



**Fine Print**

Alanna Coca

(c) 2010

## **Fine Print**

Alanna Coca

Published 2010

ISBN 978-1-59578-671-5

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2010, Alanna Coca. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books  
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:  
[raven@LSbooks.com](mailto:raven@LSbooks.com)

Editor  
Sharis Mayer

Cover Artist  
Amanda Kelsey

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## **Blurb**

Three years ago, Kara Sorrento's husband died in the line of duty. The fact that they never started a family is the one thing she can't lay to rest. Knowing that she can never love again, Kara decides to conceive a child in a more ... non-traditional way. All she needs now is the ideal DNA, and she's found it in Derek Martinez. Physically he's a perfect specimen, but when he suggests changes to her artificial-insemination contract, he threatens to disrupt not only that plan, but Kara's entire highly structured and ultra-organized world. Just as she opens her heart to Derek, a shocking blast from her past will make her question everything she once believed.

## Chapter One

Kara strained to hear the conversation between the two men seated at the table across the outdoor patio. The cafe wasn't too busy, but she had the additional background noise of the Atlanta suburb's pedestrians and traffic.

"I don't know if I can. Five years down the shitter, all because of one pretty boy." The first man's voice broke, and Kara thought he might start crying outright.

She knew the man with his back to her as Derek Martinez, though they'd never met. She had been watching him for the past two weeks. *Stalking him*, her sister Krista said.

Maybe she had gone a bit overboard. Especially that morning she caught him walking out of a parking lot. She'd followed him to his office building, and onto a crowded elevator. She'd stood right behind him, and got a good look at his physique, even hidden as it was through the tailored suit. Even now she could smell the clean scent of his cologne. She remembered freezing in place when he turned and made eye contact before he disappeared into his office. A good-looking Hispanic man, eyes the perfect shade of brown. At that moment she knew he would be the one. If she could convince him, that is. She got his name from the gold lettering on his office window, and spent that night on Google.

She found out that he owned the Brilliance Advertising Agency, he lived alone, and he went to lunch every day at eleven-thirty. Often he went to elegant restaurants downtown with what Kara assumed were clients of his advertising firm. She didn't follow him inside those places, though she desperately wanted to bump into him and introduce herself.

She didn't realize he was gay until yesterday, when she'd followed him to a lunch meeting. That was the first time she'd been able to sit herself anywhere near Derek Martinez. Although she wasn't able to see him from her seat on the other side of the half wall, she heard enough of the conversation to know that it couldn't be called a meeting. His companion spent the first half of the meal openly flirting with their waiter, until Derek asked him to "tone it down".

Now, here he was on today's lunch date, with yet another man. It made Kara wonder how many of the lunch meetings she'd witnessed over the past two weeks were dates for this promiscuous man.

Kara shook her head to clear it. His indiscretions would only cause a problem if Derek Martinez was carrying an STD. Otherwise it didn't matter. She put yesterday's lunch out of her mind, and again focused on the couple today, just as Derek's date's voice rose above the white noise around them.

"What would you do? I mean really, Derek. Try to see it from my point of view. I just feel so ... used, and cheap. Like I'm not good enough..." Here he did start crying. Derek reached across the table and laid a comforting hand on his lover's shoulder.

Derek's voice was quieter, and he wasn't facing her, so she couldn't hear every word, but she heard "sorry", and "chance".

Obviously they were breaking up, and it was due to Derek's infidelity. Kara thought back to his lunch date yesterday. Had she unwittingly witnessed his cheating in action? *Don't get too close, Kara. His personal life is none of your business.*

She studied this date-du-jour, just in case Derek didn't work out. The man with his face in his hands, sobbing uncontrollably now, was the right complexion, the caramel-coffee-colored skin and his slight accent told her that he was Hispanic also. Good genes, she noted. Tall, muscular in a lanky sort of way, and good looking in the boy-next-door way. His dark hair fell over his brow in that messy boyish cut that made a woman want to run her fingers through it to give it some order. Or a man, in his case.

She would have to see his eyes to be sure, but chances were that they would be dark brown in keeping with his heritage. She turned in her chair, waiting for him to pull himself together, yet trying not to look like she was eavesdropping. Or stalking.

"I need some time to think." He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and looked around the patio before taking a few bills from his pocket and tossing them onto the table. "I just need time, that's all."

Derek stood and pulled his lover into an embrace. He said something, but it only caused more tears. Finally, the thinner man rushed out of the patio back into the restaurant, and probably out the front door.

Derek sat back down, and hunched over his coffee cup for only a moment, then he sighed loud enough for her to hear, leaned back in his chair, stretched his arms, and pulled out his cell phone to type into it.

*This is it.* Kara checked her watch. She had to be back to work in twenty minutes, but she had been looking for the perfect candidate for months, and had anticipated the meeting with Mr. Martinez for weeks.

He didn't look humiliated, or sorry that he'd hurt his boyfriend so badly. Kara chided herself. She couldn't even see his face. For all she knew he was just as distraught as his lover.

*Do it. Now. He's perfect.*

Kara signed the credit card receipt of her bill, and laid her napkin on the table before she could talk herself out of it. She approached the man, who'd set aside the phone that looked more like a small computer.

"Excuse me, could I speak to you for a moment?"

He lifted his eyes to hers, and her heart did a happy dance. The first look at him close up. Yes his eyes were the perfect brown, set in a face that was handsome enough to cover magazines.

He straightened his long legs until he towered over her. His movement startled her, and she took half a step backward to give his imposing body some room. He looked her up and down, in a gesture that reminded her of the construction workers on her block who catcalled every single morning, despite the fact that she didn't give them any encouragement. That was silly though, this man was gay, and wouldn't be looking at her with anything less than curiosity. He was taller than she thought. Taller than the others she'd been scouting. That was good.

"I'm sorry to bother you."

He gestured toward the vacated chair. "No bother. Have a seat. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

She hadn't expected that. Manners were good, smile was good. White teeth, strong jaw. No other man could be anywhere near this perfect.

"No, thank you. I don't have a lot of time." She took a seat, and tugged her white skirt over her knees. It was a good thing she was dressed for work, her business attire

might give the upcoming proposition a little more merit.

"Derek Martinez." He offered his hand.

She took his hand, and was pleased with its size and grip. "Kara Sorrento. Again, I apologize but I couldn't help but overhear your conversation just now."

"It's not like we were very discreet. He was pretty upset." Rather than the embarrassed contrite look she expected after being caught cheating, and exposed to a handful of strangers, he only grinned. To his credit, it was a little wry.

"I'll cut right to the chase, Mr. Martinez. I'm hoping you would be willing to assist me. I've been looking for a man with your attributes for some time."

Not exactly the words she had planned on using. His eyes brightened, and his smile widened.

"Assist you?" With one eyebrow arched into his forehead, he looked cocky and arrogant. He seemed to get over his boyfriend pretty easily. Okay, so he was a jerk. Maybe conceited and a player, but that didn't really matter for her end result.

Kara's heart was pounding. She had been planning this discussion for months, but now that it was actually time, she forgot her speech. She took a calming breath, and looked around the patio. Luckily, now there was only one other table occupied, and the couple was too focused on each other to even care about the rest of the world. She faced this all too gorgeous man, who silently waited for her to continue, and swallowed her trepidation.

"Yes. I have a rather important project..."

The man's eyes never wavered. He stared at her, pinning her to her chair, daring her to look away. Never before had she been so intimidated by speaking to a veritable stranger. Sure, she knew a lot about him, but...

"Go on." He folded his arms across his chest.

She glanced at the other table, then back at him. "The project is personal, I'd rather not discuss it here." As if on cue, the hostess led another couple onto the patio.

"I see." Derek picked up his Blackberry, and pressed a few buttons.

Had she just been dismissed? She organized her thoughts. She couldn't let him get away from her before she even had a chance to proposition him.

"Are you free at four?"

Her relief had to show in her body language. To cover it, she pulled out her own smartphone and checked her calendar. It was unnecessary, she knew her schedule, but the move allowed her to look somewhere other than at his piercing gaze. "Yes, four o'clock is good. Would you like to meet in my office or yours?"

"Do you know where my office is?"

Heat burned her cheeks. Sure she knew where his office was. She even knew where he lived, and what he drove. She knew he preferred beef to chicken, and she knew that the picture on his Facebook account was taken on a recent ski trip to Utah.

She gripped her smartphone until she thought it might crack. "I assume you work nearby. I've seen you in the neighborhood." There. Innocent enough.

*Maybe.*

His eyebrow quirked, but only for a second. He didn't bother hiding the interest in his eyes. *Maybe he's bisexual?*

"I thought you looked familiar. I think I saw you in the Warner building recently."

"There is a good chance. I'm in sales. I feel like I know every office in a three mile

radius." He didn't need to know that she wasn't on a sales call that day in the elevator. She chalked her accelerated heartbeat to the threat of discovery. What kind of prison time did stalkers do anyway?

"I'm on the seventeenth floor of the Warner." He handed her a business card. "I'll see if I can help you with your..." He lifted that eyebrow. Again. "...project."

Kara gave him her best professional smile, gathered her clutch, and stood. He earned another point when he stood as well. "It was nice to meet you, Mr. Martinez," she offered her hand, "I'll see you at four."

He took her hand, then glanced down at it. He even turned it over to look at her fingers. She followed his gaze, and saw what had fascinated him. Her fingers looked so delicate and pale against the dark skin of his. As a sales woman, out meeting people every day, experiencing handshakes from wilting to painful, this one was a first for her. It was a none-too-subtle verification of her femininity, and even though it was unprofessional and a bit odd, Kara couldn't help but notice the little hiccup in her heartbeat.

"Yes, I'll see you then." He released her hand, and she snatched it back as though it had misbehaved.

"Have a good day."

She could tell his eyes followed her out of the restaurant, but the heat from his hand stayed with her much longer than that.

She walked the three blocks back into the hotel, and swiped her ID to get into her office. She threw her purse beneath her desk, and herself into her chair.

She found him. After months of searching for the perfect man to father her child. *God, how exciting.* She guessed him to be around her age, maybe a bit younger. From the girth of his neck, she imagined him to be strong, but she couldn't really tell since he wore the suit jacket. He exuded health and vitality, but there were tests to confirm what she suspected.

If he agreed.

And if he did, she could be pregnant within the next few months. She tried to imagine what a child sharing this stranger's genes would look like. Max's image danced through her mind. Yes, this Mr. Martinez could very well be Max's brother. Well, cousin maybe. They shared the same coloring, but Max's soft features were nothing like the potential donor's, and Max was at least six inches shorter.

Derek Martinez was gorgeous. He looked like a marine recruitment poster in the flesh. Although his sexual orientation wasn't an issue, Kara couldn't help but imagine him in her doctor's office with a specimen cup and his distraught boyfriend.

Not that it was any of her business how the sample was collected. She'd leave that up to Mr. Martinez and his lover. Or ex-lover. Or Playgirl magazine ... whatever it took. It didn't matter.

*Head not heart. Emotions not allowed.*

She repeated the mantra as she typed up a quote for the Georgia Teacher's Association. She was an expert at separating feelings from business. If she took every "no" personally, she wouldn't be the saleswoman that she was. There was nothing personal about this upcoming meeting either.

Other than the end result. Her future child.

She took a deep breath. Four o'clock. Her heart pounded in excitement.

Excitement? *Get a grip, Kara. Admit it. You're nervous about springing this on him. Head not heart.*

It didn't matter how sexy he looked. Or that he smelled amazing. Or even that just sitting beside him today reminded her what it felt like to be a real live woman. Emotions just were not allowed. Not with him. Not for this project. She could do it.

With that little pep talk, she switched back into sales mode. She had three important clients waiting for her phone call. Conference season was upon them, and although she normally handed off the events to the banquet manager, the Georgian Audubon Society's annual conference was a big one for the hotel. She promised Casey, the general manager, that she would continue to give them her personal attention.

*Head not heart.*

\* \* \* \*

Derek watched Jane, his administrative assistant, lead his four o'clock appointment into his office, and he stopped in his tracks. From his vantage point at the end of the hall, he could even make out her shapely form beneath that stiff skirt.

He made the correct responses to Dan, the WKLA representative on the phone. At least he thought he did. The man had been droning on for fifteen minutes already about the same damn thing. "...and those types of commercials really would work better in a different time slot."

Through the plate-glass wall of his office, he watched Kara lower herself into the leather chair in front of his desk, looking prim and ... noble. She smiled up at Jane, who was probably offering her a cup of coffee.

"Yeah. I agree." Derek straightened his tie, and made sure his shirt was tucked in properly. "Why don't you let me talk to the agent responsible, and I'll give you a call in the morning."

Dan's goodbyes were just as lengthy as his hellos. Derek switched the phone to his other ear.

Personal project. All afternoon Derek had hoped it had something to do with her and him, and maybe involving dinner and a movie. He'd tried to imagine what it could be. From what she'd overheard at lunch, one possibility was that she wanted him to talk to one of her gay friends who was having trouble. Maybe she liked the way he handled it. Maybe she'd be so grateful that she'd invite him over for a drink.

Dan detailed his morning schedule, and Derek paced the hall trying to make the required responses at the proper times.

Maybe she wanted him to put together an advertising campaign for her independent lingerie line. Commercials starring her. He dreamed up scenario after scenario, and each one ended with her in his bed.

"All right then. Thanks for the call, Dan."

"You bet. I'll talk to you in the morning. We'll figure this out when you call. I'll make sure to be in the office around ... maybe ... oh, I don't know ... nine ... better make it nine thirty to be safe..."

Derek rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Sounds good..."

"I should give you my cell number, just in case. Have a pen handy?"

If WKLA wasn't one of the top three television stations, Derek would have hung up on the man. "Yeah. Shoot," he lied.



Dan rattled it off, and Derek watched Kara discreetly check her watch. "Great. Talk to you tomorrow."

He snapped his phone shut before Dan could respond, and walked into the room amid feminine laughter. He couldn't help but smile.

"I'm sorry about that. The phone call that never ends."

Kara's genuine smile faded into a professional one, and she stood to face him. "I understand. I appreciate your time on such short notice."

Jane slipped out, closing the door behind her. Derek gestured toward her chair, and took his behind his desk as she sat back down. "Did Jane offer you some coffee?"

"She did, and I'm fine thank you."

She certainly was fine. Even sitting on the edge of that chair, with her hands folded properly in her lap, he found his deepest base desires churning to life. The skin on her neck intrigued him. Such a beautiful shade of peachy white, and it looked so smooth and warm ... he curled his fingers into a fist, and pressed it into his thigh.

"Mr. Martinez?"

Her voice shook him out of his fantasy. He blinked, and she came into focus. "Call me Derek."

She nodded. "Derek, thanks again for your time. I'll try to be brief."

*Take all the time that you need.* "You said you had a personal project?"

"That's right I..." Her jaw snapped shut, as she glanced toward the door. Was she embarrassed? He reached for his cup of coffee while he waited for her to finish, determined not to show his curiosity.

Finally, inhaling audibly, she continued. "I'm looking for someone to father my child."

His gaze snapped back up, and he almost tipped over his coffee cup. He expected to see a teasing smile, or maybe a hidden-camera-show host pop out from behind her. Thank God his jaw didn't drop open. Instead he kept any expression from his face. He, however, responded as if she stood up and stripped. So this *could* end with her in bed with him. He smothered a grin. "Go on." He took a drink of his coffee.

She lifted her chin, all signs of that brief show of embarrassment gone. Her eyes were clear and unwavering. "What I need, to be blunt, is your sperm."

He arched his eyebrow. "Sperm?" This woman had balls.

"Yes. I want to have a child, therefore I need sperm."

"And you'd like me to inseminate you?" He let his gaze travel down her chest. He would have no problem with that.

"Not exactly."

He tore his eyes away from her curves. Those alabaster cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink.

"The insemination will take place in a clinic. I would only need your sperm."

Damn. "And you don't want to go to a sperm bank because..."

"I did look into that. It's just all very ... sterile. Yes, I need sperm, but for my child to have the same father as who knows how many others out there, it just felt ... unnatural."

"So you want sperm from a donor who isn't accustomed to donating."

She nodded. "Precisely." As if this subject came up over coffee every morning, Kara Sorrento looked at him with all the cool confidence of Margaret Thatcher.

"And I look like a good candidate for the job?"

"From what I've seen so far. I would be requiring some basic tests before we agree to anything, but you have the desired coloring and build."

"Desirable to whom?" he teased. If she desired him, or any man for that matter, she hid it well.

Almost imperceptibly, her lips tightened before she answered. "Desirable to me."

"So ... you're looking for a six-foot-tall Hispanic brown-eyed man to get you pregnant?"

"Yes, but I'm not asking for anything further than that. I will raise the child as my own, on my own. I have papers drawn up to ensure your privacy and to clear you of all obligations."

He smiled. "I'm a little surprised. You're a beautiful woman. Why would you look for a stranger to give you a child? Why not settle down with a nice young man and live the American dream?"

"I was married once. I don't want to remarry; all I want is a child."

"And a clinic is too ... clinical?"

"Exactly. I want my child to have a name and face to refer to, but I promise you, you won't be contacted for money or support in any way. If you agree, after his or her eighteenth birthday, you would be able to contact each other. That will be completely up to you."

He leaned back in his chair and narrowed his eyes. She was serious, and he had no response. Never did he imagine having this conversation with a complete stranger. Especially one that looked like she did.

"Of course I plan to compensate you," she continued. "One thousand dollars to sign the contract, another thousand once I am pregnant, and a payment for each sample you donate. Most banks pay their donors fifty dollars per sample at most. I'm willing to pay two hundred."

"Per sample."

"Yes."

"So I'm coming out of this with at least twenty-two hundred dollars?"

"Yes."

"And when I knock you up, I'll never see or hear from you again?" He was deliberately rude. He wanted to see that color rise to her cheeks again, proving that she wasn't as unfeeling as she tried to look. He was disappointed though. Rather than softening, her face stiffened.

"That's a rather crude way to put it, but yes. I know this is a lot to think about, and you should talk it over with anyone special in your life." She glanced at the pictures of his siblings and their kids on his bookcase beside him, then pulled a business card from her suit jacket pocket. "All of my contact information is there. Call me anytime. I honestly want you to take some time before you make a decision, but I will need your response within fifteen days."

"Is that when you ovulate?" He didn't even look at her card before sliding it into his own jacket pocket. Still no blush, just a quick flash behind her eyes.

She jammed her card case back into her suit pocket and stood. "If you'd like further information about the deal, contact me. I would be happy to answer any question you may have, and I could email you a copy of the contract to look over."

He took his time getting to his feet. He really wasn't finished discussing this with

her. Once upright, she wasted no time reaching over the desk for a very business-like handshake.

"Thank you again for seeing me. I await your call."

Derek watched her leave, cursing himself for allowing her to. He had yet to get under her skin, let alone coax a date out of her, but he couldn't find a reason to make her stay.

Christ, the woman came into his office and propositioned him. And not in a good way.

Stunned, he lowered himself into his chair, and sucked in a deep breath. *She smells good. Like clean linens and sunshine.* Her scent lingered, and he breathed it in greedily.

Although there were women in Iceland with more warmth than Kara Sorrento, that damn blush was purely feminine. It heated her skin, and even gave her eyes a spark of life. He wanted to see that again. More than that, he wanted to see her come out of that hard shell.

## Chapter Two

Kara found herself sitting on a park bench, fourteen days later. Her dream man hadn't contacted her. Although it was disappointing, as the saying went, there were so many fish in the sea. She should have been looking for another man for the past two weeks, rather than hope that this one particular man would come through. She hadn't followed Derek to lunch since she'd introduced herself and her plan to him.

For what had to be the hundredth time, she wondered if she should have waited a few days to spring the project on him. Maybe they could have had lunch the next day ... maybe coffee one morning...

No. She wanted a stranger to father her child. Not a casual acquaintance. Not a friend. Certainly not a lover. She didn't want to subject her heart to anything more than that. Any relationship she created with Derek Martinez would only make the assignment even more difficult. She couldn't get attached to the sperm donor any more than he could get to her. Already she felt long-dead stirrings of desire when they were alone in his office. She knew he baited her purposefully, and the only way she'd kept from storming around that mahogany desk and either slapping him or kissing him was by shielding.

*Head not heart.*

That was the plan. She wasn't an emotional person. Everyone said she was good with planning. Organizing and orchestrating was her way of life. Kara Sorrento, the epitome of upstanding by-the-book detailing and follow up.

Now though, she didn't feel like the upstanding model citizen; she felt like a dirty old woman, scoping her victims as they threw Frisbees for their dogs or footballs with their sons. Knowing what she needed from the man she searched for, she realized that she didn't even look for a sexual attraction. She'd distilled her plan so much that it was down to a science. Each feature now a rating on a scale. That man was too short. The one scooping his dog's feces from the grass had thick dark hair, but not the warm brown skin that Mr. Martinez had.

Good Lord, was she looking for the perfect father for her child, or was she looking for a replacement for Derek Martinez? Was he now the stick that all other men must be measured by? Another month of this and she'd be knocking on the sperm bank's door. Her decision wasn't really worth this headache. By the time she found her perfect father, her biological clock would wind down and stop ticking altogether.

She cursed herself, then picked up her purse and headed toward her car. She landed in the hot leather seat, wincing at the burn of leather against her thighs. She started her little four-cylinder hatchback, rolled down her windows to let the heat out, and cranked the air conditioning. Before she could shift from park, her cell phone rang. Unknown caller, inside her area code. It didn't matter. This phone belonged to the Tate Hotel, and as a salaried manager, she was on call twenty-four seven.

"Good Afternoon, Kara Sorrento." Now that the a/c was doing its job, Kara rolled up all of her windows.

"Hello, Kara."

The man's voice came through clear enough, but she didn't recognize it. The intimate hello was enough to give her a little shiver of fear.

"Yes, hello. How can I help you?"

"This is Derek Martinez. We talked a couple of weeks ago regarding your personal project?"

That shiver turned into a wave of heat. Her heart beat so loudly she could barely hear the last few words he spoke. She pressed her hand against her chest to keep it from bursting through her ribs. "Yes, Mr. Martinez. Thank you for calling. Have you made your decision?"

"I have a few more questions. I was wondering if you were free tomorrow night."

Tomorrow night ... Tuesday ... no, she wasn't free. She was supposed to go to the movies with her sister, but damn it, Kris would just have to understand. "I'd be happy to meet with you." Kara hoped he couldn't tell how her voice shook. She had been involved in negotiations that were much more stressful than this one. She mentally slapped herself. *Get it together.*

"I can pick you up around seven. We'll just have dinner somewhere, nothing fancy."

"All right. I'll bring a copy of the contract. I'm so glad you called, Mr. Martinez. I was about to give up on you."

"You gave me a lot to think about."

"I understand. I'm anxious to answer your questions. I'll see you tomorrow evening."

"Kara?"

Damn, his voice was sexy. Her name never sounded so good. "Yes?"

"I'll need your address."

She blushed like a pre-teen. "I'm sorry, of course." She rattled it off. "I guess I'm just so glad to hear from you, I apologize."

"You haven't found another donor?"

She didn't dare admit that no other measured up. "Nothing concrete, the position is still open."

"All right. I'll see you tomorrow then."

Kara stared at her phone after they disconnected. It was a good thing this man was gay. Not that it mattered. She'd decided long ago that she didn't need a man in her life. Everything she had accomplished she'd done on her own. She could change her own oil, take out her own trash, and even take care of her more base needs. She had friends to have dinner with occasionally; she had her sister in town to celebrate holidays with. She needed a man around just about as much as she needed a female roommate.

She didn't.

She floated through the rest of the evening, and the following day. Casey poked his head into her office after lunch, just as she turned on her computer monitor.

"What's with you today?" His thick handlebar mustache covered any movement his lips might have made. Some of the restaurant staff had a running joke that Casey didn't have teeth. That little rumor caused them all to stare at his mouth in fascination every time he spoke.

"What do you mean?" Kara knew exactly what he meant. She'd been grinning ear to ear since Derek Martinez's phone call late yesterday afternoon.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were in love." Casey sat in the chair facing her.

She rolled her eyes, but didn't meet Casey's knowing gaze. He'd known her for over two years. He and his wife Selena had tried to fix her up with a dozen men, until they finally believed her when she said that she wasn't interested in hooking up. *Some people*

*are happy living their lives out as singles. I'm one of them.*

"I'm not in love."

*Head not heart. Head not heart.*

"Are you gonna tell me what it is that has you skipping down the hallways?"

She faced him, but closed her mouth when she saw the teasing glint in his eye. "I wasn't skipping down the hallways." She glared at him. "But if you must know, and I'm assuming you must, or you wouldn't be sitting there, I found the man who I want to father my child. I'm meeting him tonight to discuss the details."

"Oh God, you're really gonna go through with this damn fool plan of yours?"

She turned back to her computer and busied herself with the task of logging into the various sales and scheduling programs. "Don't start with me Casey."

He studied her, and she ignored him for a good five minutes. She knew that nothing would be able to sway her from this decision, not even one of her best friends. It's not like she didn't think through this "damn fool plan" from end to end first. Finally she swiveled in her chair and faced him again. "If I walked up to you one day and announced that I was pregnant, would you be happy for me?"

"You know I would. I just wish you could do it the way humans have been procreating since the dawn of time. I never thought I'd find someone who loves me like Selena does. I know you'll find someone too if you just open your eyes."

"You're such a romantic." She smiled.

He sighed, then propped one ankle on the other knee. "Tell me about him."

"I don't know much yet," Kara lied. She knew more about him than she'd ever admit. "Hispanic, around six feet, great eyes, nice teeth."

"Convicted felon?" The teasing glint was back in Casey's brown eyes.

"I don't need his parole officer's permission to collect sperm." Kara had done exhaustive research regarding genes. Although there were experts who would swear that DNA caused things like violent tendencies and sexual preference, there wasn't any proof. "Besides, you know all of that will come out before he signs that contract."

"He could lie."

"So could the guy in the club who might or might not be the love of my life. I'm not interested in chemistry..."

"...just biology. I know, I know. Do me a favor though? Send me a quick text message letting me know where you are tonight?"

Kara only had one sister. She didn't know what it was like having a big brother watching out for her. She had to admit, it was kind of nice. "It's a business meeting Casey."

"I care about you Kara. Not only that, if Selena ever found out that I let you go on this date, she'd tear me apart."

"It's not a date, it's a business meeting." Kara's reminder was as much for herself as it was directed at Casey. Keeping herself separated from Derek was already proving to be difficult, but she was determined.

"She'd still tear me apart." Casey put both hands through his hair, then smoothed it back into place. "The Reece group called today. They wanted to let me know how much they appreciated your help."

Back to business. Casey was the first general manager that Kara had worked for that didn't have his nose in a business model from the moment he stepped on the property.

Consequently, he was the only one whom Kara would go the extra mile for. She told him on a regular basis that if he ever left, she'd follow him.

"I'm glad they ended up happy. I still wish you'd assign weddings to one of the other sales managers. I don't think a single one has gone smoothly." The Reece wedding was no exception. Mothers-in-law fought over the menu, bridesmaids fought over seating arrangements.

"You've got the knack for them. A natural peace-maker, and obviously you won't get emotionally involved."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Casey shrugged, and ran his thumb and forefinger down the length of his mustache. "You are organized and disciplined enough to handle such a strict schedule and deadline."

Kara considered this. "I guess I'll take that as a compliment."

"Which was my intent, but now I'm going to take my leave before the subject again drifts toward your love life, or lack thereof."

"Thanks, Casey."

"If I don't hear from you by eight, I'll call you myself. You know how embarrassing I can get."

Kara smiled fondly. Good friends like that reminded her why she didn't need a relationship.

\* \* \* \*

"Neither parent has high blood pressure."

Kara scribbled the information down. The dinner plates were all cleared, and they were left with two coffee cups, and they were about done with page two of three.

Derek barely contained his smirk. He couldn't believe this woman. For Christ's sake, she asked him questions that shocked him, and some that just about embarrassed him, yet she sat like some robot marking each answer in her little file. The only clue that she was indeed human was when she dropped the pencil onto the table. That was right after he told her about twins running in his family.

Some devil on his shoulder urged him to ruffle her feathers, and see how much she could take before cracking. She licked her lips, but before she could ask another question, he shifted into a more comfortable position. "I've got to say, this is the first dinner date I've had where a woman asked me about my parents' medical history."

Kara looked up from her papers, her pencil frozen halfway through one note. She'd been focused on that damn checklist throughout their meal, and had yet to respond to his teasing charm. Her blue eyes could have been chips of ice, with as much warmth as she radiated.

"Would you rather take this home and finish it on your own?"

He resisted the urge to reach across the two feet separating them and touch her flawless cheek, just to see if she was indeed flesh and bone. He curled his fingers into a fist. "No, we're almost done." He gestured toward the paper in front of her. "I was just noticing the difference between this and every other date I've been on."

Her eyes widened, and for the first time that night, she touched her hair, but the blond coil at the nape of her neck wasn't going anywhere. Oh yeah, he noticed. Not one flirtatious gesture throughout dinner from this woman. "This isn't a date, Mr. Martinez,

it's a business interview."

"Oh." He nodded, then winked. "That's right."

She looked away. That was a good sign. He knew the grin he wore was naughty, and he usually reserved it for intimate play. Of course it was normally returned, not ignored, but at least she noticed.

She blinked a few times, then read the next question on her list. "Sexual orientation?"

So she did have a sense of humor. "Seriously?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Of course. It's a simple question. Unless you haven't come out ... but I assure you that this questionnaire will only be viewed by me and my physician."

She had to be joking. Did she not see the lust in his eyes? Was he that good at hiding it, or was she that good at deflecting? He was glad to know that she had a silly side, but to question his sexuality was something he hadn't expected. "Come out of what?"

She rolled those clear eyes for a split second, then speared him again. "Look, I know you're gay. It has nothing to do with the reason why we're here tonight. I knew you were gay before I even approached your table at the cafe. Shall we just move on to the next question?" She didn't wait for his response, she just returned to the questionnaire. "In the last ten years have you been diagnosed with any sexually transmitted diseases?"

She wasn't joking. He saw the mark she put on the form. *Gay*.

"How exactly do you *know* that I'm gay?"

"I overheard your conversation with the other man in the cafe."

She thought he was gay. Was she this cold toward him because of her views against homosexuality? He clenched his teeth, and dropped his hands to the arms of the chair, intending to walk out of the restaurant, and leave this judgmental woman where she sat. Just as his muscles contracted to do so, he stopped. She thought he was gay, and she still wanted him to father her child. She couldn't be prejudiced. No, this woman was just tough. Cold maybe. Frigid? Was there really such a thing? Wouldn't a frigid woman seek artificial insemination?

Derek leaned back in his chair. He never backed away from a challenge, and that's exactly what this ice queen was doing to him. Whether she knew it or not, she issued a challenge to his masculinity—maybe even his hot-blooded Latin heritage—daring him to thaw her. "You must not have heard the entire conversation," he said calmly, "because I'm not gay."

The perfect skin on her cheeks flushed to a beautiful peachy rose, then paled to a beautiful alabaster. "You're not?"

"Not even close."

"I ... I'm sorry. I must have misunderstood."

He nodded slowly, and watched her. "My friends were going through a rough time. I invited each of them out on separate occasions to get them to see that they really were meant for each other." He grinned again, mocking her for her assumption. "Not sure yet if my efforts were fruitful, but the man I was with that day is gay," he let her squirm for a moment, "I am not."

