



— *Homecoming* —

NAKED
AMBITION

ASHLEY LADD

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Naked Ambition

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-sizzling*.

Homecoming

NAKED AMBITION

Ashley Ladd

Dedication

To all my sweethearts, past and present, but especially present.

Chapter One

Police detective Cliff Griffin stewed in the back of the worst dive he'd ever seen. If he wasn't on duty he wouldn't be caught dead in the joint.

A waitress winked broadly and pointedly looked at his crotch. "Can I get you anything, sugar? *Anything* at all?"

He plastered a smile on his face as he choked out, "No thanks."

The platinum blonde with bright blue eye shadow that would do a 1960s go-go dancer proud, pouted prettily and stooped lower so that her breasts threatened to spill out of her skimpy costume. "Are you sure? You're the cutest thing to wander into this place in a year of Sundays."

Cliff didn't consider himself *cute*, but he wasn't grizzled or dirty like most of the other patrons, either. He wondered what the woman would do if he flashed his police badge or told her he was a cop. But he wasn't ready to reveal himself, so he looked away while trying not to get his face stuck in her cleavage. "I'm sure."

He had to keep a clear head and a watchful eye. Some monster was threatening the woman and her co-workers. To date, they didn't know if the threat came from a religious nut, a thwarted lover or maybe the jealous wife of one of the patrons. As the new guy in the department, he'd gotten stuck on the case.

He had nothing against naked women or drinking, but he wasn't allowed to partake of either on duty so this was torture. He also preferred to be *alone* with a naked woman.

That brought a grimace to his lips. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd been with a woman. And it had been even longer since he'd been in love with one.

That he could remember. Who wouldn't remember a big break-up on Valentine's Day? Or having a huge heart-shaped box of chocolates bonk him on the head?

If the cheesy decorations on the walls were anything to go by, it was almost Valentine's Day again—the worst day in the world. When he got off duty, it was his turn to have a stiff drink!

* * * *

When the door opened and a cool breeze wafted in, Ali James' nipples beaded into hard points. Chills racked her almost-nude body and she shivered. The iced drinks on the tray she carried sloshed dangerously so she clutched the serving dish tight. It wouldn't do to drop it and have the drinks docked from her pay. She needed every penny to pay for medical school, the mortgage and her sister's keep.

If she pretended she was someone else, like Julia Roberts or Cameron Diaz, this job wasn't so bad. She earned a lot more money part-time than she would at most full-time jobs, which gave her time to study and attend class.

Her customers only knew her as "Star." In keeping with her role, she wore spindly high heels, an obscenely short skirt and low cut, diaphanous blouse, tons of makeup and a raven-haired wig. In real life, she usually pulled back her dirty blonde hair into a ponytail, wore big-rimmed glasses instead of her contacts and preferred baggy t-shirts when not in her medical garb. So far, no one she knew in her real life had ventured into this seedy pub, so her secret identity remained intact. As she hoped to get a job as a surgeon far away once her sister went off to college, no one would ever put two and two together about her time here. Even her sister, Amy, thought she worked in a truck stop.

Except for other waitresses like herself and the exotic dancers, the room was filled with men, most of them drunk out of their gourds. Smoke, heavy cologne and alcohol filled the air. A low-hung fog made the place even dimmer than the low lights would, normally.

She moved deeper into the room, not sure if she preferred the stuffiness to the cold but clear air by the door, and delivered her drinks. The men stuck their tips into her waistband and ogled her breasts. One stood and dipped his head to quickly suckle her nipple. Another snaked his hand under her skirt and tried to grope her pussy.

"Hey! No touching." She tried to move away but a third man blocked her. She looked around for Timmy and Hank the bouncers and opened her mouth to call out to them.

The third man had long, greasy grey hair and a cheesy moustache. He slithered closer and covered her mouth with his hand then drawled in her ear, "We just gave you a very generous tip, chicky, so it's time to pay up."

Fear joined the bile in her throat. She struggled and tried to jab the guy in his ribs but he twisted her arm behind her back. *Where in the hell were her protectors?*

"Prancing around naked in a place like this tells us otherwise. Nice women don't show off their tits to a roomful of men."

Her heart twisted and her fury exploded. She *was* a nice woman in desperate need of money. It wasn't like she slept with any of the customers, not that some hadn't offered insanely gross amounts of money for her favours. With a burst of energy born of fear she jerked away from the brute. "And you're *nice* men trying to rape an unwilling woman? Timmy! Help!"

The man's partner sneered. "Whoever said we're *nice*? You took off your own top and been flaunting your pussy all night just inviting us to have a nice little gangbang."

Her eyes widened and she looked around for help but everyone was too drunk, or else, just plain ignored them. This wasn't like Timmy or Hank. They always came right away when any of the women needed them. Usually they were there the moment someone tried to lay a hand on them, without having to be summoned. She tried again, "Timmy! Somebody! Help!"

Her heart pounded so loudly she didn't know if it drowned out her scream or if the music blared so loudly no one could hear.

The ancient hippy put his hand over her mouth and murmured in her ear, "Ain't nobody going to come to your rescue in this dive. When I'm done with you, my two buddies want to take a turn."

Sickened by his hot breath, by his grimy hands defiling her, she kicked and struggled. Her costume tore and her breasts spilled out. Scared and humiliated, she bit his hand hard and spiked his foot with her heel. "I said *no*!"

The man snarled as he clutched his foot. Hate darkened his rheumy eyes. "You're going to pay for that."

His companions caught her and held her against a soft beer belly.

Then she was wrenched away and she fell to the floor. The sudden impact knocked the breath from her lungs. She was dazed and her vision blurry, but she could make out two men roiling on the floor and a third getting the shit beaten out of him. She rolled out of the way of their feet and dragged herself up with the aid of a chair. Mesmerised, she tried to cover her nakedness as she watched in horror.

Timmy sped out of the back and tore apart the brawlers. He held one by the scruff of his neck and roared, "Break it up! The cops are on the way."

Timmy turned and gave her a gentle smile that was at odds with his burly body. "Are you okay?"

Unable to find her voice she gulped and nodded. As long as her protector was here, she'd be fine. If not for Timmy, she wouldn't feel safe in this place. After tonight, she wasn't sure she would again even if Timmy stayed glued to her side.

"I am the cops," a familiar voice said.

Her heart raced as the owner of the voice stepped into her line of vision and glared at her with accusation and was it hurt? Maybe disillusionment? Although he held out a badge, he wore plain clothes — tight-fitting jeans and a white muscle shirt.

Cliff, her ex-fiancé.

Mortified, she held the shredded material tighter over her breasts. Never in a million years had she expected to see him here. He'd moved out of state after their break-up and they hadn't spoken since.

She didn't know if she'd voiced her thoughts aloud or mumbled under her breath. "What are you doing here?"

Cliff removed his shirt and tossed it to her. "Put this on."

The shirt smacked her in the face but she caught it. It smelled of him, clean and masculine, and made her recoil again. Not wanting him to see her naked again, she pivoted on her heel before sliding it on.

When she turned around again, Cliff was at her side in two long strides. He pointed at her attackers. "Were these men trying to take you against your will?"

