this," Andi said.

"But would it make a difference if I did?" he asked almost too softly for her to hear.

"What?"

Just then a nurse entered the room. Andi moved back into the visitor's chair, but the nurse paid her little attention. Andi was grateful that she wasn't dismissed from the room as a nonrelative. After checking Harley's vital signs and making notes on his chart, the nurse gave him a dose of painkiller.

After the nurse left, Harley lay back with his eyes closed, gradually lowering the bed until it was almost flat.

"I'm so tired," he said.

"I'll bet you are," Andi murmured until the flatness of his tone sank into her consciousness. Somehow she understood that he wasn't talking about physical tiredness. She thought back to what he'd said about not becoming a priest. *"They took my God away. They took my family away. Now I've got nothing."* Not being particularly religious herself, she hadn't given it much thought, but now she suspected that it might be the most revealing thing he'd ever said to her. Quietly she resumed her perch on the bed, lowering her head until it lay beside his on the pillow. She closed her eyes too. He surprised her when he started talking again.

"You want to hear something funny?"

"Considering the mess you just made of our production schedule, something funny is the least you owe me."

"I hadn't prayed since I got booted out of the seminary."

Andi nodded, not sure where he was going with this. "That's not surprising."

"I've faced death quite a few times. That time when my chute didn't open. When my canoe flipped in the flood and the water moccasins attacked me. Both times I kayaked the Snake River. That knife fight in Kinshasa—"

"Okay, I get your point. A recitation of your repeated walks down the valley of the shadow of death isn't necessary," Andi interrupted, getting queasy from the visual of his many brushes with death. How long could he keep getting away with that shit? Even a cat had only nine lives.

“Yeah right,” he said, apparently noting her discomfort. “But here's the thing. I never prayed once during any of those. And some of them were a lot worse than losing my kite in the Gorge.”

Andi had always been a believer, but praying was not something she did a lot of. After leaving a very rigid church where she'd spent her youth, Minx had pretty much tried every religion before settling on Buddhism, probably due to influence from Tina Turner, whom she'd worked with briefly. Andi had chanted some and found comfort in it, but it wasn't anything she did regularly.

“What was different about this one?” she asked.

Harley's deep breath caught on obvious pain, and he exhaled a long sigh. “Always before, it didn't really matter. I wasn't trying to kill myself, but if it had happened, it was no big deal. This time it mattered. Even as I fought to get out of that water, I felt a deep, peaceful certainty that despite my foolishness, God wouldn't leave me.”

Andi placed a hand on his chest in response to his obvious pain. “This never happened before?”

“I didn't have you before.” He raised her hand to his lips.

Not wanting to think about what he was implying, Andi changed the subject. “That's amazing. So are you going to leave the show now and return to the seminary?”

Harley made a sound that would've been a laugh had his ribs not been bound so tightly. “No, this fallen angel is a little too tarnished even for the redeeming power of grace.”

“Well, I guess we can all heave a sigh of relief, then. Thank goodness the show doesn't mind a little tarnish. In fact we prefer it.”

Chapter Fifteen

Andi sat up in the bed with a start. Confused for a moment as to what had awakened her from a sound slumber. She frowned. There it was again. After the third time, she recognized the sound as someone calling out. Of course. Harley had come home with her last night when he was released from the hospital. She rushed down the hall to his bedroom to find him thrashing about restlessly on the guest bedroom bed. He'd thrown the covers off, and she could see his bandages standing out starkly in the shadowy room. Other than that, he wore only his knit boxer briefs. Andi touched his forehead, but he felt cool and dry, not feverish. Thank goodness. The doctors were concerned that he might develop pneumonia, but that hadn't happened. Apparently he was only having a bad dream. His eyes sprang open, the vivid color standing out even in the darkness of the room. He reached up and grabbed her wrist.

"What's going on?" he rasped.

Andi sat down on the edge of the bed. "I think you were having a bad dream. Are you okay?"

Harley shifted on the bed. Andi helped him sit up into a semireclining position and propped him up against several pillows. After that, she turned on the bedside table lamp. The light from the low-wattage bulb bathed the room in a soft golden glow. "Yeah, I think so."

"Are you in pain?" She reached for the pain medication that sat on the bedside table. Andi had never had guests in her home before and hadn't bothered to do any extensive decorating in the guest bedroom. The room was painted the same toffee color as the living room, but other than a bed and bedside table, there was no other furniture.

"No." He shook his head. "Still sore, but nothing to take those things for."

"Oh okay." Apparently his distaste for drugs extended even to the legal kind. "Can I get you anything else? Water?"

"No. No." He rubbed his hands over his face. "I'll be okay. Must have been a helluva dream."

"Oh, do you want to talk about it?"

"Not particularly. I don't really remember what it was about."

"I still don't think you should be out of the hospital. It's been less than three days since your accident," she said.

"Hey, if it weren't okay, they wouldn't have let me leave."

"Considering what a pain in the ass you were being, I'm not so sure about that. They probably let you leave hoping one of those ribs would go through a lung and kill you on the way home."

Harley pursed his lips, as though thinking it over. "You may well have a point. Anyway, thanks for letting me stay with you."

"You didn't leave me much choice, after you told all the people at the hospital you were coming home with me." A small, smug smile was his only response. "I'm actually surprised you didn't want to go home to stay with your people." Andi couldn't keep the petulance out of her tone. She wasn't jealous of a bunch of teenage hangers-on. She wasn't.

Harley exhaled heavily, then reached for the bottle of water on his bedside table. After taking a sip, he gave her a pointed look. "They're just kids, Andi. It's my job to take care of them. It's not their job to take care of me."

Andi frowned. "Your job? What are you talking about?"

He shifted uncomfortably on the pile of pillows. Andi stood to adjust them, removing a couple that had wilted and replacing them with fresh ones out of the closet. He leaned back with a grateful sigh. "Back when I first came out here, I worked in a lot of the restaurants around town. You know, the usual unemployed-actor gigs. I worked nights so I could audition during the day. I'd

meet a runaway here or there; usually they'd come in looking for something to eat. Most of the time I'd feed them; sometimes I'd give them some money, if I had it, or help them out some other way. It was no big deal."

Andi nodded, wondering where this was going.

Harley rubbed his mouth, paused as though to gather his thoughts, and continued. "Over the years, it's gotten bigger. I mean, I'm not in the restaurants anymore, but there are places the kids hang out. I still go there from time to time and pitch in, you know, do what I can to help. Most of the time I hook them up with some agency or another, but occasionally I have one or two with nowhere to go."

Andi stared at him. He could not be serious. "So you move them into your house? Are you nuts?"

"Not all of them. Most of them are good kids, and they don't stay for long. Some of them just need bus fare home. You know, they come out here expecting to be discovered in a soda shop, but get taken advantage of by all kinds of lowlifes. If they can't go home, I try to help them find somewhere to go. Some of these kids aren't runaways. They've been thrown away. The streets are horrible and dangerous, but a lot of the time it's no worse than what they left behind." He licked his lips. "Back when I was going to be a priest, I'd planned to work with street kids. What I'm doing now is really not that different."

"So you're basically running a teen shelter in a million-dollar loft in West Hollywood?" Andi couldn't contain the incredulity in her tone.

"I wouldn't call it that. I'm hardly qualified to run a shelter, but yeah, that's more or less what I'm doing." He laughed but cut it off when it triggered a coughing fit. He took another sip from the bottle of water. "You know, that's where Myron got the idea for the show."

She stared at him as comprehension dawned. "No wonder you said you knew Randall better than I did. You do. You're Randall."

“Not really. He's a trained social worker. I'm just blundering through as I go. Giving a few kids a place to lay their heads.”

Another thought struck her. “Myron knows about this? And he hasn't been promoting the hell out of it?” she asked, becoming more and more amazed as this story unfolded. Myron missing this opportunity was probably the most astonishing thing she'd heard so far.

Harley closed his eyes briefly. “I swore I'd walk out and never come back if he did that.”

“You threaten to walk out every day. Sometimes hourly. Myron's not the sucker I am. He would never fall for that.” Andi waved a dismissive hand.

His eyes sprang open, and when he spoke again it was in a very harsh tone. “Yeah, but he knew I meant it. He knows I'm only on the show because I need the money.”

Andi gave him a disbelieving look.

“Hey, indies don't pay much, and what I'm doing is expensive. Besides, I do have a designer wardrobe and a hairstylist to support.”

Andi had to laugh at that. His self-deprecating humor would be the death of her. “But why are you keeping it such a deep, dark secret? Letting people think they're your groupies or something?”

Harley gave her a look that questioned her intelligence. “Can you imagine the response if people heard about this? The paparazzi would never leave me alone. Those kids didn't sign on for that kind of attention. They've got enough problems as it is. I get paid to put up with the craziness; they don't. It's better for the paps to just think they're my entourage or something; they never give them a second glance. Besides, I don't want anyone thinking I'm running around doing good deeds and shit.”

Andi didn't point out the obvious, that if that was the case, maybe he should stop running around doing good deeds and shit, but she couldn't ignore the possible consequences of his behavior. “But, Harley, you're a huge star

now. You can't keep bringing strangers to your home. I can't believe you haven't been ripped off, or worse. Those street kids are into drugs and prostitution. You could end up in a world of trouble.”

“Yeah, I know.” The heavy sigh seemed to come from the depths of his soul. “I'm talking to some people about setting up a foundation or something.”

“Well, that's a relief.” Andi sighed.

“Totally hush-hush, of course. They're fighting against keeping my name out of it. According to them, being associated with a big star will help them raise money.”

“They're probably right,” Andi said prosaically.

“They won't need to raise money. I'm going to fund it all myself.”

“Wow. Well, setting up a foundation is a good idea. Expensive as all hell, but it beats getting your throat cut in your sleep some night. You won't have to run around with street kids anymore. It's definitely a lot safer.

“Yeah, I suppose it is,” he said almost wistfully. Andi knew then that he would be keeping his hand in no matter what programs he set up. The man did love to live dangerously.

* * * * *

When he heard the key in the lock, Harley raised his head from the sofa where he was reclining and looked at the door. Minx walked in, then stopped short when she saw him in her daughter's living room.

“So where's Ondria?” Minx asked.

Harley gestured toward the kitchen. “She's cooking.”

Minx sat down on one of the wing chairs facing the sofa. “What is it about you that brings out this domestic streak in my daughter?”

Harley almost shrugged. “Damned if I know.”

“What happened to you this time?”

He explained about his kite-surfing accident while Minx shook her head in disbelief. "Ondria didn't lie when she said you have a death wish, did she?"