She kept her head lowered, erasing the mark she'd just made. She didn't look back up at him until color returned to her face. "Heterosexual then?"

"Very." He tried a wink, but it was lost on her; she had once again dropped her focus to the pages that had held her attention for the last hour.

"In the last ten years have you been diagnosed with any sexually transmitted



diseases?"

"Never. I'm very careful."

The woman recovered from her little slip into humanity pretty quickly. She continued to ask questions with her steady voice, and she wrote down his answers with her steady hand. When she was done, she put that form back into the folder, and pulled out another.

"You can take this to your own physician if you choose, but I would prefer that you see my doctor. His information is on the top of the form here." She pointed to the rubber stamp with a Dr. Anderson's name and address, and thank God ... finally met his eye. "From what I see, and your answers to these questions, you're just what I'm looking for. Take time to look over the contract, and visit a doctor, and we can get this underway."

So now she was brushing him off. *Huh uh. We've only just begun Miss Kara.* "Your place or mine?"

Kara's mouth dropped open, then snapped shut. "Excuse me?"

Derek barely contained his laughter. "You know, to inseminate you. Where do we do that? Your place or mine?"

Her lips tightened. "It's all spelled out in the contract, Mr. Martinez..."

"Derek," he reminded her for what had to be the hundredth time that evening.

"Derek. The samples will be collected at my doctor's clinic. I'll arrive afterwards for insertion."

"Insertion?" He pictured a long syringe, and winced.

"Exactly. I will keep in touch as to the progress, and if and when we'll need another sample. It's highly likely that you and I won't see each other again after today." She snapped her folder closed, and gave him another one of those plastic smiles.

"I don't think so." Derek narrowed his eyes. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe there wasn't a real live woman behind that beautiful face.

"You don't think so?"

"Huh uh. It took me a long time to come to terms that I'll have a child somewhere out there being raised without me, let alone without a father at all. I understand that from your point of view this is all about one sperm and one egg. For me, it's about trusting you with my child."

Her eyes widened, and her nostrils flared. She took a long breath before composing herself again. "That's where you're mistaken, Mr. Martinez." Gathering her cell phone and purse, she stood.

If she thought she could intimidate him by towering over him where he sat, she was wrong. He uncurled from his chair and stood toe to toe, and she had to lift her chin to meet his eye. He wasn't surprised when she did, and she didn't back out of his space either.

"You shouldn't be thinking of this as your child, just your sperm. If that's a problem, then you aren't the donor I've been looking for."

"You just asked me seventy-two questions about my personal and medical history. All I want to know is if you are going to be a capable parent before I donate any of my seed. That's a legitimate request, don't you think?"

He caught a whiff of her clean scent. A little bit baby-powder, a little bit citrus. He lowered his eyes to the fluttering patch of skin at the base of her neck, breathing deeply for another taste.

"I've answered the same questions. I'll get you a copy of that..."

"I don't give a shit about your medical history. From what I've seen so far, you're a highly strung, all-business woman, who has to think through every word she says, and who's afraid to relax. When the kid comes home from school with a B, will you be the type of parent to praise, or punish?"

Tiny beads of perspiration appeared on her upper lip. "I ... I'm not..."

"Bullshit. I think I got a total of two smiles out of you in the last two hours. You don't exactly strike me as the June Cleaver type."

Kara took a step away from him, then immediately stepped back into his space. "And you don't strike me as a psychologist. How can you judge my potential parenting skills by a two-hour *business meeting*?"

Good God this woman was sexy. His fingers tingled with the need to touch her. In fact, if he took half a step closer, he'd be able to wallow in the warmth of her body, test the softness of her breasts, the scent of her. He dared not follow his desires down that path. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, humming an excited rhythm in his ears. "That is exactly my point. I'm not signing anything until I know that you'll be a good mother."

"So you're backing out?" She blinked three times.

"No, I'm not backing out. I'm just setting down some rules of my own."

A muscle ticked at the corner of her lips. "Go on."

"I need to know what kind of person you are. Spend some time with you when you're not conducting a business interview."

"What do you plan to do, follow me around and watch my every move?"

An image of her innocently preparing for a shower entered his mind, and he knew his lust had to show through his eyes. He didn't try to mask it; she wasn't the type of woman to notice such a human emotion anyway. "Do you think that's necessary? I could do that..."

"Tell me your rules, Mr. Martinez."

"Derek," he said wearily. "If we're going to be making babies together, the least you can do is call me Derek." He glanced toward her empty chair, a silent indication to sit, then he sat back down.

She stood there for a moment. He braced himself, ready for her to turn on that Italian heel and stomp out of the restaurant. He knew he would have to let her go too. He smiled when she lowered herself back into her chair, and gave him the first real emotion. Uncertainty.

"Tell me what you do for fun."

He threw her off guard, and it showed in her face. Still, it was a simple question, so he propped an ankle on his knee and waited for her answer.

"Fun?"

"Yeah, you know; what do you do to relax? When you aren't working, what do you do for fun?" He sat back so that the waiter could refill their coffee cups.

"I ... well, I read a lot. I spend time with my sister Krista. We go to movies ... go shopping."

He reached for his coffee and sipped, and waited for her to continue.

"When it's not too hot, I like to rollerblade, and when it's not too cold I like to go camping. It's been a while though." Her words came out coarsely, like she wasn't used to

speaking without a script.

"See, now that surprises me. I wouldn't think of you as the type who likes to rough it." Her eyes dropped to her lap. Speaking about herself made her uncomfortable.

Interesting. "And you work at a hotel." He invited her to continue.

"Yes, the Tate Hotel downtown. I'm one of three sales managers."

"Selling what?"

She smiled. A relaxed genuine smile. So it was work that pushed her buttons. He wasn't surprised at all.

"I get that question a lot. I sell conference space and overnight rooms. I find organizations that are planning meetings or conventions, and try to get them into the Tate."

"Sounds like you have to travel a lot."

Her cheeks tightened, but she responded. "There is another sales manager who is in charge of the out-of-town business. She liked the traveling aspect, and Casey, my general manager, decided to put her on the road and keep me and the other sales manager here in Atlanta."

"I see."

"Anything else?"

Oh hell yeah. He had a lot more for her. "Lunch tomorrow?"

Another genuine reaction. Shock this time. Derek realized that the way through to this woman was by keeping her guessing. By the darting movement of her eyes, he thought that he might actually be scaring her.

Of course not. He hadn't done anything threatening. Unless she was afraid of men. Maybe something in her past that sent her running from the first hint of a relationship. Maybe she was hiding something. She could be running from the law. She could be a rape victim. He looked closely. There were shadows behind those eyes. It could be any one of those scenarios. The puzzle that was Kara Sorrento intrigued Derek.

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea. I think we're done here, until you see a doctor..."

"We're not done. I still haven't decided if you're the right woman to raise my child. I want to see you outside of your all-work-and-no-play facade. If I like what I see, I'll sign the contract. I'm sure in your line of work you've had to negotiate a little to get what you want. We both want something from the other; we'll have to give and take for this deal to work out."

"But..."

"Look, I'll go to your doctor tomorrow morning, and I'll pick you up at the hotel for lunch. That way you know that I'm serious. That's fair, right?"

He had no idea why he wanted to see her again. It was crazy, when all she wanted was his seed and nothing more. Yeah, she was a challenge, but was it worth it? By looking at her, and the stubborn tilt to her chin, he could tell that anything beyond their seed-transfer agreement would be difficult at best. Well hell, he could be as stubborn as the next guy.

"That's fine." She gathered her purse yet again, smoothly signaling the end of their *meeting*. The woman liked to be in charge, didn't she? He purposefully ignored the move, somehow knowing that it would drive her crazy to stand still for thirty seconds.

"I thought we'd have dessert."

Those luscious lips tightened, and by the way she sat back down on the edge of the seat, he knew she wasn't happy.

But he was.

\* \* \* \*

Derek closed the door behind him, and flipped on the lamp. He imagined Kara Sorrento, walking into her own home minutes ago, and cursing him. She would be the type to throw one hell of a fit. Did she take off those sassy shoes at the door and throw them across the room?

No, too much feeling. She probably just marched into her bedroom and put those pumps right back in their tissue-filled box, and filed them alphabetically in her color-coordinated closet.

And then she'd take off her skirt.

Derek groaned, and landed on the couch, bumping the back into the wall with his exuberance.

Why the hell was he doing this to himself? If he really wanted to get laid, there was Cindy, the receptionist from WRRG that had been after him for months. And then there was the divorcee Elena. Her door down the block had been open to him on more than one occasion. He didn't need this aggravation.

Kara Sorrento was not his type. Not only did he usually avoid blondes, he also preferred a woman who acted like a woman. Batting eyelashes and everything.

Hell, his last girlfriend was the typical southern belle. Sweet, healthy curves, and a drawl that drove him crazy with lust.

Not a ball buster with no sense of humor. Her manners were all that kept her in that chair, while he took deliberately slow bites of his cheesecake. Derek smiled at the memory. The only way he knew she was irritated was by the way she kept uncrossing and re-crossing her legs.

Something told him that deep down inside that woman lay an energetic bundle of raw sexuality. He'd love to be the one to bring that out, to watch her when she discovered the new facet.

Now, if only he could keep from impregnating her, maybe he'd have that chance.

He went back to the question that had been bothering him since that first day. Why him? She wanted his genes, and as dominant as they were, they'd make the child they created look more like him than her. One would think that she would look for a blond white guy to donate. Maybe tomorrow he could get something out of her.

He rubbed his eyes. His sperm would get inside her before he ever would. Once he signed that contract, she'd have no reason to speak to him. His ruse of ensuring that she would be a good mother wasn't going to hold up for long. She would eventually tire of his stall tactics, and find a new donor.

Tomorrow he'd start his own negotiations, and then he'd see if that strength was all a show, or if she really wouldn't budge.

\* \* \* \*

"Really Casey. You can go."

She was nervous enough for the man to walk into her office, and having Casey

sitting there waiting to meet him only kicked up her anxiety.

"I'm not going to be rude to the guy." Casey picked up one of Kara's promotional folders, and flipped through it, as though he'd never seen the Tate Hotel's brochures and price list. "You know I'm good with my first impressions."

That was true. Kara had told him on many occasions that he should have been a cop. He seemed to spot trouble as soon as it walked through the hotel doors, sometimes just by the way a guest called for a reservation put his instincts on alert.

She ignored Casey's presence, allowing him to flip through last month's *People* magazine, while drying her sweaty palms on a tissue. It had been a long day already, and it began with dinner last night.

To her relief, after they left the restaurant, Derek didn't mention her capitulation again; he only asked her about her taste in music, and the concerts she'd seen. He didn't even smirk when she scrambled out of his car before he could walk her to her door.

She watched the evening news on the same channel she always did. She set the timer and loaded the coffee maker for tomorrow's pot. She brushed her teeth like she always did, and flossed as usual, and even put her favorite pajama pant set on before crawling into bed. Routines were good, right?

Then why didn't she fall asleep at the normal time? Why did thoughts of Derek Martinez keep her lying awake with skin that fairly itched? Like she wasn't comfortable in her own body anymore?

It was his fault. The man threw her out of whack. How in the hell was he able to turn the whole idea around, and now she was nervously awaiting the chance to interview for the chance to use his sperm? How dare he think she wasn't capable.

Or worthy of becoming a mother.

It did get her thinking about the way she was. The way others saw her. She wasn't really that uptight, Derek was wrong. Just because she liked to keep things under control. Organized. Lots of people were organized.

Sure she wasn't a simpering debutante last night, but it was a business meeting after all, and lunch with him was another, but this time she'd have to let down her guard just a little bit, and let Derek Martinez see the real her.

And that scared her to death. She'd built the protective shield around her heart for a reason. She didn't let people in easily. It took a year to be able to relax enough to accept Casey's invitation to dinner with Selena. Slowly but surely she'd let the couple into her life. She didn't have the time to allow Derek in.

This morning, rolling out of bed after the rough night she had, it took four outfits before she settled on something suitable for work and lunch with Derek. Or interview, meeting ... whatever. Khaki linen dress pants, and a long white rayon blouse that was cut like a man's oxford, but moved like silk around her.

Now she had to think about this lunch date. Well, still not a date. She would be interviewing for the chance to raise his child. Damn it, it wasn't his child! Derek Martinez had completely confused her and moved her focus from her goal. Lunch was going to be hell. She would be on guard, worried about everything she said or did, worried about losing the opportunity to have his sperm.

God, she sounded pathetic.

She shouldn't care what he thought of her, let alone what he thought of what she wore. Once the exchange was made, the contract filled, she'd never see him again.

Kara's stomach rolled. That's what she wanted, right? That was the plan. Kara always followed through with the plan. Just because he was nice to look at...

"Kara, I'm sending back your appointment." Lacie, the front-desk clerk, spoke through her phone as an intercom, and Kara swallowed the lump in her throat. Casey set aside the magazine and stood, straightening his tie. She calmly shut down her computer and straightened the files on her desk.

She'd left her office door open, and like the other offices in the space, it circled around the door to the private hall, where one would need a keycard to get through, or get buzzed in by the front desk, which is how Derek walked in. She stood on legs that suddenly felt more like gelatin, and smiled, hoping it didn't look as forced as it felt.

He was dressed much like the day she first laid eyes on him, lightweight black dress pants, white shirt, and blue tie. He caught her eye through the doorway, and walked into her office.

"Hello, Derek. This is my boss, the general manager of the Tate Hotel, Casey Lawrence. Casey, Derek Martinez."

The two men shook hands, and sized each other up in a gesture as old as the Y chromosome.

"Mr. Martinez." Casey's expression was hidden behind the mustache, and Kara shook her head at his posturing. She gave him a few minutes to work his cop charm on the guy before pulling her purse out from her desk drawer. She couldn't believe how quickly two grown men could direct a conversation to baseball. Before they had a chance to start swapping stats on the Atlanta Braves' players, she interrupted Casey mid sentence.

"I thought we could just eat at the deli around the corner, if that's all right with you." She flipped off her desk lamp, and gave her boss an evil glare.

He scowled back.

"That's just fine." Derek smiled easily, and she returned it without thinking. His flash of teeth almost made her forget the folder with the contract in it. She picked it up, and checked the contents. As important as this was, and with the sensitive information on the form, she was doubly careful.

He followed her through the hallway and past the front desk. She caught Lacie's gaze, and the younger woman's obvious approval of her escort.

He allowed her to precede him through the door, and while they walked down the sidewalk side by side, she tried to relax. She had to act like she wasn't worried that he'd change his mind. All morning she told herself to pretend that the man sitting across the table at lunch was her best friend. Her sister Kris even. If she didn't keep her guard up, this man could easily worm his way into her heart. Conversely, if she didn't let her guard down, and prove that she wasn't made of stone, Derek and his DNA could slip right through her fingers. The line was very fine, and very grey. Not even her "head not heart" mantra was valid anymore. By the time they were seated in a quiet corner booth, Kara had herself convinced that she could do this.

Derek kept conversation light, even asked her opinion on some of the dishes on the menu. The folder with the contract lay on the booth next to him. The innocuous thing looked so innocent, yet so menacing. She couldn't stop glancing at it, searching for a way to bring it up in conversation. Would it be too forward to hand him a pen?

Just then, their waitress leaned too close to Derek when taking their order, and Kara

lost her nerve.

After lunch, she promised herself.

When the same waitress brought their bill to the table, she all but batted her eyes at the man. Thank God the restaurant manager happened to walk by, sending her scurrying off to another one of her tables.

Kara's patience was gone. She was out of time. The conversation never leaned toward the contract, so she gave up on a smooth transition. She took a deep breath, picked up the envelope, and turned to Derek, but he spoke first.

"I'm not going to masturbate into a cup."

### Chapter Three

It took her a moment to assimilate his words. "You ... won't? You've changed your mind?" Her heart sank to her pelvis. She was so close!

He held up a hand. "I'll father your child. I'll sign the contract, but there will have to be some changes first."

She swallowed, relief washing over her. "What changes?"

"For one thing, I'm not going to masturbate into a cup. I think if we're creating a life together, we should be doing it the way the human race has been procreating since we crawled out of the ocean."

Had Casey somehow gotten to him? That was almost word for word what her boss said. Why was he making this so difficult? What was the big deal? She stared at him, almost wishing she could run out of the restaurant screaming.

"I'm not going to have sex with you." She wanted to sound firm and confident, but the words ended up coming out with an incredulous inflection. "Why would you ... what makes you think you can...?"

"If you really wanted to have a sterile conception, you would have gone to a sterile sperm bank, and picked one of the sterile vials of sperm, with no strings attached." He managed to look cool and composed even as she sat simmering in her seat. He took a long drink from his iced tea, and continued. "This way, we're skipping the middle man. We can bypass the lab and maybe even enjoy ourselves a little bit in the process." He winked.

Oh no he couldn't. Just the thought of having sex with this man sent her internal organs into a confused spiral.

"I can't have sex with you."

"If you want me to father your baby badly enough, then you can." He challenged her with his eyes, and the stubborn tilt to his chin.

Kara suppressed the irrational urge to agree to this crazy amendment to his plan. There wasn't a way that she could have sex and keep her emotions out of it, and she didn't want to lay herself open like that for anyone. She couldn't.

"Well then," she picked up her purse and spoke as calmly as she could, "I guess this is goodbye. Thank you for your time."

"Think about it Kara." He stalled her retreat with a hand curled around her elbow. "I'm just taking one more piece of the sterility out of your plan. The end result is the same. We can still part ways once you're pregnant. Don't think of it as sex. Just procreation. Insemination."

"Prostitution," she finished. There. That was a great reason for her to keep this out of the bedroom. "That's illegal in the state of Georgia." She gave herself a pat on the back for her quick thinking, but he just as quickly squashed it.

"Only if I accept payment."

"Of course you'll accept payment. Why else would you do this?"

"As a favor to a friend."

Kara wasn't sure if it was his words, or the low voice he spoke them in, but her heart skittered to a halt, and she had to suck in a breath to get it started again. His hand was still



wrapped around her arm, and he slid it down to her wrist in a long caress.

"I can't." Her voice came out scratchy, so she swallowed to lubricate her throat. "That's not what I've been trying to do. I just want a baby."

"And I'll do my damndest to get you pregnant."

"But ... I can't."

"You keep saying that." He released her arm, and seemingly satisfied that she wasn't going to run, sat back in the booth. "Women and men get together all the time for a variety of reasons. I think you've used enough science and logic here that your emotions won't get in the way. I promise that once we get naked together, you'll want it as much as I will."

His audacious words shocked her, even as his eyes flickered with a mischievous glimmer.

"You know, I'm not that bad of a guy."

"I'm sure you aren't, but I can't just jump into bed for the purpose of ... you know..."

"Then put it in logical terms. Sterilize it. We'll be inseminating you. That's all. Any earth-shattering orgasms will be a bonus."

She watched him speak, and was amazed when his head didn't spin around, proving that she was in a crazy dream. No way was she truly hearing this. All of her plans, her carefully guarded privacy, her thoughtfully organized details were useless with this new wrench he was throwing into the cogs.

"But I can't..." She let her words trail into nothing. She didn't want to sound like an idiot, but she'd never had sex with someone whom she didn't feel at least a little bit of affection for. As much as he wanted to sterilize the act, she wasn't sure she was able, which went against her assurances that this was all a business proposition, biology not chemistry.

She tore her eyes away from his, and focused on her lap, where her hands were wringing the heck out of the napkin that was once wrapped around her silverware. There was no way that she could do as he asked. Max's face flashed through her mind. His smile, the tender way he smiled down into her eyes when they were in bed together...

*Oh God.*

She didn't say another word to Derek; she just grabbed her purse and ran. As fast as her high heels would take her without barreling into the bus boy who gave her the deer-in-the-headlights look on her way out the door.

She left Derek there. Without an explanation, without even offering to pick up the tab, but she didn't care. She'd never see the man again.

Tears burned a trail down her cheeks, and all she could think about was getting back into her office, where she was safe. A familiar place would comfort her. Kara didn't look back. She only concentrated on the click of her heels on the concrete, and swore it wasn't reminiscent of the empty beat of her heart.

It took three tries to get her keycard to work, but before she could close the door behind her, she was ushered inside and into her office. She didn't have to look behind her to know who it was. She recognized the firm grip on her arm, the cologne that teased her throughout lunch. She was dimly aware of the fact that he held the folder containing the contract in his free hand, and sent a quick prayer of thanks that it hadn't gotten into the wrong hands. She took a shaky breath. The other sales offices were empty. Still, she didn't trust her voice to tell him to go away.

When they were shut into her private office, he released his hold on her, but remained mere inches away from her where she stood rigid against the back of her door.

"Tell me."

Her head hung between her shoulders, Kara couldn't even bring herself to look him in the eye. She dared not wipe the tears from her face; she didn't want to draw any more attention to them, and she was mortified when she hiccupped. She was afraid she wouldn't be able to speak coherently, so she said nothing.

"Kara." He tilted her head up until she was forced to meet his eye.

The misunderstanding in his face turned to sympathy. "Tell me what sent you running from me. Something I said?" He used his thumbs to dry her tears.

"No. I'm sorry. I just ... can't." She tried to look away, but he held her firmly.

"Tell me why."

"No, it's nothing."

"Damn it, tell me." He spoke through his teeth, his eyes taking in every feature of her upturned face. "For once, you're showing me that you're actually human, and I want to know that about you. Tell me what it is that could bring a beautiful strong woman to tears like that."

"I'm not," she choked. "I'm not."

"You are, Kara." His voice softened, and he released her face to cup her shoulders. "You're strong, smart, confident. And God yes you're beautiful. You've confused me since you sat down with me at that damn cafe over two weeks ago. You're exactly the kind of woman I'd normally steer clear of. I like my women soft and frail and needy." He chuckled, then shocked her by pulling her into a warm strong embrace. "You proposition me, then lay out your terms like you're negotiating for world domination, and just when I think you must be made of stone, you crumble before my eyes."

It felt so good to hold him. He was big and strong and masculine. This close, she could tell that what she thought was expensive cologne was actually a combination of spicy soap, clothing starch, and the masculine musk of his skin. Before she could censor her actions, she felt her arms wrap around his waist, and cling to his shirt. For just a moment, she wallowed in the security of a man's embrace.

"What is it?" He prodded gently. "Does the thought of having sex scare you, or is it the thought of having sex with me?"

"No." She couldn't tell him. She didn't want his pity. She didn't want to feel that familiar emptiness. Not here, at work, where she was always in control. "I'm not afraid."

"You are. I can see it in your eyes, and I practically feel it coursing through your veins." He rubbed her back, and for the life of her, she couldn't bring herself to pull away. "Something scared you. Tell me."

"I can't. Nobody..." She bit her lip, then thought her words through. "It's my problem. I'll deal with it."

Now she found the strength to push him back, and was able to ignore the almost overwhelming pull his body created. "I apologize for falling apart in the restaurant." She dug through her purse, hoping if she couldn't see him she wouldn't be tempted to feel those arms around her again, or press her cheek into that hard wall of muscle beneath his shirt. "Let me repay you for lunch."

"Don't," he snapped. "My treat." His voice lost all traces of gentleness or teasing. Now it was edged with a black cloud.

"But..."

"No." He regarded her from beneath two sleek black brows. "I don't want your money." He brushed past her and she barely stepped out of the way when he swung the door open. "I've done everything you've asked, and you've heard my conditions. Think about it. If you still want to go through with this," he held up the folder, "call me. You have my number."

And he was gone. Just like that, taking his warmth and security right along with him, leaving Kara staring at the door feeling empty and cold. She reached up and touched the pearl pendant around her neck, fingering its familiar smooth cool shape until she could lower herself into her chair.

After ten minutes alone behind her desk, enough time to replay their conversation a few times, Kara pulled out her compact and repaired her makeup, barely finishing before the rest of the sales staff returned from lunch.

Knowing that Casey would want a full report on her lunch with Derek, Kara left the hotel, telling the sales assistant Raquel that she would be finalizing sales at the local university for the rest of the afternoon.

Which is exactly what she did. She poured herself into her presentations, and was able to nail down the wishy-washiest conference planner she'd met to date. By the time she unlocked the door to her house, her professional adrenaline was pumping with familiar comfort. This was Kara Sorrento. She knew this, she knew how to deal with her emotions, whip them into submission.

Evening news, leftover chicken stew, brush, floss, pajamas, and now her new routine ... tossing and turning with thoughts of Derek Martinez.

\* \* \* \*

The first two days were the worst. Kara was only able to function during the hours she was at work. Once she left the hotel, her mind had nothing better to do than visit Derek Martinez's memory. During that time, she even stopped focusing on her goal to get pregnant. She wasn't looking forward to the weekends, and forty-eight hours to think about the sad state of her life. She jumped at the invitation to go to the mall with her sister on the second Saturday afternoon, where they tried on outrageous clothes and ate outrageous amounts of food.

"What is with you lately?" Krista twirled her Chinese noodles around her chopsticks, while Kara poked at her food.

"What do you mean? Nothing's with me."

"Yeah, so that's the problem. You're acting like you did after Buddy got run over in seventh grade."

Krista was ten months younger than Kara, and their birthdays fell so that they were actually enrolled in the same grade at school. They had been inseparable since they could both walk. They rarely fought while growing up, and with having polar opposite coloring and personalities, they were often confused for best friends rather than sisters, which was just fine with them.

Now, staring into her Irish twin's face, Kara couldn't help but unload. "It's the guy. The donor I found last month."

"The guy you stalked? Not panning out? Did he fail the physical?" Kris covered her sister's hand on the table.

"No, physically he was fine. Perfect even." *Too perfect.* "But he wanted to change some of the conditions of the contract."

"Like what?"

Kara looked around the crowded eating area where they sat surrounded by parked strollers and exhausted shoppers. No one who was close enough to hear was listening; they were too busy calming down their children or flirting with passersby.

Kara was glad that Kris had brought this up. She had been hoping to get all of this off of her chest for the last week. Well, ten days really, but she'd tried to come to terms with it before inviting help. She shoved her cup of noodles away, and gave her sister a sad smile.

"He ... uh ... wanted to bypass the clinic."

Kris wrinkled her brow in confusion, and Kara raised her eyebrow in a telling gesture.

"Oh! Oh God ... you mean he wanted to..."

"Yeah. Something I wasn't prepared for, to say the least," Kara grumbled.

Kris's lips twitched. Kara knew her sister was hiding a smirk, or even an outright laugh. "I know how much it bothers you to have your plan disrupted. So what did you say?"

"What did I say?" Kara's mouth dropped open. "What do you think I said? I said I couldn't do that."

"Why not?" Kris gave her the same eyebrow-raised look.

Kara opened her mouth to explain the obvious, but snapped it shut. Kris always was the more impulsive of the two. Getting her to understand anything about logic and order was about as difficult as explaining PMS to a man. Kara pulled her noodles back in front of her, and took another bite, even though they were now cold, and she wasn't even hungry.

"Well?" Kris folded her arms on the tiny round table, and leaned closer to Kara, as if she really would continue the conversation. She even twirled a dark curl around her finger, her normal habit when excited.

"You know why not. I'm not going to talk about it. It's over."

"But you said he was perfect!"

"Apparently he isn't." She shouldn't have brought it up. Looking for a way out of the conversation, Kara took a noisy drink through her straw.

"You'd rather lie on a stainless steel table with your feet in stirrups than sleep with this man?"

Kara wanted to reach over and wipe the grin off of Kris's face herself. "Yes," she barked.

"Bullshit." Kris leaned back in her chair and narrowed her brown eyes. "You're afraid. You're scared to death of sleeping with another man."

"That's not true." Okay, so it was true, and Kris knew it. Kara dropped her chin, more embarrassed for the immature bluff than the truth of Kris's statement. "I don't want to be with another man. Ever."

"I think you're the one who told me that forever is a long time. Remember when I told you I'd never speak to you again after you told mom that I snuck out?"

Kara smiled. "You made it three days."

"Barely." Kris twisted her hair and pulled it over her shoulder. "Even though I knew

that your snitching on me probably saved me from making a big mistake with Charlie Jensen. I remember how I spent those three days not speaking to you, but writing you a thousand notes."

"I remember." Kara still had a few of those notes in her scrapbook. One that Kris had written near the end of her tirade said "It makes me so mad that I love you".

"Kara, I know I've told you this a million times, and so has mother, and so would anyone else who knows your story..."

"I don't want to hear it."

"I don't really care," Kris responded just as dryly. "You're my sister, and I'm not going to let you live the rest of your life like this. You can't believe how scared I was when you got that cat two years ago."

Kara looked up with a question on her lips before her sister cut her off.

"A cat ... you got a cat. I knew another cat would follow ... then another. Pretty soon you'd be another old lady Crenshaw."

Old lady Crenshaw was their neighborhood's crazy old cat lady. The typical woman who succumbed to Alzheimer's not too long after she started wearing her late husband's ties, and nothing else. Kara shook her head. "So you were probably pretty happy when I discovered I was allergic to cats, and had to give Lucky away."

"More than you'll ever know. You don't even want to hear what I had to go through to steal all of your granny underwear last year."

"Krista!"

Kris had the grace to look a little guilty before she laughed. "I'm your sister. I have to do these things for you. Those bras made your boobs look like the Coneheads. I only hope that if you ever see me in those ugly-ass panties you'll do the same for me."

"I knew it was you, you little brat." One day Kara came home from a conference to find all of her comfortable briefs replaced by lacy thongs, and cheeky boyleg shorts, but Kris had never owned up to the prank, until now.

"You're only twenty-eight years old, but you're starting to act like Grandma. Now here you are, faced with the opportunity to have a guilt-free fling with a gorgeous guy, boink like rabbits until you get pregnant, and you're not even going to think about it?"

"It's more complicated than that." Kara checked over her shoulder again for any eavesdroppers. Kris wasn't exactly the quietest person on the planet. "I have to think of Max."

"No you don't. Max is dead."

Kara's stomach lurched. Her face paled, and all she could do was stare at her sister. She couldn't believe that she'd spoken so bluntly! Yes, Max had passed away almost three years ago, but for the life of her, Kara had never even put those three words together before. Max is dead.

"Don't look at me like that. I've tiptoed around his memory for long enough. He's gone Kara, and you're here. You're still alive. You won't be sullying his memory by living again. He wouldn't want you to, and you know it. You're allowed to smile. You're allowed to look at another man, maybe even more than look. Just open yourself up to the possibility. Stop walking around with blinders on, thinking Max would hate you for cheating on him."

Hot tears burned her eyes, and as she focused on her sister, her best friend, they spilled onto her cheeks one after another.

"God, Kara, don't cry." Krista moved her chair close enough to pull Kara into a hug. "I didn't mean to make you cry. I just want you to see the truth. Open your eyes, sis. It's time to live again."

"I loved him so much," Kara whispered, fresh tears replacing those that soaked into Kris's shirt.

"I know you did, but you've spent the last three years putting Max on a pedestal. He wasn't perfect. You've chosen to forget that last year with him, but I haven't. I'll never forget the way you cried your eyes out all day, and those late night phone calls when you didn't know where he was. He changed after he got the job with the DEA, and you know it. He was not the same man you married." Kara tried to pull away, but Kris held tight.