"No, man!" the hippy screamed. "She begged us to fuck her. She wanted us bad."

Chills shook her and she had to look away. Sick to her stomach, she was afraid she was going to throw up. "Yes. I serve drinks and *nothing more*. I told them to leave me alone but they wouldn't listen."

Sirens whirled from outside. When the front door opened, lights strobed through the room and two uniformed policeman strode in. Within minutes her attackers were handcuffed and hauled away.

Shaky, she leaned against Timmy. She didn't think she could finish her shift tonight but also knew their boss, Frankie, would be pissed if she didn't. "I didn't encourage them. Really."

Timmy looked chagrined and hung his head. "I should've been here to stop this. Frankie had me moving stuff around in the back."

She didn't blame Timmy. Frankie, their boss, however, was a piece of work. "Don't worry about it. I'm okay."

"You're okay by the grace of God. If I hadn't been here, you could be dead." Cliff faced off against her and narrowed his eyes.

They were dark and inscrutable but the set of his lips and his flared nostrils told her he was pissed. Not that he had any right—he'd given that up when he'd dumped her on Valentine's Day four years ago.

"Hello to you, too," she drawled and squared her shoulders. "I never expected you to darken my door again. What brings you back to town?"

His glance slid around the room then dwelled on Timmy who stood by her as if he was her personal bodyguard. "This isn't the place and I'll be the one asking the questions. I need you to go to the station."

Frankie appeared out of nowhere. His face was red and blustery and he seethed. "You can't take her. She did nothing wrong. I'll be short a waitress if she leaves."

Cliff looked Frankie up and down with disdain. "I need to get her official statement."

He turned his back on Frankie and looked at her again. "Did you bring decent clothes with you? Change and come with me."

She bristled. Did he think so little of her that she'd drive across town in this scandalous costume? "Of course."

Even though she wasn't eager to spend time with the holier-than-thou cop, she wanted out of this place more. She didn't feel safe and was too shaky to continue her shift.

When she rejoined her ex, she returned his shirt. For a moment she was sorry he had to cover his awesome chest. Then she chastised herself for such a random, out-of-place thought. She had no intention of seeing this man naked again, much less any intention of seeing him after he finished with her statement. "Can we hurry this up?"

When she went to get into her car, he grabbed her elbow. "You're coming with me. We'll send someone back for your car."

Aghast, her jaw dropped. "Am I under arrest? Or do you just not trust me?"

"You're not under arrest. You're more like *summoned*. As far as trusting you, I don't know. I never expected you to do something so boneheaded. Why are you here?" He opened the passenger door to his unmarked vehicle and waited until she slid in. Then he locked and closed the door.

She quirked a brow and twisted in her seat to glare at him. "If I refuse to go with you, nothing will happen to me?"

"I'll have to take you into official custody."

She rolled her eyes and leaned against the seat. "Why were you there? Business?"

"Yeah."

She was frustrated when he didn't elaborate. It was one of the things that had driven her crazy when they'd been together. He'd had so many secrets. He'd been away so many nights without being able to tell her where. "Is this the type of place you were at all those nights you couldn't or wouldn't tell me where you were?"

He guffawed and turned into traffic. "Who are you to ask me that? After the way I caught you tonight?"

"*Caught me?*" The hair on the back of her neck bristled and she gave him the glare of death. "How can you *catch me* if we're not together?"

"Ditto."

Fuming, she turned her back on him and stared unseeingly at the passing palm trees and skyscrapers that made up Ft. Lauderdale.

"Why are you doing this? Do you have a death wish?"

She thought about not saying a word until the official statement but felt compelled. "I have to pay for medical school. And in case no one told you, Mom died and I'm Amy's guardian. Someone has to pay the bills to keep a roof over her head." Amy was her sixteen-year-old half-sister who had no one else in the world except Ali.

"And this is being a good role model for Amy?" He turned the wheel sharply into the police station parking lot.

She'd been asking herself this for ages, but was angered that he voiced it aloud. "Amy thinks I waitress at a truck stop. She doesn't know where I really work. No one does."

"I do."

Exhausted, she pulled off her wig and finger combed her hair. Then she dug around in her purse and found a rubber band. Within moments, she scraped her hair away from her neck. "You don't count."

Chapter Two

He didn't count? That stung.

Unable to make eye contact, he rushed through her statement.

When he'd seen how all those men had been ogling her, he'd wanted to pummel their faces. When he saw how they were trying to hurt her, he'd wanted to kill them.

He didn't like himself right now. Cops were supposed to be in control. Exes weren't supposed to feel jealous and protective. So why did he?

He got one of his co-workers to take her back to her car and escort her home. If he was with her another moment he was going to give her several pieces of his mind or kiss her senseless. Neither made him happy.

Plus, he wanted to make it clear to the assholes who had messed with Ali that they'd have to deal with him if they touched her again. She might not be his woman anymore but he wasn't going to let anyone mistreat her, either.

When he got off work at 7 a.m. he drove by Ali's house to make sure her car was safely tucked in her driveway. He knew from the statement she lived in her mother's house. After some checking up on her, he'd found out she'd taken over her mother's mortgage when she'd become too ill to work. So Ali was carrying a hefty mortgage plus paying for medical school. Still, he didn't want her anywhere near that terrible men's club.

He longed to order her not to go back and it itched that he didn't have the right. He swore and smacked the steering wheel. When had the woman ever listened? Medical school and becoming a doctor meant more to her than him, than starting a family, than anything. She was obsessed.

Ali's house was decorated for Valentine's Day with paper hearts taped all over her garage door. A Valentine's Day flag waved proudly from her mailbox.

He wanted to puke.

It had been Valentine's Day when he'd broken their engagement. She'd made it plain their marriage and family would be on hold until she was a doctor. He'd refused to wait and gave her an ultimatum. She'd chosen medical school over him.

So he'd left town and found another job far away. He would have stayed away, too, if his grandfather, the man who'd raised him, wasn't ill and needed him.

That reminded him the night nurse needed to get home and he'd have to pay extra if he didn't get to his house fast. He didn't want anyone to catch him driving past Ali's house anyway.

Fifteen minutes later he checked on his grandfather, the first generation of policeman in his family. His own father had been a policeman, too, but had died in the line of duty when Cliff was still a kid. But Grandpa Ray had been strong and cunning and no one could bring him down. Not until this illness got hold of him last year. Now he was bedridden and Cliff was mad at himself for deserting this man for so long. He thought they'd have a lot more years and could wait until Ali left town.

"You look all out, son." Ray coughed, then smiled as his night nurse bustled around straightening the room and set out his medications for the day.

No way did Cliff want to let on what had just happened. He didn't want anyone to know where and how he'd found Ali or his reaction to her after all this time. Nor did he want anyone to think less of her.

"Rough night. I'm glad to see the sun."

Ray elbowed himself up on his pillows and got a far away look in his eyes. "I miss those rough nights. Guess I was a born cop."

Cliff shook his head. "The best."

"You take after me and your pa. I feel safe in your hands. I'm glad you're back."