Harley frowned. "I'm just a guy who likes to have fun. I'm so misunderstood."

They both started from the clashing din of pots clanging in the kitchen. Harley laughed at the noise. "So where did she learn to cook like that? Are you a good cook?"

Minx waved one fine-boned hand dismissively. "Are you kidding? The closest I get to cooking is making dinner reservations. No, Andi must have gotten that from her daddy's side of the family."

"Her daddy's side of the family?" Harley barked his disbelief. "Yeah, right! I don't think anybody in Myron's family knows where the kitchens are in any of his houses!"

Minx joined him in his laughter, her head falling back on the chair's high back. "Well, you've got a point. I remember when we were together we would've starved had it not been for this old lady who lived down the hall—" She sat up abruptly, cutting off her mirth in midstream. "How did you know about Myron?"

Harley had immediately caught his mistake; his face blanched as he gritted his teeth. There was nothing for it; he'd have to tell the truth. "Minx, I'm sorry, but Myron told me."

Minx stood up and began pacing in front of the sofa, her posture intimidating despite her diminutive frame. She halted in front of him. "Does Ondria know? I swear I'll kill him if you've told her!"

Harley spread his hands. "No, Minx. Myron didn't even mean to tell me. He was trying to warn me off, and I thought he was pissed because I was poaching."

Minx's eyes widened. "You thought Myron was sleeping with Ondria? I would hope she would have more sense." She cut off a sharp laugh as she

resumed pacing. "You understand that Ondria can never know?" At his disapproving look she continued. "I know, I know, I've heard it all. She deserves to know who her daddy is, and I always intended to tell her, but...well, you know how she is. The poor girl already has enough hang-ups about me and my lifestyle. I should've told her a long time ago, but then things went so fast, and Myron went behind my back with that mentorship thing, and then it was too late."

Harley shook his head. "Jesus, Minx, you know eventually she'll find out. There's no way to avoid it." He paused reflectively as he digested her comments. "Why didn't you tell her when Myron started working with her?"

"I thought about it, but I just couldn't do it. Now it's too late. You can't tell her," she said urgently. "I don't think she'd ever speak to me again."

Harley wiped his hands over his face. "Look, Minx, I have no intention of telling her, but I don't think you or Myron know your daughter very well. She's not nearly as fragile as you seem to think."

"Mother, what on earth are you doing here?" Andi asked, coming out of the kitchen.

"Don't call me that," Minx said. "Is there something wrong with me coming to see my only child? You didn't tell me you were playing nursemaid."

"He's only been here for a couple of days." A timer went off in the kitchen, and Andi rushed back to check on the meal.

Minx gave him a considering look. "She's in love with you, you know."

Harley snapped his head around to stare at her incredulously. When he could formulate words, he asked, "What are you talking about?"

Minx strolled languidly to resume her seat in the chair. "I know my daughter. For thirty years now she has absolutely refused to do anything that wasn't proper. You know, a type of protest against my decadent lifestyle. She bought a condo in this building, literally right on my doorstep, when most young women her age can't wait to get away from their mothers. I think she's

afraid I'll overdose on weed or something. I'm almost sixty years old, and my daughter is still hiding my bong. Where did I go wrong?" Minx chuckled ruefully. "She's so driven, so ambitious. Totally obsessed with that awful little studio, working crazy hours and neglecting the rest of her life. You won't let her put you aside; you push your way in, no matter what. I was afraid that she'd turn out like her father. Driven. Ambitious. Willing to do anything to make it, and she is, but I always knew she was capable of love. I knew that she had to have inherited some of my fire, my passion. I've despaired of ever seeing it, but you bring it out of her. You've got her cussing and throwing things. I couldn't want anything more for my child."

Harley shook his head in disbelief. Well, this was hardly what he had expected from Andi's mother. Especially after their last encounter. If throwing things and swearing indicated love, he wasn't sure if he ever wanted to see hate. He sat there bemusedly for a few moments longer; then his countenance brightened. "What do you think is the likelihood that she poisoned the dinner?"

Minx shook her head. "Probably pretty good; especially if she thinks I'm staying for the meal. I'm sure she'd love to get rid of both of us in one blow. I'm a tough old broad. It'll take a little more than poison to take me out. You, on the other hand..."

Harley tilted his head contemplatively. "Hey, haven't you heard? I've been trying to do myself in for years. I like to live dangerously."

Chapter Sixteen

Andi turned off the steaming-hot shower. Wrapping a fluffy white towel around herself, she stepped out into the steamy, spalike confines of her bathroom. Normally she would linger a minimum of twenty minutes in the vast marble-enclosed surround of her shower, but she'd promised Harley that she would run down to the corner bakery and pick up fresh bagels for the breakfast. Warm and relaxed from her shower, she rubbed the towel briskly over her limbs. Harley had been staying with her since their return from Oregon. True to his word, he had returned to work the week following his accident. He'd paid for his dedication, though. His doctors had recommended a week or more of bed rest. Of course, those doctors didn't have budgets or shooting schedules to consider. Andi argued with Harley for hours trying to convince him to rest more. This conflicted with her role as producer, but for once she didn't care. The danger of complications, including pneumonia, was too great. Harley wouldn't back down, though, and insisted on maintaining the shooting schedule. They were perilously far behind on the shoot, and he knew it was his fault. It had been a grueling week. Rewrites, makeup, and camera angles had accommodated Harley's injuries. After three days of shooting until well after midnight, they were all exhausted, but they had the season finale in the can. Next week would just be backup shots and filler.

At home by nine for the first time that week, Andi had spent the previous evening going over the budget revisions. She didn't really want to know how she did it, but somehow Ronni had held the bean counters at a 1 percent budget cut. She looked forward to a leisurely Sunday morning with Harley, reading the papers, drinking coffee, and enjoying a huge breakfast.

After slathering on her favorite grapefruit-scented lotion, Andi stepped into a pair of white cotton capris and a salmon pink tank top. Looking forward to the walk to the corner on the lovely spring morning, she checked her hair, which she'd put up in large twists before getting in the shower. The humidity had fluffed it up quite a bit, and she tied a bright pink and white scarf around it and released the twists to form a large, free-form Afro. She slipped on her favorite sunglasses from her eyeglass armoire, and after grabbing her wallet from her dresser, she headed into the living room where she'd left Harley watching the Sunday-morning talk shows. She stopped in the middle of the floor; he wasn't there. Checking in the kitchen, guest bedroom, and second bathroom rendered the same results. Then she realized that he must have gone to the bakery anyway.

"Stubborn man," she muttered under her breath. Harley was going stir-crazy with this recuperation. He was not one to sit still, even under the best of circumstances. But given the work schedule he'd endured this past week, it shouldn't be too much to ask that he sit his ass down at least through the weekend. He'd heal a whole lot faster if he at least tried to comply with the doctor's orders. Oh well, assuming that he didn't drop dead on the sidewalk on the way back, the trip shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes or so. She walked toward the kitchen to start breakfast, only to be halted by the peal of the doorbell. Andi frowned, staring at the door wondering whom it could be. Tree was still in New York. It could be her mother, who had suddenly started visiting her more when Harley moved in. What the hell was that about? Then she remembered that she'd never got around to having another key made for Harley. There was really no point. He couldn't drive, so he'd been going everywhere with her for the past week anyway. He must have forgotten to take the key with him when he left.

Andi opened the door and then stared in befuddlement. Jordan and Pippin, two of Lainie's best friends, stood on the landing with anxious

expressions on their faces. Before she could ask what they were doing there, Jordan spoke up.

"You've got to come with us. Lainie needs you."

Andi frowned. Both girls seemed frantic, and as she watched, a bead of perspiration ran down from Jordan's hairline to her cheek, where she impatiently brushed it away. It wasn't a particularly warm day, so it was strange that the girl was red-faced and sweating. There were rumors that both girls were strung out on meth and pills, but then there were always rumors about the girls in their clique. With too much money and not nearly enough to do, they were also rumored to hit the club circuit pretty hard. Andi had no trouble believing that. Myron and Bunny kept a tight grip on Lainie, and she'd never got caught up in the club scene.

"What?" Andi asked.

"Lainie sent us to get you. She really needs you," Pippin added in the same urgent tone as her sister.

Andi backed away from the doorway as they crowded her space. Why would Lainie send someone for her? They weren't close friends. She'd rarely seen the girl since she stopped working on her show. And if Lainie did in fact need her for some unknown reason, wouldn't a phone call have sufficed? Before she could ask her questions, Jordan reached out and grabbed her arm. Both girls were considerably taller than Andi, but she probably outweighed them by more than twenty pounds and was strong from years of Pilates. She easily broke away from Jordan's hold.

"What are you doing? Why would Lainie send you here? Where is she?" It was then that she realized that Pippin had removed something from her oversize designer bag.

"Look," the girl said, her high-pitched voice bordering on hysterical. "You've got to come with us. We don't have time for this."

When the girl reached out toward her, Andi realized that she held a bright Barbie pink Taser in her hand. She stood there so stunned and mesmerized by what Pippin was doing, her inattention allowed Jordan to grab her again, in a firmer grip this time.

Still confused as to what the young women were up to, Andi knew she had to get away as quickly as possible. She pulled her left arm strongly, throwing Jordan off balance and into the direct line of her sister's Taser attack. The device went off with a distinctive buzz, and Jordan dropped to the floor, screaming in agony. Andi paused briefly, horrified by the girl's involuntary muscle spasms and the knowledge that, had things played out differently, she would've been the one writhing in pain. *What did those damned fools have that thing set on?* She pushed Pippin with all her might. Pippin's momentum, aided by Andi's shove, sent her down as well. The Taser in her hand found skin left bare by her short-sleeved shirt, and she cried out as well, screaming in concert with her sister. Andi ran toward the still-open door to get away from the matching menaces.

Harley stood in the doorway, and she ran into him. His arms came up in an automatic embrace, pulling her close and preventing her headlong rush into hysterics.

"What the hell's going on here?" he bellowed.

"I don't know. They just showed up here wanting me to go with them. Jordan grabbed me, and Pippin tried to Taser me," Andi said.

"Jordan? Pippin?"

"Their dad's from Chicago." Andi remembered that their father had once said he'd made more money betting on the Bulls than on any investment he'd ever made in the stock market.

"So you know them?"

"They're friends of Lainie's," she said, still trying to catch her breath. "They used to be on the *Blues* set all the time."