She had put that final year out of her mind. Why dwell on the worst of times when she could polish the beautiful memories of their courtship and honeymoon? She knew it was just Max's way of dealing with the stress of his job. Leave it to Kris to remind her of that heartache.

"I know," Kara mumbled against Kris's tee shirt. For the first time since Max died, Kara *did* know. "You're right, but it's so hard to let him go."

"You don't have to let him go. Just let yourself go. You've forgotten all of his flaws, making him out to be some saint. It's time to live again Kara. Everyone knows how much you loved him. You always will love him, but don't close off your heart to new experiences. New smiles ... new loves. This is your turning point. You have to open your heart before you can let your future child in. Now is the time. Start with NSA sex with a sexy man, and go from there."

Kris was babbling. Kara recognized it as her way of getting everything off of her chest that she'd been keeping inside for a long time. Kara held on to her sister almost as if she would fall into a million pieces if she let go. Only when her tears dried, and the murmur of the mall shoppers again permeated her brain, was she able to sit back in her chair. She fumbled through her purse for a Kleenex.

"I guess if it were you, you'd have jumped his bones right then and there." Kara grinned from behind the tissue.

"You're damned right I would. No health risk, no emotional risk ... it's like a dream come true. If you don't call the guy, I might be tempted to."

Kara laughed, then flipped open a compact to check her mascara. Not a total disaster, she thought with relief. "I don't think he'll want to hear from me now."

"You won't know until you try." Kris picked up Kara's phone and handed it over, a daring glint in her eye.

"Now? I can't call him now..." Kara looked at her phone like it might bite her.

"Why not? If you wait, you'll only talk yourself out of it. For once, just do it. Quit thinking things over so damn much, and just do it."

Kara took her phone, and with a pleading look that Kris ignored, she hesitantly dialed Derek Martinez's phone number, praying that he wouldn't answer.

No such luck. "Hello?"

*Shit.* Kara gave her sister another panicked look, which Kris waved away, and pointed back to the phone. "Uh ... yes, hello, Mr. Martinez, this is Kara Sorrento."

"How are you?"

Okay, he didn't hang up on her. That was a good sign. "I'm well, thank you. I'm calling ... the reason I'm calling is..."

Kris waved her hand in a circular "get-on-with-it" motion.

"After ... considering your offer, and discussing it with my family," she sneered at Kris, "I've come to the ... uh..." Damn it, Kara hated the fact that she was stuttering through this. The surge of anger spurred her back into the speech. "I'd like to revisit the contract we discussed, and the changes you suggested."

There. Short, sweet, and professional. Kris's cheesy grin gave her another dose of confidence.

"I see. Well, I'm glad you called." He didn't sound too surprised to hear from her, or even upset that she did call.

"You are?"

"I don't have a lot of time right now, I'm actually on the golf course, and my partner's giving me the evil eye for answering my phone on the green. Can I stop by your place after I finish? We can cover it all then."

"Yes, that will work out. About four?"

"Perfect, see you then. Goodbye Kara."

Kara had to admit, she liked the way he said her name. "Goodbye, Derek."

She pushed the "end" button on her phone, and stared at the device until the lighted keys dimmed.

"Well?" Kris bounced in her seat, her chestnut curls slapping against her cheeks, and a huge grin on her face.

Kara couldn't help returning it, almost like they were in middle school again, waiting for a phone call from the most popular boys in class.

"He's coming over to talk." At Kris's beaming face, Kara had to add, "Just to talk. I'm not going to throw him down on my entryway."

"Oh no ... no, no, you wouldn't do *that*." Kris gave her a sarcastic eye roll. "But what will you do?" Her mouth dropped open. "What will you wear? You can't open the door looking all stiff and buttoned down ... oh God ... it's a good thing we're here ... come on."

Kris ignored Kara's attempts to clear their table before being dragged to one trendy shop at the mall after another. If she got through tonight with her dignity intact, it would be a miracle.

\* \* \* \*

She knew those clothing purchases were the wrong idea. As soon as she pulled open her front door and saw how Derek Martinez's eyes widened, she knew that Kris would have to die. There really wasn't anything wrong with the tee shirt, with the Pink Floyd prism emblazoned across her chest, but she wasn't used to wearing anything quite so tight. The jeans could have passed for an old pair that she dug out of the closet, but she knew better. She didn't even want to dwell on the dollar amount she'd spent on the faded things.

Kris had said she looked good. She'd said she looked young and frivolous, which was just what she was going for in this new endeavor with Mr. Derek Martinez. Looking across the threshold into his eyes, she wasn't so sure.

"Hello, Derek. Please come in."

He met her eyes, and closed his mouth. Then he smiled. "Thank you. You look ... different."

She gave him a cardboard smile, feeling anything but confident. In fact, she felt like she was standing naked in front of a room full of priests. "I hope that's a good thing?"

"Yeah, it's ... you look ... very nice. Relaxed."

If it didn't sound too banal, she would have said the same thing about him. He was dressed in khaki pants and a baby blue polo shirt. He had to have come directly from the golf course. This was the first time she got a good look at his arms, and she liked what she saw. Good muscle tone, toasty brown skin ... made a woman want to take a bite out of that muscle.

Good Lord, where did that thought come from?

She saw the manila folder in his hand, and swallowed.

"It's Saturday," she explained, as if she always dressed like a high school student on her days off. He didn't need to know that this was the only psychedelic rock band tee shirt that she owned. "Can I mix you a drink?"

She gestured toward a sofa, and crossed the room to the small corner bar. It was Max's idea to have a bar in the living room. She gave in, because he let her design it to match the fireplace.

"Do you have a beer?"

Only because Kris made her pick up a six pack on the way home. She took two out of the tiny cooler, handed him one, along with a glass, and sat on the chair facing the couch. The contract practically flashed a homing beacon, announcing its presence on the seat of the couch beside Derek. She had to studiously keep her eyes averted.

She watched him open his beer, and forsaking the glass, he took a long drink. His Adam's apple bobbed, and that singularly masculine movement fascinated her. Before he caught her staring, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "I wasn't sure you'd answer my call."

His smile faded, just a little bit. "I told you to call me."

She poured her beer into the thick glass mug. "That you did. I have to admit, it took my sister giving me a much-needed talking to in order to swallow my pride."

"Then I have your sister to thank. You two are pretty close, aren't you?"

"We are. I was born in September, and she was born in July of the following year. We were more like twins than just sisters, so much so that our parents put us in school together."

"You didn't mind that?"

"Not at all." She set her beer down on the coffee table to wait for the enormous head to dissolve. "Most of the time we had different teachers, then during high school we rarely had the same classes. It was nice to double date and eventually graduate with her." She chuckled. "Sounds kind of sappy, doesn't it?"

He didn't answer, just looked her up and down as though he just saw a new facet to her. The heat of those eyes was almost tangible, and Kara had to look away.

She picked at the label on her empty bottle before setting it on the table. Then, feeling like she had to have something in her hands, she picked up her mug. She wasn't a beer person. Why she felt like she had to drink one in front of Derek, she didn't know. "I should explain my outburst at the hotel that day."

He sat back in the couch, looking all together comfortable and easy-going. "Not if you don't want to."

She hadn't meant to bring that up, but after the long talk with Kris after the trip to the



mall, she knew she needed to explain. Still, she was pleased that he wasn't going to pressure her for information. "I appreciate that, but I want you to know. You've more than answered all of my questions." She took a drink from her glass, and surprisingly enough, enjoyed the cold bite of the carbonation in her throat, and the malty flavor.

She took a deep breath, and dove right in. "I lost my husband three years ago. He was a narcotics officer, working for the DEA. He was killed in the line of duty during a raid on a fourteen-year-old's meth lab in his parent's garage." Kris was right, just saying it felt good, and not at all like reopening an old wound.

Derek only nodded, not looking a bit surprised, so she continued. "The lab exploded, leaving nothing but tiny bits of shrapnel. I didn't even have a body to say goodbye to. I was told that he was killed instantly, which ... they say ... was a blessing." She licked her lips which had gone numb for some reason. "I haven't been with a man since," she continued before losing her nerve. "And I never thought I'd be able to sleep with another man. I love him. A lot." She swallowed. She still couldn't make herself use the past tense when saying those words.

"I can tell. I'm sorry you lost him like that, and when you were so young. Thank you for telling me." He raised his beer bottle in a salute. "He was a lucky man, and you were a lucky woman."

Kara was never the weepy type, but she'd been in tears more in the past week than she had during most of her adult life, not counting those months after Max's death. Now, with those few words, Kara felt the newly familiar burn behind her lids.

"Thank you," she said, so quietly she wasn't sure he could hear her, but he did nod and take another drink. Before the silence became uncomfortable, she called upon her skills with small talk. "So, how was your game today?"

"Not great, but I've done worse. Do you golf?"

"Oh no. I used to drive the cart for my dad, but that's as close as I ever got."

"You should try it. Maybe one of these weekends we could putt around the course."

His golf game must have contributed to the extra bronze on his skin. The warmth of the color made her want to reach over the coffee table to touch him. "I'm a natural klutz." She smiled. "You don't want me near anything even remotely dangerous. A golf club would be almost lethal in my hands."

He laughed, and she relaxed even more. Maybe that shot of brandy half an hour before he showed up was a good idea after all.

"From what I know about you, I bet you'd be a real competitive player."

Kara twisted the beer mug in her hands, keeping her eyes away from his, even as he continued.

"There's nothing wrong with being a tough-as-nails business woman, but I can tell there is another side of you waiting to come out."

*More like struggling to stay hidden.*

"I brought the contract." Derek's low revelation obviously omitted the last word, so she supplied it.

"But?"

"But I made some changes." He leaned across the coffee table to hand her the folder, and she set her drink down to accept it.

She flipped open the folder to reveal the contract, now sporting two black lines and Derek's initials, and he continued.

"I just took out the sentences about Dr. Anderson's office as the official site for the exchange. That leaves the rest open for discussion. The important parts are still there. I'll still supply as much seed as needed until you conceive, and I'll still walk away once you're pregnant."

Her living room seemed to close around her. He was agreeing to the plan. Surely she could do this. It's just sex, and it would get her to the end result just as easily.

She glanced again at Kris's picture. *You can do it. It's just sex.*

Before she could talk herself out of it, she swallowed hard. "I'll rework the contract and email it to you Monday morning then."

"Great. I'll sign it and bring it by the Tate on my way home from work."

*You can do it. It's just sex. Head not heart.*

She took a deep breath, and tried to smile.

His eyes were on her chest, and she cursed her nipples for responding without permission. "So you're a Pink Floyd fan, huh?"

Oh yeah. Her shirt. She forced her libido back behind the wall, and smiled. "No, I just like their tee shirts."

He laughed and took a long drink of his beer. Kara looked away before he caught her appreciating him. That's when she recognized the biggest obstacle in her path.

Guarding her heart.

That Monday she sent the newly revised contract, and he replied not an hour later informing her that it was signed.

As promised, he dropped by Monday afternoon with the contract in a sealed envelope. She had a client in her office so she couldn't talk much, she barely had time to admire the way his suit fit his broad shoulders.

## Chapter Four

Kara felt cheap.

It wasn't the hotel; the two-star chain would serve the purpose just fine. It was clean and safe, and it had a king-sized bed butted up against the wall in the middle of the room. Kara stared at it, and even with the fluffy white pillows and comforter, it looked like the instrument of the devil.

She didn't have much of a choice. It wasn't like she could invite him over to her place—the house she shared with Max—and she watched too much true crime to consider his house. Besides, that would make this too personal. Already, keeping her heart out of it was proving to be a difficult task.

She dropped her briefcase onto the floor, her purse on the chair, then laid the keycard down on the wardrobe near the television.

It's just sex. Less than that, it would be insemination. There would be no pleasure to be had, at least on her part. Of course Derek would be required to...

She couldn't even finish that sentence. Kara glanced at the briefcase. This would have been so much easier if he'd agreed to the clinic. The thought of him leafing through the magazines she brought along while she waited for him to get aroused was just too disturbing.

The bathroom! She unzipped her briefcase quickly—as if she didn't have thirty minutes before he'd arrive—took the three magazines into the restroom, and stacked them neatly on the vanity. She had chosen three different genres, one with basic nude women, another a bit racier, with sex on every page, and finally one with a selection of BDSM featured. That particular cover stared up at her, a young woman—probably barely old enough to be there—decorated with strategically placed leather and chrome chains, and nothing else.

The way she stacked them was too orderly for such content. Kara gave the stack of porn a swipe, skewing the pile. She steeled herself against straightening them, gave them one last long look, wondering which one Derek would choose, and walked from the bathroom.

She pulled out the remaining object in her briefcase: her terrycloth robe. She'd debated leaving her blouse on, but she dismissed that when she thought about the sweat and bodily fluids that might stain and wrinkle. Naked would be best. It might help him maintain an erection.

*Don't flatter yourself*, she scoffed. A man like Derek Martinez probably has his fair share of beautiful young women panting after him. She couldn't compete, even if she wanted to. For all she knew, he had some perky girl waiting at home for him.

She stared out the window, not even seeing the passing traffic through the leaves of the trees that surrounded the hotel.

Did he have a girlfriend? That was one question that she hadn't asked. His blood type and medical history were more important than his personal life, so she didn't want to breach his privacy, but she couldn't help her curiosity. Would a man like Derek cheat on his girlfriend? Even if it wasn't an emotional tryst? Would he be the type to inform her, or even get her approval before agreeing to the plan?

It didn't matter.

Kara closed the curtains, casting the room into a dark shadow. Her stomach tightened. That certainly gave the meeting a darker and seedier flavor, but there was no way she could have sex with the man with the bright afternoon sun shining through the window.

She opted for the lamp by the desk in the corner.

Four fifteen. He was due in fifteen minutes.

Swallowing what little saliva she formed, Kara disrobed. Her hands shook so badly, it took longer than it should have, and she really didn't want him to walk in before she was ready. She folded her clothes, taking great care to hide her underwear, and set the pile on the desk chair, her heels neatly lined up beneath the window behind.

She wrapped her robe around her waist, and cinched the belt tight. She folded down the comforter, and pulled aside the top sheet, then sat at the foot of the bed to wait.

Each second ticked by. The only clock in the room was digital, so the ticking had to be a figment of her imagination, but the silence made time pass slowly.

She crossed her legs, then thought that might make her look prudish, so she uncrossed them. That made her look eager. She crossed her ankles, and adjusted the robe to cover her knees. Very regal. Is that what she was going for?

"Damn it." She stood, and paced the room. There wasn't a way to make this easy. She could only hope that he was as uncomfortable with the set up as she, but Kara doubted it. Judging by his voice over the phone yesterday, he was taking this a lot better than she was.

"Great," he'd said. "Tomorrow works for me. Four thirty?"

They could have been planning a game of bridge. Today would be the first of three consecutive days that they would meet, and hopefully the most awkward. If all went well, after these three tries, she would never have to face the man again.

That thought gave her a little shot of courage. It's a business transaction. Business she knew. A greeting, a professional exchange, a handshake and a smile. She did it every day.

*Head not heart.* She could do this.

Her pep talk ended right on time. The sharp knock couldn't be anyone but Derek. Adjusting the panels of her robe, she shuffled to the door, peered through the peep hole to make sure it was him, then opened it before she could talk herself out of it.

Her appearance must have surprised him. His eyes grew wide, and he took in the no-frills robe before meeting her eye. She suddenly felt awkward, the way she was dressed and facing the man who was impeccably outfitted in dark suit pants and a crisp white shirt. The only thing that softened the blow was his tie draped undone around his neck.

"I wasn't expecting this type of welcome." He bobbed his eyebrows.

Fighting the urge to relax and smile, Kara pursed her lips. *Business transaction. Don't give in to his teasing.*

Choosing to ignore his greeting, she gestured toward the bathroom to her right. "You can get ready in there. I've picked out some ... material for you. If it isn't your preference, let me know. I'll be happy to bring whatever you would like for the next time."

Derek closed the door behind him, then peered into the bathroom. When he saw the magazines, he faced her again, this time with a raised eyebrow.

"Take as long as you need," she continued before he could comment. "And don't feel

like you have to undress completely."

His lips thinned, and the skin on his face pulled tight, making his cheekbones stand out.

"Maybe I should just undo my fly?"

Oh, so she irritated him. *Well, tough, Mr. Martinez. This was your idea.* "Whatever makes you more comfortable. I don't want to take up too much of your time. I'm going to remain prone for half an hour, but you're free to go as soon as you ... we finish here."

She left him standing by the door, fully expecting him to go into the bathroom and start preparing.

She lowered herself onto the side of the bed and looked up. Derek's incredulous expression surprised her. He stood a few steps from where she left him, just inside the door, his arms stiff, his hands clenched.

"So that's it?" he bit out.

"What do you mean?"

"I come in, have sex, and then leave?"

Kara glared at him, in the same way she glared at Kris when she was being obstinate.

"This is simply a business transaction." *It had to be. Head not heart. Head not heart.*

"The setting was your idea."

His face turned a peculiar shade of red, and then he moved. With each step toward her, he worked on his belt, his hands jerking on the leather. He shoved his pants past his waist just as he reached her, and completely invaded her personal space. His distinctive spicy scent made her suck a deep breath through her nose.

"Well, let's get this show on the road. I'm such a busy guy, but I have a minute or two."

Kara backed away from his sarcasm. The curl of his lip and his frantic movements were frightening. She had to crane her neck to see his face, and she had to steel herself to meet those eyes, frosted as they now were.

"Don't you need ... you can get ready in the bathroom." As if that would buy her time.

"I've been ready since I met you lady. Just lie down. I'm sure you only penciled me in for a thirty minute slot. Let's get this thing over with."

Her shoulders barely hit the mattress when he entered her in one long deliberate thrust. She cried out in pain, and he cursed, bracing himself on stiff arms. She bit her lip, knowing that although she felt as if she were being ripped apart, surely that wasn't the case.

"I'm sorry ... God, I hurt you?" All traces of irritation gone, he now looked like he'd been struck by a bolt of lightning.

"I'm okay." She blinked tears away, and was mortified when one leaked down her temple. She had been so worried about his preparation, she hadn't given hers a thought. It had been well over three years since she'd had intercourse, and even then, this man was considerably larger than any of her previous lovers. She stretched around him, and burned from the lack of lubrication.

"Do you want me to ... what do you want me to do?" he rasped.

"I'm fine," she lied. "It has just ... been a while. You can ... finish." She had wadded two handholds of the starched sheet, and her heart was pounding, but she forced muscles long unused and now screaming with pain to relax.

"I don't want to hurt you." He didn't move. His arms vibrated with tension, and the muscles of his legs bunched and flexed against hers, even through his suit pants.

"It was just a shock, that's all. Please don't ... don't stop now."

He bared his teeth. "Jesus, you're so tight," he hissed. "Tell me when."

Kara took a shaky breath and closed her eyes. "Now."

Slowly, he pulled out before reentering just as carefully. His strokes were gentle, cautious even, and she could have kissed him for his consideration. But she didn't. In fact to keep from doing just that, she turned her face to the side, hoping to blot the remnants of her tears on the sheets. The burning was gone, but the stretching was hell. He kept up his slow pace until her robe slipped off of her chest, completely exposing one breast.

"Christ," he groaned, and bent down to lick the very tip of the newly revealed piece of her. That seemed to do it for him, and he swelled and spurted inside her.

She didn't dare meet his eye. This should be a moment for lovers. Basking in afterglow, cuddling together, celebrating love.

But they weren't lovers. This emotionless coupling was so far removed from everything she knew about making love that she couldn't show him her eyes. She swallowed back a fresh batch of tears, and he slowly pulled away from her. Without a word, she heard him cross the room and enter the restroom.

She rolled her head, and stared up at the popcorn ceiling. *Just a few more seconds, and he'll leave. Then you can lose it; just wait for him to leave.*

Feeling suddenly very naked, she rewrapped her robe where she lay, afraid to move. She throbbed. Not a good throbbing either. Her body protested the taking.

She heard water running, so she used the few moments to collect herself. She swiped the backs of her hands beneath her eyes, and was relieved when they didn't come away with black streaks of mascara.

*It's over. You did it.*

Inside her lay the key to her future. The possibility of the beginning of a new life. A child. Her baby. She laid her hand on her abdomen.

*Don't get your hopes up Kara.* She rubbed her stomach. This was just the first installment. She had two to go yet this month.

The restroom door squeaked a bit when it opened. Kara turned her head like a coward, and stared at the headboard. She listened for him to leave, and wondered if he would say anything on the way out. "Goodbye"? "See you tomorrow"? "Thank you ma'am"?

Instead, his footsteps came back into the room, and she could even feel his presence before he sat beside her. She turned to face him, and was shocked to find the beaten expression on his face.

"I brought a cool cloth. I think it will help." He touched her leg, and she jumped. He jerked back, then used that hand to drag down his face. "I'm not going to hurt you again Kara." His voice was a rough grumble.

"It wasn't your fault." She resisted the temptation to smooth a lock of hair from his forehead.

"Fault or responsibility, it is mine."

Kara was stunned by his stare, filled with intense honesty, and contrite apology. "I'm fine. Really," she assured him. "Dr. Anderson told me I should just lie still for a while."

Derek lifted his hand again, as though to touch her face, but he dropped it before

making contact.

"Can I get you anything?"

*Pregnant.* "No, thank you, Derek. I'll see you tomorrow."

Derek took a long breath, laid the washcloth beside her, and nodded sadly before standing. "Yeah, see you then."

She heard the door close behind him, and she was left alone. The silence of the room was only broken by the intermittent whirring from the air conditioning unit by the window. Otherwise it was just Kara, alone with her thoughts. She could do this. Head not heart. Right? The tears burning a path down her temples and into her hair said otherwise. How she wished she could have indulged in the scents and textures of Derek's body, or curled against him afterwards.

Kara left the hotel an hour after Derek, and even though it wasn't supposed to be involved in this project, her heart was heavy with regret, sorrow, and dread. Dismissing that, she employed her head to prepare for tomorrow.

\* \* \* \*

Derek looked through the contract for what had to be the hundredth time that night. Of course, there wasn't a penalty for breaking the contract. He'd just have to live with his own sense of failure for not following through with something he'd committed to.

Could he really go back into that hotel room tomorrow to do the same damn thing? He'd been anticipating the meeting most of the day, and was primed and ready even before she opened that door to him. When she talked to him like he was a little kid, it should have affected him like a cold shower. Instead her haughty tone lit a fuse deep in his gut.

"You signed up for it, idiot." Derek tossed the contract back onto his desk and stomped across the hall. He tore his tie off, and almost popped a button from his shirt before calming down.

There wasn't anything in that damn contract about being civil. She'd told him from the beginning that it would be nothing but a business deal. Was he really that full of himself, that he thought he could charm her into enjoying the act?

Yes he was.

He kicked his discarded clothes into a corner of his bathroom and stepped into the shower.

She certainly wasn't enjoying herself this afternoon. He'd hurt her for Christ's sake. He scrubbed that memory away with deodorant soap and searing water. Yeah it was his idea to move the exchange from the clinic to the bedroom, but he had no idea she was so dead set against it that she wouldn't be physically prepared. He didn't even take the time to touch her before sliding home.

Derek groaned, the sound echoed loudly against the shower walls. Even though the memory of that one move was tainted with her cry, his body remembered the exquisite sensation of that first long stroke with vivid clarity. She was so damn tight and warm. He'd wanted to slow down and enjoy, but at the same time, every base instinct in his being screamed for release. That had to have been the quickest end to a sexual encounter since Carlita Ray took his virginity in seventh grade.

She had at least pretended to like it. And he didn't hurt Carlita.

Derek ducked his head beneath the spray and let the hot water pound on his scalp.

He had to call this off. He couldn't continue like this. Hurting her wasn't part of the deal. And then he realized. *Fuck*. If he called it off he'd hurt her, just in a different way.

Derek twisted off the water. *Like it or not, you're committed. You promised her. Not only that, you signed a contract. You can't back out now.*

He toweled off. He'd gone into the shower pissed, and came out defeated, but if he was going to do this, he'd be damned if he would cause her more pain. He pulled on some clothes, ran his hand through his hair, and grabbed his keys. Thank God there was a drugstore close by.

\* \* \* \*

Kara set her briefcase on the floor, and her purse in the chair. The room looked as it did when she walked in the day before. The maid had even pulled the curtains back, revealing an identical afternoon sun, and she followed the same procedure. Curtains closed, robe belted, magazines stacked. She wasn't sure if he'd use them today or not. Her behavior yesterday might have given the man a severe case of stage fright.

She was prepared today. She'd bought a tube of lubricant, and yesterday's stretching wouldn't be nearly as bad today.

Right on time, Derek knocked.

Today, he didn't tease. He didn't flirt. He looked like a little kid sent to the principal's office—with his shoulders hunched, and his hands stuffed into his front pockets.

"How are you?" The innocuous question could even have been the basic greeting, one that didn't merit an honest response, if not for the serious inflection, and his piercing stare.

"I'm fine, thank you. I trust you're well?" She closed the door behind him, then brushed by him toward the bed. This time she lay in the center of the bed to wait for him to join her.

"Yes, I'm well."

Banal conversation for a sterile transaction. Kara thought it fitting. She stared up at the ceiling, unable to meet his eye. She had to keep her mind out of the actual exchange. Once she started seeing, she might end up feeling, and that wouldn't do. She would just close her eyes and imagine Max. That was the only way to protect herself. She heard two clunks of shoes hitting the carpet, then his zipper.

She held her breath, and he climbed onto the bed, and knelt between her knees. She pinched her eyes shut when the temptation to look at him almost shook her resolve. The unfamiliar snap of a plastic cap brought her eyes to his.

"It's just a lubricant," he explained, holding up a clear tube. "Not spermicidal. I'm not going to hurt you again Kara." He still wore his white oxford shirt, but she dared not look down to see any more.

She gave him a shaky nod—not wanting to admit that she'd applied some earlier—then returned her attention to the tear-drop light fixture above the bed.

*Relax. Breathe. You can do this.*

He entered her slowly. The gel helped immensely. Only a flicker of the pain from yesterday, and she was able to relax.

Once she did, he released a long sigh, lowered his chest to hers, and buried his face in the pillow.

Her arms automatically moved to wrap around his neck, but she redirected them at



the last second, and instead gripped his arms in a less personal hold. She wanted to knead the muscles beneath his shirt. She wanted to look up at him and see him looking down at her.

*No, Max. I want to see Max's face hovering over me.*

She pushed her cheek into the pillow, and squeezed her eyes shut. Her body, not understanding the message from her brain, relaxed and loosened around him.

He moved inside her, keeping his movements smooth and fluid, his strokes long and deliberate. The first stirrings of desire confused her, and then scared her. One flutter in her channel, and Kara gasped.

Derek's breath rushed beneath the collar of her robe, over her shoulder, and down her back. When the steady rhythm stalled, he tensed, then shuddered, and without a sound, filled her with the seed she'd had to expose her scarred soul to receive.

He lingered inside her for a moment. Kara gathered handfuls of his shirtsleeves to keep herself from wrapping him up and kissing him breathless. That was her heart talking again. It was a good thing she had such control.

\* \* \* \*

Third time is a charm.

Kara dropped her briefcase to the floor, and her purse in the chair.

This would be their last meeting of the month. If she was lucky, their last meeting period. She shut the drapes, and lit the lamp. It wasn't that bad. Yesterday's session had almost been pleasant. Even the slight smile Derek gave her before pulling out and delivering another cool washcloth was better than the stricken look he'd left her with after their first attempt. The pleasure that unwound moments before his climax gave Kara hope. Perhaps her mind couldn't forget the love of her life, but maybe her body was able to feel again.

Today, at his knock on the door, Kara felt good enough to greet him with a smile. He noticed, and from the hotel hallway, smiled back. A warm smile that made her glad she'd chosen him.

"Hi." He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

"Hi."

"How was your day?"

Kara's smile dissolved. *Too personal. Don't let him get to you. You'll never see him again.* "Fine, thank you." Her words sounded stilted and formal, even to her own ears.

She heard his sigh, even though she'd turned her back on him and took her place on the bed.

Like before, he removed his shoes underwear and pants, but left his shirt on, the tails framing his manhood.

Kara quickly looked away, and found her favorite spot on the ceiling, where two globs of popcorn stuck together and made an abstract heart shape.

She didn't want to admire his body. She didn't even want to see it. Just knowing how he felt buried inside her was enough to torment her when she lay awake at night, staring at the empty side of her bed.

The familiar click of the plastic cap, a bit of adjusting and he slipped inside her. Kara bit back a moan. Any remnant of soreness from before was gone. His entry was nothing but one long stroke of pleasure.

He released a long hot breath against her neck, and she wondered if he felt the difference too. She focused on her breathing, trying to steady it, hoping she wouldn't give anything away, even though each long draw inside her sent swirling tendrils of feeling through her core and into her heart.

Involuntarily, Kara's hips surged against his. Derek swore beneath his breath, but against her ear, so she heard it clearly. After a few more strokes, she did it again. His shuddering moan was enough incentive, but when he pressed his lips against the curve of her neck, she wrapped her arms around his back for the first time, and held him close. Damn it, she hadn't wanted to do that, but it felt so natural. And for Christ's sake, it felt so good. Couldn't she let her heart out to play?

Another curse, and his movements quickened. He pulled back, and just in time, Kara averted her gaze before he could see her emotions.

Just as her body readied, on the brink of a warm completion, Derek lowered himself again, and pulsed inside her.

Kara panted, more worn out this time than the others, yet still feeling a rush of energy that could have sent her running a five-kilometer race.

She recognized the source of her frustration, and stifled a whimper.

Derek was here, doing his job. That was it. *Focus Kara. Heart not head. Wait ... head not heart.*

She let her arms drop from his neck, and again faced the window, only to clamp her eyelids closed.

He lingered inside her longer than before, and she could have sworn she felt his lips move across her neck, but it might have been just the movement of air due to his exhale.

She knew when he lifted his head, and she knew that he stared at her, but she refused to move.

Again, he slipped free, and made a trip to the sink to bring her a washcloth on his way out. This time, he paused by the door.

"Will you let me know either way?" His gruff voice carried in the silent room.

Kara rolled her head to face him. He was beautiful. He'd put himself back together in the bathroom as usual, his tie askew but tied, his white shirt now neatly tucked into his buckled slacks. It was his dark expression that gave her pause. Try as she might, she couldn't identify it, the tight lips, the slack cheeks, and the intense sadness in his eyes didn't add up to anything she'd seen there before.

Kara nodded. "I will. Goodbye, Derek."

She hated the desolation in her words, and tried to soften them with a smile, though as shaky as it was, she shouldn't have bothered.

"Goodbye, Kara."

Kara waited for the door to close behind him, and even gave him time to make it to the elevator before she gave in to an uncharacteristic bout of spontaneous emotional release and screamed into the firm hotel pillow.

*Please God, let these sessions take.* She didn't think she could bear to do it again next month. No matter how much she wanted to remain detached, Derek Martinez had wormed his way into her off-limits heart. Each time she saw him for his bodily fluid exchange, she found herself wanting more. Hadn't she told herself that this would happen? Maybe some women could have NSA sex without thinking twice. Maybe even Kris could do this. How, she didn't know. For Kara, sex would always go hand in hand

with love.

All she could do now was hope that she wouldn't have to put herself through another string of these emotionless exchanges.