Cliff started to get choked up, feeling guilty again for his absence so he turned away. "Yeah. Me too."

After he could speak again, he turned around and asked, "How are you feeling? All better?"

"I'll be up and doing a ten-mile marathon tomorrow. Bessie here says so, don't you, Bessie." Ray winked at his middle-aged nurse who looked the epitome of professionalism in her starched uniform.

Bessie winked. "You bet."

"See?" But Ray went into a coughing spasm and Bessie rushed to his side. She held his hand while Cliff claimed the other.

Ray's coughing ended and he breathed easier. "Give me a nip of brandy and the TV remote and I'll be fine until Daisy gets here. You go on to sleep." Daisy was Ray's housekeeper who was usually late because she had to drop several children off at school.

"I'll stay here with you." Cliff was reluctant to leave him alone and hovered over his bed.

Ray held out the remote and turned on one of his recorded cop shows. Then he sank into his pillow with a blissful smile when the policemen drew a gun on the suspect. "You'll be in the next room. I'll yell if I need you. Scoot."

A huge yawn attacked Cliff, so he nodded. Daisy and Bessie had keys. "Make sure you do, too."

Before Cliff left the room Ray was lost in his TV show.

Cliff stripped down to his boxers and climbed into bed. He was glad it wasn't the same one he'd shared with Ali, then cursed himself for thinking of her. Sleep was fitful, as dreams of Ali plagued him.

The Ali of his dreams turned on the CD player and sexy tropical music filled the bedroom. She swayed sensually to the beat and slowly ran the tip of her tongue across her lips. Smoky and seductive her eyes beckoned him to ravage her, yet she continued to gyrate across the room, out of reach.

Her short gown was so diaphanous the aureoles of her nipples peeked through. The swell of her breasts threatened to spill out of the low-cut bodice and they pushed together to form a cleavage deep enough for a man to drown in.

A crooked smile teased her lips as she looked down at her breasts and ran her fingertips across her mounds. She dipped a finger into the material and rubbed her nipple. Then she dipped in two and rolled it between her fingers.

Flames licked his cock and it tented his shorts. He yearned to feel her, to go deep inside her and make her his. He insinuated his hand between his shorts and stomach and pumped his cock. His hips pounded the bed until it banged the wall. "I'm ready for you, babe. Climb on board."

But she shook her head and tossed him a mischievous grin. "But your show's not over."

It was going to be over much too soon if she didn't have mercy. He backed off his cock before he came and it was game over. "You're a hard woman."

Her smile broadened and she shot a pointed look at his cock. "You're a *hard* man. Just the way I like you."

Growls rose in his throat. "Then get over here before I have to throw you across my shoulder and carry you over here."

"Promises, promises. I'll make it worth your while." She arched her back so that he could see her panties. They were crotchless and the flimsy material disappeared between the crevices of her legs. Her pussy lips were pink and glistening with moisture.

His heart raced. He was in danger of having a heart attack if he couldn't fuck her in the next minute. When she delved her finger into her pussy and then pulled it out and sucked it, he almost came.

He hadn't realised how nimble she was but her gymnastics tonight would be put to good use. He kicked off his underwear, slid off the bed and prowled across the room. He closed his eyes and let her musky scent wash over him. Then he fulfilled his promise and scooped her into his arms.

Instead of throwing her over his shoulder, however, he jacked her up against the door and supported her with his lower body. "Wrap your legs around me."

As if she'd read his mind or had done this a hundred times, she was already in the process of doing just that. She also wound her arms around his neck as she parted her lips wide for his kiss. He plundered her pussy and slammed her against the door. It banged loudly but soon Ali's screams drowned out all other sound.

He ravished her mouth then tried to suckle her nipple but couldn't reach it so he dropped a trail of wet kisses across her neck to her shoulder. His blood boiled and fire consumed him.

He kissed her again and swallowed her screams. They rocked together as waves of euphoria and rapture washed over him.

* * * *

Giant yawns attacked Ali in class the next day. She kept drifting off to sleep.

"Miss James? Could you snore a little quieter? The rest of your classmates want to learn," her anatomy professor said.

Ali jerked awake with a hiccough. Heat crawled up her neck to her cheeks and she gulped. She wished the floor would swallow her. She sank down in her chair, trying to hide. "Sorry," she mumbled, veiling her eyes from the angry man.

Her friend Sarah squeezed her hand. "I hit the books late last night, too."

Ali gave her a grateful smile. She wished she'd been able to. Sometimes she thought about telling her secret to Sarah, but always held back. She liked Sarah better than any of her other classmates but she wasn't sure how she'd react. Sarah came from a rich family who paid her full tuition, as well as her room and board. She drove a sports car and vacationed in the Riviera.

Ali didn't begrudge her friend her fortune and typically just put it out of her mind. She wished she could put her ex into a closed compartment as easily. She whispered an aside, "Cliff's back."

Sarah twisted around in her chair and scraped it back. She asked much too loudly, "Since when?"

"Miss Everett and Miss James, this is the last time I'm going to tell you to stop interrupting my class before I ask you to leave."

Sarah rolled her eyes but turned around and primly folded her hands on the table.

Ali sat up straight and couldn't wait to get her hands on a steaming cup of black coffee. These late nights were killing her and last night had been the worst. Cliff had kept her at the police station until the wee hours. Then Amy banged around, waking her up. She'd had trouble getting back to sleep for the couple of hours before class.

After class Sarah gave her a conspiratorial wink. "Tell me all about you and Cliff. Are you two back together?"

Ali choked and spluttered. Her blood had frozen in her veins at the look on his face when he'd looked at her topless in front of all those other men. He'd scared her more than the men who'd tried to manhandle her. He'd looked as if he'd wanted to kill her. Or, at least turn her over his knee and spank her. The words came out so dry and cold it left her lips freezer-burned, "Hardly. He's back, in spite of me."

"What brought him back, if not you?"

Ali shrugged. "Beats me. He wasn't exactly in a talkative mood when I saw him." Except to interrogate and berate her, that is.

"Maybe he's decided he can't live without you and will wait for you until you finish your residency."

Ali tossed back her head and guffawed, "Dream on."

"You never know. Anything can happen on Valentine's Day." Sarah pointed to a fat cupid on the wall that seemed to be pointing its arrow at them.

Ali stuck out her tongue at it and swerved out of its line of fire. "I *hate* Valentine's Day. Only people who already have lovers like it. It only reminds the rest of us poor slobs what sorry losers we are."

"Since you hate it so much and you obviously don't have a tryst planned, can you switch shifts with me the weekend of Valentine's Day? Terry wants to take me to the Bahamas for a romantic getaway. I think he's going to propose."

Ali wrinkled her nose. She worked every weekend at the club. Fridays and Saturdays were the best money-making nights. Holidays were the absolute best. She couldn't remember the last time she had a weekend or holiday off. A long sigh escaped her and she said, "Sorry. I'm on schedule to work."

"You work too hard. I'm amazed you don't keel over."