Jordan sat in the middle of the living room floor, still sobbing hysterically. Pippin had taken up a similar position, though she wasn't crying as much as her sister. Andi suspected that she'd only got a glancing blow from the Taser, whereas her sister had received a full jolt. Realizing that they weren't going to get any answers anytime soon, Andi picked up the Taser from where Pippin had dropped it on the floor. As an afterthought, she took the girls' oversize handbags as well, just in case they had additional weapons. She placed the bags and the Taser inside the armoire on the other side of the room.

Harley closed the door and leaned against it, giving the girls an appraising look. "Okay, who wants to explain what the hell's going on here?" When loud sobbing was the only response from them, he walked over to the coffee table and picked up his phone. "Maybe you guys won't mind talking to the police."

"No, wait a minute. Wait a minute." Pippin suddenly regained her composure. Jordan continued sobbing quietly, holding her side, where she'd apparently been zapped.

"Okay. Start talking," Harley said.

"Can we get up from the floor?" she asked, already rising to her knees.

Harley shot Andi a glance where she stood next to the armoire.

"No," Andi said. "You need to stay right there." Harley was in no shape to help her, and she didn't want to take them on again by herself.

Pippin sank back down to the floor. "We were going to kidnap you," she said in a resigned voice.

"Yeah, I figured that out," Andi said drily. "The question is, why?"

"Duh. For ransom money," Pippin said.

Andi gritted her teeth to keep from responding to the flippancy in the girl's tone. "Ransom money from whom? My mother?" Minx was fairly well-off, but by Hollywood standards she was a pauper. They could've found better targets pretty much anywhere.

Pippin gave her another “you're an idiot” look. “Your mom? Please. No. From Myron Ellison, of course.”

Andi pulled on heretofore-unknown reserves of patience. Amazing what a year of working with Harley had done for her tolerance levels. “Why would Myron pay ransom for...? Wait a minute. You guys kidnapped Lainie?”

Jordan finally spoke up. “Not really. I mean, we helped, but it wasn't a kidnapping. She was just pissed at her dad about her show. So she asked us to help her get back at him.”

Harley gave Andi a knowing look. “Then what happened?” he asked, still looking at Andi.

“She got mad when we tried to collect the money.”

Andi looked away from Harley to stare at the girl. “Your dad is one of the wealthiest producers in town. Why are you kidnapping people for ransom?” Hell, maybe they really were strung out on drugs. Or were they doing it for kicks? Dick Bruckett probably had a million dollars in change in his sofa.

Pippin shook her head. “He's lost everything. He said it was a Fonzi scheme or something. He's lost everything. We don't have any money.”

“That would be Ponzi scheme,” Andi corrected her. “Unless he lost all his money on motorcycles and leather jackets.”

“Huh?” Jordan frowned.

“Sorry, before your time. Does Lainie know this?” Andi asked.

“No. Nobody knows. Daddy said he can get it back, but we have to keep it a secret. He said it's all a confidence game. If people think you've got money, they have no problem giving you money; but if they know you're busted, especially if you lost it in a Fo—Ponzi deal, then you're screwed. We're moving to a smaller house and had to give up all our club memberships,” Jordan said with a melodramatic wail.

"But why did you try to kidnap me?" Andi asked the question slowly, enunciating each syllable with care. She hadn't realized it before now, but neither girl was particularly bright.

"We figured Mr. Ellison would pay lots of money to get his girlfriend back," Jordan said.

Andi rolled her eyes. Her arm had been bruised a bit in the skirmish, and now it was beginning to throb. She wanted to get these stupid girls out of her house so she could get an ice pack. "I'm not Myron Ellison's girlfriend." She'd ignored the rumors when Ronni warned her about them, but now she wondered if she had made a mistake. Apparently they had left her open to attack from Public Enemies #1 and #2.

Both girls looked dumbfounded by the news. "You're not?" they said, almost in unison. Their puzzled expressions emphasized their unfortunate resemblance to lemurs.

"That would be no," Andi said again.

"But everybody knows..."

"Just rumors. None of it's true."

Both girls began crying again. Then Jordan hit her sister, hard. "I told you this was a stupid idea."

"How was I supposed to know? He paid for her to go to school," Pippin retorted.

The breath caught in Andi's throat. She looked across the room at Harley, who looked as thunderstruck as she felt.

"What did you say?" Andi asked.

Pippin looked confused. "What did I say about what?"

Andi held on to her patience by the finest of threads. "About Myron paying for me to go to school."

"Oh that." The girl shrugged casually. "Lainie said her mom told her that he paid for you to go to UCLA."

Harley moved away from the door. "Okay, girls, it's time for you to go."

"You're just going to let us go?" Jordan asked.

Andi gave him a questioning glance but was really too bewildered by this bombshell to pursue the matter.

"You might want to reconsider your career options. Getting jobs or going to school to support yourselves is less likely to land you in the penitentiary...or a morgue. Kidnapping is a federal crime, you know," Harley said.

"School? Jobs?" They echoed as though they were foreign concepts. Andi thought maybe they were.

"Yeah, what was I thinking?" Harley said. "Just get out."

Both girls scurried out of the condo as quickly as they could; Jordan dashed back to grab their handbags. Andi gave them to her after checking for weapons, but she kept the Taser, amazed that someone had sold the dangerous weapon to a pair of idiots.

Andi sank down on the sofa, totally drained from the ordeal. She held her throbbing right arm close to her body, hoping it wasn't more than bruised. Harley took one look at her, took out his phone, and dialed a number. "You need to get your ass over here," he said into the phone. "Two of Lainie's friends just tried to kidnap Andi with a goddamned Taser." He closed the phone with a snap before whoever he was talking to had a chance to respond.

He studied her for a long moment, clearly taking in her shaken state. "Hey, boss lady, we might as well get breakfast together," Harley said, picking up the bakery bag from where he had dropped it near the door. "He has to drive here all the way from Holmby."

"That was Myron?"

"Yeah, that old boy owes you some explanations."

A little over an hour later the doorbell rang. Andi checked the peephole; she wasn't about to be caught flatfooted again, and was gratified to see Myron

standing there. He hadn't been around for what seemed like forever, and under normal circumstances, she would have been thrilled to see him again. She opened the door to let him in, only to be flabbergasted when she saw that Minx was with him. Andi stood in the doorway, staring at them both owlishly, trying to figure out what they were doing together. As far as she knew they didn't even know one another. Minx had clearly just come from the gym. She was still wearing workout clothes, which is something she never did. The front of her shirt was even sweaty. Minx was never seen in public looking anything less than flawless. Myron... She'd thought he looked awful the last time she saw him; now he looked barely human. His deep-set eyes were sunk into dark caverns, his swarthy complexion was incredibly sallow, and he looked as though he'd lost a half dozen pounds or more. *What the hell?*

Andi stepped out of the way to let them into her apartment. Minx walked in briskly and took a seat in an overstuffed lounge chair across from the sofa. Myron didn't sit; he just stood near the door as though trying to get his thoughts together. Harley had followed her out of the dining room. After the tumultuous morning, they'd lost their appetites for the huge breakfast they'd planned, and settled for bagels and schmears of cream cheese and lots of hot tea.

Andi turned to her mother. "What are you two doing here...together?" *Do they even know one another?* Minx raised a brow toward Myron, who was pacing restlessly near the door.

Andi turned back to him. "Myron?"

Myron cleared his throat. "Andi, why don't you and Harley sit down?"

Andi hesitated, then followed Harley to a seat on the sofa.

Myron stopped pacing but didn't sit. Instead he continued to rock back and forth, as though too agitated to be still. Minx watched him, perched on the edge of her seat as though wishing she could escape. *What the hell?* Andi was brought out of her musings when Myron finally began speaking.

"You know Lainie came back last week." Andi nodded. "Apparently it was some kind of setup. Those girls, the ones who came here, are friends of hers, and she had them helping her."

Andi took a deep breath. "Yeah, I know that much, but I can't believe Lainie would do something so awful. She put you and Bunny through hell."

"Yeah, well, Lainie always was a bit spoiled. Unfortunately she shared a little too much information with them, and after she got away, they moved on to you."

"Any particular reason why you didn't have those two idiots arrested?" Harley's voice was still dark with anger.

"What? And have this get into the tabloids?"

Minx glared at him through narrowed eyes. "Money again. Andi could've been killed," she snapped.

Myron turned on her. "No, not money. You know goddamned well I have more money now than I could ever spend. Do you think I want the world to know Lainie did this? They promised not to do it again, and I let them go. It never occurred to me that they'd move on to Andi. How could I? I didn't know Lainie had told them about our...relationship."

"What relationship?" Andi spoke up before her mother had a chance to say anything further. The conversation was quickly being derailed. Minx was shaking with rage, and Andi wanted to know why. "They said they thought I was your girlfriend because you paid my way through college." Andi glanced at her mother, but Minx's expression gave nothing away.

"Yeah. I didn't know Lainie knew about that. Apparently Bunny told her. Of course, I didn't know Bunny knew. So much for me knowing everything that goes on. Apparently I've been reading my own press."

Minx's lips tightened. "*Apparently* you don't have a clue about much of anything and never did," she said harshly.

"Goddamnit, Minx," Myron said.

"Mother, you're not helping." Andi sighed. "Wait a minute," Andi said with sudden clarity. Obviously there was history between Myron and Minx, and if she let them continue sniping at each other, they'd be there all night. "Those girls said you paid my way through school. I didn't even know you then. Could you please tell me why you did that?" She tried to keep her voice as calm as possible, even as her stomach clenched and a sense of foreboding descended over her.

Myron cleared his throat again, then walked over to her small bar and poured himself a club soda. "Sorry, Andi." He sat down in the other lounge chair, his legs spread with both hands hanging loosely between them.

"He insisted on doing it. He wouldn't listen to reason," Minx said. "I told him it was a stupid thing to do. That somebody would find out. He was always a stubborn jackass."

Andi held up a hand to halt her mother's diatribe. The truth loomed before her, and though everything inside her railed against it, she continued to probe anyway. "Why would you want to...?" Andi looked from Myron to Minx and then back again with dawning horror. She couldn't make herself ask the question, but Minx answered it anyway.

"Yes, Myron is your father." Andi almost doubled over. Each word was like a knife jab straight to her gut.

Andi sank back on the sofa and closed her eyes. "You told me my father was in that production of *A Chorus Line* you were in."

"I told you I met him while I was in *A Chorus Line*. Either way it was a lie. I met Myron while I was on one of his shows. He swore he would leave his wife, but he never did. He couldn't stand to lose the money," Minx hissed bitterly.