\* \* \* \*

Kara buried her face in her hands. Two days after her missed period, and following forty-eight hours of giddy anticipation, her menses had begun. All day she felt twinges, so she shouldn't have been surprised, but still she came home from work and discovered she hadn't conceived, so she changed into flannel pink checkered pajamas, sat on the edge of her bed, and cried.

She knew she shouldn't have gotten her hopes up. Before she began this adventure she had counted on months of treatments. This wasn't the end, just the beginning. She knew this, but it didn't make it any easier.

Derek would have to know.

Her heart skipped a beat, just as it did every time the man crossed her mind. Two more weeks and she'd have to schedule another three-part tryst with him, and hope like hell she could keep her emotions out of it.

She grabbed her phone, and dialed his number. As much as she didn't want to like the guy, Kara discovered that the first person she wanted to share her bad news with was Derek Martinez.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Derek, it's Kara Sorrento." Thank God her voice was steady.

"Of course. How are you?" His voice soothed her. Even with the tension behind it. He had to have been expecting her call any day now. Perhaps he would be just as disappointed as she. It did call for another chunk of time out of his life.

"I'm well. I just called to let you know that it..." Didn't work? Failed? God, she hated that word. She swallowed through the burning behind her eyes, and steadied herself. "I'm not pregnant."

He was silent for so long, she wondered what he could possibly be thinking. Finally he cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Kara. I'm sure you're disappointed."

The words shouldn't have made her feel worse, but for some reason she choked back a sob, and couldn't answer him.

"Kara? Are you okay?"

She took the phone away from her ear completely, and pressed it against her chest. She didn't want him to hear her cry. His voice came through the earpiece. She couldn't decipher his words, so she put the phone back to her ear.

"I'm fine." She knew her misery sounded loud and clear. Why didn't she wait to call him? "I just wanted you to know." Her voice cracked, and she couldn't control her tears, so she just swiped them away.

"Are you at home?"

"Yes. I just found out." She sniffed, and reached for some Kleenex. "I'll call you in a few days to schedule the next..."

"Can I come over?"

The suggestion should have scared the desolation right out of her, but the tenderness in his voice only made it worse. "I'm ... not really up for company."

"You don't have to entertain me. I was out dropping off my dry cleaning anyway. I'm

about ten blocks away."

"I'm okay, Derek. You don't need to..."

"I want to. If you don't need me there, at least let me come over for my sake."

"I don't know. I'm not..."

"Please."

Kara didn't know if it was a good idea or not, but deep down she didn't want to be alone. If he was offering his shoulder, she'd use it as a tear-blotter.

"All right."

"I'll be right there."

Kara barely had time to wash the mascara stripes from her cheeks before her doorbell rang.

Feeling very self-conscious in her pajamas and sans makeup, she swallowed her pride and opened the door to him.

He was dressed for work, much like he was during their afternoon sperm-exchanges. Today's shirt was a pale blue, and his tie was missing. With four buttons undone at his neck, she saw his rapid breathing clearly.

"Hello." She stepped back to let him walk inside.

"Hi." His greeting was much more intimate than hers, even by merely shortening that one word.

She stared at the buttons on his shirt, trying to keep her reddened eyes from view. She didn't know what to say, and the awkward silence stretched out interminably.

"I'm sorry, Kara."

She dropped her head and a quiet sob escaped before she could stop it. Derek groaned, and in an instant she was enfolded in two strong arms, and the dam broke.

He walked her over to the couch, and sat her on his lap. He rocked her, stroked her back, and kissed the top of her head, almost like she was a lost child. She cried as quietly as she could, and he held her throughout each shudder. She gripped onto the thick fabric of his shirt until her tears dried, and she sniffed.

He snatched two tissues from the box on the table beside them, and handed them to her. After drying her tears, and blowing her nose in a most unladylike manner, she felt better. She slipped from his lap to throw the Kleenex away.

"Sorry about that."

He pulled her back against him, and she didn't protest. In fact she snuggled to his side, and closed her eyes, enjoying the peace he brought her.

"There's no reason to be sorry. You had your heart set on something that didn't pan out. You're bound to be upset." He rubbed her arm, and his mouth moved against her hair. "There's nothing wrong with letting someone help you through a difficult time." His voice rumbled against her cheek, and she couldn't believe it when she felt herself smile.

She sighed. "Thank you."

"My pleasure." He stroked her bare arm, infusing her with his warmth. "I wanted to talk to you anyway."

He could talk all he wanted. She was content to listen from her place curled up beside him.

"Oh?"

"I need to tell you about my friends, John and Tyler." Derek spoke as though they sat on a couch like this every evening. "It was John you saw me with at Candi's Cafe that

day. Hey..." He pulled back to look down at her. "Did you think I was the one who cheated on him?"

Kara gave him a guilty look and nodded. "Like you said, I didn't hear the whole conversation. I'm so sorry."

He pulled her back against his side and laughed, a low chuckle that she felt against her arm. "I didn't stop to think about what you thought that day. But yes, Tyler did cheat on John. They both work for me. John in the mail room, and Tyler is one of the graphic artists. They were planning their commitment ceremony, with invitations, showers, and everything. When I saw that something was affecting Tyler's work, I took him out to lunch. He told me how he'd met some guy at a bar and went home with him." He shifted her closer against him, if that was possible. She'd all but melted into him as it was. "So, long story short, the two broke up, and I'm stuck with their present."

"Oh." Kara wasn't sure where he was going with this, but she played along. "Can't you return it?"

"What actually happened was I gave Tyler my frequent flyer miles, and he cashed them in on a trip to Cancun, Mexico. One of the restrictions on redeeming those points is that you're stuck with what you buy."

"Okay ... so what are you going to do?"

"Well, on Friday morning, I'm flying to Cancun. I want you to go with me."

Kara sat upright, and faced him. "What?"

"It's a weekend trip, neither of them wanted to take off of work, so they wanted a long weekend. Cancun is a short flight." He spoke calmly, and he looked serious, which was odd, considering the off-the-wall proposition he had just made. "Fly out at ten a.m., fly home Sunday at seven p.m. Of course, you'll need to take Friday off, do you think..."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course. The tickets are non-refundable, and I don't want to waste them. I also sprung for a two bedroom suite that I was told sleeps six. From the pictures, it looks like a great location, huge swimming pool, right on the beach..."

"But ... I can't go to Cancun with you!"

"Why not?"

Kara opened her mouth, then shut it when her planned words would make her sound like an old fuddy-duddy prude. She looked around her empty living room, hoping for a way out of this. As if someone would pop out from behind Max's lazy boy and tell her she was on a hidden-camera television show. "I can't just take a day off from work for no reason..."

Even to her ears that sounded lame, but maybe it would buy her time.

"Call in sick." He dragged her back against him.

"I can't do that!" She didn't struggle.

"Why not?"

"My GM is a friend of mine. I couldn't lie to him."

"Good. Then tell him the truth. You have the opportunity to go to Cancun for the weekend, and you'll see him on Monday."

"But..."

"Am I going to have to call your sister?"

Well, that shut her up. Without thinking, Kara glanced over at the picture of Kris that sat in a Mickey Mouse frame on her mantle. Her silly smile as she tried to look like

Goofy, the character who had his big felt arm around her shoulders. She knew what Kris would do, and she knew what Kris would say when she found out she turned down a weekend getaway to Cancun, Mexico.

"I ... guess I could ask." She glowered at Kris's image across the room.

"Good girl. We're getting somewhere. But don't think that I'm using this trip to get you into my bed."

Why did she suddenly feel disappointed? That had to be *relief*. That's it.

"There are two bedrooms. You'll be my totally platonic guest for the weekend. Just a friend sharing a suite. I won't try anything. I promise, okay?"

She trusted him. The problem was, she didn't quite trust herself.

## Chapter Five

"I'm so proud of you. You're acting like..."

"Like you?" Kara stuck her tongue out at Kris who lay on Kara's bed, and hadn't picked her chin up off of her fists.

Krista watched her sister with a dreamy faraway look. "Yeah, like me. It's great."

"Great, yeah. I still can't believe I agreed to this." Kara couldn't decide between her fuzzy pink bathrobe, and her silky red kimono, so she packed them both.

"Wait, what the hell are you doing?" Kris crawled over to Kara's suitcase and started to rifle through it.

"Packing. Stop it!" Kara slapped her sister's hands away. "You're wrinkling everything."

"You can't go to Cancun with this crap! Huh uh. I can't let you." She pulled out the pink fuzzy robe. "You're kidding me."

"I like that robe!"

"Kara, this robe isn't even suitable for Atlanta. I have no doubt that you got this on the internet somewhere, because they don't sell robes thick enough to go snow skiing in around here."

Kara turned away, and pulled open another drawer. She did get it off of the internet. It looked so soft and cozy. "Fine, I'll use the red one."

"A one piece?"

Kara spun back around, to see her green swimming suit dangling from Kris's thumb and forefinger, as if it were contaminated and contagious.

"That's all I have. If you're not going to help, you can just go."

"Oh I'm helping all right." Kris dumped her almost full suitcase back onto the bed. "I thought you said you went shopping for the trip. All I see is your old crappy wardrobe."

"Thanks a lot..."

"You didn't even buy a new pair of shorts? What did you buy?"

"You know, chewing gum, travel-sized shampoo, deodorant..."

Kris let out a string of curse words that would have made their mother swoon, then grabbed Kara's elbow and pulled her out the door. "You might not give a crap about what you look like, but as your sister, I'd be embarrassed as hell if you showed up on the beach wearing that..."

"I don't have time to go shopping. I have a hair appointment in an hour, remember? You made it."

"Even better. I'll take your credit card, and that way you can't fight with me about what I'm buying. That will save time." Kris shoved her into the passenger side of her car, and stomped around the hood before dropping into the driver's seat, mumbling under her breath.

Kara didn't say a word. This was Kris's territory. Kara would just have to trust her sister. Still, while she was getting a haircut, manicure and pedicure, she wondered what Kris was doing with her credit card.

Pushing that thought aside, she instead went back to her favorite daydream, Derek Martinez.

That night at her house, he'd stayed for almost an hour. They talked about his job, and how he'd been interested in the promotional aspects of marketing since middle school. "I would come up with all these ideas, then delegate all the work to my classmates. Student Council elections and Homecoming were my favorite times of the year. I'd get to make posters and videos. I don't think any one of my classmates is surprised by my career choice."

She wasn't surprised either. Already he'd managed to not only sell her on sex until she got pregnant, but now a weekend trip to Mexico with him.

Alone.

He didn't move his arm from her shoulders until he kissed her forehead goodbye. She felt the absence of his body heat for the rest of the night, but she did sleep soundly for the first time that week.

The next day he sent an email asking if she spoke to her boss. She replied that yes she had, and she was able to secure a vacation day for that Friday. She didn't mention how excited Casey was, or how his wife Selena called half an hour later to gush and cheer.

Wednesday he sent an email with a picture of the resort where they'd be staying. Even though she should have felt guilty about doing so on the hotel's time, she clicked through the virtual tour, and got more excited with each amenity revealed. And there were two bedrooms.

Now here it was, Thursday afternoon, and she still hadn't packed. She hoped Kris didn't go too crazy.

\* \* \* \*

"You went crazy!" Kara pulled bag after bag out of the trunk. "It's a weekend trip, for God's sake. Two nights, two days. How much did you spend?"

"I didn't max out your credit card." Kris snapped her chewing gum and winked. "At least I don't think so, they kept accepting it."

"I'm taking most of this back." She fumbled through her front door.

Kris closed it behind her, and dropped the bags where she stood. "You can't. I threw away the receipts."

"Kris!"

"I know! Shopping with someone else's money is a lot of fun. You got me a really nice skirt too, so thanks." She pulled a pair of denim shorts out of one bag and offered them up to Kara for her approval.

They were way too short, too sexy, and something that Kris would wear. Kara rubbed her temples, and flopped down onto the couch. "You're fired. You can no longer be my sister."

"Tough. You're bound by DNA. You wanna try this stuff on, or just pack it?"

Kara didn't have the energy to argue. Sometimes it was just easier to let Kris take over and bulldoze her way. "I'm making dinner," she groaned.

Kris didn't seem to hear the frustration in Kara's voice. "Great! You feed me, and I'll pack you." She flounced out of the room, dragging a load of her purchases behind her.

Kara threw together a quick stir fry, cursing her sister, her huge credit limit, and most of all her own weakness. If she really wanted to, she could put her foot down, send Kris home, and pack her comfortably long shorts, and her fuzzy pink robe. But whether



she wanted to admit it or not, Kara needed Kris's help. Maybe if she wasn't dressed like Kara Sorrento, she wouldn't feel like Kara Sorrento, and maybe she wouldn't act like she would rather be at home with a good book. For one weekend in her life, Kara was determined to let loose and enjoy herself. A weekend in a Mexican resort with Derek wouldn't be too traumatic.

Yeah right.

"You're packed. I put the outfits in together, so don't try to mix and match, you'll screw up my system." Kris sat down at the kitchen island, and tore off a paper towel to wipe up a splatter of peanut oil.

"I can always unpack everything once you leave and go back to my original wardrobe." Kara dished up the rice and stir fry, and handed it to Kris.

"You can try, but I just locked your old crap up in my car. It's going to goodwill on the way home."

Kara's fork clattered against her plate. "Kris!"

"I know, right? I'm a freaking genius! And you ... so charitable and stuff." She shoveled a forkful into her smirking mouth. "Mm, this is good."

Kara took a deep breath. Twice. "I hate you."

"Yeah, I know. I hate you too."

\* \* \* \*

Derek white-knuckled the armrest that separated him from Kara. Not because he was afraid of flying as she probably assumed, but more to keep himself from reaching out to touch her. He'd told her this trip would be platonic, and he'd do his best to keep it that way. God, it was hard though. Did she have to wear that perfume?

He shifted in his seat. If he could tear his eyes away from her bare legs, he wouldn't have to keep the *SkyMall* magazine on his lap.

"I don't see a single cloud in the sky." Kara had leaned away from him, and craned her neck to look through the tiny window. Her position highlighted the curve of her hip, and it was all Derek could do to stifle his groan. "Looks like a great weekend."

"Yeah," he agreed. "I checked the forecast before we left; it should be clear through Sunday."

She should wear shorts more often. She had gorgeous legs. He wasn't able to touch them near enough when he had her beneath him in bed. He was still reeling from that final insemination attempt. He swore that he could feel the ice melting inside her. Maybe just a little bit. When her arms wrapped around him, he was a goner. He had to bury his face in that hotel pillow to keep from kissing her. Not only because he knew she wouldn't want that degree of intimacy, but also he couldn't bear to see her face turned away as it had been before.

*God damn it.* He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He needed to stop thinking about that. Maybe this weekend wasn't such a good idea. He was bound to embarrass himself sooner or later. She certainly wasn't the type of woman who would be flattered by a man's attention.

"Are you okay?"

Derek pulled his hands away from his face to find Kara looking at him curiously.

"Yeah, just fine." He hoped his smile wasn't as cardboard on the outside. "My eyes dried out I guess."

She glanced at the magazine on his lap, and his heart seized. He reached down to adjust it as casually as he could.

"Any interesting gadgets in there?"

*Head out of the gutter, Martinez.* "Lots of things I didn't know I couldn't live without."

She smiled. A real, genuine smile. Her face glowed, and every cell in his body responded. He returned her smile, but the *SkyMall* cover was destroyed in his fists.

Okay, maybe this weekend *was* a good idea. He was going to expose that woman behind the wall, even though it might kill him.

\* \* \* \*

Kara stepped out of the shuttle van and craned her neck to see the top of the hotel. The white adobe reflected the early afternoon sun, the brilliance contrasting against the deep blue sky. Two other identical hotels flanked the one she stood before. The scent of the ocean wafted along the gentle breeze, filling her with excitement of the upcoming weekend.

"Do you like it?" Derek came up behind her, and spoke into her ear. His wide chest brushed against her back.

"It's beautiful." Kara knew from their conversation on the plane that this was his first time in Cancun as well.

The bellman arrived with a luggage cart, and he and the driver unloaded the luggage.

Derek took her hand, and they walked into the huge open lobby.

Tropical plants thrived in the sunlit area, making Kara feel like she wasn't indoors at all. She let Derek handle the details at the front desk, since he spoke fluent Spanish.

"Let's get settled into the room, then we'll come down and explore." Derek handed her a keycard, then tucked her hand in the crook of his arm, and with an encouraging wink, followed the bellman to their room.

Kara had been in her fair share of hotels. She'd traveled quite a bit when she first started working for the Tate Hotel, and was frequently set up in competitor's hotels while another Tate was under construction. She'd never been in a room that reminded her more of a condominium than a hotel room. The kitchen was almost as big as the one in her first apartment in college, a full refrigerator, two-burner stove, and microwave. A round table dominated the dining area, and behind that the main living area was large enough for a couch and armchair. The far wall wasn't a wall, but huge sliding doors that opened up to a good-sized private balcony.

"Looks like they want us to stay a while," Derek said, closing the door behind the bellman, and tucking his wallet back into his pocket.

"It's very nice. John and Tyler don't know what they're missing." She walked through the rest of the space. The smaller bedroom was the first door in a tiny hallway. Two double beds, and a huge picture window, otherwise not much to speak of. A vanity area outside of a blue-tiled bathroom, a closet ... and then the master bedroom.

The headboard was the first thing that caught her eye. A rattan palm tree cut-out design, and the rich dark color contrasted against the white walls. Like the front room, the far wall was all glass, and there was another sliding door leading to the balcony.

"Let's get unpacked." Derek lifted her suitcase onto the bed. "Then we have to eat something. That snack on the plane isn't going to do it for me."

"Wait." She stopped him before he disappeared through the door. "You stay in this room, I'll take the smaller one." She pulled her luggage off of the bed, and wheeled it toward the door. When he opened his mouth to argue, she threw up her hand. "You've got a foot and at least a hundred pounds on me. You take the king-sized bed. I'll be fine next door. Now, chop chop. I'm hungry too."

His chuckle followed her into the smaller bedroom, and the sound made her smile.

She unpacked quickly, careful to keep her outfits together, after scrutinizing them first. Nothing too outrageous, just four pairs of shorts in varying lengths and fabrics, a few slacks, and various tops, from tee shirts that looked way too small, to silk blouses that looked way too expensive. At the bottom of her suitcase, rolled into a neat little cigar shape, Kara found a silky teal dress. She shook out the wrinkles, and held it up to her shoulders.

Maybe she wouldn't kill her sister after all. This dress was beautiful in its simplicity, and the color was one of her favorites. She hung it in the closet, promising herself she'd try it on later, and hoping to God she had a reason to wear it this weekend.

She stared out the window, tracing the edge of the beach against the pane. The ocean was a beautiful shade of blue, clear and warm looking. The curving pool wound around a brick deck, lined with blue chaise lounge chairs, white umbrellas, and potted trees for shade. The three identical buildings that made up the hotel arched around the pool area, open to the white sand of the Cancun beach. Everything about the scene gave Kara a welcome serene feeling.

"Are you glad you came?" Derek's voice from the doorway startled her, and she jumped back from the window. He'd changed into a pair of shorts and sport sandals. If she didn't know that he was thirty-four years old, she would have thought that he was a spring break college student who missed his flight home, or maybe even a native Mexican.

"Yes, very. I haven't taken a vacation in years. I hope I can remember how to relax." She turned back to the window. "It's a beautiful place. Look how clear the ocean is."

He crossed the room, his footsteps silent on the plush carpeting, until he stood beside her. "It sure is a nice view."

Kara didn't have to face him to know that he wasn't looking at the ocean. His face was so close to hers, she could feel his breath on her temple. Although the warning bells still sounded, they were now comfortably deep in the recess of her mind, and she was able to instead listen to Krista's voice.

*Relax, Kara. You aren't cheating on anyone.*

Kara sighed, and even edged closer to him when he put his arm around her. "We could take one of those glass-bottomed boat trips." He stroked her bare shoulder and upper arm. His hand should have warmed her skin, instead goose bumps broke out all over her body. "I also want to go parasailing, what do you think?"

She thought he was crazy, that's what. "I'll try to watch, but I'm not promising anything."

"Watch? No, I want you to go with me. They have tandem rides, where they strap us together." He moved her in front of him, pressed his front into her back, and wrapped his arms around her collarbone. "It's very safe. I've done it before..."

"No way. My feet stay planted. I would get dizzy just watching you up there." She was surprised to see that she could still speak calmly, even though his broad chest against

her back made her want to melt.

"I'm really good at talking people into things," he taunted. "Especially when I know they would end up enjoying them."

Lord, didn't she know it? The very fact that she was standing there was due to his manipulation. She was glad he couldn't see her naughty smile. "So you know what's best for everyone, do you?"

"That's right. It comes with my Type-A personality. You'd do better to just agree with me to begin with."

When was the last time she joked around with a man? Other than Casey? Even the front desk staff didn't tease her like they did everyone else. She never let it bother her, though she noticed the way everyone snapped to attention when she walked by. It was fine with her, saved a lot of time every day, and she wasn't one to open up and share things with people anyway.

"You're a bully?"

He turned her around, keeping her close. "I'm not a bully." His voice was low and tender, and he looked into her eyes with an honest intensity that made her shiver. "If I ever do anything that makes you uncomfortable, you can tell me."

She stared up at him, wondering how such a good-looking guy could actually be so down to earth and gentle. When she didn't respond, he raised his eyebrows, and she nodded in agreement.

His gaze danced across her face, caressing each feature with those dark brown eyes, then he reached up and the tips of his long fingers followed the path his eyes had forged. Never before had Kara felt so treasured and cherished. Her throat tightened, and she had to lower her chin to swallow the lump that formed. He cupped her head in his strong hand, and tucked her beneath his chin.

"I don't want to hurt you. That first day ... in the hotel ... I felt like shit afterwards. The only thing that brought me back the next day was that damn contract, and the thought that if I called it quits it would hurt you even more." His voice dropped another decibel. "The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you, and I'll never do it again. Trust me on that." He spoke against her crown, his warm breath filtering through her hair.

Kara did trust him. His worthiness was evident in his embrace. She reveled in the way he made her feel protected and so very feminine against him. That scent that was uniquely him, sending a tickle through her blood, making her hold on to his shirt near the small of his back in two tight handfuls.

"I trust you."

He groaned, then tilted her head up until he captured her lips with his. Kara's mind raced, and the only thing she could focus on was the fact that they'd had sex three times, and this was their first kiss. It started with his warm mouth, and worked its way down through her body, shimmering with heat at every point where they touched. And they touched everywhere they could. From knees to chest, to the intimate way his tongue plundered her mouth. Still she wanted more. She stepped closer, meshing her body against his, and he groaned against her mouth.

His talented tongue danced with hers, drawing it into the mischievous play, so she could taste the warm saltiness of his lips. Just when she started to lose all sense of who she was and where they were, he pulled away.

"Is this okay?"

She blinked up at him. "What?"

"I just told you that you could trust me, and then I kissed you without permission. Is it okay?"

Was it? A kiss did lead to a more personal involvement than she was prepared for. Kara licked her lips as she pondered his question, but with the taste of him on her tongue, she couldn't really think straight. She wasn't able to form words, but she did nod, and she didn't back away from him.

He made a low grumbling sound, and kissed her again, drawing her even closer against him than before. Kara's eyes slid closed, and she was vaguely aware of a whimpering moan escaping her throat. She wasn't used to kisses like this. Kisses that involved not only her lips and tongue, but also everywhere that he touched her. Each breath he took contracted his chest against hers. Muscles rippled in his thighs when he took a step closer, and his fingers trailed a lazy path up her back and into her hair consuming all her senses.

He broke away, leaving small nipping kisses on each lip, then nuzzled her nose with his. "Let's go. I'm hungry."

She stumbled behind him. Was there a problem with their air conditioning? Derek seemed quite comfortable.

They ate a quick lunch in one of the resort's restaurants, and then took a long walk on the beach. Kara slipped off her sandals and she couldn't believe how warm the water was. Even the fine sand massaged the soles of her feet with each step.

Derek took her free hand. "When was your last vacation?"

Her first impulse was to clam up. She didn't take time off. The Tate allowed for a cash payout on vacation time, and for the last three years she'd taken the money and put it into the bank. "I took some time off after Max died." Kara looked out across the ocean at the setting sun. The orange rays left a swirling pattern of color on the water's surface. "Two weeks was all I could stand." She glanced at him, feeling a little embarrassed for divulging so much personal information, but he looked genuinely interested, so she continued. "I don't know what I would have done without Krista and my mother. They made sure I ate, and even took care of the funeral details. After those two weeks though, I found I couldn't sit at home and mope around anymore."

Kara remembered that first week back at work as the worst. The co-workers that were able to say anything at all ended up stumbling over their condolences, and she'd end up irritated. The rest would avoid her, not wanting to say the wrong thing. Not long afterwards, Kara took off her wedding ring, and applied at the Tate, where she was able to begin anew. As far as her fellow employees knew, she'd never been married. They probably thought she was a frigid bitch. Or a stuck-up lesbian by the way she brushed off any date invitations.

It didn't matter. She wasn't at the Tate to make friends. It was a job, and she did it well. The sales awards on her office wall would attest to that.

"You're frowning." He smoothed the wrinkle between her eyebrows with one long finger.

She glanced up at him, and was able to give him a shaky smile. "More proof of my humanity?" Each step she made in the sand caused her to shift closer to his side.

"You have a good memory." He grinned. "Superheroes can smile too you know." He stopped, and twirled her in front of him. "Now that I've kissed you, I know that you're a

real woman." Adjusting his body, he settled comfortably against her. "Robots can't kiss like that."

She didn't realize that her face had tightened until he lifted an eyebrow.

"I'm teasing you."

"I know," she whispered back, relaxing her lips into a smile. "I'll get used to it eventually."

"I hope so. You're beautiful when you smile. You should do it more often."

She opened her mouth, but closed it again without uttering a word. What could she say? There were times when she caught herself smiling, then immediately felt the stab of guilt. As if she shouldn't be smiling when Max wasn't around. As if her happiness would somehow erase his memory. Krista's voice again invaded her mind. *Max wouldn't want you to be unhappy.*

"Still feel the guilt, huh?"

His soft words were unexpected. Her eyes snapped up to his. Did she say something out loud?

He shrugged. "Just a guess. You're a very loyal woman. I could tell by the pictures of your family on your mantle. I'm betting you still keep in touch with at least one high school teacher."

Her face bloomed with heat. She actually had two teachers that were on her Christmas-card list. "I'll never tell."

He laughed, and kissed the end of her nose. "Were you a cheerleader or a geek?"

"Neither. I was the captain of the debate team," she said proudly.

"Geek."

Her mouth dropped open. "I was *not* a geek!"

"What was your GPA when you graduated?"

"Three point eight five."

"See now, if you weren't a geek, you wouldn't even know that."

"That's not true..."

"But you weren't a cheerleader?"

"No..."

"Let me guess," he interrupted. "You had three good friends in high school, one that you still talk to because you were friends since third grade. One boyfriend who went off to college before you, and you two broke up when he met someone else."

Good Lord, how did he do that? Kara leaned back against his arms, and looked him up and down.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

He looked way too smug. She couldn't give him that over her. "Not quite."

"Uh huh. I've got you pegged." He laughed, and tucked her back against him, and continued to walk along the beach.

"No," she insisted. "You're wrong. Caitlin and I have been friends since second grade, not third."

She liked his laugh. She even liked the fact that she said something to cause that rumbling sound of joy against her ear. Even though her smile faltered a bit when Max's face flashed in her mind, she focused on the image of Max smiling, and she relaxed.

"Look!" Derek pointed across the ocean, where a boat sped by. Secured by a white rope—which looked way too thin in Kara's mind—was a parasailer. Even from his great

height, they could hear his whoops of excitement. "You can't tell me that that doesn't look like a good time. Does he look scared?"

"No, but he does look crazy. I'm betting he has some deep-seated thrill issues. He was probably born on a rollercoaster, and his mother let him play with knives."

He laughed. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"The cable could snap." Kara didn't waste a second in answering.

"Unlikely, but you're attached to a parachute, you could just float to the ground."

"Or blow away to Florida."

She wasn't joking, but he laughed again anyway. "I'm gonna get you up there with me," he said confidently.

"Don't bet on it."

"I'm not a gambling man." He tilted her head up and kissed her lightly. "I only go for the sure things."

She would have responded, but he kept her mouth busy with long deep kisses. As good as he was about distracting her, she hoped she had her wits about her when the parasail was before her.

Kara realized that anyone who happened to see them as they were on the beach would think them two lovers. Honeymooners maybe. The ocean breeze blew around her ankles, and the warm sand shifted between her toes. All while Derek Martinez devoured her mouth. For the life of her, she couldn't push him away.

"I know I told you that I would keep my hands off of you on this trip, but I'm finding it a little difficult." His lips brushed her cheekbone and settled against her temple. "Come on. I promised to bring my nephews some souvenirs."

It was a short walk to the outdoor pavilion where local craftsmen showcased their wares. The streets of Cancun were filled with exotic aromas and pushy salespeople. Although they would often ignore them, sometimes Derek would respond with a polite "gracias, no". Kara wasn't sure if it was Derek's ability to speak the language, or if he was a natural barterer, but he was able to come away with some pretty good deals, if her conversion math was correct. He ended up with two marionettes, one for each of his nephews, and a sterling bangle bracelet for their mother, his sister. "Remind me to pick up a bottle of tequila for my brother-in-law." He shifted the purchases into his other hand so that he could hold hers. "It's a good thing I didn't tell the whole family where I was going, or we'd spend our entire trip shopping for gifts."

"You have a big family?"

"Not too big. Three brothers and a sister."

That seemed big to her. "Do they all live in Atlanta?"

"Just my sister is left. My brothers each joined the Marines right out of high school. They got shipped all over the globe, and each one settled in different corners of the country. Two are married with kids. My parents just moved into a little retirement community last year."

Kara was a little jealous of Derek's big family. Although she never could see herself as the mother of five, she would have liked to have grown up with four permanent playmates and confidants. "And you grew up in Atlanta?"

"Well, Sandy Springs, but yeah. You?"

"Dallas, Texas. Growing up, I couldn't wait to travel the country until I found the perfect place to settle down. I met Max." She stumbled over his name, but hurried on. "I

met him when I moved to Atlanta for college, and we never did leave the area."

"Life throws you sometimes, doesn't it? For a while there I wanted to move to Alaska."

"Alaska?"

"Yeah. I think it was during one year that we had a hundred-and-twenty degree heat index."

She laughed. "What changed your mind?"

"I got a job. Then car payments, mortgage..." He shrugged. "I'm pretty happy in Georgia. I'd like to visit Alaska one of these days though."

Even though the heat and humidity made their hands slick, he didn't release her, and frankly she didn't want him to. City life rolled around them, the sounds of children playing and traffic roaring past. Not far from their hotel, they came across a restaurant. The smells wafting through the doorway were enough to make Kara look at the place with interest. A well-dressed couple walked in, greeted by a tuxedoed maitre d'.

"Something smells good." Derek followed her gaze. "Should we try it out tomorrow?"

Kara thought about the beautiful dress hanging in the hotel closet, and smiled up at him. "I'd like that."

They stopped by the front desk, and flipped through the rack of leaflets. Kara gravitated toward the guided tours, while Derek pointed out the more adventurous activities. She assured him that there was no way she was strapping on a parasail, but he just shrugged, and took the pamphlet anyway.