"Easy for you to say. I don't have a choice." Ali told herself for the umpteenth time – all this would pay off when she had a career with a good income. She would never have to worry again how to pay the mortgage or someone's college tuition. *Just a couple years...*

Sarah hugged her. "I know it's hard for you, sweetie. How's Amy doing?"

Ali swallowed a sigh. Amy, the boy-crazy cheerleader? Amy, who was mad at the world that her parents were dead and she had to live with an older sister who was never around? She shrugged and said, "Amy hates me and thinks I'm Momzilla. On the bright side, she and her cheerleaders are building a huge Valentine's Day float in my driveway. Every time I go out in my yard, a big, fat, stupid cupid grins at me. I swear she picked that little monster just to piss me off. Can I scream yet?"

Chapter Three

Cliff couldn't get Ali out of his mind. He kept seeing her at the club, kept worrying something terrible would happen to her. It was just a matter of time, at a place like that.

He'd hoped he'd solved his case when he booked the scum that mistreated Ali. But none of their fingerprints matched the stalker he was investigating. He bristled that he couldn't throw away the key on those men so they couldn't hurt another woman. The owner of the nudie club had taken out a restraining order on them, but Cliff knew from years of experience they didn't scare away such slime.

He stared into the distance, driving on autopilot as he travelled to check out his new lead. If something happened to Ali, he'd never forgive himself.

"Damn! You're supposed to be over Ali." The words echoed through his car, mocking him.

A pickup truck swerved in front of him and cut him off. He sped up on its tail and called in its licence. When no priors came up, he frowned but backed off. He was anxious to check out his lead, but he had a bad feeling about Ali, so he detoured to the club.

He slinked into the back of the room. Even with all the smoke, Cliff was glad he wore black so he blended into the wall. This time he ordered seltzer water, fighting off the advances of a redheaded waitress.

After a half hour without spotting Ali he was beginning to think she wasn't on duty tonight. He was about to call it quits when he spied her across the room, having a heated discussion with the proprietor.

The guy's face purpled as he yelled and shook his pudgy fists. His hands flew in wide, exaggerated gestures.

When Ali flinched, Cliff's blood boiled. His heart raced and he swore under his breath. If the moron ever struck Ali, he would answer to him. *Nobody* struck a woman, especially not Ali.

Cliff moved closer. He wound his way through the crowd and leant against the wall behind a partition to hide within earshot.

Frankie shook his finger at Ali. "Next time you're late, don't bother to come back. Ever."

Ali squared her shoulders and jutted out her chin. "I had a flat tire. I had to get it changed."

"And last week you had radiator trouble. And the week before that your engine blew. Get a new car. Or better yet, quit school and get some sleep. Those bags under your eyes tell the whole story. You overslept again." Accusation rang loud and clear in Frankie's voice.

Cliff wouldn't doubt the truth of Frankie's assumption. When they'd been together, she poured her heart and soul into school and often fell asleep on him.

"I'm *not* quitting school."

"You can't serve two masters. The time's coming you'll have to pick one." Frankie rubbed his hand over his hair, mussing it. "I mean it. This is your last chance. I have a line of women begging me to work here. This is the easiest money you'll ever make."

Cliff couldn't listen to another word. He cleared his throat and stepped into the light. "Pick the other. You're serving the devil here."

Ali gasped and looked as if she was going to ignore him. Then she squared her shoulders. Her eyes flashed fire, only this time she threw the flames at him instead of Frankie. "Butt out, Cliff. I can fight my own battles."

The costume she wore tonight was a provocative one that showed more of her breasts than it covered and it was all he could do to keep his hands to himself. He wondered how many other men hadn't, how many had touched her, caressed her. The thought killed him.

She narrowed her eyes and thrust out her breasts. She pointed to her eyes. "Up here, not down there."

He seethed. How could she parade around in that getup, jut her breasts in a guy's face and expect him to look into her eyes? "If that's what you want, then cover yourself."

"Pig." She flung back her head, snorted and sashayed away.

Over her shoulder she tossed, "Frankie, I'll talk to you later. I have tables to wait."

She wasn't going to get away from him this easily so he followed. Cliff was amazed how much such a slim ass could wiggle. Then again, it didn't have much support in the flimsy G-string. Was she begging to be fucked, too? His cock swelled and crowded his pants. He had the mother of all hard-ons and cursed himself. He was pretty sure the one causing his

discomfort wanted him to jump in a canal. His days of running, however, were over. He was back for good and she'd better get used to it.

He followed a few steps behind and didn't take his gaze off her. He wondered how long it would take to get a reaction. To his surprise, it took longer than expected. She ignored him as if he was invisible.

Unable to take it any longer, he ambled up to her as she was taking drink orders from a table of three men who never once looked at her face. He slid his arm around her waist and whispered in her ear, "This place is no good. You're better than this."

She ripped herself away. "Hands off, if you don't want Timmy to kick you out of here forever."

Okay, if it were her rules, he'd play. Before she could react he bent his head and kissed her nipple through her costume. When she froze and didn't move, he suckled it. His cock got so hot it burned through his pants.

She quivered, swore and pushed him away. "God! You never listen."

He was pleased to see her quaking. She wasn't as immune to him as she liked to pretend. He cocked a lopsided grin. "You said *no hands*, darlin'."

Her patrons snickered and guffawed.

She treated them all to a round of withering looks. "You know what I meant."

He was enjoying the verbal banter almost as much as watching her nipples pucker into tight little points that strained against the flimsy top. He'd forgotten how easy she was to goad or how much he enjoyed seeing her get hot and bothered. "As I recall, you used to say I never understood you. Why would you think I'd start now after being gone so long?"

A strangled cry tore from her lips and she threw up her hands. "You're impossible! I couldn't talk to you then. I can't talk to you now. Why are you here? Don't you have any criminals to chase?"

Why *was* he here? He wasn't so sure himself any more.

He pulled up a chair from an empty table and hunkered down. From there he had an even better view of her and he gulped. "It's a free world, isn't it? And last time I checked, this is a public place. I'd like to order a drink."

She turned and held out her order pad with a saccharine sweet smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I'll take your drink order – and nothing else. What'll you have?"

"Orange juice. On the rocks."

"You're a strange man." Ali flounced away and he wasn't pleased to note his weren't the only set of eyes following her around the room.

* * * *

"Ali, you got a personal call. What'd I tell you about this shit?" Frankie thrust the phone into her hands.

Ali's heart sank. Her sister was the only one that ever called here and she should be fast asleep. She covered the receiver with her hand and whispered, "What is it? I'm at work."

Instead of Amy's voice, an unfamiliar masculine one met her ears and she jerked upright.

"Is this Alyssa James? Guardian of Amy Nance?"

Ali's knees went weak and she couldn't exhale. "Yes. I'm Alyssa James. Is my sister okay?"

"This is Sergeant Cates of the Fort Lauderdale Police Department. We got a call about a wild party at your residence earlier tonight. We found your sister and several other minors engaged in underage drinking and sexual activity."

Ali gulped. Her head split and she rubbed her temple. She turned away from the rest of the room and tried to keep her voice low. "You actually caught Amy in bed with a boy ... having sex?"

"Yes, ma'am. She's in our custody now. We need you to come to the station on Broward Boulevard."