Before today Andi would've said that she knew her mother and her boss better than practically anyone on earth; now she sat staring at two people who were apparently total strangers to her. Still trying to gather her thoughts, she looked at Harley, who hadn't said a word through all these revelations. He looked strangely unanimated. Harley was one of the most expressive people she

knew; it was odd to see him looking so—That train of thought broke off when a horrible thought occurred to her.

“Does Lainie know?”

Myron shook his head sharply. “No. She just knows I paid for your schooling. They put two and two together and made five. I’ve got to tell everyone now.”

Andi exhaled sharply through her nose. “I’m not sure it’s not better for them to think that the rumors are true. Seems like a lot fewer people will be hurt.”

“Nope. Have you forgotten that you started college when you were sixteen? They’ll think I was sleeping with you when you were still a minor and that your mother went along with it. I have many sins, but I’ve never been a child molester. No, it would be far better for the truth to come out.”

Andi looked at her mother, who still sat with her arms crossed as though holding on by sheer force of will. “How could you lie to me?” she whispered.

Tears welled up in Minx’s eyes. “You have to understand. I didn’t want anyone to know. I was his whore, and I was ashamed.”

“Whore? You always said that was a word men made up to shame women into tolerating their poor sexual performance.”

“Andi—”

Andi interrupted, unable to contain the pain in her quavering voice. “You taught me that a woman’s sexuality is her own and that women should have the same sexual freedom that men do. Was that a lie too?”

Minx lowered her eyes. “I probably said a lot of things I don’t really believe. I think deep inside I’m still Feadie Mae Smith from Lick Skillet, Alabama. You can take the girl out of the country...”

“Everything you taught me was a lie,” Andi said, hot tears rising in her eyes.

"Not everything, Andi. I love you. I just wanted to protect you. I didn't want you to be hurt. Didn't want you to know. Just let me explain..."

Andi stood up; after the past couple of weeks, this was simply too much. Without thinking, she walked over to the door and opened it. "You...you...you've got to go," she said, gesturing toward Myron and Minx.

Minx rose to her feet. "Ondria, wait... Let me explain."

Andi turned and looked from Myron, who was standing in the middle of the living room floor, to Minx, her arms reaching toward Andi.

"There's really nothing else I want to talk about...Minx. Now get out." She stood by the open door until both Myron and Minx slowly made their way out the door.

* * * * *

Andi leaned against the door after her parents left. Suddenly she lacked the strength to move any farther. Harley walked over to her and gathered her in his arms.

Andi collapsed against him. Mindful of his injuries, she didn't place all her body weight against him. The sobs she'd held back through the whole awful morning suddenly overwhelmed her and wouldn't be contained any longer. As though he was accustomed to having women cry all over him, Harley just stood there with her face against his neck, patting her back and murmuring soothing nonsense.

Finally realizing that she was probably hurting him, Andi forced herself out of Harley's arms. He stepped back and used his left arm to close the door, then went over to the bar to pour a glass of water for her. Andi fished a handkerchief out of her bag and wiped her still-streaming eyes and nose. Harley led her over to the sofa, where she collapsed, still holding the handkerchief to her face. He sat down beside her and handed her the glass of water. Andi gulped it down in just a few swallows and placed the glass on the low coffee table that faced the sofa.

"I'm so sorry, baby. This is unbelievable. I can't believe it turned out this way. What were they thinking?" Harley said.

Andi shook her head. "I know. I just can't believe Myron's my father," she said hollowly, still dazed from the revelations. "I can't believe they never told me."

Harley closed his eyes. "Andi, I need to tell you something."

Andi took a deep breath. Suddenly what he'd said echoed through her mind. "*I can't believe it turned out this way.*" That was wrong. Her breath caught in her throat as alarms shrieked through her head. Her senses confirmed what she already knew. What she should have sensed through his strange silence during that whole scene with her parents. Harley was many things, but he was seldom silent.

"You knew," she said with dead certainty.

"Andi, let me explain..."

"How long have you known?" She struggled to keep from screaming at him. From striking out. How could he?

"I found out the same night I found out that Myron knew about us, but baby, he wanted to keep it a secret. I couldn't go against that."

"What do you mean? You were sleeping with me!"

"On the down-low," he said through gritted teeth. "You wouldn't even acknowledge me in public."

"Is that what this is about?"

"Of course not. Myron's my friend. He wanted to keep it a secret; it wasn't my place to tell. I tried to get him to tell you, but I couldn't do it."

"Had you ever planned to tell me?" She hated that she sounded so...broken.

Harley ran his hands through his hair; it seemed to take everything he had not to pull at it in frustration. "Baby, I told you, it wasn't my secret to tell. Don't you understand? Your father..."

"Don't call him that!"

"Okay, okay. Your—Myron. He's my friend. He trusted me with that information; if I'd told you, I would've betrayed him. He wanted to keep it a secret. How could I do otherwise?"

Andi looked around the room, anything to keep from looking at Harley. Her thoughts whirled, and her heart beat so quickly, all she could hear was her pulse roaring in her ears. She just knew that once again she had to escape from someone she...loved? *Oh God. No.* She stood up and backed away from him toward the door.

"I've got to...I've got to go." She turned and ran out of the house.

* * * * *

Andi stood on the landing for a brief moment. She walked over to Tree's door before she remembered that her friend was still in New York. She looked down at the handbag she didn't remember picking up before she left her house. There was no reason she couldn't be in New York too.

Chapter Seventeen

“Oh, for the love of God. Are you still moping around this place?” When she was annoyed, Tree's South Carolina Gullah roots came to the forefront. People typically thought her accent was Jamaican, but she was quick to correct them. Andi curled up on the window seat and looked out the window of Tree's tiny New York apartment. She'd always loved the city in the springtime, but right now she could barely work up the energy to appreciate the bright colors and the new vibrancy in everyone's step after a long, dreary winter. She didn't remember living in New York, though she'd been born here. At least that's what her birth certificate said. Given the events of the past few days, she wouldn't be surprised to discover a fucking stork had brought her. There was something to be said about a city that actually had seasons. As much as she loved LA and never wanted to live anywhere else, she thought she could get used to the experience.

Andi sighed. “You know. I think I might relocate. New York is growing on me.”

Tree flopped down in the chair adjacent to the window seat. “Yeah, like mold. You've only been here for three days. After a week you'll hate it again and start talking about how much you miss driving your beloved automobile. When are you going home? Isn't it pilot season? Who's running that precious show of yours while you're loafing around my apartment in my pajamas?”

“Ronni.”

“Oh, if that girl knew anything about fashion, I'd steal her from you. She's capable of running that show. Hell, she could run the studio.”

"I'm pretty sure she will someday," Andi said absently. "I think it goes without saying that I don't work for Myron anymore." She'd told Tree the whole story after she'd showed up on her friend's doorstep in the middle of the night, exhausted and without luggage. She'd got a few odd looks from airport security, and they'd certainly screened her more thoroughly than usual. Apparently taking transcontinental flights without so much as a change of underwear was a bit unusual. Her friend hadn't had much to say then, but now Andi sensed she was finally about to get a "good talking-to." There were times when Tree practically channeled her mother. Charlotte was a small, wrenlike woman whose heart was bigger than her whole body. More than once Andi had been on the receiving end of one of her painfully direct but unbelievably loving talks. Apparently Tree had decided one was long overdue.

"Oh yeah, that makes a helluva lot of sense. You're going to quit a job you love just because..."

Andi straightened from her slouched position. "Because he lied to me. They both lied to me."

"I know that," Tree said.

"Then stop acting like it's something trivial," Andi snapped back.

"I never said it was trivial. Look, sweetheart, I understand you're hurting, but damn, it is what it is. You crapped out in the parenting sweepstakes, but you know what? Minx could've left your ass in a Dumpster somewhere. You have to see it from her viewpoint too."

Andi jumped up from the seat and began pacing around the tiny, hexagon-shaped room. Tree came to New York as little as possible and consequently hadn't invested much in her apartment, which was diminutive even by the city's standards. She'd been camping out on a sofa that looked more like Barbie furniture. Seriously, if she were going to stay much longer, she would have to get a room. Maybe in that fabulous Michelangelo hotel where she'd stayed when she came here with Harley. With that thought, her feelings deflated even further. She didn't have a job, so she couldn't afford a room at

the boutique hotel. She refused to think about Harley and his betrayal any further. Having walked all six corners of the studio apartment, she turned on her friend.

"I can't believe you expect me to be understanding of what they did."

"How can you not be? Minx was all by herself when she had you. She'd been abandoned by her married lover..."

"Yeah, I know, she could've left me in a Dumpster. Thanks for that lovely visual. But she kept me and fed me bullshit all my goddamned life," Andi derided.

"You *know* Minx—"

"No, apparently I don't."

"Come on, Andi. You know Minx. A lot of women would've continued the relationship with Myron, if only for financial reasons. Instead she pulled herself up and raised you by herself. She's a helluva businesswoman, and while she's not rich by Myron's standards—"

"Who the hell is?" Andi interrupted as she flopped down on the sofa, her chin resting on both knees.

"She's hardly hurting for money. And she's made plenty of money for both of us too." Tree gave her a long look, and Andi knew she was about to get Big Mama'ed. Tree's accent thickened to the point that Andi had to consciously focus on her words just to understand her. She only did that when she was schooling her. It made her lectures pretty much unforgettable, and maybe that was the point. "Look, sugar, the situation sucks, no doubt about it, but it's not like they've been tying you up in a closet and whupping your ass for the past thirty years. Poor Andi, finds out her daddy is a gazillionaire who paid her way through college and gave her a dream job with a six-figure salary—"

"Low six figures," Andi interjected.

Tree sucked her teeth. "And a mama who worked her ass off to provide for her. Sure, they're a little twisted, but whose parents aren't? Mine still drink white lightning."

Andi frowned at her. "What the hell is white lightning?"

"White liquor from a home still. One hundred fifty proof."

"You never told me you were a Clampett." Andi smirked.

"You never asked."

Andi twisted around until her legs were under her chin once again. Her hair was still up in the twists she usually slept in. She was on her third day in the same pajamas, which she'd borrowed from Tree, so they were at least six inches too long. She had to roll them several times at the waist to keep from tripping over them.

"Okay, so let's table the discussion about your parents for the moment," Tree said.

"Thanks."

"What about Harley?"

"What about him?"

"Do you really think you're being fair to him?"

"You know, you might want to Google that term 'best friend.' You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am on your side. Why do you think I'm asking about this? I'd rather you not throw away a good man."

"Good man?" Andi scoffed. "Have you forgotten we're talking about Harley Joseph here? You do remember that he and Bryan Spencer *shared* that Chasdity woman."