"The ancient ruins would take an entire day," she said with a pout. "Too bad we don't have more time."

"We have all day tomorrow." Derek punched the button on the elevator. "How about wasting the rest of the afternoon by the beach, and we'll decide there?"

Kara thought that was a good idea, especially knowing that she'd get to see Derek in nothing but swim trunks. Then she remembered the bikini that Kris bought. It wasn't anything fancy, just a black two-piece with a subtle black shimmering stripe. Was she ready to walk around half naked in front of Derek? Even with the sheer white beach cover-up that probably set her back sixty dollars?

Strange that she'd already been more intimate with this man than any other alive, yet she was still nervous about showing him her body.

Derek unlocked their suite door and stood back to allow her to enter before him. He grabbed two plastic bottles of water, passed one to her, and drank his down in one long go. The way his mouth closed over the bottle, and the angle of his head, gave her a new appreciation for his physical perfection.

Oh yeah. He knew he was sexy. Even that cockiness that should have turned her off merely sent a shiver down her spine. She wanted to feel every inch of him, starting with the rough skin on his jaw, where the dark stubble was forming, down to the smooth tight skin of his neck where it met the curve of his shoulder. Her mouth watered at the thought of following the path with her tongue. She almost reached out to touch his neck when he brought the empty bottle down, and caught her staring. She flushed, again blaming the air conditioning, but she was unable to look away, even when he grinned that cocky way, and winked.

She drank from her own bottle, then hurried from the room.



## Chapter Six

"I could get used to this," Kara sighed, and adjusted her sunglasses. Her glass of iced tea never reached the half-way mark; the waiters kept it and Derek's lemonade full.

"I know what you mean. Maybe we should just spend the entire weekend right here in these chairs."

If it kept her out of the sky, Kara was game. "I wouldn't complain."

"I bet you don't slow down much."

"And you do?" Kara grinned behind her dark lenses. "I know a little something about advertising as a career. I think it is listed as one of the top winners in the stress category."

"That might be true," he took a long drink through his straw, maneuvering around the stick full of skewered fruit, "but I must be the exception. To me it's fun to create an ad campaign. I get a kick out of being part of a team, and the best days are when I get to hand off the project. Some of my peers get frustrated when the project gets scrapped, or it does a complete turn-a-round, but to me that's just part of the excitement." He put one thick brown arm over his head and turned to face her. "That was years ago. I've put my hours in. Now I've got people clamoring to the top like I was."

"Oh, you're not in the trenches?"

"Only when I want to be. How about you? Feel like moving up the ladder? Running your own hotel some day?"

"No," she laughed. "Sales and operations are so different. I've got steady hours, weekends off ... I'm pretty spoiled really."

"The hours would have to be regular, with a baby on the way."

*A baby on the way.* To hear him say those words gave her a little jolt of reality. That was what she was working toward here. *A baby on the way.* Their relationship boundaries were beginning to blur. She had to remind herself that this was a business relationship. Once she saw two pink lines on that plastic stick, she'd never see him again. That was the plan. She really didn't want anything more than that. Did she? He held her stare, a sleepy smile that made him look sexier than usual. That one arm thrown as it was over his head drew her attention to his underlying strength.

"Tell me about Max."

Kara knew her face blanched. She could actually feel blood drain to her toes. He wanted to talk about Max? Max was one topic that she just didn't discuss. Never with friends, and even Kris and their mother didn't press her to talk about him. The police force sent over a counselor right after Max died. She told Kara that keeping his memory private wasn't a good practice. She told her to remember and celebrate Max's life, and not shut him away as if he never existed. Kara disregarded the woman's advice, and for the last three years it seemed to be working for her. By removing herself from her old circle of friends and changing jobs, no one was put in the uncomfortable position of reminding her of Max.

Now, lying in the sun in Cancun, Mexico, beside a virtual stranger—albeit one that she'd slept with—she was put on the spot. She couldn't very well ignore the question.

She took a deep breath. "Max was a very good man. I met him when we both attended Georgia State University." So far, so good. Derek took another drink from his

lemonade, so she gathered her courage and continued. "He waited tables at his family's Italian restaurant in Plano. His father wanted him to take over the restaurant, and when I first met him, he was on his way to do just that, but he didn't want to run a restaurant." She remembered Max telling her as much. She swallowed before continuing. "His dream was to join a SWAT team. He was an adrenaline junkie. Fast cars, extreme sports ... you name it. If he couldn't do it, he'd watch it on television. The more I got to know him, the more I realized that a man like that wasn't going to be happy as a restaurant manager. One night he came home late ... again."

Kara closed her eyes, going back to that place in time, when she and Max were young lovers, sharing their dreams and desires, sure that they had the world on a string. Max was dressed in his black suit as usual, having just left the restaurant after another double shift. Kara met him at his apartment. When he approached her perch on his cement steps, she knew he was beaten. She saw it in his weary eyes, and the way his shoulders slumped in defeat.

What followed was what haunted Kara since his death. "We talked for hours. I told him that he should follow his dream." Max didn't want to let his father down. He worried about money, security, and even Kara's role as the wife of a DEA officer. Kara countered each of his concerns until she convinced him to sit down with his father for a long talk. The very next day, and with old man Sorrento's blessing, Max applied at the police force, and started the process of becoming one of the elite SWAT members in the DEA.

"And so he did." Derek's voice startled her. She'd almost forgotten he was there, so lost in her memories was she.

"Yes. I'd never seen him so happy as the day he graduated from the Academy. I was so sure he was making the right move. We got married soon after that, and everything was going great. For the longest time, until..." She bit her bottom lip, and fought to keep the burning tears from spilling.

"What happened, Kara?" Derek stroked the back of her hand with one long finger in a tender gesture that gave her the courage to continue. She took a deep breath.

"I don't know. He changed. Slowly. He started parking down the street from the house. He wouldn't go out in public with me, he wanted to know my exact whereabouts at all times. He would call me twenty or thirty times a day. He started worrying about everything." Kara closed her eyes again, and let the sun warm her chilled skin. "He wouldn't talk about work anymore, and he refused to tell me what was bothering him. This went on for about six months. Then things got even worse. At the time I thought he was cheating on me. He'd be gone from home for days at a time. He started lying to me about ... about stupid little things. When I caught him in a lie, he'd get upset and storm out of the house for another day or so. It just kept getting worse until ... until he was killed. I never did find out what changed him."

That year was the hardest on their marriage. He rarely ventured close enough to her to even touch her, let alone kiss her. They were virtual strangers for months. Max not only shut her out, but he aged a decade. He lost weight. His eyes sank into his head, and his entire body would shudder almost like he had a constant chill.

Kara took a deep breath. She hated reminders of those few months, when the rest of their marriage was so beautiful. Once the urge to cry passed, she opened her eyes again.

Derek didn't say anything. He just took her hand in his, and watched her. Their chaise loungers were butted up against each other, and the only things that separated

them were the aluminum arms. His deep brown eyes shone with understanding and sorrow, and Kara clung to his support, even though it was only a mental lifeline he tossed her.

"Can I ask you something?" He stroked her fingers with his free hand.

Kara shifted in the chaise, and indicated that he continue with a questioning look.

"Do you feel guilty for talking him into the line of work that eventually caused his death?"

Few people knew that Kara was involved in Max's decision that night. Max's family knew, of course, which was why she hadn't seen or heard from them since the funeral. Kara suddenly felt very exposed and vulnerable in front of Derek. The man that she swore was a business contact only. Still, she couldn't help but nod in answer to his question.

"I know you work pretty hard at keeping your emotions hidden behind that tough-ass exterior," he winked, "but when you talk about Max, you change. I could see everything behind those beautiful eyes of yours. From the love you feel for him, to the pain of his death. Even the guilt when you talk about his career choice. I guess you just forgot to mask yourself there for a few minutes."

Kara looked away, but he reached out to direct her gaze back at him.

"Huh uh. Don't turn away. I'm glad you let go." His thumb moved in a lazy path beneath her lip. "It means that you're starting to trust me. You're beginning to feel comfortable enough around me that you aren't censoring every emotion from showing." He rolled onto his side, so that less than six inches separated their bodies on their respective chairs. "I've got to tell you, seeing that pain in your eyes makes me want to tear somebody apart, and I don't even care who it might be. But," he slid his hand from her chin up into her hair, "seeing the love that you had for Max there..."

She dropped her chin, and this time he let her, but in an instant his mouth was on her hair, and his words washed her temple with each hot puff of air. "It makes me wonder if that guy had any idea how damn lucky he was."

Kara's heart could easily burst, with the pressure it was pumping from behind her ribs. The conversation that had at first made her feel uncomfortable, and then guilty, now gave her a strange sense of freedom. The urge to laugh out loud was almost too much to ignore.

"I think I was the lucky one."

"Does it bother you to talk about him with me?"

She couldn't see his face. All she saw was his broad brown chest, sparsely covered with a dusting of fine dark hair. "No, it doesn't bother me. I don't talk about it much though. It ... feels good."

"Did he look like me?"

Kara pulled away, his question struck her as a little too personal, and she didn't really know why. "What...?"

"Did he look like me?" He stroked the curve of her jaw bone. "Is that why you picked me to father your child?"

She wasn't sure what to make of the question. Should she be offended? His understanding expression told her that it was safe, so she settled back on the lounge chair facing him. "Max was dark haired like you. Brown eyes. His features were ... softer than yours though, and he wasn't as tall, but ... yes. That's why I chose you." She focused on

the horizon, where the sun was sinking into the ocean. "Max and I were planning on starting a family once we moved into our new house, but it...didn't work out that way."

"I'm sorry."

Kara sighed. It did feel good to talk about Max. Even if she was talking to another man. A good-looking man. Okay, a flat out gorgeous man that she would have been all over if she weren't cynical and jaded.

She let her eyes wander across him. He was easy to talk to. He didn't pressure her for more information, and he didn't judge when she revealed what she thought might be too much. She relaxed even more, and again met his eyes.

They were a lighter brown in the sunlight. A ring of sage green that she'd never seen before surrounded his iris, and little wrinkles from squinting in the sun radiated from the outer corners. She could probably spend hours looking into these eyes, learning each fleck of color.

Her gaze slid down his long straight nose, with a slight flare to his nostrils. Even the set of his mouth was attractive. She couldn't really look at it without remembering how it moved over her own lips. She hadn't indulged in exploring each millimeter before, but now her tongue moved inside her mouth in anticipation of tasting him again. The memory of the last time they were in the hotel room back in Atlanta came unbidden to her mind, just as it had many nights since.

"Are you falling asleep?"

She saw his lips move before the words sunk in. She blinked a couple of times to get him in focus. "Oh ... maybe I am."

"Too much sun?" He reached up and smoothed her hair away from her forehead.

"We should go inside soon anyway. I want to shower before dinner."

She closed her eyes, and leaned into his caress. Perhaps she was a little bit sleepier than she thought. His fingers traced her face, so lightly that she wasn't sure that she hadn't fallen asleep and was dreaming. When the tips of his fingers grazed over her lips, she relaxed her jaw and released a long ragged breath.

"You have a beautiful mouth," he whispered, and by the warm puffs of air against her cheek, she could tell that he was very close.

She lifted heavy lids to find him hovering over her. "Thank you." She again watched his lips, and licked her own.

He muttered something under his breath, then kissed her. She didn't stop to think, she just slipped her hand under his arm and around his shoulder, reveling in the heat of his skin, and the way it stretched over the bunched muscles of his upper back. She dug her fingers into the rippling expanse, and drew him closer.

A sweet, tangy, lemony taste filled her mouth. His tongue stroked hers, and she let out a whimper that only got smothered before it turned into an all-out moan. Hovering somewhere over a dream, she indulged in the kiss. He pecked tiny kisses along the line of her jaw before returning to her mouth again and again.

She sighed dreamily, and he pulled back. His eyes were blurry due to proximity, but she could still see the intense fire behind them. Rather than release her hold on his back, she used her free hand to touch his face.

Derek pinched his eyes closed, and let out a ragged breath. When he opened them again, he grinned down at her. It was a crooked half smile, one that could have been read as either cocky or self-effacing. "I told you I love your mouth, but it's awfully distracting."

Come on." He rolled off of the lounge, and tossed his towel over a shoulder.

They decided on the casual hotel restaurant for dinner, and Derek made reservations for the following night at the Bella. While Derek was in the shower, Kara tried on her dress.

It wasn't a surprise that it fit her so well. She and Kris had been shopping partners since they could walk. What surprised her was the fact that the color brought out the extra gold in her hair, and the way that it moved around her knees when she walked. She didn't even want to think about what kind of price tag was attached to the work of art. She would find out eventually when her card statement came in.

She shook her head at her reflection. Kris was a real pain in the butt, but she still deserved a big thank you. Without her, Kara would be sitting in front of HBO right now, eating a bowl of cereal.

She returned the dress to the closet, put on the pair of dark brown capris, and then the sleeveless top that was packed with them, a sea blue crocheted knit with a matching shell. She had just finished buckling the ankle strap to her sandals when Derek knocked on her bedroom door.

He gave her an appreciative sweep of the eyes, and an approving smile before offering his arm.

She watched him through lowered lashes as they walked into the restaurant. He wore a simple pair of black slacks, and a basic white oxford shirt. Nothing special, but the cut and design showed off his muscular frame, and gave him that dashing dark hero look. When he spoke in perfect Spanish to the host, she immediately thought of Zorro, and wondered what Derek might look like in a black mask.

The thought made her giggle, and he gave her a curious look. "What's funny?"

"Nothing." She waved him off. Still, as they sat down and looked through the menu, her eyes strayed to him. He really was the perfect specimen. Great bone structure, good height, good teeth. Derek was intelligent, kind, and generous. A good brother and uncle, and probably a good son. He'd make a good father too.

The menu slipped out of her hands, and fell with a noisy clank onto her silverware. She picked it up, apologized for her clumsiness, then hid behind the stiff board before he saw her embarrassing flush.

He *would* make a good father. No wonder he was so worried about what kind of mother she'd be. Family was important to him, enough so that it would make giving up his flesh and blood all the more difficult.

*Relax, Kara.* Her grip tightened on the menu, and her hands started to shake with the strain. Damn it, this was exactly why she wanted only a business relationship with this man. Already she was feeling too much. Already it would be too hard to let go when the time came. The printed words describing her meal choices blurred before her eyes. Her well-laid plans had been the last thing on her mind for the last three days. Now, faced with following through, Kara wasn't sure she could pull it off. After spending time with Derek Martinez, the thought of sleeping with him appealed even more to her, and the idea of leaving him once she was fertilized, even less.

How had things changed so completely, and so quickly? She chanced a quick look around her menu. Derek's sharp eyes perused his own dinner choices, seemingly unaware of the internal struggle she was going through. *Yeah, that's exactly how things changed.* She started to feel something for this man. Something other than a business contact, or a

sperm donor.

She wanted to be mad at him. She wanted to change her romantic way of thinking, and go back to the original plan, but the longer she looked at him from the cover of the menu, the more she realized that it wasn't going to happen. Her original plan was out the window. She was able to get a hold of herself before the waiter returned to take their order.

"I think you've had too much sun." Derek took her hands in his, and pressed a hot kiss on her knuckles. "Your cheeks look a little pink."

"Maybe all this lying around and doing nothing is getting to me." She smiled, hoping it didn't look too fake.

"And tomorrow I'm dragging you onto a noisy tour bus to go see the ruins. Are you still up for that?" He spoke against her hands, and Kara could barely think straight.

"Of course." Anything to keep her feet on the ground. She wasn't going to bring up the parasail idea though.

"Good. The bus leaves at eight, but we can still hit a night club after dinner if you want to. I can have you back by midnight."

*Don't do it Kara. Go back to the room and get in bed. Send him to the club without you; that would show him.* Her internal voice wasn't loud enough, because it was drowned out by her simpering, "I'd love to."

During dinner, she drank a little more wine to give that inner voice some more volume. All it really did was drown it a little more.

Kara's grilled tilapia was flaky and tender, seasoned to perfection, and complemented by steamed asparagus and wild rice. Derek kept her wine glass full, so she wasn't exactly sure how much she actually drank. She did know that when he offered her a bite of his meal, she leaned a little closer than was necessary, and her eyes lowered in a sleepy enjoyment of the morsel. His intake of breath told of his take on her expression, and her blood warmed. After that, he shifted uncomfortably in his chair and his voice took on an additional huskiness.

"Dessert tonight?" The waiter surprised her. She must have been staring at Derek for quite a long time, if she didn't even see the server approach their table.

Kara shook her head. "I couldn't, but feel free," she told Derek.

"No, thank you," he dismissed the waiter, and continued to watch her from beneath dark brows. "If we want to go dancing, we should be going."

Dancing. That's right. A crowded smoky bar would be just the thing to end this evening on a less personal note. The bill came, and he scowled at her when she dug into her purse.

The club he found was right on the main strip, which might have contributed to the number of people inside. The American music and blue neon light came through the door. Most of the floor was cleared for dancing, three good-sized bars surrounded them, and booths and tables lined the walls. Kara held on tight to Derek's hand, letting him fight his way through the crowds, and clouds of cigarette smoke and over-applied cologne.

"There isn't a free table." He led her to perhaps the only empty seat in the house, a black vinyl-topped barstool in between two young men. One turned on his stool when Kara sat down, and even smiled a greeting, but Derek stepped in between them, effectively shutting him down. "What do you want to drink?"

She had to shout her pina colada order twice, even though Derek stood right beside

her. While waiting for the bartender, Kara watched people. Men outnumbered women two to one, and one group of men at a booth in the corner were the loudest of everyone. As a group, they flirted with every female who happened to walk by. Kara had a working knowledge of the Spanish language, but they spoke so fast and all at once, so she wasn't able to thoroughly enjoy the scene. They seemed to focus their ribald joking on one particular young man at the table, even offering one woman money to sit on the poor guy's lap.

"Bachelor party," Derek spoke into her ear, and handed her a curvy glass. He leaned against the bar beside her to watch them too.

The future groom was as red as his shirt. The woman swayed along with the music, straddled his lap, and worked her way down. She couldn't be an amateur by the way she gyrated her hips, torturing the young man by keeping her body just far enough away from his. Kara laughed and pointed out his white-knuckled grip on his chair seat to Derek.

The club was hot, even with air conditioning blowing over their heads. The icy drink went down way too easily, and before she knew it, Derek led her out to the dance floor.

Thank God it was a slow song. Kara walked into his embrace, and very naturally draped her arms around his neck. There was an excellent sound system, with small speakers hidden in the ceiling all along the dance floor, so the music surrounded them. The Righteous Brothers belted out their blue-eyed soul, drawing even more couples out beneath the lights.

"I can't believe how soft you are." One hand traced lazy patterns on her bare arms, while the other kept an insistent pressure on the small of her back. He could be talking about either contact point, because she was sure that everywhere her body touched his threatened to melt. "How is it that your skin is so cool when it's a damn oven in this place?"

"Cool" wasn't the word she would have used to describe the way she felt right now. She pressed her ear against his chest. He did radiate an amazing amount of heat, and an appealing humid scent. With Unchained Melody sending a hush over the dance floor, Kara heard every beat of Derek's heart. She'd grown a lot since Max's death. Although up until recently, she thought she had become a self-reliant woman, with an unwavering character. Tonight, for the first time in a long time, she felt safe, protected, and shielded. It was a sensation that she swore she never needed. She wasn't a weak woman. She didn't want anyone hovering over her. Tonight she wondered how she could have forgotten the way it felt to be held like this. In a man's arms.

If she were a cat, she would be purring right now.

"By the way the men in this place are looking at you, I don't think I'll be able to let you out of my sight." His lips moved against her ear, and she tilted her head for more.

"Were you hoping to find a new dance partner?"

"Why would I do that when I have the best-looking woman in the club right here in my arms?"

His hot breath sent goose bumps down her neck and all over her body. The tantalizing spot where his shoulder met his neck—right where it disappeared beneath the starched white collar—looked way too tempting. A light shimmer of sweat caught the disco lights, illustrating the smooth heated skin. "I don't think you're looking very hard."

He laughed, so quietly that she didn't hear him, she just felt the rumbling in his chest. "I don't think you're paying much attention yourself, or you wouldn't have just said that to

me. I might not look it, but I am." To prove it, he tilted his hips toward her.

When she discovered the rigid flesh digging into her belly, rather than putting space between them, she stepped even closer between his feet, shuffling along as they moved in slow circles across the dance floor.

"I bet if I kiss you like I mean it, it might scare a few of them off for you. What do you think?"

"You'd do that ... for me?" She smiled up at him, trying to look cynical, not flirtatious, but she could feel the heat behind her eyes. "You're such a martyr."

He gave her a quick smile, then covered her mouth with the heat of his. In a heartbeat, his tongue was inside her mouth, coaxing hers into a slow twisting dance.

She gasped, drawing his whiskey-flavored breath into her lungs. This man didn't just use his lips to kiss her. She was seduced by his hands on her back, his chest circling her stiff nipples, even his hard-muscled thighs moved against hers in an erotic caress. Kara was left feeling beautifully ravaged. Wickedly debauched.

She answered each movement with one of her own. Emboldened by his growl of approval, she clutched him closer yet, moving against the stamp of his desire thrust into the heat below her navel. She brought one hand to his throat, caressing that skin that enticed her, only to trail her fingers down to toy with the first button on his shirt. Just when she slipped the disc through its hole, they were jostled by another couple on the dance floor.

"Oh, sorry man." A young blond tossed over his shoulder, then continued his funky steps. Only then did Kara realize the song had changed, and now a popular hip-hop song drew out a different set of dancers. How long they stood on the edge of the floor lost in the kiss, she didn't know.

Derek must have been thinking the same thing, because he laughed. "I think it worked. The only looks coming our way now are some jealous ones. I might have to watch my back now." He took her hand and escorted her off of the dance floor, not before she saw every pair of eyes seated at the bachelor party table, focused directly on her.

Kara didn't think it was possible, but the club had grown even more crowded, and even the seat she'd used before was now occupied.

He squeezed her hand to get her attention. "Mind if we get some air?"

"Please." She nodded, and held on tight, still almost losing him in the thick mob of tourists and locals alike. She dodged elbows and shoulders, and even propositions in at least two languages.

It wasn't much cooler outside, even with the sun down, but there was enough of a breeze to chill the perspiration that had gathered on her hairline and chest.

"I'm sorry. I promised to take you out dancing, and we barely got one dance in. Maybe we could find another place. One that isn't so crowded." He released another button on his shirt, and Kara's mouth watered.

"We could just go back to the hotel." Kara fanned herself. When her words sunk in, she rushed to continue. "Maybe a swim would cool us off..." Oh that really helped.

*Great, Kara. Why don't you just tear off his clothes right now?* She should have been a straight man in a comedy sketch. Derek's smirk told her that he read her double entendre, even though it was intentional.

*Unintentional.*

Oh God. She studied the tiny pink flowers dotting the landscaping around the club,



and fanned herself with more fervor.

"I'm so glad to hear you say that. I'd love to try out the pool." He offered her his arm, so she hooked her hand on his elbow, and fell into step beside him.

The walk back to the hotel was a lot quieter without the street vendors. Cancun's daytime activities had all wound down, and the night life was confined to the clubs. Kara figured there were few precious hours of peace for this touristy city. The further from the club they got, they could actually hear their footsteps on the cement.

Kara gave up trying to keep her hip from bumping into him as they strolled down the sidewalk. In fact, if she stepped just a little closer to him, she could feel each muscle contract with his movements.

They got into the elevator, and he punched the number seven, then leaned back against the mirrored wall. He held both of her hands, and smiled tenderly.

Kara cleared her throat. "Don't feel like you have to entertain me." She concentrated on the wedge of milk chocolate skin below his collarbone. "If you'd rather go out dancing, I can..."

"No way. I only went there because I thought you might want to get a taste of the Cancun night life."

"I guess we did get a taste. I must be getting older. Or maybe I'm just used to the little bar at the Tate."

He didn't comment on her age. Smart man.

Inside the room, Derek grabbed another bottle of water from the refrigerator, and drank half of it in one swallow.

The man was some kind of god. There wasn't anything about him, from the top of his dark head to the loose-gaited walk, that wasn't damned appealing. He had shaved before dinner, so his chin was still smooth. The chiseled angles of his face just begged to be traced by her fingers. Or maybe her tongue. The sweat that coated his skin from the moment they walked into the club would taste salty. Even the curve of his ear tempted her, and she hurried from the room to keep from nibbling on that little lobe.

She peeled off the outfit that a few hours ago was crisp, but now looked worn and wilted. The swimming pool would feel heavenly against her overheated skin. She stood naked for a moment, letting the air conditioner soothe her fevered chest. She had her bikini and sheer robe on in record time.

If she didn't get the hell out of this hotel suite, Kara Sorrento would end up doing something completely out of character. She bit her lip, but she could still taste him there from the kiss on the dance floor. It tasted so good, she swiped her tongue all along her lips, and her insides hummed with desire. She grabbed the first two towels that she saw, glad to have something to hold with her shaky hands.

He wasn't in the kitchen when she emerged. Nor was he in the living area, or the balcony. "Derek?"

"Yeah." His voice came from the direction of his bedroom. The door was open; she saw the light spilling into the hallway, so she walked toward it.

"I've got some towels, did you want to..."

She couldn't continue. Derek lay on the end of the wide bed, arms over his head, feet planted on the ground. He wore his blue swim trunks, but nothing else. The position of his body called attention to his muscular frame. The white bedcover emphasized his brown skin. The air conditioner was blasting frigid air through the room, and it looked as

though he stretched out to cool off his body, and hadn't moved since.

His legs were the same toasty color as the rest of him, except for the very bottom rim of his feet. Even his toes looked perfect, the way they all lined up neatly together. Her eyes travelled back up his body, until she saw that he had now propped himself on his elbows, and gave her a curious gaze.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded, knowing her eyes were wide, and her face had flushed.

He shifted that sinewy body. "I'm ready whenever you are."

*He's ready, Kara.* Her eyes dropped to his lap, then to the carpet by her feet. She swallowed hard. "Okay, I'll meet you in the kitchen." She took a step back.

"Wait."

## Chapter Seven

*Wait.*

That one word froze her in place, almost like he had some magical power over her. Her heart pounded, and she clutched the towels against her chest to hide her misbehaving nipples.

"Come here." His words were husky, spoken to travel across the room on the lowest of frequencies.

Again, she followed his direction, without any thought to the contrary. When she stood before him, he sat upright, took the towels from her, and laid them aside.

"Do I scare you, Kara?"

She shook her head before thinking. Did he scare her? Really it was her own reaction to him that scared her. When faced with this sexy bundle of muscle and skin, she lost all ability to think straight, let alone act like the strong, poised woman that she knew she was.

"You don't scare me." She laid her hands on his shoulders, and the skin almost burned her palms. She dug her fingers in when his hands brought her closer, until her knees hit the mattress between his legs.

"That's good." He spoke against her cleavage, before slipping his big warm hands inside her wrap, and around the curve of her waist, to press a chaste kiss on her breastbone. "I've got to tell you, I used to think I could read women pretty easily. I always knew when one was lying to me, or whether she was interested or not. With you," he kissed her again, this time on the curve of her left breast, and left his lips there while he continued, "I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I'm trying to keep my distance. I told you that I wouldn't pressure you into anything, but every time I get you near me, I can't..." He stopped abruptly, ground his teeth together, then swore. "But you kiss me back," he whispered, "and it makes me wonder if you like what I'm doing, or if you're too afraid to push me away."

She suddenly felt the need to comfort him. She curled her arms around his head, until she held him against her breasts like a mother would a child. "I'm not afraid of you Derek. Of course I..."

Guilt. *Damn it.*

She took a deep breath, shoved it aside, and focused instead on the man cherishing her right now. "I like your kisses. I like them a lot. That's all that scares me." Her voice dropped an octave.

He rolled his head back to look up at her. He seemed to be looking for residual fear, or maybe he was looking for the lust that would match his. Whatever he found, it made him smile. Before her lips could curl up in answer, he dragged her onto his lap, her bent knees on either side of his hips, and then he kissed her with more hunger than he'd used before. He used a bit of suction to bring her tongue into his mouth, and for a moment he just held it there with his teeth. He licked the tip of her tongue, the bow of her upper lip, and then each corner of her mouth.

"Don't be scared, Kara. Please. I'll never hurt you again." His hands moved over her exposed skin, touching everything they could, ravenously learning each inch of each

curve. "I like your kisses a lot too."

He peeled the wrap off of her shoulders, and it fell to the floor in a cloud of white fabric. When his fingers found the clasp of her bikini bra, he looked up at her seriously, his eyes shimmering with desire.

"Is this okay?"

She realized then, that if she didn't want him walking on eggshells around her, she'd have to make a move. She lowered her lids halfway, and reached back to unhook the clasp. His breath hitched and he dropped his hands to her hips, so she waited a long moment before letting the fabric fall from her body. She let it go, and the whisper of the cloth as it hit the ground was the only sound in the room.

She forgot to breathe.

She took a shaky breath, and opened her eyes to meet his.

"Jesus, you're perfect." His eyes were fixed on her breasts, his expression so openly hungry that her loins clenched at his words. She felt each of his exhaled breaths against her super-sensitized skin. She tangled her hands in his thick black hair, intending to force his mouth onto her nipples, but before she could, he used the tips of his fingers to trace erotic messages into the white globes.

She whimpered. An embarrassing immature sound, but his answering growl gave her courage.

She touched him everywhere. Each inch that she dreamed about all this time. She wanted to absorb his warmth through her fingers, and she wanted to have her hands all over him at once.

"Your skin is cool, and soft ... like a cloud. I could touch you all day."

She certainly wouldn't complain. She rose up on her knees to drag her hungry nipples across his chest. The corded muscles felt so good against her, so she did it again. On the third trip, Derek held her hips tight, and guided her up until her breast was poised in front of his mouth. At first he only licked, painting her skin with his tongue. His breath cooled the damp patch, sending a different kind of shiver straight to her loins.

"Derek," she gasped, and arched her back into his caress.

He groaned, lying back onto the bed, and pulling her along with him until she ended up on her elbows and knees, caging his body below her. His mouth never left her breast, except to move to the other. Even then he didn't neglect either one; his kneading hands and talented fingers kept her mind in a state of euphoric bliss. Each tug of his mouth sent an electric buzz straight from her nipples to her swelling sex. He tortured her like that for what felt like hours, leaving her pulsing with need, and breathing heavily.

He rolled them over, until her back hit the cool white quilt, and her knees hung over the edge of the bed, feet barely dangling above the floor. Derek trailed a line of kisses up her chest, and he licked a line from the straining tendon in her neck along her earlobe and followed the crease behind her ear.

What a strange sensation. Who knew that such an odd spot would be an erotic point? Derek was the first person to touch that place on her body, let alone use his tongue to learn it. He nibbled the cartilage of her ear, his breath sending shivers of desire down to her toes.

Her hips bucked off the mattress, desperately seeking contact with his. He slid one leg in between hers, the rough hairiness such a contrast to her smooth skin. She marveled at the way his hard body complemented her softness everywhere they touched.

He kissed her. A long and unhurried kiss that made her writhe with frustration. As much as she loved his mouth on hers, she wanted more.

He read her mind. His hand left her waist, and his fingers slipped beneath the waistband of her bikini bottoms, but before he peeled them away, she felt his hesitation.