Ali didn't have to look at her watch to know her shift wasn't even halfway over. If she left now, Frankie might make good on his promise to terminate her. But she couldn't say no to the police or ignore her duties as a guardian. Amy was *so* going to die.

But as furious as she was at her sister, she was angrier at herself. For Amy's sake, she should have been home to supervise. This time, the girl was causing her own trouble – next time it could be an intruder. She hated to admit that Cliff might be right – that she should walk away from this job.

Her head throbbed like hell. If she quit, how would she make the mortgage *and* pay for her school? How would she pay for Amy's college in a couple of years? Her dreams of finding a cure for the cancer that killed her mother would go up in smoke.

"Miss James? How long will it take you to get here?"

With her brain fried she could barely think, so it took her a moment to calculate. At this time of night without traffic, she could travel quickly. "About a half hour. Do I ask for you when I get there?"

"Tell the desk sergeant why you're there. We'll see you soon."

Dreading the confrontation with Frankie, she turned to find him behind her with his hands planted on his hips. He glared and the edges of his lips were white. "What now? Your house is on fire?"

She couldn't do this right now. "My sister's in trouble. I have to go."

"I should fire you."

Trapped like an animal she whirled on him. "Fire me, then. I don't have a choice."

"Go now, but this is your last chance. I mean it this time."

She was well past him when she caught his words but she turned to wave and shoot a small smile. It wasn't much of one, but she tried. She felt pretty horrible that she'd let her sister down, her mother down and herself down. Everything was too crazy and too much for one person to handle.

Cliff...

She looked and he was still where she'd left him. Bracing herself for an "I told you so" she marched over to him. "I need you."

When Cliff's eyes lit up, she cursed herself. "I mean, I need your *help*. Can you come with me?"

Sure, he would follow, good Boy Scout that he was. Ali took off at a trot to the dressing room to grab her clothes. When Tim barred Cliff's way, she said, "He's with me. It's okay."

"You're white as a ghost. What's wrong?" Cliff stood at her elbow, concern etched on his face. "Did that jerk fire you?"

"Not yet," she mumbled as she fumbled with her bra, her fingers jittery.

Cliff replaced her fingers with his and latched it for her. He whispered in her ear, "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

His warm flesh grazed hers and shivers shot up her spine. His words echoed in her head. He had always been there until she'd shoved him away. Now that her mother was gone, he was the only one left who had always been good to her.

Guilt racked her and tears burned her eyes. Had she been a fool to end things with him? To put her career first? To worry about money more than love? Cupid had obviously been busy shooting his darts at other people that Valentine's Day when they'd broken up.

Frightened, she turned in his arms and leant on him. When he circled his arms around her, she burrowed deeper into his embrace. She rested her cheek against his heart and took comfort in its strong beat. "I'm so sorry. I don't deserve your kindness or your help."

In a gruff voice he said, as he stroked her hair away from her face, "Well, you've got it anyway. But you still haven't told me what's wrong so I can help."

The momentary weakness fled and she patted his shoulder and pulled back. Her half-hour was waning and Amy was waiting, probably scared to death in a jail cell. Maybe it would do her sister good to sweat it out, but it was Ali's duty to take care of this. She'd promised her mother, she was obligated by law and her sister was the only family she had left. "Amy's in jail. I have to go to the Fort Lauderdale PD. Come with me?"

Storm clouds roiled over Cliff's face and lightning flashed in his eyes as he held her blouse for her to slip into. "What happened? Is she okay?"

"She might not be when I get my hands on her," Ali muttered.

Cliff's brows rose but he remained silent, listening.

She slung her purse over her shoulder and marched out the back door. "She was caught having a wild party at my house. There was underage drinking and sex. They'll probably release her and lock me up instead."

Cliff stopped. "You leave her unsupervised at night while you're here?"

His tone made her bristle and she stopped dead in the middle of the parking lot. She pivoted on her heel and faced off against him. "Sixteen's too old for a babysitter. We live in a nice part of town. She locks the doors and has my number on speed dial. Mrs. Rice is next door if there's an emergency."

"Mrs. Rice must've been asleep on the job."

Ali boiled over but she did her best to keep her voice controlled. "You know what? I don't need your kind of help. I do what I have to do to survive."

But was she actually surviving? If she'd married Cliff, she'd be home to supervise Amy. She wouldn't have to worry about keeping a roof over their heads. Her medical school might have been put on hiatus, or she might not have finished, but survive? Yeah, they would have survived fine.

The truth was, she wanted to do more than just survive. Why did that make her suddenly feel selfish?

She'd always thought it was noble, her goal to cure people of cancers like the one that had claimed her mother. But if her life, and her sister's life, was falling apart because of it, was that really so noble?

"So you keep saying." Cliff took her elbow and gently propelled her forward.

At his touch, frissons of desire stole up her arm and shot straight to her heart, confusing her more than ever.

Chapter Four

Two days later, Ali cooked dinner beside Amy, who was still seething about being grounded for the rest of her life and having a “babysitter” sleepover on nights when Ali had to work. “I promise I won’t do it again. I learned my lesson.”

Ali wasn’t so sure. She diced tomatoes, green chillies and green onions and scraped them into a pan with browned hamburger. She supervised the spices her sister added to their taco filling. Then she flipped the plantains, jumping back when oil hissed at her.

“So did I. You’re too young for me to leave you alone at night. What if a burglar had come in?” Or worse. Amy might think she was immortal but she wasn’t. In many ways, she was still a child, as the other night had proved.

Amy squared her shoulders and pouted. Her sullen expression was opposite of the smiling hearts on her T-shirt. “I keep the doors locked when I’m alone. I don’t open the windows.”

“Have you had boys visit at night before when I’m gone?” She hated to think so. It was her job to protect Amy.

Amy scowled, “I’m not a child. I practise safe sex.”

Ali’s heart fell and her gut twisted. “So you *have*. Do you know how dangerous sex is? Do you know how many people get pregnant having ‘safe’ sex? Do you know how hard I’m working to provide a better life for us?”

“For *us*? You mean, for *you*.”

That smarted and Ali winced.

Ali wasn’t sure how to ask, so she just blurted out, “Is there any chance you’re pregnant?”

Amy slammed down the pan she was working with, heedless of the food that jumped onto the stove, and swung around to face Ali. Her brow furrowed, and her chest heaved. “I told you, I practise safe sex. I’m on the pill and we use condoms.”

Ali chewed her lip, uncertain if she should make her sister take a test. Why hadn't their mother left a manual on how to raise teenagers? "It's a lot more involved than just that. You're too young. I want you to stop seeing that boy. You're grounded."

Amy stomped up to her. "No! We have a big date planned for Valentine's Day. I won't dump him, especially not on Valentine's Day. I'm not like you."

That knocked the breath out of Ali but she did her best not to show how deep the barb wounded her. "You don't have a choice. You do as I say."

"You're not my mother. You don't care about me. You're only letting me live with you because you have to."

Ali couldn't believe her ears. Her heart shrivelled. She reached out for her only family and winced when Amy flinched and stepped back. Hurt, her hand fluttered to her side. "That's not true at all. I love you. You're my sister."