"Ewww. Apparently *you've* forgotten that I just ate." Tree pressed a hand against her stomach and made a moue of distaste. "Nonetheless, I'd rather you not throw away the man you love."

"Love? Who said I loved the guy? I admit he's good in bed—"

"Please, Andi, you've been with him for months. Most of the time you can't be bothered for more than a few weeks, even when the guy has the dick of death. You've forgotten more guys than most women date in a lifetime. Do you have any idea how many of your castoffs have cried on my shoulder because you've literally dismissed them for pilot season? Do I need to mention that you're missing pilot season right now to sit here and mope in my apartment in a city you hate? You've been married to your job forever, but you were willing to shut down production for weeks so Harley could recuperate from some crazy-ass-white-boy accident *he* caused. You, who's been known to ration paper clips to save money, were willing to lose millions, even though he wanted to go back to work. It's obvious you've got it bad for him. Almost as bad as he has it for you."

"You think he's got it bad for me?" Andi asked, then could've bitten off her tongue for what she'd revealed.

Tree rolled her eyes. "Ewww again."

"Okay, okay. I admit that was bad. I'll try to do better. But what do you expect? He lied too."

"No, he didn't."

"He knew Myron was my father and didn't tell me."

"What could he do, Andi? Myron's his best friend. It was hardly his story to tell," Tree said. "At worst it's a sin of omission."

Andi glared at her friend, but deep down inside she knew Tree was right. Damnit, Harley should have told her. She knew Harley was loyal to a fault. It was one of the things that made her—*oh shit*—love him? She really hadn't planned on thinking about that again. It was just too goddamned disturbing. Was Tree right? Did he really have it bad for her, or was she just a convenient lay? She groaned in frustration. That was the thing. She had hardly been convenient. Harley had women throwing themselves at him all the time; why

would he be so interested in her if that wasn't really what he wanted? She was so engrossed in her mental gymnastics that it took her a while to realize Tree was still talking.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

Tree gave her an exasperated look. "Never mind. Look, what do you plan to do about the guy?"

This was hardly a question Andi wanted to address right now. Moving to New York City seemed like a significantly easier proposition. She had no doubt, however, that Tree would keep nagging her about it until they were both well into their granny-panties years.

"I guess I'll take him back," she said with a sigh.

"Take him back? I thought y'all didn't have a relationship?" Tree said with a smug smile.

Andi threw one of the sofa's numerous throw pillows at Tree's head. "You know what I mean, heffa." Peals of laughter were Tree's only response.

* * * * *

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" Harley stormed into Myron's office on the Ellison Productions lot.

Myron looked at him with bleary eyes. "To tell you the truth, for only the second time in my life, I'm not really sure. Odd that both occasions involve Minx."

Harley leaned across Myron's desk, which would've been at home in the Oval Office or with a mob boss sitting behind it. "Don't try to make me feel sorry for you, old man. I told you this was going to be a disaster, and now it's fucked up my life too."

Myron gave him an arch look. "Nobody told you to tell her."

Harley bunched his fists. The urge to hit Myron almost overcame his common sense. Despite their long friendship, Harley knew Myron had people at his disposal. People who could eliminate him and still make it to brunch at the

country club. Still, he couldn't totally let him get away with it. "Oh yeah," he snarled. "The woman I love is devastated because she just discovered who her dickhead father is. Her mother's been lying to her all her life, and I'm supposed to lie to her too? Have you ever given any thought to trying to become a fucking person?"

Myron raised his hands in surrender. "Hey, I never claimed to be a good guy, but I love my family and always do my best by them."

Harley straightened up then, staring down at his friend's lowered head. The breath he exhaled was full of the frustration he wanted to vent on Myron and...on himself. He slumped down into the sleek Biedermeier club chair that was placed on a diagonal to Myron's desk.

"It's not totally your fault, man. I knew this shit wouldn't work. I should have told her," Harley said.

Myron shook his head firmly. "No, I left you in an untenable position. Shitty thing to do to a friend. I'm sorry."

Harley pulled both hands through his hair. He slouched farther into the chair. Myron's office was decorated like a gentleman's club from the 1930s. The richly paneled walls and designer furnishings looked like something out of a Cary Grant movie rather than something one would find in a studio lot in LA. It always made Harley want to put up his feet with a cigar and a single-malt scotch, even though he didn't drink. Not surprisingly this office suited Myron more than the one in the house he'd spent millions on. That might explain why he was seldom there. Then again, Bunny wasn't here either.

"Problem is," Myron continued, "she took off and won't talk to me."

"Join the club," Harley said with a harsh laugh.

"Yeah, but now the tabloids have gotten wind of the story. I think there's a leak in the police department. Should've known I couldn't muzzle everybody." He shrugged philosophically. "I thought I'd head it off by giving someone an exclusive. They want to interview her, but if we don't hurry up, it'll be too late."

Shit. Andi would have an absolute fit about her personal life being all over the tabloids. She loathed publicity of any kind and did the bare minimum necessary for the show. "Is she talking to Minx?" Harley asked.

"Hell no. She's in New York."

"Well, you know more than I do." Harley raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"After what happened with those stupid girls, I'll always make it my business to know where my family is," Myron said. "She's staying with her friend Teresa."

Of course, he'd forgotten that Tree was still in New York. For the most part he'd been on autopilot since Andi'd walked out on him. As much as he'd been dreading her finding out that he'd kept this awful secret, he'd never thought she'd walk out. That wasn't like her. He'd expected to get his ass kicked and maybe even thrown out of her house, but the way she'd taken off had been so out of character, he hadn't had a chance to react. By the time he ran after her, she was long gone. Her bright red Cabriolet burned rubber spinning out of the parking lot.

"What do you plan to do?" he asked Myron.

"I was hoping you could help."

"She's not speaking to me either."

"Yeah, it never occurred to me you'd be stupid enough to tell her."

"Myron." The single word was a warning.

Myron waved his hand in an apologetic gesture. "I need her here and willing to talk to the magazine."

"You don't ask for much, do you?" Harley flicked his thumb against his forefinger, and both men fell into silence. Harley's mind wandered to the last night he'd spent with Andi, and he was understandably distracted when Myron spoke again.

"The good thing is, Andi's not one to hold a grudge. She blows hot, and she'll eat your ass alive, but after that she's done."

"Of course," Harley felt compelled to point out, "she's never found out her whole life is a lie before."

Myron glared at him but said nothing more as they continued to stare at each other. Eventually Myron began pacing restlessly about the room. Harley couldn't help but notice that the past few weeks had apparently been hard on his friend. For the first time ever, Myron actually looked his age and then some. Harley got the impression that he wasn't sleeping well, and given the shambles that his life was in, that was hardly surprising. Of course, he knew he didn't look his best either. A good night's sleep was a distant memory since he'd moved back to his own place. In just the short time he'd lived with Andi, he'd got accustomed to her comforting presence in bed. Maybe he could've slept better if he'd at least had her things around him.

Suddenly Myron turned to face Harley again, his sallow face animated in a way Harley hadn't seen in a long time. "There is that screenplay..."

Harley frowned. Maybe it was sleep deprivation, but he was not tracking where his friend was going. "Screenplay?" The words were out before he remembered. The screenplay. *North Star*. The old bastard wouldn't... But of course he would. "Please tell me you're not thinking of using Andi's screenplay to bribe her into doing what you want."

Had he not known Myron for so long, the ruthlessness of his expression would have been more than a bit frightening.

"I told you, I'll do anything to protect my family."

"But you said it wouldn't make any money."

"For God's sake, Harley, what's wrong with you? It's not always about money."

Dumbfounded and rendered speechless, Harley stared at Myron. If that remark didn't trigger ice storms in hell, nothing ever would.

Chapter Eighteen

"If you came to see me grovel and beg again, you can forget about it." Minx stood in the open doorway of her apartment, her face set in a mulish expression as she confronted Andi.

Andi sighed and hitched her handbag up higher on her shoulder. "No, Minx, I'm not interested in anyone begging."

"So why are you here?"

"I'm hoping for an explanation. I need to understand why you did what you did."

Minx gave her a long, steady look, probably taking in Andi's rumpled appearance. Aside from dropping off her things, she hadn't stopped in her apartment long enough to change clothes or to freshen up after her long flight from New York. She could only imagine how she looked. Fortunately she'd bought several outfits and some luggage in that city, so she wasn't still in the same capris and tank top she'd left in, but the long flight had still left her rather worse for wear. Surprisingly Minx didn't comment on how she looked, and that was a stronger indicator than anything of the chasm that had opened between them. Minx seldom missed an opportunity to chastise her about her appearance. Instead her mother simply turned away from the door and walked toward the kitchen.

In keeping with the style of the building, Minx had decorated her penthouse condo in a Spanish Colonial style. The reclaimed heart pine hardwood floors echoed the rich ochre and burnt sienna tones of the walls and plush leather sofa. The contrast between the bold, ethnic flavor of Minx's home and the almost clinical decor in her fitness center was a bit disconcerting. But

Andi had always thought both aesthetics suited the unique, multidimensional character that was her mother.

Minx came back into the room carrying two glasses of wine and gestured for Andi to take a seat. Andi sat down on the sofa, and Minx sat in the adjacent chair. She handed Andi a glass and kept one for herself. Andi raised her brows. It was after eight o'clock, and later than she generally consumed alcohol, but then, it wasn't like she had an early shoot in the morning, so she took a sip. As she expected, it was an excellent pinot grigio.

Minx sipped from her own glass, then leaned back with a sigh. Staring at the fireplace across from her chair, she began talking. "I know I've talked about how tough it was to be a black woman in this town back in the early seventies. It's rough now, but back then..." Minx shook her head. "It was damned near impossible. But when you come from Lick Skillet, Alabama, there's literally no place to go but up. After years of going to auditions and slinging a lot of hash, I got my first role in one of those action pictures."

Andi nodded, wondering why her mother was going over this again.

"Then I got a cameo on one of Myron's shows." She shrugged. "My agent acted as though I'd been cast as Scarlett O'Hara. I wasn't expecting much. Then I met Myron." Her voice dropped to a soft whisper. "He was just so beautiful."

Andi took another sip of wine. She'd never heard her mother talk about a man in quite that tone of voice. It was a bit unnerving, but the wistful notes in her voice were somehow reassuring.

Minx laughed softly. "I fell. I fell hard. Oh, so did he. He even promised to develop my own show for me."

"What?"

"I think he meant it at the time. But he was already married. He was going to leave his wife. He told me that over and over again. I went with it for a long time; then I knew I was pregnant, and I pushed it." She shrugged. "Maybe I

shouldn't have, but I was young. I didn't understand that sometimes half a loaf is better than none. I wanted it all.”