She let go of his mouth, and licked his Adam's apple. "Don't go shy on me now, Derek."

"I told you I wouldn't ... the two bedrooms..."

She loved the gravel in his voice. It told of his arousal far more than the physical proof against her thigh.

"You also told me that I'd want it as much as you."

"I lied," he mumbled against her neck, where he nibbled and licked. "No way you can want this as much as I do."

His words sent a shock straight to her heart. She wrapped one leg around his, searching for the elusive contact that would send her over the edge. "I do, Derek. Please don't stop. I want it ... I want you."

Hot damp kisses left a trail from her neck to her navel. Each stamp of his mouth was embellished by a swipe of his tongue. He spent extra time once he reached her belly button, and leisurely worked his way to the edge of her bikini. This time there wasn't a pause when his fingers gripped the fabric, dragged it down to the bend of her knees, and allowed it to drop to the floor.

The hungry growl could have been from a carnivorous beast who had sighted weak prey. She chanced a quick look down her body, where he ravaged her with his eyes, his hands curled into the bedspread. He slid off of the bed between her legs, and pulled her to the edge. Before she could protest, he took both her thighs in his hands, and lowered his mouth to their apex.

Kara wasn't a screamer. She had never before lost herself in the sex act, certainly not enough to allow a vocal outburst, but at the first touch of his intimate kiss, she had to bite both lips hard between her teeth. Blood rushed to her loins, making every feather-light touch against her feel all the more decadent.

He took his time, ignoring her squirming attempts at rushing him. Before she knew it, she found her hands buried in his thick hair, giving him a punishing tug on his scalp. Still, he kissed her as though he had all the time in the world. Learning each dip and fold, every inch of her was explored, licked, nibbled, and sucked. Only when he moved her legs to rest on his shoulders, and introduced two long fingers into his caresses, did she release a sharp cry.

Her loss of control seemed to please him. He moaned against her, a long low vibrating sound that sent her to the edge of reason. With his fingers deep inside her, and his mouth giving her a serious suck on her erect lobe, Kara relaxed, succumbing to the wave of erotic bliss that blanketed her.

It seemed to go on forever. Waves of exquisite pulsing washed through her body, ending at the point where Derek's talented mouth drew out each contraction, and went back for more. He gave her a long parting kiss, then stood up.

Kara blinked, trying to focus on watching him shed his shorts. His erection bobbed against his stomach, so hard with hot blood that it took on a slightly purple tint. A drop of moisture shone on the tip, making Kara lick her lips and shift on the bed uncomfortably.

"Baby, you drive me crazy." He smoothed his hand down his body, circling himself

with his fist, all while studying her where she lay, sprawled on the edge of the bed.

She watched his hand, fascinated that he would be so bold, and despite her recent pulsating orgasm, more than a little turned on. He swiped his thumb over the mushroom-shaped end, and Kara swore she felt the stroke deep inside her.

She sat up, until her mouth met the rib directly below his pecs. She trailed her fingers down his forearm until they tangled with his, matching his slow strokes.

His chest tasted salty, the bite of sweat and cologne met her tongue, and she lapped it up like a kitten with a bowl of cream. His uneven breath sifted through her hair, and his heart pounded against her lips.

With a strangled groan, he took her hands in his, and away from his arousal, pulling her to her feet. "Your touch is the sweetest torture." He brought her around to the side of the bed, and after tossing aside the covers, gave her a dark look, full of erotic promises. "Lie down."

She did, almost collapsing onto the ultra-soft sheets, and scooting into the middle of the bed, and in a heartbeat he was beside her, pressing his hot body all along hers, tangling their legs together. Any other thought dissolved into the conditioned air.

"You have a beautiful body." He adjusted against her, and spoke with her earlobe in his mouth. "Outside and in."

He brought his hand to her core, slipping his fingers again into the hot wet folds of her sex, and playing her like a musical instrument. All Kara could think about was humming along to his tune.

She grabbed his shoulders. "Please." She wasn't sure she spoke the word, so she tried again. "Derek ... please..."

"What do you want, Kara. I'll give you whatever you ask for, just tell me."

She groaned, his fingers strumming, and his erection poised at her entrance, and no amount of struggling would bring him closer. "You. Please."

He braced both hands near her shoulders, and tilted his hips just enough to bury his plump tip into her.

Kara sucked in a breath, the hissing sound snapping her eyes open, though she didn't remember closing them. His lids were pressed closed, his teeth bared like a rabid animal.

"So much better this way."

Kara knew what he meant. Already the last three sessions in the Atlanta hotel were being deleted from her memory, overwritten by the present. She brought both hands down to the tight globes of his butt, and lifted her hips at the same time, sending him deep.

He muttered a string of dirty words that made no sense together, but they made her smile. She held him with her internal muscles, then gave him a quick squeeze.

"So damn good." He pulled out, then inched his way back up against her cervix.

Derek didn't seem to be in any hurry. He lazily rocked against her, kissing her mouth and cheeks, learning her curves with his hands. She met each of his slow thrusts, growling impatiently when his pace remained steady.

When the frustration grew intolerable, she hooked her legs around his, and flipped him onto his back. His eyes were wide when he hit the pillows, but his grin gave her the confidence to continue.

"You're a big tease, Mr. Martinez."

She flattened her hands on his erect nipples, and braced herself. She couldn't go as

slowly as he had, so she rode him with quick flicks of her hips, her racing heart urging her on.

"Please, call me Derek." He winked, allowing his hands to cup her swaying breasts. Right then, Kara did something she'd never done in bed with a man. She laughed. The way her joy bubbled through her, and found an escape in that form, was a little disconcerting, and she even looked away from his grin in embarrassment. She let go of his chest, and held on to his forearms instead, willing his hands to stay where they were.

The friction she created sent a warm hum through her veins. He slid his hands down to wrap around her hips. His thumbs pressed hypnotic circles between her hip bones, and moved further down until he reached the spot where they were joined.

"Yes," she moaned, slowing her movements to concentrate on the pleasure his touch gave. When his knowing fingers robbed her of the ability to think, she slumped back down to stiff arm his chest. A few more circles, and her arms collapsed.

"Come with me, Kara."

She lifted her chin, and saw the raw desire flaring behind his chocolate irises. She rocked her hips, bucking against him as much as she could. She swelled, preparing for another eruption, and Derek brought his hips off of the bed, matching her tempo with each thrust. The flickering rush seemed to come at her from somewhere in the room before settling around her like a warm cloak, and swirling its way to where they were joined.

"Oh God," she panted, unwilling to stop her movements lest the wave break. "Oh God," she repeated, and released the exquisite tension in a long pulsating spasm. She rode out each one, her body milking his until he wrapped his strong arms around her back and surged into her with a low moan. He leaned his head up from the pillows enough to seal his mouth to hers. He kissed her desperately, hungry for his own pinnacle. She felt him swell and release, and the sensation drew another flutter from her womb.

She melted onto his chest, her body sore from the unaccustomed workout, and her arms stiff from the position. She regained her breath from a spot on his chest, right below his chin. His heart pounded against her ear, and each gust of his breath stirred her hair, now damp with perspiration and clinging to her forehead.

He held her gently, skimming his fingertips over her back and shoulders. "I knew you could be a wild woman, but that was better than I imagined," he said with a short laugh, and leaned up to kiss her crown.

"You imagined this?" She tried to sound prim, but she knew he could feel her smile against his chest, though she kept her face averted.

"Of course." He shrugged. "I'm a man. It's almost the first thing we think about when we meet a beautiful woman." She was glad he couldn't see her skin turn beet red, but he wasn't done. "Especially when the first thing that woman starts talking about is his semen." When he laughed, she slapped his bicep.

"I didn't use that word!" Surely the heat of her embarrassment burned a spot on his skin.

"Maybe not, but that's what I heard." He rolled them onto their sides, and slipped out of her. His eyes still had that smoky veil, and his smile was anything but school-boy innocent. "I'm surprised that I remember anything you said that day." He pressed his smile against hers, teasing her with swipes of his tongue. "You knocked me for a loop."

Kara couldn't stop smiling to save her life. She threaded her leg between his, and

made herself comfortable.

"I thought you wanted to go swimming."

She giggled, a totally immature sound that normally would have made her cringe.

"No, now I'm too tired." In fact, she wasn't sure that she could make it to the door if the room caught on fire; her body had turned to a pile of mush. She refused to think about the ramifications, and even the sensibility of spending the night in his arms. For once, she wasn't going to talk herself out of doing exactly what she wanted to do. Even if it was just for tonight, she rubbed her cheek against his slightly furry chest, like a kitten nuzzling its mother. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I was hoping you'd say that." He reached over her, and pulled the covers over them, then switched off the bedside lamp.

He settled in beside her, and tucked her back against his chest. On a whim, Kara tried something new. "Don't you want me to sleep in the other room?"

She wasn't good at teasing. Her first thought was that he would agree and send her on her way. Before she could really worry about it, he laughed.

"I have a feeling we won't be needing that second bedroom after all."

\* \* \* \*

Kara woke up much later, to a warm tongue on her earlobe. It took her a few seconds to remember where she was, and whose tongue had moved inside to seduce her ear.

"Derek," she breathed, his name barely audible.

"Mm, I'm sorry I woke you up," he whispered back, but his tongue continued to wander, belying his words.

"You are?" She pressed her hips against his, and smiled at his obvious motivation. "I don't think you're sorry at all."

"You're right, now be quiet, I'm busy."

She wasn't able to speak after that anyway, her mouth was otherwise occupied.



## Chapter Eight

Sun streamed through the wall of glass, leaving a warm rectangle on the bed. The air in the room was still cool, thanks to the air conditioning, but Kara's body left him hot, and immediately aroused.

She looked so much different from that first day. When he met her, her lips had been stiff, practiced words spoken flawlessly, cheeks which looked as though they had never before felt a smile wrinkle them. Now, relaxed as she was in sleep, her lips were slightly parted, and it might have been his lust-clouded mind, but they seemed to take on a sexy, well-satisfied curl.

He knew it had been a while for her, and after the night they had, he would be surprised if she wasn't sore today.

Remembering the way she flipped him over to straddle him made him wild with desire, and his libido stirred to life. Who knew the woman had such a wild side hidden behind that anal-retentive veneer? Looking like a fallen angel wrapped in the pure white sheet, her blond hair curling on the pillow, he could barely remember that other woman in the starched suit.

He flashed back to their three attempts at impregnating her. The way she kept her face turned away from him hurt him deeper than he thought possible.

Not anymore, he grinned. Last night he saw desire burning in her eyes when she looked directly at him, sending his own need through the roof. He was sure he filled her with more seed in the last twelve hours than he had on their three previous tries.

She stirred, tightening her thighs around his for only a second, enough to kick his heart rate to a new high. He didn't want to wake her up. There was a chance that she'd regret everything they did the night before. And early this morning. Things had a way of looking a lot clearer in the light of day.

Derek hated the insecure feeling, but it was there, twisting his gut into acidic knots. He might have blown it. She might wake up right now and scramble out of the room. She could call the airline for the first flight home.

To delay any reaction at all, he slipped from the bed, and drew the curtains that covered the entire bedroom wall, enclosing the room in a dreamy shade of grey.

He crawled back beside her, and she curled against him in sleep. He tried to lie very still, treasuring every moment that he could just stare. He watched her breathe, deep and even puffs of breath that cooled his chest. Every minute that passed tested his restraint. Her hair tickled his chin, and smelled like coconut shampoo. As thick as it was, he expected it to be coarse, but each strand felt like a fine silk thread. About thirty minutes later, she fidgeted, then reached for him, sending his ego through the roof.

"Derek?"

"Good morning." He kissed her forehead before her eyes opened. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Hm." She kissed him, and wrapped those cool arms around his shoulders. "I fell for that once already. You need a new line."

She didn't bolt. In fact, she didn't move much at all, other than to sigh into his chest. Derek felt the tension leave his body. "I thought you liked my ... uh ... line."

She laughed. A beautiful laugh—still husky from sleep—tantalized his ears, and travelled down his spine to settle in his loins. She didn't laugh often enough. Derek made a mental note to change that.

"I'll be too tired to do anything when we ... oh! What time is it?" She pushed him to his back, and reached over to throw the towels that covered the alarm clock aside. "Oh no..."

Derek bit back a smile. "Nine fifteen."

"We missed the bus to the ruins!" She looked truly crestfallen, and flopped back onto her back beside him. Her pout was just too cute, which was a word he'd never associated with her before.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to set the alarm. I think someone distracted me."

Her eyes twinkled, and she reached out with those long slender fingers and touched his cheek. "I haven't slept past six in years. So now what will we do all day?"

He didn't try to hide his smirk. It didn't even look like she tried to shut down at his teasing anymore, but he still wanted to take it slowly. "You should know better than ask me that, unless you really want my answer."

Her blue eyes widened, and she shook her head. "I'm not parasailing."

That wasn't even anywhere near the front of his mind, but rather than come across as a sexual deviant, he let the conversation turn. "Scuba?"

She pursed her lips. "Snorkel?"

"All right." He smiled. He'd agree to just about anything when she looked at him that way, with her eyes twinkling, and the scent of sex on the sheets.

She didn't make a move to leave the bed, so he didn't either. Instead they spent another hour just lying side by side, whispering, touching, exploring, learning. He was even able to control his carnal urges, which was damn hard with her naked body twined with his. The only thing that roused them were rumbling bellies.

"I think we missed breakfast," he whispered against her mouth.

"Room service?"

He laughed, and it made her jump, so he kissed her apologetically. Room service was tempting. He nibbled on her ear. They could spend the afternoon right here. Never leave the suite. Rarely leave this bed. "As much as I'd love to spend the rest of our trip right here, I think we should get out of bed. It looks like a beautiful day out there."

She eyed the window, sealed as it was by the opaque curtains, and gave him a doubtful look, but he shoved her out of bed with a playful slap on her rump. He let her shower before him, and as tempting as it was to join her, he didn't want to push his luck.

The front desk clerk suggested a little bistro in town, and although they could have walked, he was too hungry to wait. They took a taxi cab, and he saw by her nose against the window that Kara enjoyed the little detour through the city.

"I'm glad you speak the language." She poured the little cup of dressing onto her salad. "I'd hate to accidentally order something weird."

Derek swallowed a bite of refried beans, and wiped his mouth with his napkin. "I'm surprised you don't know Spanish. Didn't you grow up in Texas?"

"I did, but when it came time to choose a foreign language, I chose French." She stabbed the lettuce. "It's a beautiful language, but not as useful in Texas as say ... Louisiana." She twirled the fork in her hand, and by her expression Derek thought she might be remembering something painful.

"Max spoke Italian."

He was right. She stared down at her fork, lettuce, carrot shards, and dressing dripping off the longer she twirled.

"He tried to teach me some. It's a lot like French, and even close to Spanish."

"I only know some dirty words in Italian."

She smiled, the uncomfortable moment past. "Why am I not surprised?"

"I don't know. I've been a perfect gentleman on this trip haven't I?"

The smile disappeared again, like she just remembered that she shouldn't be happy. Thoughts of the husband that she lost probably made her feel guilty about the time she spent with him. Derek didn't think he could stand it if she regretted anything they'd done, and irrational as it was, he was honest enough with himself to recognize feeling jealousy for a dead man. He could taste its bitterness, and fought to keep the distaste from showing.

"Kara?"

She raised her eyes to his, her chin still lowered, an unsure sign.

"It's completely natural to feel guilt. To think that you're somehow betraying the one you've lost by feeling happiness again. With another man."

She dropped her eyes again, and stared at her clasped hands in her lap. "How did you know?"

He knew because the same darkness invaded her eyes whenever she thought about her departed spouse. He could almost feel her pain just by sitting near her. He took her hand, and kissed her knuckles.

"It's obvious. The way you stop yourself from smiling, as if his memory will disappear if you let yourself be happy. The way you touch your left ring finger every time you think of him."

She blinked rapidly. From this angle, he couldn't see her eyes, but he knew that she was fighting tears.

"I won't push you, Kara. I'll only take what you're willing to give."

She took a shuddering breath. "I know." Her voice was so quiet, he had to read her lips. A moment later, she finally put the bite of salad in her mouth. He supposed it was her way of ending the conversation, but he let her. Derek realized that he might seduce her body into forgetting her husband, but Kara's heart would be forever out of reach. This woman didn't do anything half-assed, and devoting her life to another wouldn't be any exception.

The burn in his gut only grew hotter.

They walked back to the hotel, stopping beneath the street vendor's canopies along the way, and sharing an ice cold bottle of Coke. He guided her with a hand on the dip in the small of her back. Walking as he was, a little down wind, he breathed in her scent, that coconut-floral smell that went straight to his head.

After her shower this morning, he stood in the humid bathroom, and that scent surrounded him in the moist air, shrouding him with the memory of her. He didn't know how long he stood in the steamy room, leaning against the marble countertop and sucking the thick air into his lungs. There was something so very personal about sharing that space, where she had innocently readied for their day together. Intimate and familiar at the same time.

They came to a clearing in the throngs of tourists, and Derek slipped his hands

around her waist to stop her, bringing her back up against his front, and laying a kiss on her neck before he could even stop himself. Again, her skin was cool beneath his lips. The woman had to have some kind of freon running through her blood, keeping her at that temperature, like a permanent taste of whipped topping.

"How do you do that?" he mumbled against her hairline.

Her hand came up to cup his cheek, a tender caress that he could feel in his toes, and he stumbled them both to the edge of the sidewalk out of the way.

"Do what?" She tilted her head to the side, giving him more room to explore.

"Your skin ... it's always so cool. It must be a hundred degrees out here, and you're as cool as a drink of water."

"I blame you. You're giving me goose bumps."

He kissed her, even though the angle was awkward, her face turned over her shoulder. Her tongue followed each of his movements, dancing along his in a twisting swirling dance. He'd placed that tongue in many of his fantasies over the past month, and memories of the night before slammed into him, leaving his body heaving and shaking against her back. He took a deep breath, and set her away from him. Much more of this, and he'd embarrass himself on the streets of Cancun.

\* \* \* \*

Kara adjusted the huge pink umbrella to shade her entire body, even stretched out as she was on the plastic chaise. Derek was about thirty yards away from her, now buckled into the contraption that would take him who knew how high in the air, while attached to a speedboat. She shook her head at the foolishness of such an act. She would blame it on testosterone, but the two parasailers before Derek were both young women who squealed the whole time airborne. In fact, they turned around and got back in the queue to go again.

The instructor spoke to Derek, demonstrating how to hold on right above his chest, in between checking and rechecking the bindings.

Moments later, he followed the instructor toward the shoreline and Kara's stomach churned. His back was to her, so she couldn't really see what was happening, but the bright yellow boat idled not far off shore, the white rope stark atop the clear blue water. She couldn't even watch when they hooked that rope to Derek's sternum. By the time she looked back, Derek had turned to face her, and gave her an assured smile.

She waved back, trying to match his confidence. A few more hand signals from the instructor, a sharp whistle, and the boat took off. Derek ran toward the water, but Kara didn't see anything else; she'd covered her face with both hands.

Several deep breaths later, and since she didn't hear a blood curdling scream, or a loud splash, she peeked out from between her fingers, and scanned the area for the yellow boat. She finally saw it, going way too fast for her sense of safety, but beneath a rainbow parasail, dangled Derek. He seemed unaware of the danger, because he'd let go of the handholds, and held both hands high above his head in a gesture of pure freedom. The stark whiteness of his teeth showed up clearly against his dark face, and Kara couldn't help but smile back.

*He's fine ... it's safe.* She had to repeat the mantra, but she eventually relaxed enough to move her hands from her face, and lay back onto the chaise. Back and forth, Derek flew by, waving when he caught her attention. When he coasted over the beach, Kara

couldn't watch. She focused on her pink toenail polish. The landing process scared her more than the ascent, so she waited for the cheer from the small crowd before looking back across the beach.

Derek spoke with his hands, an animated man, she smiled fondly. She wondered what he said, his arms spread out like an eagle, then forward like Superman. She laughed, and took a long drink from her icy lemonade, feeling the cold liquid soothe her tense insides. Derek shrugged out of the black vest, and soon jogged across the beach toward her.

"Oh, God that was amazing. You've got to try it." He collapsed into the shaded sand beside her. "It's as close to flying as man will ever get."

"I'm glad you had fun." She rolled onto her side to take in his body, sprawled out and looking dark and delicious against the white Mexican sand. His heart pounded visibly, and his smile spread wide, even when he captured her eyes. "Try it. You'll love it. I just know you will."

"Not likely." She reached out to trace the wrinkles that his smile created in the corner of his eyes. "I might need some antacid just from watching you."

He spent the next twenty minutes reliving every detail of his flight, and another fifteen minutes trying to talk her into taking her turn.

"Sorry, there is no way you'll get me up there, no matter how hard you try. I don't do extreme sports. I like to maintain control."

He smiled, like he just found the last piece of a puzzle. "I never would have guessed that about you."

She knocked his sarcastic smirk away with a slap to his shoulder. He was propped on his bent elbows, his chest sprinkled with glittery sand. She couldn't help herself, she brushed the grains from his heated skin, then lingered on the tight muscles.

"Did Kris pack you a dress, or should we go buy one?" His voice lost all hints of sarcasm, and took on a low timbre.

Kara rested her cheek against her curled right arm, and trailed her other hand against him, feeling warm and dreamy. "She did. Are we dressing up?" She liked to feel his heart beating beneath her fingers. It gave her a powerful thrill, and the tempo of her own heartbeat kicked up.

"The Bella is a pretty nice place. They'll let us in dressed like tourists, but we might as well dress up. I still feel bad about missing that tour bus." He caressed her hand where it lay on his chest. The movement caused him to turn onto his side, and they faced each other, though she was a foot or so off the ground.

"I've enjoyed today. Even without the ancient ruins." She wouldn't have traded sleeping in this morning with Derek for anything.

He picked her hand up, slowly brought it to his mouth, and ran it along his cheek. "Just a good excuse to come back to Mexico some day," he murmured, then put her hand back against his pebbly nipple.

She didn't know if it was his touch, or the words he spoke, but a chill ran down her spine, then wrapped around to twist her stomach in knots. Derek was implying a future. Something she wasn't sure that she was ready to commit to. Was she? She stared at their hands, loosely clasped against his chest. Hers so thin and pale compared to his, so strong and brown. She threaded her fingers through his, and the contrast gave her a little jolt at the sense of rightness. What was that word Kris used, the one Kara had laughed over at

the time? Mashed? No, *meshed*. They meshed. Now she knew what her sister meant. At that moment, Kara knew that not only the contract needed to be scrapped, but her entire plan for having a baby needed revamped. She thought she was ready, but after meeting Derek Martinez, her whole perspective changed. If whatever magic she was feeling this weekend in his company were to dwindle away, she would reconsider an anonymous sperm donor. If it didn't ... if the little tingle she got in her belly every time she touched the man never went away...

Kara could almost feel the weight drop from her shoulders. In fact, she wouldn't have been surprised to hear a heavy thud. She had inadvertently set herself free. While Derek waited patiently, she had just released all tension. She no longer had to worry about getting pregnant within the next six months. She didn't have to worry about hiding her feelings from the man beside her. Most of all, she would no longer hide behind the guilt of betraying her late husband.

She was free.

"You're smiling." He sounded incredulous, and when she met his eye, she found a brilliant smile in return.

"I'm happy," she explained.

He laughed, a free rumbling that took her breath away, and with one pull on her arm, he'd rolled her out of the chaise, and onto his chest.

"You're so God damned beautiful when you're happy," he spoke between kisses, his hands holding her steady above him. "What can I do to see that every day?" He rolled them over, and Kara gasped at the gritty sand in her hair, but it wasn't enough to extricate herself from the prison of his arms.

"I think you're doing a fine job, Mr. Martinez. You're quite ... adept at making me happy. You seem to have a knack."

He kissed her until her jaw ached. Her lips tingled, and she gasped for breath before he finally pulled away. Even then, he kissed the sore muscle beneath her ear, and nipped tiny bites in her neck.

They splashed in the ocean, they half-heartedly looked for seashells, and then they wandered back to the pool, and held hands as they floated along on their backs.

Kara was glad that Derek liked her smile, because now it seemed to be permanently fixed.

\* \* \* \*

Kara stood in front of the mirror, staring at her reflection. She rarely spent any amount of time in the sun, and the additional color on her skin showed it. She was lucky enough to have the type of skin that didn't burn easily, just a pleasant warm tint. She had piled her hair into a messy up-do, only because she lacked bobby pins to make a proper chignon. The simple modern cut of the dress worked well with her hairstyle, and gave her a free-spirited look. Kris would approve. Derek clinked glasses together in the kitchen, probably drinking more water. The man drank more water than anyone she'd ever met before.

She dressed in the smaller bedroom, since she'd unpacked there, leaving Derek to get ready alone. He seemed to be giving her plenty of space, and she really was grateful. Even though she spent her shower expecting him to join her, he never did. In fact, when she emerged from the master bath, she heard the shower from the smaller bathroom

running. With a towel wrapped around her middle, and her hair dripping, Kara stood outside the door and pondered joining him instead. She even reached for the doorknob before talking herself out of it. The mental image of his naked body dripping with hot water followed her to the room and teased her as she dressed.

She picked up the thin gold necklace from the top of the dresser, and studied the clasp. Good Lord, she'd have better luck threading a needle in the dark. After a few attempts, Kara closed her eyes, because that sometimes helped. Not today.

"Can I help?"

Derek leaned against the doorway, wearing a black suit and pale yellow shirt. The lack of a tie didn't detract from the outfit. In fact, the wedge of skin revealed by the two free buttons was better than any silk tie could have been. His hands were stuffed into his front pockets, giving him a comfortable unassuming look. Kara's heart tripped over itself at the sight of him.

"Yes, please." She held the necklace tightly, afraid that her shakiness would show.

Derek shoved himself away from the doorjamb, and walked ... no, he swaggered over to her. Kara heard her breathing in the otherwise still room, and was reminded of her childhood dog panting in the summertime.

He took the jewelry from her, and when she made to turn her back on him, he stopped her with a firm hand on her shoulder.

"You look amazing tonight." His words were a low grumble against her forehead. He took another step closer, until she could feel the heat from his body.

Kara slipped her arms around his waist without conscious thought. "And you ... not many men can pull off that shade of yellow."

He laughed, and kissed the tip of her nose. "My sister gave it to me last Christmas. I'm normally not this adventurous with color." He pressed her forehead against his chest so that he could clasp the necklace at her nape.

She'd expected him to turn her away from him to fasten the necklace, but this was so much better. Aware of her lipstick, she rested her cheek against his crisp yellow shirt, and breathed in his scent.

"I love your skin." He ran his fingers down her back, exposed as it was by the dress until it hit the curve of her rear. "I could spend hours just touching you."

"Feel free." As much as he seemed to enjoy her cool skin, she couldn't get enough of his heat. She moved against him, wanting to crawl inside and curl into a little ball.

"I ordered up some wine. I hope you like merlot."

"Mmm." *Forget the wine*, she released another button on his shirt, and slipped her fingers inside to touch his skin. His sharp intake of breath made her smile.

"You'd better button me back up, or we'll never get out of here," he growled.

She kissed his collarbone. "We have reservations. We can't be late." She slipped another button from its hole.

His hands tightened their hold on her hips, and she reveled in his apparent struggle to remain in command of himself.

"I've poured the wine..."

He wasn't thinking about wine. By the rigid flesh digging into her abdomen, his mind was right with hers. Another button popped free.

"You smell sinfully good." She nibbled on the curve of his chest, and dipped her fingers beneath his shirt to find his nipples, already erect and tempting.

"Kara..."

"Hm?"

"Dinner..."

"I'm famished."

Derek covered her mouth with his. Almost as if he could survive on her kisses alone. A hungry growl reverberated against her tongue, and her adrenaline surged. He took her wandering hands in his, and placed them firmly on his shoulders. They slid down her bare arms, caressing the tender skin underneath, and paused with his thumbs resting against the outer curves of her breasts.

"I used to be so proud of my self control..." He rested his forehead against hers, and took in huge amounts of air.

"And?"

"And you shoot it all to hell." He shook his head. "But if we don't leave this bedroom right now, I'll say screw dinner."

He didn't get to see the giddy smile on her face, because he'd taken her hand and dragged her to the kitchen.

They drank the merlot, and shared steamy gazes. And in the cab on the way to the restaurant, even more of the same.

"How is the chicken?" Derek leaned back in the high-backed chair, and watched her pick at her food.

"It's good." She didn't really know if it was good. She hadn't tasted a bite. She was too aware of Derek's eyes on her. "I don't think I can eat any more though." If Derek ordered dessert, she thought she'd die.

"You look amazing. I'd love to show you off. Do you want to try dancing again?"

"Not really." All she really wanted to do was take the man back to the hotel.

"Sightseeing?"

"No thanks."

Derek signed the bill, and Kara didn't even attempt to pay.

"Well then." He stood and held his hand out to her. "What should we do for the rest of our night?"

"I don't know ... I'm pretty tired. I didn't get much sleep last night. Maybe I'll just grab a good book and go to bed." Kara had to turn away from him, and pretend interest in the fragrant potted gardenias that seemed to be everywhere. She wasn't good at joking around, and her face flamed. She could hardly keep from laughing.

"That sounds like a great idea." He didn't miss a beat. He draped his arm around her shoulders and they walked out of the restaurant. "If you don't find a good book, I hope you'll consider an alternative."

Kara had been thinking of the alternative since he came drifting from the sky beneath that rainbow parasail like some angel sent to tempt the devil right out of her.

The cab ride back to the hotel was a lot like the ride to the restaurant two hours ago. She could barely keep her eyes off of him, and he didn't bother trying to do so either. This time they both sat in opposite corners of the back seat, studying one another silently. The urge to touch him was almost palpable, but she resisted. Simply staring was decadent, and her mind filled with naughty fantasies.

She didn't get to undress him the night before. First to go would be that dark jacket. It was lightweight enough, but he had to be warm beneath two layers of clothing. She



licked her lips at the thought of the amount of heat the man could project. She couldn't wait to make a show of each one of those buttons. Even the tiny one at each wrist.

She knew he didn't wear an undershirt. She didn't blame him, and it certainly made it easier on her. When her eyes dropped to his waist, she cursed. A belt. One of those weird buckled ones too. Could she manage that with only one hand?

"Stop that," Derek growled.

Kara blinked his sexy face back into focus. "Stop what?"

"You know what. I'm practically naked over here."

Kara narrowed her eyes. "Not quite."

## Chapter Nine

Derek clenched his hands. The woman drove him mad with lust. She'd all but undressed him, sending his ego through the roof. He imagined those cool slender fingers on him, taking each layer of clothing off of him.

As much as he wanted to launch himself across the cab and pin her to the grey vinyl seat, he steeled himself against the urge. The anticipation was just as exciting.

Why it took ten times longer to get back to the hotel than the other way around, he didn't know, but finally the car stopped.

Derek paid the driver without even looking away from Kara's clear blue eyes. He grabbed her hand and hauled her out of the taxi before he reminded himself to cool it. He all but ignored the doorman, and the desk clerk that shouted out a friendly "Buenas noches amigos". He was able to keep his hands off of her—almost; he did hold her hand—all the way up the elevator, and even until he followed her into their suite, and backed against the closed door.