"I don't believe you. You're never around. You just want to lord it over me."

This tough love stuff was a lot harder than she'd imagined. Had she been as difficult at the same age? She didn't think so. She'd taken care of their mother and Amy when their mom had been too ill to get out of bed. She'd even quit the high school softball team to care for her. Now she wondered if she should have stayed on and got a scholarship. She wouldn't have to work so hard now.

She girded herself for more sass and hateful glares. "Get up to your room and do your homework. Like it or not—believe me or not—I'm doing this for your benefit." She pulled her final trump card: "Do as I say or I'll sell your car and TV."

After Amy snarled and stomped up the stairs, Ali deflated and rested against the counter. Her appetite had vanished. Her energy was sapped. She had a ton of studying to do, as this was her night off from the club. She ached for a break. She longed for a strong shoulder.

The desire to talk to Cliff overwhelmed her.

Before she overanalysed it, she locked herself in her bedroom and dialled his number. When he answered, her heart somersaulted and she started to hang up.

"Ali?"

Shit! Damn Caller ID! She hated technology.

She dug her nails into her hand and hoped he wouldn't say he told her so. "Do you have a few minutes to talk? I need a sounding board."

"What's up?"

His voice sounded so disembodied and she felt so alone. Even the ghost of her mother was absent from the house. "It's Amy. Oh, it's just *everything*."

"Are you at home or work?"

"Home. Why?"

"I'll be right over."

Before she could yell stop, the phone went dead.

Her nerves tried to jump out of her skin. She ran to the bathroom and checked her face in the mirror, swearing at what she saw.

Although she didn't want to look as if she'd prettied herself up for him, she didn't want to look scary, either, so she scrubbed her face, brushed her hair and pulled it into a high ponytail. Then she applied moisturiser, to give her skin a natural glow. She was just finishing when Cliff pounded on the door.

"Coming!" She wanted to bite back the word soon as it escaped.

Amy emerged from her room and ran to the window. "Is it Connor?"

It better not be Amy's boyfriend, Ali thought. She'd give the young man a piece of her mind and then let Cliff have a turn. "Cliff's coming over."

Amy cocked a brow and drawled, "Are you two back together?"

Ali shook her head but tingles shot down her spine. "We're just friends ..." And not really friends, but she didn't want to get into that with her sister.

When she opened the door, with the early evening sun behind him, Cliff looked like an apparition. When he stepped inside, she could see his hair was damp as if he'd just stepped out of the shower.

Her mouth went dry. He had recently been naked. Maybe he'd been naked while talking to her.

She chastised herself. She, of all people, shouldn't react like this to the thought of naked people. It was just skin. Just another male body. Everybody's basic anatomy was the same.

But Cliff's anatomy wasn't the same as 99.9 percent of the men who came into the club. He had a lean, hard body. He obviously worked out and kept in shape. He wasn't soft and pudgy, with a beer gut. He was clean cut and didn't dress as if he'd just crawled out of a gutter.

Tonight, he wore tight dark jeans that gloved his thighs and showcased his tight ass. He wore a white T-shirt that stretched over his broad shoulders and tapered to his slim waist.

"What's wrong?" Cliff closed the door and led her to the living room.

She wondered if Amy could hear them. She wouldn't put it past her sister to eavesdrop. She held up a finger. "Wait a sec." She called Mrs. Rice who agreed to come over and stay with Amy.

"Can we go somewhere private and talk?"

He regarded her closely. "How about my place?"

Alarms blared in her head but she tried to keep the expression on her face neutral.

"Aren't you staying with your grandfather?"

"I am, but there's a private apartment over his garage that's vacant. I use it when I want to be alone."

She nodded. She didn't want anyone to overhear if their conversation turned to her job so she quelled her misgivings. "You have time?"

"I'm off-duty tonight and you look as if you need a friend."

She looked that bad? Maybe she should have put on mascara. "Okay."

When they were safely cocooned in the garage apartment, she paced. As much as she needed to get this off her chest, she feared he might not understand.

He pulled two beers out of the fridge, handed her one, and then hunkered down on the couch and watched her. When she arched her brow at the beers, he chuckled and tipped his bottle to hers. "Neither one of us are on duty tonight. You look as if you need a little fortification."

She needed a whole bottle of rum, not merely a puny beer. But she took a long swig and let it slide down her throat.

"It's Amy. She's wild. She's sleeping with her boyfriend. She's defying me. She thinks I don't love her. She's only 16!"

She held her breath, waiting for the "I told you so," hoping it wouldn't be too dark to walk home after she stomped out of here in righteous indignation.

Cliff sipped his beer and settled deeper into the couch. "From everything I hear defiance is on par for the age. Unfortunately a lot of teens sleep around these days."

Shocked at his laissez-faire attitude, she gaped. "You think it's okay for a sixteen-year-old to be sexually promiscuous? I didn't go to bed with a man until I was twenty-th—" She bit off her words, lest she remind him he was her first.

When his eyes flashed and he finished, "—Three. With me," she knew she hadn't been quick enough, and she mentally kicked herself. Suddenly the apartment walls closed in and she was intensely aware of how close he was, how sexy he smelled. She spied an open door and when she moved closer, saw a large bed made up in the centre of the room.

She did her best to ignore it but the bed mocked her. When Cliff gave a wry chuckle, she turned her gaze back to him.

He scrubbed his hand across his jaw. "No. I'm not saying it's okay. But you can't stick your head in the ground and ignore it, either. You can't be with her every second, even if you didn't go to work or school."

She felt a bit better but questions still inundated her. "So I shouldn't have someone stay with her at night when I'm gone? She's furious that I hired a babysitter since the episode this week."

"I think you're smart to have someone with her."

Now she was confused and tilted her head. Her legs felt heavy, so she sank onto the couch beside him and tipped the beer to her lips.

He pulled her into a friendly hug and patted her shoulder. "You can't stop everything but you can't let her run totally wild. You can't open your house to Amy and her friends every night when you're gone, either. All sorts of things could happen."

She shifted so she could gaze up at him and her breast grazed his arm. Shivers coursed through her. "I'm not a total ogre?"

His gaze bore into hers as if searching her soul. His voice softened, became husky. "Not at all. You're being a concerned, responsible guardian. Someday she'll thank you for it."

Wry chuckles escaped her lips. "If I survive that long."

She couldn't break the gaze or maybe she didn't want to. She enjoyed letting his body heat warm her. She took comfort in his strength. She asked herself, was it so bad to let go for one night? To borrow his strength? To enjoy his company?

Once they had been close and she had loved being with him. She'd forgotten how much, until now. Had she been a fool to end things?

As he didn't seem to mind, she cuddled against him and rested her head on his shoulder. "Welcome back. Are you here for good or just until your granddad gets better?"

"I'm not sure yet. It depends."

She couldn't contain her curiosity. She didn't flatter herself that his decision could hinge on her. "On what?"

"Things." He wrapped his arms around her and held her close, dropping a kiss on the tip of her nose.