“What happened?” Andi asked.

“We made arrangements, but he never followed through. Time and time again he made excuses. Of course, I knew he didn't want to go through with it. Bunny was his connection to money, to power.” Her mouth narrowed to a grim line. “He always cared about family, though. If I had told him about you, he would've left her in a heartbeat. As a matter of fact, when he found out about you later, he offered to leave her if I'd come back.” She laughed again. “But I wanted him on my terms or not at all. Not because I was pregnant. So that was that.” She dusted her hands together. “I went to New York. Had you. Did some theater; then I got tired of that. I'd always been a dancer, and the whole fitness thing was just starting up. I decided I could open a fitness center.”

Andi nodded again. She knew this part of the story, or at least thought she did.

“Myron knew more about money than anyone I knew. So I got in touch with him.”

“But I thought you were angry?”

“I was, but I also needed his help. I'd grown up a little by then and knew I had to be practical. I wouldn't take money from him, but he made sure I knew how to make my own. He wanted to be sure that neither of us ever wanted for anything. He taught me everything I know about money.”

“So he didn't really abandon us.” It shouldn't matter so much, but it did. She'd take anything she could get from the crazy mess her parents had created.

“No. He never abandoned you. He did all I would let him do. He was there at pretty much all your milestone events. Graduations, recitals...”

“But why didn't you tell me?”

"At first I *was* angry. I wanted to get back at him. Then I was ashamed. I'd slept with a married man and done my damndest to break up another woman's home. That's shameful behavior, and I don't think I'll ever forgive myself for it." Minx stopped talking as she choked up on that last sentence.

Andi leaned forward and placed her glass on the coffee table and took her mother's hand in her own. "Oh, Minx, I'm so sorry."

Minx exhaled heavily. "He wouldn't back down on the school thing. He was so proud you wanted to be a producer like him." Her mouth curled in a sad smile. "I was horrified, of course. I didn't want you anywhere near this business. I suppose I should've stayed in New York. LA is a one-industry town. I shudder to think about how much money he spent on that mentoring program at UCLA."

Andi stared at her mother in amazement. "He started that whole thing just for me?" Another little leap of joy.

Minx nodded. "I think he went nuts there for a while. Finally there was something he could do for you, and I couldn't stop him. Didn't want to stop him, really. This was something you'd wanted since you were a little girl. And of course, money was no object. Before I knew it, he had you working there at the studio."

"Wow." Andi picked up her glass and took another sip, and then another. None of this jibed with the internal picture she'd had in her mind of her parents' relationship, or their relationship with her for that matter. Sure, it was hardly the most wholesome thing she'd ever heard of, but somehow the knowledge that her father hadn't abandoned them, had done his best for her, eased the pain and left her feeling almost euphoric. Much as she hated to admit it, she had to accept that though they weren't perfect, Tree was right, they'd done all right by her.

Minx closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they were swimming with tears. "I don't expect you to forgive me. What I did was pretty much unforgivable. I just want you to understand. I was a stubborn, proud young

woman, and I guess I'm a stubborn, proud old woman. Just understand that I always loved you and did the best I could."

Andi reached out and took her mother's hand again. "I wish you hadn't done what you did, but if I weren't ready to forgive you, I wouldn't be here, Mother."

* * * * *

"Have you talked to your mother? You have every right to be pissed off at me, but your mother doesn't deserve that. She did the best she could with a mess I created. So if you're going to be pissed off at somebody, be pissed off at me."

Andi leaned back in her chair and sighed. Why was it that all of a sudden her parents were being so reasonable after being decidedly unreasonable—no, hell, downright insane—for the past thirty years? "Believe me, Myron, there's plenty of anger to go around."

"I understand that, but we can't work this out until you talk to your mother. She deserves it."

Andi shook her head, still wondering why they hadn't been this logical before. "I've talked to Mother. She's explained things from her viewpoint. I'm just trying to understand what the hell was going on with you."

Myron sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He looked a little better than he had the last time she'd seen him, but that wasn't saying much. Then again, a kidnapping, an attempted kidnapping, and the baby mama from hell would be hard on anybody.

"I don't know where to begin, Andi. I got married young, probably too young, but that's no excuse. I deliberately chose someone well connected. Bunny was old Hollywood. She had silver nitrate in her blood and money for days. I wanted power and money of course."

Andi nodded; Minx had more or less told her the same thing. She looked around, a bit uncomfortable to be having this conversation with Myron at his

home, but when she'd called, he'd asked her to come over. She wondered how much of this he had shared with his wife.

"Bunny was... Well, you know Bunny. But we still did okay. Our marriage wasn't great, but back then I was still reasonably faithful."

Andi considering asking him to define "reasonably faithful," then decided she really didn't want to know. "I'm surprised you were ever faithful."

"I was faithful to your mother too."

"Myron," Andi said gently. "I don't think you can be faithful to one woman while you're married to another one."

"You might have a point, but I didn't sleep with anyone else, not even Bunny, when I was with Minx."

Andi raised her brows, wondering if Minx knew that. A hint of a smile curved her lips at the notion of a married man being faithful to his mistress. Well, Myron wasn't going to win any Husband of the Year awards anytime soon, but then again, he wasn't trying to. She was going to have to accept these two people who had created her as they were, even if both had enough warts to cover a passel of frogs. She idly wondered if this acceptance meant she was growing up. Or maybe she was so damned tired it just didn't matter anymore. She suspected it was a little of both.

Myron waved his hands, dismissing his previous statement. "Anyway. Like I said, I didn't leave Bunny like I promised. Minx left me. A couple of years later she came back with you."

"Did you try to see me?" Andi hated that it mattered so much.

"Minx wouldn't hear of it. She made sure I knew about all your events. I was at both your graduations. I was a coward. I'll be the first one to admit I didn't try very hard. I didn't want to fight Minx in court. I didn't want Bunny to find out."

"Does she know now?"

Myron nodded. "Everybody knows. I'm not keeping any more secrets. They're too goddamned dangerous."

"That's comforting to know. I guess I need to be watching my back. Lainie will probably take a hit out on me now that she knows. And Blake is already pissed off. We'll be lucky if he doesn't go to the union screaming nepotism."

Myron chuckled. "No. Lainie actually took it fairly well. She's always liked you, you know."

"I know. It's one thing to like your producer, but to find out she's your sister... I dunno."

"Has Blake been giving you grief? Why didn't you tell me?"

"No, not really grief. I just know he wants my job. That makes me a bit uncomfortable."

"Get used to it," he said with a wry chuckle. "Blake's not stupid. He knows better than to fuck with you."

"I hope you're right." She stared at him, trying to figure how to formulate the next question. "Did you make me a show runner because I'm your daughter?"

Myron threw back his head and laughed. "You know me better than that. I sent you to school because you're my daughter. I mentored you because you're my daughter. But blood or not, I don't hand over ten million dollars an episode to just anybody. You're a show runner because you're damned good at what you do." He shrugged and gave her a lopsided grin. "You're a pretty girl. If you couldn't write, I would've just given you a show. I owe you one anyway. Another broken promise I made to your mother," he added sadly. "Are you going to be okay?"

Andi closed her eyes. Until that moment she hadn't realized how crucial that question was. It went right to the heart of her identity. She opened her eyes and returned his smile.

"I have to say, this has been the mindfuck of a lifetime. I hope there's nothing else like this out there. Is there?"

"If there are any more skeletons in your closet, I didn't leave them there," Myron said.

"If that's the case, then I think I'll be okay." There was suspicious moisture in Myron's eyes. She knew he didn't handle his emotions well. He was from a generation of men who simply didn't do that. She reached up to give him an impulsive hug. He returned it and held on for a long while. She heard him murmur, "Thank God," and she understood just how traumatic this whole situation had been for him.

"Solet's talk about the screenplay," he said briskly as he stepped back.

"Screenplay?" Andi struggled to keep up.

"Yeah, that slavery thing you wanted to do. I think I can finance it as a TV movie, but I'll need to see a projected budget."

What the fuck? Andi rubbed her eyes and stared at her father. Had she fallen asleep? Just what in the hell was he up to? Her confusion must have shown on her face, because Myron spoke up.

"Look, I'm not going to blow smoke up your ass. I think we need to give an exclusive to one of those tabloids. Nothing fancy, just an interview to let them know who you are. That way we don't have to worry about any more craziness. Or at least no more than the usual craziness in this family."

Andi stared at him for a long moment. The man would never learn. She couldn't believe he was trying to bribe her. Turning him down would be the right thing to do. The moral thing to do, but right now she wasn't feeling particularly right or moral.

"I'll think about it, Myron."

"Well, you know—"

"I said I'd think about it."

Chapter Nineteen

Andi stood in the doorway, bemused, as Lainie swept into her apartment. She'd just put on her pajamas and was getting ready for bed when the doorbell rang. After her long flight and the emotionally draining meetings with her parents, she wanted nothing more than her own bed. At this rate she wouldn't be seeing it anytime soon. Lainie loved to talk. She knew she should have waited before seeing Myron and her mother. But she'd but thought she'd rest better if she had it out with them first, and she probably would, if she could actually get in the freaking bed.

"Obviously, I need to relocate," she murmured to herself. "Lainie, what the hell are you doing here?"

Lainie flopped down on her sofa. "Well, I was waiting for you to come see me," she said with a petulant pout. "I can't believe you came to the house and didn't even let me know."

Andi stood with her arms across her chest, staring down at her younger...sister. For some reason this revelation was actually more disturbing than the knowledge that Myron was her father. And for the life of her she couldn't figure out why. Maybe it was because, after years of being an only child to a single parent, she was suddenly awash in relatives and connections she wasn't so sure she wanted. Realizing that Lainie wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, and that she'd been running around since her plane landed that morning, Andi decided to join her on the couch. "And I would be doing that because..."

"We're sisters, numbnut. And just how fab is that? All my friends are going to lose their shit," she chirped. "They'll be so jealous that I have a black sister. Everybody wants to be black. It's just so hella cool."

Andi stopped in her tracks. "Lainie?"

"Yes?" Lainie bubbled up, apparently still enchanted by the social cachet of having some melanin in the family.

"As your black sister, it's my duty to tell you, don't ever say that again."

"Did I sound stupid?" Lainie asked, proving that despite her carefully cultivated image, she was actually quite bright.

Andi collapsed onto her favorite chair. The past few days had been exhausting emotionally and physically, and she didn't know how much more of this Addams Family reunion she could take.

"Unbelievably stupid. Not to mention culturally insensitive."