"Did you really bring a book?" He pulled her against him. Her face was flushed. A new rosiness on her cheeks, probably due to the sun today, but the glassiness in her eyes couldn't be anything but desire. His chest felt like it had been dog-piled. He was so damn hard it almost hurt.

"No, I didn't bring a book." She reached up to his shoulders, deftly removed his jacket, and draped it on the nearest chair. "Maybe you could tell me a bedtime story?"

His breathing echoed in the room. He leaned his head back against the door, and looked to the ceiling fan to steady himself. He held her by her tiny waist. Just keeping his hands still was taking all of his self-control.

"You have to be hot..." She worked on his shirt, button by button. She wasn't in any hurry, and he used the time to calm himself down. Three deep breaths in and out.

God, she smelled good. "Very hot," he agreed.

She pulled his shirttails out of his slacks, and released the last button, which was hanging below his belt. He held his breath.

"Do you need a cold shower?"

His eyes found hers instantly. Thank God she had a smile flirting with her lips. "I don't know, do I?"

She ran those cool hands up his chest, effectively parting the panels of his shirt with them. "Only if I can join you this time."

He couldn't help it. He didn't even try to shrug out of his shirt before wrapping her against him and kissing that succulent mouth. Although he moved quickly, she immediately responded, molding her mouth to his, sending the tip of her tongue into his mouth, and against his anxious plundering.

She tasted sweet, like strawberry wine. He wanted to drink the taste from her, take it into his soul, as if she held the ultimate nectar in that cool cavern.

He walked her backwards into the room until he could reach the entertainment center. He tried to fumble for the controls without releasing her mouth, but gave up and looked over her shoulder to turn on the stereo. Thank God, it was set to an adult contemporary station, and Journey's "Faithfully" filled the speakers.

"I owe you a dance," he explained.

She smiled, a shy virginal smile that sank into his blood to heat it further. "You don't owe me anything. This is a beautiful weekend."

"And the view couldn't be any better." He swayed along with the music, barely shuffling his feet against hers, and stifling a moan when she stepped even closer to him.

It took Steve Perry four minutes, and another song by Josh Groban, before Derek had again regained control. This would be their last night in Cancun. He wanted to make it last. It had to be perfect. Who knew what would happen once they returned to Atlanta? The atmosphere of the tropical island might play a part in her willingness. He hated to even think about her turning away from him on Monday morning, but the thought was there. If tonight was all he would have, he was going to make it damn hard for her to walk away. He left the stereo on, and pulled her by the hand into the kitchen, where he refilled their empty wineglasses from earlier that evening.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?" She sipped the merlot, her eyes on his chest, bare beneath his unbuttoned shirt.

"No, this is just some expensive wine. I don't want to waste it." He winked, and used one finger to tip her glass back up to her lips. "Plus, it gives me an excuse to watch your mouth."

She swallowed, then swiped her lower lip with a dainty pink tongue. "Are you stalling?"

He wanted to follow her tongue. He set his glass down to do just that. "Stalling?"

"Are you afraid to take me to bed?"

There was that self-assured woman who wasn't afraid to say what she meant.

He framed her face in his hands, and slid his fingers into the loose bun of hair at her nape before he kissed her. "Not at all. I'm just afraid I won't let you out of bed. Does that scare you?"

She narrowed her still glistening eyes. "Bring it."

He'd been primed most of the night, but her bold words flooded his groin with hot blood, making him grow insanely hard. With a steadiness that he couldn't believe, he took her glass from her, and set it on the counter behind her before sealing his body against hers. He licked her top lip, then the full bottom one. Damn, he couldn't get enough of her. He walked backwards, dragging her along with him, keeping his mouth fused to hers, and trying not to step on her toes all the way down the hall. He bumped against the bed, then reached behind him to flip off the covers.

She pulled back, and Derek had to consciously stop himself from going after her. *Slow down Martinez, you're smothering her.*

She didn't look bothered by his exuberance. In fact, the hungry look in her eyes made him want to tear off her dress and throw her down on the floor.

She peeled off his shirt, and laid it carefully on the armchair nearby. "You're built very nicely Derek." She ran those cool fingers down his chest, flirted with his belt, then skimmed back up to tease his nipples.

"Ah, Kara..."

"Lie down. On your back."

This woman was full of surprises. He did as he was told, but not without a smirk. He folded his hands behind his head, and let her have her way. She untied his shoes before pulling them off, which made him smile. She peeled off his socks, taking great care not to

turn them inside out, then she stood, trailing one finger from his navel to his throat as she did, leaving flames of lust to swirl behind. She gave him a long predatory look, and his fingers itched to pull her down on top of him, and kiss that curl from her lips. His pants were uncomfortably tight, and his belt kept his erection at an odd angle. He wanted to finish undressing, but this was her show, and he'd enjoy the hell out of it.

Then she turned away from him. His muscles tensed, and he prepared to go after her, but she looked over her shoulder and winked, making his body useless. Did the woman just flirt with him? His heart pounded. She bent her head down, then reached behind to the short zipper at the small of her back. She made a show of it, taking way too long, but those hands were so graceful, so fluid in each movement, he couldn't tear his eyes away.

With the zipper down, he caught a glimpse of her thong—its color matching her dress perfectly—before he followed her hands as they crossed over her chest. She took the shoulders of her dress in each hand, and peeled them down. Slowly, with such seductive control that Derek thought he might snap. Each inch of creamy skin she revealed was a treat to his eyes. His mouth watered at the thought of kissing her flawless back. She held the fabric of her dress against her waist, then again turned to look at him. Derek glanced up at her, but he couldn't stop looking at the curve of her waist, not wanting to miss a thing.

She gracefully stepped out, and hung her dress on top of his shirt.

"Jesus," he whispered. The sound shocked him though; he didn't realize he'd spoken out loud.

She reached into her hair, and pulled out the myriad of pins, and soon her luscious tresses tumbled over her shoulders. Only then did she turn to face him, but she took a moment before meeting his eye.

"God, you're beautiful." Her breasts were perfectly shaped, the color of alabaster, and capped by dusky rose nipples. They rose and fell with her breath, the movement somehow enticing. Slipping her thumbs underneath the waistband of her panties, she inched them down her thighs, revealing a trim nest of golden curls.

Derek groaned. He couldn't help it. He wanted to stay calm and let her do as she pleased, but she'd barely touched him, and still he was afraid he'd spill his seed before he made it inside her. His fingers itched to touch her. Each muscle burned with the restraint he put them under.

She lifted one knee onto the bed beside him, and then the other, until she knelt by his left hip. Her eyes stayed focused on his belt buckle, and Derek could practically feel the perspiration ooze from every pore on his body. He jerked his hands down, and went to work on his belt.

"No." She stilled his hands with hers, the cool soft skin such a contrast to his. "I want to do it."

"You're killing me."

"I think you can take it."

He watched her release the tongue and groove clasp of his belt, the pressure of the backs of her hands digging into his pubic bone, and he hissed through the need to take over for her.

"Did I hurt you?"

"I told you ... you're killing me."

She answered with a smile, but thankfully she unzipped his slacks with far less

ceremony, and dragged them down his legs along with his boxers. She sat back on her heels and stared at him while she folded his slacks and tossed them on the arm of the chair along with the rest of their clothes.

He had to touch her.

Before he could even finish the thought, he sat upright, had his hands buried in her hair, and his mouth on hers. She collapsed against him, and only then could he calm down. She moved her legs until she sat astride him, her sweet body cooling his front, yet at the same time stoking the fire below. Her breath brushed his cheek, the shallow puffs another indication of her arousal.

"Ahh, God woman, you make me crazy with wanting you."

She made a little mewl, and the sound went straight to his chest and settled in around his heart. He wanted her as crazy as she made him. He held her against him, picked her up enough to move his legs, laid her down, and kissed his way down to her perfect breasts. "You taste so sweet all over. I can't get enough."

With her entire body at his disposal, he took his time. Licking circles on her flesh, kissing each curve he could reach, and stroking the others with his hands. He waited until she squirmed before he latched onto one nipple, and she made that kittenish sound again. He groaned against her creamy smooth flesh. Even trying to make her crazy was driving him crazy. His fingers found her opening, warm and wet. He used long strokes to pet her, and her erratic breathing encouraged him. Moving to her other breast, he continued touching each dip and fold in her beautiful body. He slipped one finger inside her warmth, and his eyes rolled back in his head at the tight heat that enfolded him.

"Derek," she whispered, and gripped his hair. "I want to feel you when I ... ah ... please ... come up here."

He didn't need another invitation. He leaned forward, and sent his tongue inside her mouth just as he was enfolded in the sweetest enclosure. In one slow deliberate thrust he possessed her.

Or she possessed him. After only a few long draws, he experienced her orgasm, and it felt almost as good as one of his own. He moved only enough to prolong it for her, but the exquisite sensations of the rippling down his staff gave him another jolt of lust, and though he thought it would be impossible, he grew harder inside her.

She purred, a satisfied rumbling sound against his cheek and into his ear as he buried his face into the pillow beside her, breathing in the perfume of her hair. He rode out the last of her contractions before allowing himself to pump in a tempo that matched his need for her.

"Feels so good," he panted, nibbling her ear. "I love feeling your pleasure around me."

"Derek..." Her hands were busy, scaling up his back, squeezing and grasping. She rocked against him each time he entered her. "Kiss me."

He did, gladly. He kissed her until she whimpered again. He knew what the sound meant, so he reached down where they were joined, and found the pulsing little bud where it rode against him. Slowing his rhythm, he worked his fingers against her until she writhed beneath him.

She let out a sharp cry that made his ears ring, and his heart pound. He increased his pace, and only when she milked him did he give in to the overwhelming need to release. The shudder worked its way down his spine and burst in a snowballing flare.

She found his mouth with hers, and kissed him through it hungrily. He held her as close as he possibly could until the room stopped spinning.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, they'd reluctantly left the bed to pack their suitcases before taking one last walk on the beach. The sand was still cool beneath his bare feet, and the midmorning sun warmed his back. Kara gripped his hand, and laid her head against his arm.

"I think Cancun is now my favorite place on earth."

Derek smiled at her words. The trip did have a calming effect on her. She hadn't twisted her hair into that tight bun that made her look like a prickly spinster, and the additional color on her skin gave her a warm glow. If her sister Kris was responsible for the wardrobe change, Derek would have to personally thank her. Kara had a way of wearing a simple black bikini, and making it look like sexy lingerie. The ocean breeze kept blowing her sheer white wrap away from her body, billowing like a cloud behind them.

"I'm glad you came along."

"I am too, but I feel bad for John and Tyler. I'm cashing in on their misery."

Derek laughed, and gave her an encouraging squeeze. "I'd bet money that they get back together within a month."

Kara lifted one eyebrow. "After one of them cheating on the other?"

"If you saw them together you'd see what I mean. Tyler is an impulsive, sometimes arrogant, ass, but he loves John. This is probably just the thing he needs to shake him up and make him see what he's got."

"I hope so. For both of their sakes."

They walked in silence, soaking in the soothing music from the waves lapping against the beach and the occasional bird chirping from the palm trees.

"We didn't get to go snorkeling. I hope you aren't disappointed."

"Not at all. I enjoyed our other activities."

God, so did he. There wasn't a way he could go back to those sterile sessions in that damn hotel again. "I think you should take more vacations. You're a natural."

She sighed. "I'm not sure I will be ready for work tomorrow. I'll probably just daydream all day."

Derek's heart seized. "Daydream? About Cancun, or about me?"

"Both." Her blush was beautiful. This woman managed to be both cold as stone and sweetly feminine. Derek's inquiring personality made him want to learn every facet of the woman, and discover what made her tick.

"That's good. I'd hate to think I was the only one afflicted." He pulled her into his arms, keeping her in the shade of his body as he looked down into her eyes. They were so clear and bright, he could actually see his own reflection in the deep blue pools. "Don't be surprised if you see a sexy commercial about Cancun coming from my desk sometime soon."

"I didn't see you taking notes."

He didn't bother buttoning his short-sleeved shirt, and Kara was no longer timid as she traced each line on his chest.

"I have a good memory."

"Hm, well we have to meet again this month, so you can't forget about me quite yet."

He lifted an eyebrow. "You're going to make me schedule an appointment?"

"As far as my personal calendar goes, I can squeeze you in whenever you've got the time."

He loved the fact that her guard was down. The woman in his arms today was a totally different woman from the one he agreed to "no strings attached" sex with a month ago.

He covered her face with kisses. Slow stamps of his mouth that would hopefully show her how much he adored each feature. From the high arch of her cheekbones, to the smooth skin of her eyelids. He made his way down to her jaw, and she tilted her head back to offer her neck. It was a move displaying her trust in him, and he groaned.

"You're beautiful." He licked the long line of her neck before pulling back. "You would tempt the Pope."

She laughed. "And you sir, are good for my ego."

He kept his arm around her shoulders all the way back to the hotel. After a quick lunch in the hotel's restaurant, it would be time to leave.

Derek would see to it that they would be back. Kara deserved more than a quick weekend getaway. She needed two long weeks without a care in the world.

With him.

\* \* \* \*

Kara brushed a strand of hair from her forehead, and opened the oven to check the dinner rolls. Derek would be knocking at her door in a matter of minutes, and she wanted everything to be perfect first. The warm scent of yeast and butter filled the room.

Perfect.

Although she had seen him multiple times over the course of the last three weeks, tonight would be the first time he would experience her cooking. Whether consciously or not, she hadn't invited him to spend the night in the home she shared with Max. His spirit still seemed to hover in the space. It was especially noticeable in her bedroom. Derek either knew the reason for her reluctance, or didn't mind her spending so much time at his place. Tonight might change all of that. She'd suggested the idea of her cooking dinner for him early this morning, before his alarm went off.

His arms really were the best place to start a new day.

If he was surprised at the invitation, it didn't show. He merely kissed her on the top of her head, and asked, "What wine should I bring?"

Kara fanned herself with the frying pan lid. Memories of last night merged with the many nights before. She swore her heart wasn't up for grabs, but each time Derek held her, she all but forgot her resolve.

Casey admired him, Kris loved him.

And so did Kara. She didn't want to admit it, but there was no escaping the reality of that statement. She loved him. She didn't even feel as if she was betraying Max. The feelings she had for Derek overshadowed guilt and loss she'd suffered from since Max died.

She loved the way Derek called her some days at lunch just to say hello. She loved his smile. She laughed at his teasing humor, and then there were his kisses.

She could no longer call their coupling anything but making love. After last month's

insemination attempts in the hotel room, Derek made it a point to please her ... many times ... before he gave in to his own desires.

She couldn't help but smile each time she recalled one particular conversation that took place in the wee hours of the morning. Derek had asked her how she was keeping track of his emissions.

"What?" She'd pulled away from him, and feigned affront.

He shrugged, and a smile flirted with his lips. "You know ... in your original contract. You said I get paid for each shot. Do you know how much money you owe me? I'm going to be rich."

She reached up and took his nipple between her fingers, pinching until he yelped.

"You changed the contract, remember?" She gave him an evil smile, and rolled him onto his back to continue her torture.

"God, stop that Kara. That hurts."

She ignored him, and even leaned down to take a bite of his shoulder. "Those were all freebies. The earth shattering orgasms were a bonus. Remember?"

Her false sense of control lasted five seconds. He chopped her hands away from him, and in the same movement, flipped her over until he had her pinned beneath them. He cupped her breast, and rolled her nipple in between his thumb and forefinger.

"Are you sorry?"

"No." She lifted her chin.

He pinched and pulled with a little more force. If the action was meant to hurt, he would be disappointed to find that it instead sent tendrils of burning lust from her breasts to her loins.

He pulled on her other nipple with the suction of his warm mouth. "Sorry yet?"

"If I say yes, will you stop?"

"Yes," he said against her breast.

She arched against him, and dug all ten fingers into his hair. "Then no. I'm not sorry."

After that, she had forgotten all about counting emissions.

The ringing doorbell shook her out of her daydream. With any luck, she would be able to play out more of her fantasies tonight. She opened the front door, and Derek took her breath away. First at the sight of him standing there looking so darkly handsome, and next when he stepped over the threshold and kissed her breathless.

\* \* \* \*

"The Braves made it fifteen innings. That run in the end was bullshit and you know it..." Derek spoke into the phone, using his free hand around Kara's waist to keep her beside him amid the throngs of stadium evacuees. "No way. Keep your Angels, man. The Braves are gonna pull out of this slump."

Kara liked to listen to Derek talk. His voice was commanding, but not abrasive, and low enough to vibrate against her. Every once in a while she could detect a slight accent, usually when he spoke words of Spanish origin. He laughed at something his old college buddy said, and in a seemingly unrelated gesture, he kissed the top of Kara's head. The familiarity warmed her already sun-ravaged skin.

Finally, they made their way to Kara's car, and she threw their game gear in the back seat.



"Look Jason, as much as I like you, you don't compete with the gorgeous woman sitting next to me, so I'm hanging up now."

Kara blushed, and Derek winked. She started the car, and turned the radio down while he said his goodbyes.

Before she could shift from park, Derek took her face in his hands, pulled her over the center console, and kissed her.

"I'm sorry about that. He always calls the second the Braves lose a game."

He kissed her again, and Kara gripped his shirt for balance. The air conditioner slowly turned the stifling heat in the car into something more livable, and Derek pulled her ever closer.

"You need a bigger car."

She laughed against his mouth. "Or we could just go back to my place."

She was finally able to have Derek in her home without thinking that Max would walk into the room.

"I like the way you think." He kissed the tip of her nose, then pulled back. "As a matter of fact, I like a hell of a lot about you."

"I like a hell of a lot about you too." She beamed. "Especially this." She covered his mouth with hers, and drew his tongue into her mouth.

"Ah." Long moments later, he nibbled her lip. "I wasn't being completely honest. I don't like a hell of a lot about you. I love you, Kara."

He said it so naturally, she couldn't doubt his sincerity. She pulled away, and looked him in the eye. He didn't flinch. In fact, he nodded. "I do. I love everything about you."

She fell into his arms, and her heart soared. The twinge of guilt wasn't deep enough to consider. She said what she'd wanted to say for weeks. "I love you too, Derek. I think I started falling for you when you brought that lubricant with you to the hotel."

"I don't want to remember those afternoons. I should have known I'd never be able to perform like a machine with you beneath me."

They celebrated their mutually declared love with a long kiss that only ended when the Atlanta Braves parking lot cleared out, and Kara's tongue started to cramp.

They found a fast-food drive-through, and he fed her French fries as she drove home, licking the salt from her lips at every stop light.

When she turned the corner at the end of her block, and saw a strange car in her driveway, she faced Derek with a question on her lips.

Derek shrugged, and his expression darkened.

Whoever drove the non-descript black sedan had parked it in the spot that hadn't been used in years. Not since Max sold his red Mustang and began parking his SUV in the garage.

She pulled into the driveway, got out of her car, and peered inside the strange car, but there wasn't anything about the vehicle that would give away who the owner would be.

"Give me your house keys." Derek's face hardened, each feature seemingly carved from a piece of mahogany. She obeyed him without question, and took his offered hand, following him onto the porch.

Her front door was locked, and Derek unlocked it and stepped inside before her.

She immediately knew that something was wrong. The scent of warm oregano wafted through the air, and the light in the kitchen was on. She peered around Derek.

"Hello?"

A shadow emerged from the kitchen, followed by a man.

"So she does eventually come home," the man spoke as he slowly turned to face Kara.

When she saw him, the rest of the world melted around her, and Kara knew that nothing would be the same from that moment on.

"Max."

## Chapter Ten

It couldn't be Max, she knew that. She knew her husband was dead, and had been for three years. Her eyes were playing tricks on her.

"Hello, K."

No one called her by her first initial except Max.

*Max is dead!*

"No..." She backed into Derek's chest, and he automatically brought his arms around her to steady her.

"Yes. It's me. I'm back." The man who looked like her dead husband took a step toward her, and she immediately stumbled backwards.

"No ... no ... who are you? Derek..."

Derek moved in front of her. "Whoever you are, you'd better have a damned good reason for breaking into her house, and you'd better get the hell out now before..."

"I didn't break in." The man smiled, a slow movement that crept over his face like thick molasses. "I used my key." He cocked his head and looked at Kara, half hidden behind Derek.

"Don't you recognize me K? It's really me."

Kara tried to speak, but her mouth was too dry from hanging open as it was. She snapped her jaw shut, and shook her head. "No. You can't be ... who are you? What do you want?"

The world as she knew it was crumbling away. She was stuck in a horrible nightmare, where even the home she'd lived in for years looked unfamiliar. Everything was happening too fast, and there was no way to slow it down. Irrationally, she wanted to cover her ears to block out the pounding.

"Look ... look ... I'll prove it to you." The man took off the gold band on his left ring finger, and offered it to her. When she cowered behind Derek, he held it up. "It's the ring you bought me. Read the inscription. You'll know it's me."

Kara didn't have the nerve to reach for the ring. She was too busy staring at the man before her. It looked like Max. His hair was a bit longer, and additional lines around his eyes and mouth spoke of a rough few years. The man was heavier than Max, a good start to a pot belly showing underneath his stained white tee shirt.

Derek took the ring from the man and handed it to her.

She tore her eyes away from the stranger, and looked at the ring. A plain fourteen-karat band, nothing unique, but the inscription was there. The man was right.

*My love, forever, for always, Kara.* This was Max's ring. No doubt about it. She remembered picking out the bold font, not wanting anything too fancy and feminine on her husband's ring.

Her husband's ring.

"Where did you get this?"

"I got it from you. You put it on my finger in front of our friends and family. In Saint Anthony's church. Remember, you tried to put it on my right hand? I switched hands so fast that no one saw, not even the videotape showed. Remember?"

Yes, she did remember that. No one knew about that little blunder except Max. She

didn't even tell her family; it was a memory that was too private to share. But this man ... the man pretending to be Max Sorrento, he knew.

And he looked like Max. A lot. "How ... where ... I don't understand."

"I've been out of the country for the past three years. It's a long story, but just know that I had to leave town, I didn't have a choice, and I couldn't take you with me. I couldn't even tell you that I was alive, when really for all intents and purposes, the man you married is dead."

"What do you mean?"

Kara still hadn't released Derek's hand; she gripped it so tightly that she was sure she had to be cutting off his circulation. She stared back at the ring in the palm of her other hand.

"It's a long story, and no offense to your ... friend here, but it isn't something I want to share." Kara's visitor eyed Derek, as if only now wondering about his presence.

Kara looked up at Derek, but his eyes were trained on the other man. She looked back at the ring. It had to be him. This had to be his ring.

"Max?"

"It's me K. I promise. I'm back. Come to me. I missed you so much babe." The man ... Max, held his arms open.

Kara looked up at Derek, his jaw ticked, his eyes narrowed. "Derek?"

"Do you believe him?" Derek's mouth barely moved with his words.

Kara didn't know what to believe. The ring. Max. "K" ... their wedding. It all made sense, yet she was more confused.

The ring. She stared down at it, tears filling her eyes.

"I guess ... I do."

Max took another step toward her. "I can explain everything." He took the ring from her hand, and put it back on his finger before easily moving Kara away from Derek.

"Excuse us, would you?"

"Kara?"

The tension in Derek's shoulders and neck showed that he didn't want to leave her with this man.

"It's okay Derek. I need to ... understand this. I'll call you tomorrow."

His jaw bunched and his lips tightened. "Call me by ten tonight, or I'm coming back."

"Don't say anything," Max hastened to say. "I'm not supposed to be here. Don't tell anyone you've seen me."

Derek glared at Max, gave Kara a possessive kiss on the cheek, and let himself out.

When the door closed behind him, Max pulled her into his arms. "God K. I've missed you so much. Seeing you with another man kills me, you know that?"

He didn't smell like she remembered, he wore a new cologne, and there was cigarette smoke on his clothes. She had a hard time hugging him back. "I ... thought you were dead. We had a funeral ... it's been three years."

"I know. I don't blame you." He led her to the couch, and sat down beside her. "The guy looked like he wanted to pull my arms off."

*I'm sure he did.* Kara could still see Derek's ice-cold glare. "He's a good man..." And she was going to hurt him. With her husband back, she couldn't continue seeing him. Her heart lurched at that realization.

If only Max had come home two months ago. Before she met Derek. When she was still caught up in Max's memory. That would have been so much better.

If only he'd never left.

"Where have you been?" She ran her fingers all over her husband's face. This was like a dream come true. One she never could have imagined coming true. One that she had at one time awakened from and spent the day in depression.

"Aruba. Some of the big drug lords got a hold of my identity. An informant told the force that they were coming after me." He stopped her wandering hands, and kissed her fingers. "They would have ended up hurting you too, if they came for me here. I had to leave."

"Why couldn't you tell me?" The pain from that day so long ago returned. She remembered the Sheriff at her door who brought the news. How her family swooped in to surround her in a cocoon of sympathy and love for the following weeks, each reminder sending a hot tear trailing down her cheeks. "You have no idea how I hurt. For so long."

"I know K, I know. I hurt too. I couldn't tell you. I had to break all ties. I shouldn't be here now either, but I had to see you. I couldn't take it anymore." He tucked her beneath his chin, and she cried. She still thought she was going crazy, but she held on to him while she could. "We'll never be apart again. I've come for you. It's safe enough now."

"What do you mean?"

"The men who were after me won't be watching you anymore. They won't notice you're gone. We'll sell the house, and go back to Aruba. I've got a great little condo there. It's beautiful ... sunny, warm ... you'll love it."

She pulled back to look into his face, shining with excitement, making him look more like the Max she remembered. She wiped the mascara streaks from her face.

"You want me to ... leave the country?"

"With me," he urged. "A new life, a beautiful new life. Paid for by the federal government."

"But ... I can't just..."

He put a finger to her lips. "Shh, I wasn't going to bring that up right away. It's okay. Let's not think about that right now. I just want to hold you. It's been so long K. So long. Sometimes I didn't think I'd survive. Knowing how you must have felt when they told you I was dead."

"It was horrible." Kara went back to tracing the new lines on Max's face. When she assured herself that he was real, she buried her face into his tee shirt. Only when the oven's timer sounded, did she jump away.

"I made a frozen pizza." Max disentangled himself, and walked into the kitchen like he owned the place.

And why wouldn't he? He did own the place. Practically. His life insurance paid the mortgage, his pension paid...

Fraud. Oh Jesus, she was going to jail for spending that money.

She shook her head. She couldn't even think about that. Surely the federal witness protection program had some sort of pull. They were probably in on the insurance payout. Right?

She watched him move around the kitchen. He knew where everything was, down to the pizza cutter which she always hid beneath the silverware tray because she was afraid to cut herself on it. It was as if time melted away, and three years had never passed.

"Want a slice?"

She shook her head. "No thanks. Derek and I just..." Derek's image flashed before her, and she couldn't continue. She tried to stuff the hurt back with a fist to her chest.

"Oh shit. You're in love with him, aren't you?" Max held a plate full of pizza in one hand, and a bottle of beer in the other. He looked at her with pity, not accusation.

An hour ago, she would have answered that question without hesitation. Now, looking into her husband's eyes, the man that she vowed to love and honor until death, she wasn't so sure. "I ... I don't know. I'm so confused."

He took a long drink from his beer, then set his plate down on the dining-room table, in the spot he always used. "I know this is hard for you K. I don't expect you to hop into bed with me like I was never gone. I'm a different guy than I was when I left, and you're a different woman." He dropped into the chair, leaving her standing there watching him fold the slice of pizza in half to take a huge bite, a habit she remembered clearly. He moved the food to one side of his mouth when he continued. "We've got a few days." He shrugged, then swallowed the bite before taking another one. He ate like he hadn't eaten in weeks, but then he always did. "I want you with me. I still love you, I never stopped." He tore his eyes off of the pizza to look up at her. "But you gotta do what you gotta do."

Kara sat beside him. She couldn't stop staring. She couldn't believe that he was here. In the flesh. And she was awake.

"Where's the clock?" He gestured to the mantle, where an antique clock used to sit.

The question was so unexpected, that it took her a moment to answer. "I gave it away." The ticking was so irritatingly loud, that Kara rarely wound it, and Kris told her that a clock like that required regular use, or the gears would jam.

"To who?" Max's eyes flashed, striking Kara dumb.

His grandmother's clock. Kara suddenly felt ice cold. "I'm sorry, Max. I asked your mother if she wanted anything after you ... well, died. She said she didn't want anything." She also said she didn't want a traitorous bitch living in her son's home or driving his car.

"So who did you give it to?"

Kara glanced at the empty spot on the mantle, then dropped her chin. She never would have thought that he would feel so strongly about the clock. If it meant that much to him, he certainly didn't show it before.

"I gave it to my boss Casey. His wife collects antique clocks. She has a room full of them, and when they go off it's like..."

"I want it back." Max stood quickly, causing his chair to scrape along the hardwood with a screech. "Tomorrow." He took his plate into the kitchen, and dumped it into the sink rather than put it into the dishwasher, just as he always did.

He returned to the dining table, and took her face in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Kara. I didn't mean to shout." His expression was back to tender. "I just came home expecting everything to be the same, and when I couldn't find the clock, I guess I freaked out a little bit."

Kara covered his hands with hers, and stood to face him. "I understand. I'll get the clock back tomorrow."

He gave her a smacking kiss on her lips. "Thanks, babe. I think I've got a case of jet lag, so I'm gonna hit the sheets. Don't worry, I put my stuff in the guest room."

She stared after him, as he walked down the hallway without a backwards glance. He closed the guest-room door behind him, leaving Kara standing in the dining room, her

mouth hanging open.

She pinched herself. Max was alive. He ate a pizza, he wants his grandmother's clock, and he left her where she stood, with all of her questions unanswered.

She slowly sat down in the chair Max vacated, feeling as if she would fly into a million pieces if she didn't move with care.

Aruba? He wanted her to move to Aruba with him. She'd have to leave her job. Her sister. Derek.

*Oh God.*

The one time she allowed herself to let go and live again, and she ends up hurting the man she came to love. As for her, she was too confused to know if the pain in her chest was her heart breaking at losing Derek, or healing from finding Max. In her wildest dreams, when she imagined him walking back into her life, she pictured a loving homecoming scene, complete with kisses and a long lovemaking session. She didn't expect him to get upset about his grandmother's clock and disappear into the guest room.

To prove that he had done just that, a series of loud snores came through the closed door. Kara slumped against the table. Max always could fall asleep quickly. She listened to the snoring, letting the memories return. He had tried every product on the market to stop snoring, but in the end, Kara found that she had grown so used to it that it didn't disturb her sleep, in fact she couldn't sleep when it was too quiet. She remembered during the first weeks after his death, when she wished she'd recorded the noise so that she could get some rest.

Now he was back, and she was sitting alone, trying to figure it all out.

\* \* \* \*

Derek paced his living room. Twice now he had run into the coffee table from not paying attention, but after a string of curses, he just went back to pacing.

Kara's husband was home.

Derek didn't delude himself. When faced with a choice between her husband and him, he knew what her choice would be. Kara loved Max. He'd known that, yet he still fell for her.

*And she fell for you too Derek.*

God damn it. All the progress she'd made in coming out of her shell. She'd overcome her guilty feelings, and that day she mentioned Max without losing her smile was one of the best moments of his life.

And now it was all screwed up.

If he was a good and decent guy, he'd leave her alone. Let her resume her life with the man she loved. The man she pledged her life to. They would live happily ever after, just like she deserved. They would settle into their married lives, have children and...