She was getting warm all over. Too warm. She had too many clothes on, too much separation from Cliff. "Mm, this feels nice."

"You think so?"

Alarms buzzed in her fuzzy brain but were quickly drowned out by the beautiful smile he bestowed on her. "Don't you?"

His arms tightened and he pressed his cheek against her head. "Yeah. I do."

She tried to hide the happy smile that played on her lips but gave up. "So I'm not such a monster? I'm not the worst parent in the world?"

"No. You're learning."

She nodded and nestled closer. When he pulled her onto his lap, she didn't protest. Her heart banged against her ribs in rhythm with his. Her breathing fell into synch with his, too.

"You're a nice man. There aren't many like you."

"Sorry you let me go?"

"Maybe..." An impromptu video played in her head of the lonely years that followed their break-up. No one else had stirred her, even a bit. Only him.

One thing she was definitely sure of. She lifted her eyes, sure her bruised heart shone through. "I'm sorry about how and when we broke up. Of all days to break up, it shouldn't have been Valentine's Day."

"I've hated that fat stupid cupid ever since." His words held a hint of mischief, though, rather than bitterness.

"Me too." She sighed heavily but rubbed her cheek against his, revelling in the feel of his five o'clock shadow. She'd missed having a man. It had been too long. She'd anaesthetised herself to men at her job.

This closeness felt way more erotic than prancing around half-naked in front of a roomful of drunken men. Cliff's tenderness was much more of a turn-on than their leers and groping.

"I really loved you," Cliff said against her cheek as he trailed kisses down to her neck.

Frissons of desire shot through her and she arched her throat for more of his caresses. "Loved?" she baited, as in, he didn't love her any longer? His lips, his body said otherwise and she hoped they told the truth.

Turning her face to his, Ali captured his lips. She opened her mouth wide and pulled him close. When his cock swelled against her she squirmed with excitement. "Love me tonight."

He crushed her against him and pushed her back into the couch. They writhed together as if they'd both been starved for years.

She slid her hand under his shirt and pushed it up, splaying her hands against his chest, delighting when his nipples puckered.

"Are you sure?" he asked breathily against her lips.

She'd been starved of true affection far too long and hadn't realised how much she'd been craving it. She was realising that attention was a totally different thing. "Yes."

To let him know that without a doubt she meant it, she pushed his t-shirt off and unbuttoned his pants. Delving inside his underwear, Ali wound her fingers around his cock. She was thrilled with its hardness and how hot it was, as if aflame.

After she'd watched a couple of her co-workers give lap dances, she fantasised that her perfect man would saunter into the bar and ask her for a lap dance. So far, no one remotely close to perfect had shown up.

Now her panties were soaked and her pussy clenched, aching to be filled by him and only him. The world quaked beneath her and stars spun above. "Fuck me. Now."

His hungry gaze never left her as he stood and peeled off his pants as she stripped out of her clothing. She felt vulnerable but right. Like she was in the right place for the first time in a long time.

Before she could stretch out on the couch and call him to her, he swept her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom. He drank deeply of her lips as he kicked the door wide.

When he reverently lowered her to the mattress, she quickly crawled onto her knees and wiggled her ass in his face, her breasts swinging freely. She shot a coy look over her shoulder. "Sit on the edge. I want to give you a lap dance."

Confusion lit his eyes, but then he cracked a crooked grin. "I see you're still trying to keep me off balance."

He perched on the side of the bed, nonetheless, his cock standing straight up and demanding her attention. "Come here, babe. Ride me hard."

"Are you as wild as you used to be?"

He remained quiet for several moments and she wondered if he'd heard her. So, she stood before him and slid her finger under his chin, forcing him to gaze into her eyes.

"I don't know," he finally said in a husky voice. "I haven't been with anyone since you."

Floored, she swayed towards him and held onto his shoulders to regain her balance. She didn't know whether to be flattered or to cry.

He leant forward and swirled his tongue around her nipple. Then he drew it into his mouth and suckled it. In heaven, she closed her eyes and pushed her breast deeper into his mouth. Her pussy screamed for attention and she spread her legs.

He inserted a finger, then two, and moved them in and out. His thumb caressed her clit and ecstasy filled her.

He pulled back leaving her cold and bereft. Just as she opened her mouth to protest, his hands spanned her waist and he lifted her onto his lap.

Losing her mind, she squirmed and rubbed against him. She needed him more than ever, so she parted her lips and begged for his kiss. He thrust his tongue deep inside her mouth and it duelled against hers. She could no longer think straight. Ali ran her palms over Cliff's hot flesh, delighting in rediscovering his broad shoulders and tapered waist. He filled her thoughts and everything else fled her mind.

By the time he fit her onto his cock she was lost. The years of their separation melted away. She worked her way down the long length of his cock, loving its thickness, loving his mastery. If possible he felt as if he was stronger and hotter than she remembered. It was hard to believe he'd had as long a dry spell as she had.

Wildfire shot through her veins. Her blood boiled. Her flesh tingled. Her pussy convulsed. She flung back her head and crushed her pelvis into his, taking every inch of him as deeply as she could.

They were one and she wanted it no other way. She wanted to stay in this position, wound in his arms, held in his heart and his arms, forever.

Feverishly, she gyrated on his cock and rubbed her breasts against him. As she came, long and hard, she plundered his mouth.

As she began to wind down, he released her lips, tossed back his head and howled. He spread his hands over her ass, imprisoning her against him as he made one final excruciating thrust.

It was so deep, so powerful she screamed in rapture and clung to him.

Spent, they fell back onto the bed. He grinned ear-to-ear as his slick cock flopped against his leg. She giggled as she enjoyed the strain between her legs that attested to the fact she'd been made love to.

She rolled to her side and propped herself on her elbow. Playing with his cock, she was fascinated how her cream covered it—another testimonial to what they'd just done. "I can't believe neither one of us have done this in so long. It's incredible."

Cliff rolled onto his side and put his hand between her legs. He caressed her pussy and massaged her clit. "It's incredible when we're together."

She moaned again and moved her pussy in rhythm to his hand. She wondered how his stamina was, if he was ready to get on top.

"Marry me. Quit the club."

Her heart stopped, and then raced into overdrive. Her lungs almost burst. "Yes!"

"And school. Let's start a family." Before she could react, he rubbed her belly. "Maybe we just did."

She gasped and looked down at his hand sitting proprietarily on her belly. In her tipsy state she'd forgotten to use protection. She wasn't on the pill, as she'd been celibate so long.

Damn him! Damn her!

As if he'd stabbed her in the heart, she yanked back and leapt off the bed. She towered over him and stood at parade rest. "I'm not quitting school."

"At least slow down. I didn't mean to quit forever, but you've exhausted yourself. You need a break."

Did she look that terrible? Or was he assuming because of her failure with Amy? If Ali quit now, she was afraid she'd never go back. "I can't just quit. And I can't 'slow down.' It's too late in the semester. I'd get F's. I only have two years left. I'm on a roll."

He sat up and looked at her as if she had morphed into an alien. "What's so wrong with taking a break? You know, for a honeymoon? To have a baby? To spend time with your new husband? To focus on raising your sister? In two years, she'll be grown and you'll be free."