"Sorry." She immediately dropped her dumb-blonde demeanor. "I know how much you hate that. Look"—she fluffed up her mane of shoulder-length hair—"I toned it down a little bit."

Andi nodded. The first thing she'd noticed when Lainie came to the door was the change in the girl's hair color. She was still blonde, but she'd gone from nearly platinum to a softer, more natural shade that suited her olive complexion. Lainie had striking features—a heart-shaped face and a full mouth that was a bit much on her nineteen-year-old bone structure but would be stunning when she matured. Hopefully by then she would let the bleach and the flatiron go. Her naturally curly mahogany locks were stunning. Andi had often told her so, encouraging the girl to let go of the tired, old, blonde-bimbo image she'd embraced. She was actually shocked that some of her lectures had apparently stuck with her.

"Daddy wants me to go to school," Lainie said on a dramatic sigh.

Andi nodded thoughtfully. "I told you before, it seems like a good idea." She had almost forgotten that when she was still working on *Blues*, Lainie used

to come by her office almost daily to talk. She'd always treated Andi like an older sister. It was odd how they'd fallen into that role, and now they assumed their parts again. Andi refused to think about how natural it felt.

"None of my friends are going to school; it'll be strange to have to meet people. He's even talking about somewhere on the East Coast. I don't know anybody there."

"Yeah, but some of your friends have become attempted kidnappers. It's probably a good idea to have a slightly better fallback position," Andi said drily.

"I never really thought about it, but I guess you're right. And Daddy said he'd develop another show for me once I finished school."

Andi held her tongue. Baby steps. "Is this all you wanted to talk to me about, Lainie?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, you talked with everybody else, but you never talked to me," she almost wailed.

Andi closed her eyes and sighed inwardly. She really was too damned tired for this tonight. "I'm still not sure what it is that you want to talk about. I'm sure Myron has told you everything that went down. What more is there to say?"

"For one thing, I think it would be a good idea if we saw each other more. I don't see you hardly at all now that you're not working on *Blues* anymore," Lainie said.

"For what?" Andi asked.

"We're sisters," she said in a tone usually reserved for the learning disabled. "I'd kind of like to get to know you. We can't do that without hanging out. We could go shopping. Maybe you can score me some of that fab Geechee Couture you're always wearing."

"You hardly need my help there. You wear more of Tree's clothes than I do."

"Yeah, but you always get it before it's available in stores. My friends will lose their minds if we show up somewhere in matching outfits."

Like that would ever happen. Andi was grateful when the doorbell rang, though she wondered who else could be showing up at this hour. She opened the door to admit Harley, who immediately embraced her and held her close.

"Jesus, I'm so glad to see you. Why the hell did you take off like that?" he asked, then covered her lips with his own, giving her no chance to answer. The kiss quickly turned carnal, and she returned the devouring movements with equally hungry ones of her own. Lainie must have shifted or said something, because Harley raised his head, staring at the young girl.

"Lainie, what in the hell are you doing here?"

"Why isn't anyone ever happy to see me?" The girl pouted. Her pansy brown eyes widened, and suddenly she looked like a wounded angel.

Andi had always wondered why the media always claimed Lainie couldn't act. The girl was brilliant. Apparently that didn't fit in with the stereotype of the spoiled rich girl. Certainly she didn't help her cause any with her dumb-blonde image.

Lainie joined them at the door. "I didn't know you two were seeing each other. How long has this been going on? Does Daddy know? I'll bet he doesn't know. He'd be pissed off beyond belief. You should have seen him when he found out about my little crush on you. He grounded me for weeks. It was just a little crush. I got over it pretty quickly, especially when Daddy took my car away. Why do you think parents always do that? It's just about the meanest thing ever. Especially around here. You can't go anywhere without a car. I couldn't go shopping or anything. They even took away my driver. I don't really like having a driver, but it beats being grounded totally."

Andi knew from experience that Lainie could keep on with this stream-of-consciousness monologue indefinitely. She grabbed the girl's arm and gave her a little shake. "We've been keeping our relationship a secret on the set. For obvious reasons."

Lainie nodded her quick comprehension. "Yeah, everybody says Tennessee is such a fucking brat."

Andi raised her brows but didn't make any comments about the blackest of kettles disparaging the coloration of a pot. "She's not the only one who would give me trouble, so we would still like to keep this discreet."

"Andi, you do know he's like the biggest man slut in town?" Lainie said, apparently untroubled by the rudeness of badmouthing Harley to his face.

Andi smiled. "I've heard allusions to the fact." How pathetic was her love life that a teenager felt compelled to warn her about a man? She'd never thought of herself as particularly unsophisticated. Apparently she was wrong.

Lainie's brow furled with intensity as she glared at Harley. "I've just gotten my sister, so if you fuck over her, I'll..."

"You'll what?" Harley glared back. "Make me disappear? Stomp a mud hole in me? Beat me to death with an ax handle?" Harley asked, clearly tired of repeated death threats.

Andi's eyes widened in astonishment as she immediately recognized the source of each threat. She'd never thought of herself as particularly in need of protection either. It was quite a revelation to realize that her friends and family thought differently. It shouldn't have been such a comforting thought, but it was.

"No." Lainie crossed her arms and raised her delicate chin in the air. "I'll just have someone hold you down while I cut your hair," she said smugly.

Harley backed away with an audible gasp. Andi wasn't sure, but she thought he blanched under his tan. He immediately grabbed his hair, as if to shield it from impending destruction. "That's one helluva sadistic streak you got there, don't you?" He gave her a considering look. "I like that in a kid sister." In a practiced gesture, he reached out and mussed her hair. If Lainie's vengeful glare was any indication, it was something he did regularly, and Andi thought it might be a good idea to warn him to stop before Lainie shanked him.

She recognized the look on the girl's face. It was one she typically wore herself after Harley drove her into a homicidal rage. Odd that she'd never noticed the physical resemblance between them until that moment. According to Myron, she looked like his mother. Apparently Lainie did too.

It began as giggles, until finally they were all doubled over laughing. Andi knew some of it had to be exhaustion, but it felt good to laugh after the horrible week she'd had. Finally she straightened and wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"Okay, Lainie, it's after eleven o'clock. I'm sure Bunny would prefer that you be home by now."

"My driver is waiting downstairs. I told him I'd only be a minute, so yeah, I guess I'd better be going." Despite her words, the girl lingered by the door, until finally Andi realized what she was waiting for.

"Why don't we hook up to go shopping next week? Tree will be back then, and I'm sure she'll have lots of samples."

Lainie's eyes lit up like Chinese New Year. "Okay, that's great. I'll get going. I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about." She gave both of them quick hugs.

After Lainie left, Andi shook her head. She'd seen hurricanes with less intensity than this little sister of hers. "I might as well put in a revolving door," she said as she returned to the sofa.

"Yeah, you've had a helluva week all right." Harley moved behind her and began giving her a leisurely neck rub. "You never told me why you took off like that. You didn't give me a chance to explain."

"I really needed to clear my head to think about all this craziness. You were right. You couldn't tell me about Myron without blowing a confidence, and when push came to shove, you made him tell me."

He leaned down to kiss the back of her neck. "So I'm forgiven?" His lips were a velvet whisper against her skin, sending a delicious shiver racing down her spine.

Andi sighed. What was the question again? “There's nothing to forgive. If anything, I should be apologizing to you. Honestly, I think I was so mad at my...parents that the extra anger had to go somewhere. I'm sorry you got caught in the blowback from the mess that is my family tree.”

Harley began untwisting her hair, combing his fingers through the fluffy strands. She let her head roll back, seeking the delicate pressure against her scalp.

“Myron apologized for putting me in the middle. Have you talked to him?” Harley asked.

“Seems like I've talked to everyone in LA County today. Yes, I talked to Myron. We worked through some things, but well, I think there's a lot more to talk about.”

“What about Minx?”

“Pretty much the same thing. I've been thinking about them a lot, and you know what?”

“What, boss lady?” He was massaging her scalp now, and Andi was having increased difficulties forming coherent thought.

“Their situation is just so sad. I think they genuinely loved each other at one point—”

“Still do,” Harley interrupted.

“Hmmm?” She struggled to follow the thread of the conversation as her muscles melted like chocolate in his hands.

“Myron told me he still loves Minx.”

Andi took a deep breath, though she wasn't surprised by the revelation. She remembered the soft look on Minx's face when she'd said, “*He was so beautiful.*” “See, that's what's so sad. They lost everything through greed, pride, and stubbornness.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And Myron still doesn't get it.”

"What do you mean?"

"He tried to buy me," Andi said in an infuriated tone.

"Oh yeah. He told me about that. He offered to finance *North Star*, right?"

Andi nodded.

"You didn't turn him down, did you?" he asked, pausing the massage.

"Not yet, but I'm going to."

"Why?"

"Why what?" she asked.

"Why are you going to turn him down?"

Andi turned around to look at him. "Because I don't want him to think he can buy me."

Harley shrugged. "He already knows that. Or at least he will when he comes to his senses. Meanwhile we'll have the movie in pre-production already. He won't stop it, because he won't want to lose money."

Andi laughed. "I have to admit, it's an appealing idea. He'll be pissed when he finally figures it out."

Harley shook his head. "Are you kidding me? He'll be a proud papa. He'll be bragging to everyone that you outflanked him. Besides, he deserves this and worse."

"I'll think about it." She patted the cushion beside her. Harley climbed over the back of the couch to sit beside her. Andi yawned widely. It really had been a helluva week. She'd only been back in town a matter of hours and hadn't had a chance to rest after her long flight. Thinking about the mistakes Minx and Myron had made forced her to realize that she might well be following in their footsteps. She'd been keeping Harley at arm's length, not just because of her job, but also out of fear of being hurt. After seeing the way her parents had wasted their love, she realized there were worse things than a broken heart.

Harley stretched out with a sigh, placing his head in her lap. Andi returned the favor and began massaging his scalp, eliciting a deep, contented groan. She continued her ministrations, her nimble fingers making quick work of the knots she found in his neck and shoulders.

“Harley, do you love me?”

He started, then lost his balance and fell to the floor with a thud. “What? Just what the hell did Myron tell you?” His brows beetled as he looked at her suspiciously.

“Interesting reaction.” Andi deadpanned, even as a battalion of butterflies ran amok in her stomach. She took comfort in the fact that Harley looked...frightened. What was he afraid of? No matter what, she was determined to see this through. “It's a fairly simple question. Only requires a yes or a no.”

Harley propped himself up on his elbows and gave her a long, considering look. Then his mouth curved in a knowing smile. “Tell you what, boss lady. I'll answer your question, if you'll go with me to the Emmys.”