*Fuck.* Children. He dug the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. She might be carrying his child right now. What would she do? Raise his child with her husband? Would she change her mind, and give the baby up for adoption? Abortion?

He stopped in front of the window overlooking the Atlanta skyline. Lights twinkled on as the sun dropped ever lower. The city continued humming with life, as if Derek's world wasn't crashing around him. The idea of losing not only her, but his own child made his stomach turn even more. When he agreed to this insemination idea, he thought he could separate himself from that. He didn't expect any kind of personal involvement.

But then she baited him with her damned icy personality, goading him into making her feel.

*Well Derek, you did it. You made her feel all right.* And in the process he started feeling more than he ever thought possible. And now he would lose her, and the life they created together. If it came down to a legal fight for the kid he'd be screwed. He signed the damn contract.

And since when did he want a baby?

*Since you went and fell in love with the mother.*

He pulled his phone out of his pocket for what had to be the hundredth time. Still no missed calls. It was only nine o'clock, she had another hour. He almost hoped she wouldn't call, just so he'd have an excuse to drive back over there. Of course, if he found her in bed with the man, he wasn't sure he could keep himself together. Even if he was her husband.

*Fuck.* He resumed his path back and forth through his apartment. When his phone vibrated in his hand, he almost dropped it. It was her.

"Hello?" He sat in his leather recliner so that he could focus.

"It's me." She sounded beaten. Hollow. Derek's heart squeezed painfully.

"Are you okay?"

She didn't answer right away, and it was enough to make him stand again and storm toward the door.

"I'm okay," she said finally. "Confused."

Derek's hand stilled on the doorknob, and he pinched his eyes closed at her weary tone. His arms burned with the need to hold her and tell her everything would be all right. He cleared his throat, and tried to speak calmly. "What did he say?"

"He's been in Aruba, under federal witness protection." Her words were staggered. Stilted. "He wants me to sell the house and go back with him."

*Fuck.* "So he came back for you."

"That's what he said." Her voice broke. Damn it she was crying. "And the clock."

"The clock?"

She barked a mirthless laugh. "His grandmother's clock. I hated it. It was too loud, so I gave it to Selena, Casey's wife. Max was pretty upset that it wasn't there. He made me promise to get it back tomorrow, and then he went to bed."

Derek shook his head. A clock? Did nothing make sense anymore? He left his house, and was inside his car before he could even think about the logic.

"Where is he now?"

She sniffed, and Derek clenched his teeth. "He's in my guest bedroom. Asleep."

So she wouldn't be sleeping with him tonight. Derek relaxed only marginally. "I'm coming over." He fished his keys out of his pocket.

"No, Derek. That's not a good idea."

The keys dug into his palm. "I want to see you. I need to hold you right now."

"I can't. I'm ... married."

"Kara..."

"Please Derek." Her voice was so shaky, he knew tears had to be streaming down her face. "I can't ... see you right now."

He gripped the steering wheel, heedless of the heat inside the car. "I love you."

Her cry broke his heart. "I have to go."



"Talk to me Kara. If you won't let me come over, we can at least talk on the phone."

"I can't. I'm sorry, Derek. So sorry..."

"Don't do this Kara." Derek swallowed, forcing his voice to remain at a respectable level, even though he wanted to swear at the injustice of the whole damn thing. "Don't do anything without thinking it over. What if you're pregnant?" That might be a cheap shot, giving her one more thing to stress over, but damn it he had to say it.

"Oh God," she cried. "What are we going to do?"

"Let me come over. Please. For five minutes. I need to see you. Hold you." He ran a hand through his hair. "Please."

She seemed to think about it, and Derek said a silent prayer, but then she cried. The sound seeped under his skin and made it crawl with the need to comfort her. "I can't let you come here. Max is here. My husband."

Shit. This was it. She was saying goodbye. He leaned back in the driver's seat. Yes, any reasonable man would probably let her go, wish her well. But he wasn't a reasonable man. He was going to fight for her. She was worth it.

"Then talk to me. I can't hang up until I know you're okay." He wiped the sweat from his brow, and almost gouged his eye with the keys in his hand. He swore, and tossed them on the seat.

"I'm okay, really Derek." She sounded a bit calmer. "Just talking to you is helping me. You're a good friend."

Friend? *Oh hell no.* It took an act of God to keep from growling into the phone. He took a deep breath, and kept his voice steady. "Are you really okay? Do you feel safe with him?"

She laughed, a short dry sound. "He's my husband."

"Has he ever hurt you?" Okay, so he was reaching, but she didn't answer right away, which made him wonder.

"I should go..."

"Has he?" That would explain her reluctance to get close to a man. By God, if Max laid one hand on her, he would rip each one of them off of his wrists.

"No, of course not."

"You said he was upset about the clock." His car was hotter than hell, so he started it up and cranked the air conditioning.

"Yes, he was upset, but he didn't hurt me. He has never touched me. I promise."

Derek believed her, but he'd still like to tear him apart. "You can call me any time you know. Day or night."

"I..."

"You know I won't be able to sleep tonight. I already miss you."

"Derek don't. Don't make it harder on me."

"I love you, Kara. I can't make that go away just by not saying it out loud."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't think I could ever do anything to hurt you, and now..."

"No," he interrupted. "This isn't your fault. Don't you dare start building up that wall of guilt to hide behind again." He sucked in a lung full of icy air. "I'm not giving you up. I love you, and I could never ... *never* ... walk away from you Kara." He left the most important words unsaid. Max had walked away. He didn't know the circumstances of her husband's disappearance, but she had to remember that he made a choice, and left her. Put her through her own personal hell.

"I know you have a lot to think about," he continued into the silent phone. "I'm not going to push. I'm a pretty patient guy, you know that."

"I know." Her voice was quiet, almost like it got when she curled up beside him and went to sleep.

"I won't call you, but I want you to call me whenever you can. I'll drop everything to come to you."

"I miss you already."

He barely heard her, but he closed his eyes in deep pleasure at her words, as if by keeping them shut he could keep her sentiment in his ears for a moment longer. "I miss you too my love, but I'm here. Always."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You sound sleepy. Go on to bed. Call me from work tomorrow if you can."

"I can't go to bed yet. I have to call Casey."

"Your boss? Why?"

"The clock. I need to get it back for Max. I never should have given it away. I feel terrible."

What the hell is up with the damn clock? "Don't feel bad. You didn't know it meant so much to him."

"Yeah."

"Will you call me tomorrow?" So much for not pushing.

"I'll try."

"Please do. I love you, Kara."

She didn't answer, until Derek's jaw ached from clenching his teeth. "Good night Derek."

*Shit.* "Good night."

She didn't hang up immediately, so Derek held on to the phone like it was his lifeline, waiting for her to say something. Finally, with a quiet sob, she disconnected.

*Shit. Holy God damned mother fucking shit.*

He pounded his fists against the steering wheel. He replayed their conversation over and over as the car hummed and the air blew in his face. She didn't exactly tell him it was over. But then she didn't exactly tell him he had a chance in hell either. He pictured her sitting on her couch, curled up with that blue afghan that her great grandmother crocheted. Her eyes would be red, there would be a box of Kleenex by her side, and the little wicker trash can by her feet, because she'd never just pile the dirty tissues together. Maybe she'd even fall asleep on the couch. After calling Casey.

Derek shut off his car and got out. There was something about that clock that just wasn't right. If he'd been away from his wife—from Kara especially—wouldn't the whereabouts of a clock be the last thing on his mind when he returned home?

Derek walked back inside his house, and threw himself into his easy chair. The more he thought about the damn clock, the more it bothered him. Making up his mind, he poured himself a glass of whiskey, and turned on his laptop. While it went through its boot-up process, he dialed the Tate Hotel.

\* \* \* \*

Casey looked from Kara to Max, then back again. His mustache twitched. "Good morning, Kara."

"Good morning. Thanks for letting us stop by so early." Kara hoped Casey didn't see through her forced smile. "Is Selena here?"

"No, she's on that teacher's retreat until next Thursday." He again focused on Max, and Kara introduced them.

"Max, this is Casey, the general manager of the Tate Hotel where I work. Max is my ... friend."

"Hey," Max said in his familiar cheerful voice.

The men shook hands, and Kara was reminded of the day that Casey sized up Derek in her office. Her heart thumped heavily at the thought of Derek, but she smiled through it. She had to. Max's grin was usually contagious. He could win over even the stodgiest of people, but Casey didn't look impressed.

When Max emerged from the guest room this morning, Kara was glad to see that he'd changed from jeans and a dirty tee shirt into the same black cargo pants he used to wear to work on the force, and a black tee shirt. He looked more like himself today.

"Come on in." Casey opened the door and stepped aside. "After you called I went into her Clock Shrine, but I didn't know which one it is." He led them down the hallway, and into the room at the end. It should have been a good-sized bedroom, but Selena had lined each wall with shelves, and each shelf was covered with antique clocks of various styles, sizes, and wood types. The last time Kara had been in the room, every one of them was wound and ticking away. Casey must not have kept up on winding them while Selena was gone. Kara would have to remember to give him a hard time about that later.

Max walked through the room, quickly at first, and then slower the second time through. "It's not here."

"Are you sure?" Kara looked over the shelves herself. It was a distinctive clock. Mahogany wood, with three ornate gold columns on each side, notched open to show the interior of the clock gears.

"Yes, I'm sure. It's not here Kara," he snapped, then turned on Casey. "Where else does she keep clocks?"

Casey's eyes narrowed fractionally. "Just here. There is one on our mantle that I bought her myself. That's it."

Max's jaw ticked. He spun back around and searched through the shelves again. Casey gave Kara the fatherly questioning look, and she could only shrug in response.

They looked through the room twice more. It wasn't there. "Are you sure it wouldn't be anywhere else in the house?" Max ran his hands through his hair, making it stick out from his head.

"I hate the noise. She keeps them here." Casey folded his arms across his chest, studying Max's agitation.

Kara suddenly felt caught in the middle between her husband whom she couldn't publicly claim, and her friend. She stepped between them in an effort to keep them from actually going at each other's throats. "Can we call Selena? Maybe she knows..."

Casey interrupted her silently by shaking his head. "It's a retreat. On top of some mountain in Canada. No telephones, and no cellular service. It's one of their amenities." He looked back at Max. "If I remember correctly, she took a few clocks to the shop before she left. The damn things need regular maintenance, or they aren't as annoying." He smiled at Kara.

Kara's polite laugh was stifled when Max took a step toward Casey in an obviously

aggressive motion. "Which shop?"

Casey shrugged, his eyes incredulous. "How am I supposed to know? This is Selena's thing."

"Maybe you drove her there. Maybe you got a bill in the mail..."

"Max," Kara laid her hand on his forearm, and tried to pull him back. "It's okay. We'll get it back. Selena will be home soon. What's the big hurry?"

Max's eyes shifted to Kara, then back to Casey. It took a few deep breaths before he responded. "Yeah. There's no hurry. Come on Kara." He took her hand and dragged her back down the hall. At the door, he was back to his cordial self.

"Thanks anyway, Casey." He shook Casey's hand. "If your wife calls, would you mind asking her about it? The clock means a great deal to me."

"See you at work," Kara smiled, before Max pulled her back to the car.

## Chapter Eleven

"Well? What do you think?"

Casey closed the door, and turned to face his other visitor. Derek heard every word that was said, and even from his place in the room opposite Selena's Clock Shrine, he heard the desperation in Max Sorrento's voice.

"I don't like him. He's up to something," Casey muttered. His mouth barely moved with the words, hidden as it was beneath the long mustache. "Did you find anything?" He nodded at the clock that Derek held.

"No. It just looks like a clock to me." Derek set it down on the table to let Casey have another look. His hands still hurt from clenching them so tightly while Max and Kara were here.

"Tim should be at the shop by now." Casey grabbed his cordless phone and dialed. "If anyone can figure it out, it's him. He's been taking care of Selena's clocks since she bought her first one."

While Casey talked to Tim, Derek paced. He'd been up all night. After speaking to Casey last night, the idea that something was wrong only grew. The clock wasn't anything special. He'd looked it up on several internet websites. Made in 1894, identical to hundreds of others, worth about one thousand dollars, but only if there was an interested buyer.

Nothing special. He'd give the guy a grand himself if it got rid of him.

"Tim said he'd take a look." Casey put on his suit jacket, and picked up the clock. "I'll drop it off on the way to work."

Derek followed him outside. He was tempted to go with him to the repair shop, and he tried to mentally rearrange his schedule. In the end he realized that whoever Tim was, he wouldn't like Derek breathing down his neck.

Casey shot him a knowing look from the driver's side of his car. "Get in. I'll take you to your car."

Before dawn, Derek parked around the corner and three blocks away. He'd been staring at the clock ever since. He rubbed his eyes.

"I'll call you as soon as I find something out from Tim." Casey spoke to him like he was a pouting little kid.

Casey pulled up next to Derek's car, and Derek reached for the door handle. "Will you ask her to call me? No, wait. Don't do that. I told her I wouldn't push. Just tell her I'm thinking about her."

Casey's grin only showed in his eyes.

"No ... shit ... you can't do that," Derek continued. "She can't know we talked. Tell her that I..." Derek dropped his chin, realizing that he was rambling. His lungs felt so damn tight, and even a deep breath didn't ease the burn. "Yeah, call me when you find something out. Thanks, Casey."

Derek got out of the car, feeling weak and useless.

"Hey, Derek?" Casey's voice stopped him before he could open his own car door. Kara's friend and employer leaned across the seat to look through the passenger window. "She knows."

Derek watched the gold sedan drive away, and he sank into his own car, one big heap of hurting man.

He didn't get a damn thing done at work. The combination of stress over Max Sorrento's behavior, lack of sleep, and most of all, missing Kara. His assistant seemed to sense his distraction, and took care of most of his calls, leaving him staring out the high-rise window for most of the morning.

His stomach rumbled loudly, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since the fast food drive-through with Kara. He picked up his phone to order in, and it rang in his hand.

It was Casey.

"What did he say?"

"He says it's something I need to see for myself. You coming?"

Hell yeah, he was. He was halfway to the elevator already. "Where?"

"I'll pick you up. It's hard to find."

"I'll be waiting outside."

Derek loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. The entire building must be going to lunch at the same God-damned time, and they all moved in slow motion. He counted to ten. When the elevator stopped at every fucking floor, he counted to twenty.

\* \* \* \*

"I wouldn't have seen it myself if I hadn't just worked on one of these last week."

Tim was a small guy. He had a long nose, thinning hair that he slicked down somehow, and beady eyes. Right now one of those eyes was hidden behind a jeweler's loupe.

"I put it back so you could see how well it was hidden."

Derek wanted to throttle the soft-spoken man and tell him to get on with it. *Relax ... one ... two ... three...*

Tim used a long pair of tweezers, and from one of the hundreds of slots on the clock, pulled out a thin piece of plastic. The edge was painted to match the wood, but the rest was black, except for the vertical strips of gold on one end.

"A memory card?" Derek stepped closer to the work table. The tiny card fit on Tim's fingertip with room to spare.

"A micro SD card. Usually people use these in cell phones. You need to slide it into an adaptor to plug it into your computer." Tim dropped the card into a plastic baggie, and sealed it.

Derek took the baggie, and gave Casey a nod. "Get the clock. Thanks, Tim."

"Hey," Tim hollered after them. "Are you gonna tell me what's on it?"

Derek pulled a fifty from his wallet and laid it by the cash register. "Thanks for your time."

The first stop was an electronics store for an adapter.

"Maybe we should take this to the authorities." Casey tore open the adapter's package with his teeth. "What if there's some virus that takes out your computer?"

"You think he'd come back for a virus?"

Max Sorrento was no good. He was hiding something, and he was living in Kara's house.

"Maybe it's just his little black book. All of his old girlfriends' phone numbers."

Derek snorted, and buckled his seatbelt. He bounced his knee impatiently. "The man was married to Kara for Christ's sake. Who in their right mind would cheat on Kara?"

Casey laughed. Derek glared at the man as he drove through Atlanta traffic. There wasn't a damn thing funny about this.

"Well no one who loves her like you do would cheat on her."

"No one loves her like I do."

\* \* \* \*

Kara looked up from her desk to find Casey staring down at her.

"Please don't start." She was tired of hearing his opinion about her new "boyfriend", and Casey's opinion on how wonderful Derek was.

Kara already knew how wonderful Derek was. *Is*. She couldn't tell Casey that the man she introduced this morning wasn't simply a boyfriend, but her long lost husband who'd come back from the dead.

And Derek really was wonderful. What little sleep she had last night was filled with dreams of him. She awoke this morning and rolled over to kiss him before she remembered the new drama in her life.

She resigned herself to being content with fantasies and memories of Derek for the rest of her life. Eventually she'd fall in love again with the man she married. His new quirks were minor. Surely underneath that new exterior lay the old Max Sorrento that she had married.

"I found the clock." Casey's voice brought her out of her thoughts.

Kara grinned. "You did? Where was it?"

Casey's expression was unreadable. Not unusual for him, but normally Kara could figure him out.

"It was at a repair shop. Being cleaned."

Kara covered her heart with her hand. "Thank God. Max was so worried. I'll let him know." She picked up her phone to dial her land line.

"Come by around eight. I'll have it ready for you." Casey's last words mingled with Max's greeting on the phone. She waved a thank you at Casey and turned in her chair.

"Good news," she told Max. "Casey got a call from a shop where the clock was being cleaned. We can go pick it up tonight."

"That's great K." Now this voice she recognized. Easy going and relaxed. "I'm sorry I've been so worked up about it. I think ... I guess I thought it might be something nice to pass on to our kids, you know?"

Immediately, Kara's hand dropped to her abdomen. Half of her hoped that she carried Derek's child, the only part of him she would ever be able to openly love, but another part of her hoped that she wouldn't have to tell Max that she carried another man's child. The way his moods had been swinging, she couldn't be sure how he would react.

"Children?"

"You haven't changed your mind about that have you? I thought you wanted kids."

Kara could hear a game show in the background, and she could just picture him in his tee shirt and tighty-whities.

"I do. Want kids," she stammered.

"And ours will grow up on the beach in the Caribbean, the lucky little squirts."

Kara was speechless. Her palms grew moist, and she had to remind herself to

breathe.

"All right K. You'd better get back to work. Don't want you to get fired before you give notice." He chuckled. "I'll see you tonight."

"Okay," she croaked, then cleared her throat and tried again. "Okay. I'll be ... home soon."

She hung up, and stared at her flickering computer monitor.

She must be the most fickle woman on the planet. After three years of pining for this man, he sits at her house ... their house, right now, ready to whisk her away to a tropical island, and still she's not happy.

She missed Derek. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since she saw him, and she felt the loss as if it were weeks.

She had to stop herself from picking up the phone and dialing his number on numerous occasions. She couldn't say it last night when they talked, but she didn't love him any less. As much as she wanted to discuss the whole thing with Kris, no one could know that Max was alive. But if she left with Max, there was no way that she would be able to put Kris through a phony death.

She wasn't going to rush into anything. Surely Max would understand. Even as strange as he had been acting, he had to remember how much her family meant to her. Once Max got his clock back, maybe he could relax a little, and they could discuss their future. Spending three years out of contact with his family must have made him nostalgic.

Kara's phone rang, ending her focus on her mixed-up love life.

\* \* \* \*

Casey opened the door to Kara and Max for the second time that day. He still didn't look happy about it. His face was an unusual shade of red, and the spark in his eye wasn't joy.

"Come in," Casey murmured, in the way that the restaurant staff hated.

"Hey, thanks for finding the clock." Max flashed his toothy grin, and stepped into the room. "It has been in the family for generations."

"No problem." Casey growled.

Max probably wouldn't be able to read the other man's mood, but Kara gave Casey a warning glare.

Grandma Emma Sorrento's clock sat on the dining-room table, and Kara breathed a sigh of relief. It looked better than she remembered. The black lacquer shone against the mahogany, and even the gold embellishments were buffed to their original luster. Selena had taken good care of it.

Max rushed over to pick it up, with a little less care than she had expected, and turned it to the side.

"Thank Selena for us." Kara moved in beside Casey. "I'll buy her a replacement as soon as..."

"Where is it?" Max spun around, the clock in his hands, and a fierce scowl distorting his face.

Kara took a step back, and her hand went to her throat. She'd never seen anyone change so drastically in such a short amount of time. To see the morphing of her own husband was like watching a horror film.

"Where is what?" Casey didn't seem fazed by Max's reaction.



"You know damn well what," Max spat. His eyes flitted to Kara, then back to Casey.  
"Kara, go to the car."

She'd never heard him speak in such a deadly way. Her blood seemed to chill and thicken. "Max? What..."

"Go to the fucking car Kara." He somehow bit each word off without unclenching his teeth. He didn't move his focus from Casey, who returned his glare without flinching. Kara backed another step away, her gaze bouncing from Casey to Max.

"What's going on, Max? There's got to be a misunderstanding." No way was she leaving Casey and Max in this atmosphere.

"No misunderstanding Kara. He has something of mine, and I'll get it back one way or another. Now go outside before it gets ugly."

Casey held both hands up in a calming gesture. "Why don't you tell me what you're talking about? You've got your clock."

"Fuck the clock," Max shrieked, and advanced on Casey with three long strides. He threw the clock onto the hardwood floor, and it broke into a dozen pieces. "The card was there, and now it's gone. You have it. Don't deny it, you bastard."

Kara didn't know what was going on. She felt like she was in the middle of a nightmare, and everything happened too quickly. She had to do something, even if she was about to wake up. She grabbed Max's forearm and tried to pull him away, but he didn't budge from his belligerent stance. His chin jutted out, and the veins in his neck popped out grotesquely. "Come on Max. Let's go home. We'll find your card."

In a quick move, he chopped her hand away from him, and in the process sliced his fingernail along the tender skin of her lip. "Don't patronize me. Get in the fucking car before you get hurt."

His pupils were like pinpricks in his muddy brown irises.

He had gone crazy. Kara blotted the blood from her lip, but couldn't move.

"I don't have your card." Casey's calm voice was incongruous with the tightness in his face. His eyes only left Max for a split second to glance at Kara's lip. "Don't hurt her again."

"If I were you, I'd be worried about my own skin." Max took another step toward Casey, and brought one fist back.

"Max, no!" Kara grabbed his wrist before he could swing.

"Stay out of this Kara."

"Tell me what you want." Casey's steady voice amazed Kara.

"The card. Don't play stupid. I don't have the patience."

"What card?"

"I put a memory card in the clock." Max used a condescending tone, and his head bounced back and forth dramatically. "A thin black micro SD card. Just give it to me and you keep your balls."

Kara realized at that point that Max really had lost it. He needed professional help. Maybe the isolation had gotten to him. "Max ... the clock was an antique, why would it have a memory card? I think you're confused. We should just..."

"Kara, you have no idea what you're talking about, so why don't you just shut the hell up?" Max no longer spoke through his teeth. In fact, by looking at him one might think he was perfectly sane. She refused to let his words hurt her. He was sick. "I hid the card in the clock before I left the country." He glanced at her, but returned his attention to

Casey, who had yet to move a muscle. "Either you or your wife has it, and I want it back. It's mine."

Kara played on Max's newly relaxed demeanor. "You mean the kind of card that holds pictures and music? Is that what you mean?"

Max rolled his eyes. "Yes, Kara. Only in this case it has an address book. In the wrong hands it could be deadly."

The sound of booted feet rushed from the kitchen and from down the back hallway. Before Kara could react, Max pulled her against his chest, and cold metal was shoved beneath her chin.

"Let her go, Sorrento."

Kara's head was pinned at an awkward angle against Max's shoulder, so she couldn't see the owner of the voice. She swallowed, and tried to extricate herself, but she was crushed by Max's arms wrapped around her.

"I don't want to hurt you, Kara," he growled. "Don't make me hurt you. Stay still."

"Max..."

"And shut up." Saliva sprayed her cheek, and her stomach lurched.

"Drop the gun Max," the voice said.

*Gun? Oh my God.* Kara felt the blood drain to her toes, and her knees buckled. Max only held her against him tighter.

"I just want the memory card, and my wife and I will leave you alone."

"You know we can't let you do that." The voice grew closer. "Let your wife go. You don't want to hurt her."

"The hell I don't. It almost killed her when I died the first time. She said so herself. I won't make her live through that again."

Hot tears burned a trail down both of Kara's cheeks. "Max, don't."

"It's all right, K." Max walked them backwards. "We'll get the card, and we'll leave. We'll live happily ever after."

"We already have the card, Max. It's already being processed. It's over. Put the gun down before someone gets hurt."

Kara felt Max's body go tense.

"It's over Max. Let her go."

She strained to find Max's eyes. When she did, she was crushed by the lack of life behind them. This man was no longer the man she loved, but a shell. She thought that if there were such things as the undead, this would be a prime example. His face paled to a dull grey, the muscles in his cheeks now slack.

"Max," she whispered, and was a little surprised and more than a little relieved when he turned to meet her gaze. "Please."

He moved his arm, dropping the gun from her neck, and with a sad smile, he placed the muzzle against his own temple. "Goodbye, K."

"No!"

Her scream was muffled by an eardrum-splitting explosion, and was cut off when another body came from behind and took her to the floor. Her cheek rubbed against Casey's area rug, leaving a searing burn.

"No! Max ... no. Let me go." She struggled against the body on top of her, using her elbows and heels.

"It's okay Kara." The familiar voice soothed her immediately, even though shouts

and frantic movement behind her made it hard to hear.

"Casey?"

"Yes, it's me. We need to stay out of the way. They're helping Max." He rolled away, and she was pulled off the floor and into yet another pair of arms.

Spicy cologne, broad chest, strong arms. "Derek," she sighed. Suddenly, finally, feeling safe for the first time since he left her house. He didn't say a word. He just scooped an arm underneath her knees and took her from the room.

"Derek," she said again.

"You're safe now. I'll never let you go." His voice was thick with emotion. He kicked open a bedroom door, and sat in the window seat, cradling her in his lap.

The sounds from the living room carried down the hall. Police radios squawked unintelligibly, one man shouted for towels, and in the distance, the increasing volume of sirens.

Kara pinched her eyes shut and buried her face in Derek's chest. His heart pounded in her ear, its cadence strong and fast. She wallowed in the familiar warmth of his hard body.

"God damn it Kara. You don't know how scared I was when he put that gun to your head." His voice broke. It was so uncharacteristic that Kara pulled back to look at him.

His eyes were red, sunk deep in his eye sockets, leaving dark shadows below. His brow wrinkled with worry, and his jaw moved around as though he didn't remember where it belonged.

"You were there?"

He closed his eyes, as if the memory hurt him. "Yes, I was there. They told me to stay out of the way, but I couldn't just sit in another room when ... Jesus baby. You could have been killed."

He smoothed her hair away from her face, and then wiped his hand on his jeans. Kara was surprised when it came away stained with dark blood. She grabbed his wrist and stared wide-eyed at his palm.

"Max is gone, Kara. I'm sorry."

His tender words should have triggered tears. Instead she laid her ear against Derek's chest, closed her eyes, and counted his heartbeats.

## Epilogue

Kara slid further into Derek's leather easy chair. "That feels good."

Derek looked up from where he sat cross-legged on the floor in front of her, and showed off his perfect smile. "Good. You deserve it."

He knew just how to use the pads of his thumbs on the bundle of nerves and muscles on the sole of her foot. The peppermint lotion he used made her toes tingle with cool heat.

She should be used to such treatment; he'd given her a foot rub every night since her sixth month of pregnancy. Now, with her swollen abdomen, she could barely see her own feet, let alone pamper them.

"I don't deserve it. I haven't done a thing all day."

Derek set her foot on the ottoman beside the other, and kissed them both before walking on his knees until he knelt before her. He took his child in his hands, and kissed him through her thin nightgown. "You've taken care of my son all day. What more can I ask?"

Kara ran her fingers through his hair, loving his adoration of the miracle they had created. "You're going to spoil me."

"It's only fair." He leaned in and kissed her mouth. "You spoiled me first."

Derek's tongue found its way into her mouth, and Kara latched on eagerly. He kissed her deeply, caressing her lips with his until her eyes fluttered shut. He tasted like his favorite whiskey, a flavor that she'd come to love secondhand. When they had to break for air, he nibbled sweet kisses along her jaw and down her neck.

"Derek...?"

"Hmm?"

"You ... ah ... you never told me what the police said today."

"I was distracted." He licked a design against her throat.

She giggled. "I didn't distract you. You started playing with your baby as soon as you got home. I see where I rank," she pouted.

"Well, if you must know..." He lifted her out of the chair and carried her through the room. Kara wrapped her arms around his neck and kicked her feet like a carefree child. "Officer Kent tells me that of the names and addresses on that SD card, ninety percent are now in custody."

"It's ninety percent now?"

Derek laid her in the middle of the bed, and bless his heart he didn't even groan with her added weight. "Yep. Most of them charged with international drug trafficking, so they're facing hard time. If Max was alive, he wouldn't be a very popular guy on the streets right now."

Kara dropped her eyes. "I guess he ... knew what he was doing then."

"No, I think he did the only thing he thought was left to do. I don't think he ever knew what he was doing." He shrugged out of his clothes, and crawled in bed beside her. "The memory card was his insurance policy. Kent still thinks he was blackmailing some of the drug lords. I think he went mad with greed. If he'd just kept taking bribes as a DEA officer, he probably never would have been caught. It was the idea of owning his own

cartel that drove him to do what he did three years ago."

"And I never knew."

Derek dragged his thumb across her cheeks, then along the curve of her chin. "You weren't looking. He was good at hiding things, and you had no reason to question him. Officer Kent still can't say what brought him back into town though. I think they agree with us for the most part."

"That someone found him in Aruba?"

"Yeah. That's why he cleaned out his place there. He never meant to go back."

"And if I hadn't given the clock to Casey and Selena, I would never have known he was alive. He would have slipped in, took the memory card, and left."

Derek's mouth tightened. "That would have been so much easier on you."

"But that card put a lot of criminals away, so it was worth it. At least now I know why he changed so much near the end of our marriage." Kara brushed a wayward strand of his hair from his brow. "I have closure." She studied Derek's collarbone as she let her mind wander. "I wonder what would have happened to me if I followed him..."

"Don't." He covered her mouth with two long fingers. "Don't even think about it. It drives me crazy, and I'll want to go hurt someone. You're not following anybody except me."

Kara smiled at his possessive words. "Will you take me to Aruba?"

Derek pulled her against his chest, cradling their child between them. "Let's get Junior here, and we'll all go. Maybe then I can get you to go parasailing."

Kara pulled the sheet over them. "I'll follow you anywhere."

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Alanna Coca is a Wyoming native, who has always been intrigued by the rich history of the wild west. In her free time she enjoys reading, writing, and spending time with her family.

**Meet Lsb Authors At The House Of Sin**  
**Lsbooks.Net**

**We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books**

LSbooks.com  
for other exciting erotic romances.

**2007: Terran Realm**

Urban fantasy world: TerranRealm.com

**Featured Series:**

**The Zodiac Series: 12 books, 24 stories and authors**  
Two hot stories for each sign, 12 signs

**The Coven of the Wolf by Rae Morgan**  
Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

**Fallen: by Tiffany Aaron**  
Fallen angels in hot flight to redeem their wings

**The Max Series by JB Skully**  
Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

And many, many more!