“For crying out loud. That's months from now.” Andi dismissed the preposterous suggestion.

“Hmmm, sounds like you don't really want an answer to your question.”

God, he was the most infuriating human being she'd ever met. “Okay, fine, I'll go to the Emmys with you.”

“And walk the red carpet,” he insisted.

“Are you kidding me? The paparazzi will go insane.” Seriously, dude really had lost his mind.

“Yep. And I won't be your dirty little secret anymore.” He tried to hide it, but for a brief moment the pain on his face was apparent.

“That really bothered you, didn't it?”

“More than you could ever imagine.”

"I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you." She sighed; now she really had no choice. He had guilt-tripped her fair and square. "Fine. I'll walk the red carpet with you."

"Really?" He made no effort to conceal the joyous surprise in his voice.

"Really. But no making out."

"Well, you can't have everything," he said with a philosophical shrug.

"Now answer my question," Andi prodded.

He peered at her owlishly. "I'm sorry. I got a bit distracted by the visual of making out with you on the red carpet. What was your question again?"

Jackass. "You know full well what I asked. Do you love me?" She gritted her teeth at the plaintive note that crept into her voice there at the end.

"I can't believe your ever doubted it. Of course I love you. Why do you think I let you lead me around by the nose all this time?"

"And this happened when?" Andi asked, recalling all the times he'd driven her insane with his open defiance. He'd constantly challenged her authority... Then she stopped. That wasn't right. He never openly defied her. Oh, he threw plenty of hissy fits, but at the end he always did what she wanted. Near as she could tell, she was the only person he'd ever done that for. He was right. She hadn't been paying attention. She could see how, in his mind, he'd done it out of love and respect. He'd been showing her his love all along. How had she missed it?

He reached up and pulled her down to the floor. She rested her chin on her stacked hands on his chest. "I've loved you almost since the night we met. Why else do you think I put up with being hidden? I wouldn't tolerate that bullshit from anyone else on earth."

"I never really thought about it. I guess I thought you just wanted to get laid."

"Do I need to point out to you that as Sexiest Man Alive I rarely have a problem getting the nooky?" he said in a lofty tone.

Andi wasn't really paying attention; she was reveling in the knowledge that he loved her, and she began raining kisses on his face. It felt as though a thousand white roses had blossomed inside her.

"I suppose this means you love me back?"

"Never doubt it for a moment," she said emphatically.

Harley looked up into her smoky topaz eyes, and suddenly all he could think about was making her his. The past few days had been excruciating, the relief of knowing that she'd forgiven him almost made him dizzy. He shifted uncomfortably on the floor; he was still quite a bit sore from his accident, but he didn't want to break the mood to get up. They hadn't made love since he'd been injured, and even if it killed him, he was going to have her, right now. He looked around the room and spied the comfortable lounge chair that flanked the sofa. Perfect.

He grabbed the back of Andi's head and pulled her down for a kiss. As her soft lips slipped over his, the silky sensation suddenly left him starving for more. Holding her head in place, he grazed on her mouth, sucking her tongue into his mouth as though it were life-giving sustenance. She shifted against him, and the pain was almost enough to break the spell but not quite.

"Sweetheart? This floor is a little hard on my back. Why don't we move over to that chair?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Harley. I don't know what I was thinking. Your poor ribs, and your shoulders..." She sat up and moved off him with a gasp of dismay.

Harley got to his feet and moved over to the chair, tugging her along with him. If he didn't put his plan into operation quickly, she'd start thinking too much about his injuries. He'd had enough of that. He sank down into the chair and maneuvered her into a position where she was sitting astride him with her legs supported by the wide arms of the chair. Perfect. Now he had her exactly

where he wanted her, and he didn't have to worry about hurting a thing unless he really wanted to.

He began kissing her again, his mouth even more demanding against hers than before. He wanted her soul, her very essence, and he wouldn't settle for less. Andi growled against his lips, and her hands tangled in his hair as she returned the kiss with interest. His head almost exploded when she moved on to his ears, following the contours with her tongue in a movement guaranteed to drive him insane. She shoved the collar of his shirt aside to take a sharp nip out of his shoulder, and he quickly realized that somewhere along the way he'd lost control of the agenda for the evening. Thinking to get it back, he pushed her soft cotton pajama top up over her head in one motion. The rich brown tone of her skin was irresistible, and he followed the curves of her torso with his tongue. Her full breasts with their puffy areolae beckoned him. He'd never dated a girl with puffs before, and feared he was now spoiled for any other type of breasts. Their swollen contours were such a blatant invitation, he was amazed that he didn't spend his every waking moment with his head under her shirt.

Andi's head rolled back, and soft, kittenish little moans escaped from her throat. Harley slid his hands inside her loose-fitting pajama bottoms. His fingers immediately sought out the delicious wetness hidden by a nest of curls. She raised her hips, seeking greater contact with his fingers, and groaned when two fingers slipped inside. In and out he stroked, while his thumb strummed her clitoris. Andi's cries got louder, and Harley realized she was close to coming. Determined to feel her around his cock when she came, he slipped his hands out of her pants and raised her up enough to pull them off her. His ribs protested the exertion, but at this point he was too desperate to care. He fumbled with the fastening of his jeans and pulled his cock out. Andi knelt down between his legs and took the head between her lips. Harley gritted his teeth, and the breath hissed out through his teeth. Jesus! Now he was the one on the verge of coming. He held on for endless moments as her warm, wet

mouth engulfed his erect penis time and time again. As she began to gain speed, he grabbed her hair, pulling her off.

“No.” He guided her back into her previous position; her widespread legs left her totally exposed and hovering just over his throbbing cock. His ribs and shoulders ached from the strain, but he arched his back, just as she lowered her hips, bringing her silken warmth over to envelop his entire shaft in one movement. He loved the way she flexed her hips as the muscles in her thighs tautened to bring her down for stroke after stroke. His head canted back involuntarily as he struggled to breathe. Despite his injuries and desperate for release, he couldn't hold back; his hips jackhammered up and down.. His hands tightened on her waist, holding her in place as he ground his pelvis against hers, and that's all it took. Andi cried out as her orgasm struck her, the walls of her pussy contracted as though trying to pull his own completion out of him. He was so close, he could feel the feathery sensation down his spine, and suddenly it hit him; his back arched one last time as ecstasy exploded over every cell in his body.

A long time later, Harley stroked his hands across the generous curves of her bare backside. They hadn't bothered to get up from the chair, and Andi was still sprawled across him, still deliciously naked. “So, what are you wearing to the Emmys?”

Andi raised her head from his shoulder and gave him a drowsy look. She was really going to have to get some sleep sometime soon. “What? I've hardly had time to think about that.”

“Hmmm.” He gave her a leisurely kiss. “I need plenty of lead time.”

“For what?”

“To figure out how to get you out of it.”

SEXIEST MAN ALIVE BREAKS OUR HEARTS

Current Sexiest Man Alive, Harley Joseph, star of the hit show The Shelter, escorted the show's producer, Andi McFadden, to the Emmys. McFadden, who we exclusively revealed to our readers several months ago is the daughter of television mogul Myron Ellison and legendary actress Minx McFadden, walked the red carpet on Joseph's arm in a black silk Madame X gown by Geechee Couture. Though the Harry Winston diamond earrings and bracelet she wore were worth a cool half-million dollars, they didn't eclipse the five-carat canary yellow diamond ring that adorned her left hand. No date has been set for the nuptials, but the couple is in pre-production for their next project, North Star, a television movie. From the besotted looks on both their faces, I think we can safely say Joseph is off the market for good.

Epilogue

Andi slipped quietly into the trailer. Harley sat at the desk, his back to the door as he feverishly typed something into his laptop. She watched him for a moment, enjoying the view as the sunlight washed over him, accentuating his golden good looks. There was something incredibly sexy about his intensity on this project that definitely got her juices flowing. She walked over to him and embraced him from behind.

“Hello, love. I just came from the director's trailer, and Douglas is over the moon. He nearly has an orgasm every time he watches the dailies. He says you're giving the performance of a lifetime.”

Harley leaned back into her embrace. His costume of a denim work shirt, roughly woven canvas pants, and heavy work boots should've detracted from his masculine beauty. Instead it somehow enhanced it. He was wearing two hats on the *North Star* set as both a lead actor and executive producer, and he was taking both roles far more seriously than Andi had expected.

“Really? I'd be nowhere without your incredible script.”

“That sounds suspiciously like an Emmy acceptance speech.”

“I would never be so presumptuous,” he said with tangible false modesty.

Andi laughed. “Yeah right, Mr. Executive Producer.”

Harley turned around in the chair, his head level with her breasts. He nudged against her, seeming to luxuriate in her softness. “You know, I could get used to that title.”

“Don't get too used to it. Myron only made you executive producer to keep from paying you that extortionate salary your agent demanded.”

Harley snorted in dismissal. "Either way, it's good to be the king."

Andi frowned. "I still feel badly about letting him think that I would only forgive him if he funded the movie."

"Come on, babe. All's fair in love and television. Myron's no fool. It'll eventually dawn on him that you're not the type to sell your love."

Andi bent over at the waist to give Harley an appreciative kiss. Before long, the innocent salute blossomed into a full-fledged lustful exchange. Andi trailed her lips down his neck, then knelt on the floor between his legs. Her nimble fingers made short work of the button fly of his trousers, and she eased his throbbing cock out of the opening. She stroked her hand up to the head and then down again, enjoying the way Harley's hips arched off his chair in response. Andi slipped the large cockhead between her lips, and the sound of his breath hissing out through his clenched teeth echoed off the walls of the trailer. She pulled him closer, until she was nearly under his desk; then she looked up at him with a sly grin. "Hey, boss man?"

Harley grunted in response but didn't open his eyes.

"This is going to be a long shoot. You might want to order a bigger desk."

THE END

Other Loose Id(R) Titles by Roslyn Hardy Holcomb

Pussycat Death Squad
Try A Little Tenderness

Roslyn Hardy Holcomb

Roslyn Hardy Holcomb was born in North Alabama and has had a disparate career and varied interests. Her lifelong devotion to needle arts led to a stint on the editorial staff of Oxmoor House, the publishing division of Southern Progress, Inc. Regular volunteer work and a passion for child welfare inspired her to leave that field to pursue an advanced degree and a career in social service. Shortly after her son was born, she decided to become a stay-at-home mother and pursue a writing career fulltime. Her first novel, *Rock Star*, was recently re-released in mass market.

Find out more about Roslyn at <http://www.roslynhardyholcom.com>.