She seethed and wanted to slap herself for putting herself in this position. She wouldn't be *free* if she had a baby dependent on her. "So you *do* think I'm a bad parent!"

She stormed to the door, intent on escape. But she had to say one more thing: "Why would you want me, worst mother of the year, to be the mother of your precious children? Well, I'll save you the trouble. No, I won't marry you. Not now. Not ever."

Chapter Five

Cliff cursed himself. He wanted to shake some sense into Ali. Couldn't she see what her obsession was doing to her? To her sister? How it had torn them apart?

Couldn't she see that he wasn't against her becoming a doctor, but that waiting two more years was an eternity for him? He wanted his grandfather to meet his grandchildren. He didn't know how long the old man had left.

"Let me take you home. It's dark."

She waffled on the threshold of his doorway as if she was going to walk home, just to spite him. Then she said, "Okay." But the silence was thick in the car all the way to her house.

Back at his grandfather's house, he went to check on the old man. Thinking Ray would be asleep, Cliff was surprised when the older man was sitting up in bed, bright-eyed and wide awake. "Come in and tell me what you've been up to."

Cliff watched Ray carefully, cheered that he was looking so chipper and remarkably strong. This must be one of his good days. Hopefully he'd have many more.

A shit-eating grin spread across Ray's face and devilment flickered across his eyes. "Was that Alyssa I saw you go into the apartment with earlier?"

Cliff froze to the spot and his tongue grew thick. Finally, he nodded. "She needed to talk in private."

"Was that Alyssa I heard screaming in ecstasy?" Ray asked, his smile getting bigger.

Heat flowed into Cliff's cheeks. He wanted to crawl under the bed and dig his way to China.

"Does this mean I'm finally going to see you married and be sure you won't be alone after I'm gone?" Ray sat up straighter in bed and his covers pooled in his lap.

Cliff gulped and sank into the chair beside the bed. He thought fast. "You heard a movie. Sorry, we must have the volume up too loud."

"Is she your sweetheart again? About time. Valentine's Day is around the bend and you gotta have a sweetheart on Valentine's Day."

Annoyed, Cliff snorted and shot back, "Since when were you a matchmaker? If I didn't know better, I'd think you were a sappy romantic."

"What's wrong with a man wanting to see his grandson happy? If you don't do it soon, her eggs are going to get too old for you to have kids and I'll be buried six feet under."

Cliff couldn't believe his ears and wanted to sink into the floor. "You're not checking out yet. And Ali's not even thirty. She still has a lot of time to have babies."

"Ah hah! So you are thinking about making babies with Ali. I knew it!"

Cliff wanted to throttle the old man. "I didn't say that. Stop putting words in my mouth."

"Someone has to put the thought in your head. You haven't dated since you broke up with Alyssa. That means she's the one. That wasn't any movie I heard, was it?"

"That's classified as none of your business." Cliff shook his finger at Ray. "Don't you go saying anything to her that would embarrass us."

Ray looked pointedly around the room. "Me? To whom would I say it? I'm bedridden in this godforsaken room."

Cliff tilted his head at the computer and cell phone on the nightstand. "Uh huh." He wasn't fooled.

Ray tilted his head at the spare closet across the room. "Your grandmother's wedding dress is back in vogue and would probably fit Ali if she wants to wear it ..."

Cliff couldn't take any more. Had he said anything about a wedding? "Can I get anything for you? Did you get your pills?"

Ray scrunched his nose. "I'm sick of pills. I'm sick of this bed."

Cliff's heart went out to him. He wondered if it would be okay to take him out of the house on a field trip, brighten his spirits. "I'm going to talk to your doctor and see what we can do."

"No!" Ray bolted out of bed and stood tall. He poked his finger at Cliff's chest. "You don't have to do that. You're too busy."

Cliff eyed his granddad up and down. For a bedridden old guy, he'd bounded out of that bed pretty good and stood pretty straight and steady. His body looked defined and fit. Suspicion began to form in the back of Cliff's mind and he didn't like his thoughts. Smoothing his hair, he said, "Well, yeah, I am mighty busy. Are you sure I don't need to talk to him?"

"I talk to him all the time. My body may be frail but my mind's like a steel trap. I can deal with him."

"Yeah. Okay." Cliff made a mental note to call Ray's doctor first thing in the morning and make an appointment to talk about the older man's condition. He should have done that his first day in town. One way or the other, he needed to know what he was dealing with.

Cliff stood and faked a yawn. "Well, I'm tuckered out, so I'm going to hit the sack. Are you sure I can't get you anything?"

"Daisy's here if I need anything. She takes good care of me." Ray crawled back into bed and lay prone. He pointed the remote at the TV and it flickered into one of his favourite cop shows. Gunfire rang out and people started yelling. Ray sighed in ecstasy.

Cliff couldn't help but grin at his granddad. The guy was a born law enforcer.

* * * *

Ali renewed her pact with herself to finish school and become a doctor. She also told herself she'd keep working at the club, if only to piss off Cliff. Where did he come off, telling her what to do? He wasn't her husband, not even her fiancé. Hell, they weren't even friends.

But she was worried about Amy. She hadn't paid enough attention to her sister. She had fallen down on her role.

"Tell you what. You can go with what's-his-name to the Valentine's dance. I'll even buy you the prettiest dress you can find," she told her sister the next afternoon, when Amy came home from school.

Amy's jaw dropped, then suspicion clouded her eyes. "For real? Any dress?"

"Within reason." Ali wondered how far her sister would push her. "It can't go over \$200 and it has to be modest."

"Modest? You mean I have to wear a collar up to my neck and the skirt below my ankles. No thanks."

Ali rolled her eyes. "I'm not that old-fashioned. But I'm not going to let you show your cleavage or your ass."

Amy narrowed her eyes. "Why not? *You* do."

Ali's breath caught in her throat. Did Amy know her secret? Had someone recognised her and blabbed? Did the whole town know? She sucked in a deep breath and crossed her fingers that her secret was still safe. She told herself not to get paranoid. "No, I don't. And even if I did, I'm twenty-nine. You're sixteen."

"So? You make sixteen sound like a little kid. I'm grown up. Connor's seen me naked. He says I have the most beautiful breasts in the world."

Ali couldn't exhale for several moments. Finally, she found her voice. "Over-sharing. If you want me to lock you up in a chastity belt, keep it up. Or maybe I'll just ship you off to a convent."

"You couldn't. We're not Catholic."

"Try me." When Amy glared at her, Ali reminded herself she had to be tough for her sister's sake. If she got pregnant now, it'd ruin her life.

She had to be vigilant about that herself now, even though she had no intention of letting Cliff or his cock within viewing distance of her. She was through with him. Love or not, she couldn't lose sight of her goal. If he couldn't understand that, he wasn't the man for her.

Her heart sank. But she buoyed herself up for Amy's sake. "Come on. I'm not that bad. We'll find something you like that I can live with. It can't be that hard."

"Up to \$200? Is that with shoes or just the dress?"

Ali tried not to blink as she tried to remember the balance in her checking account.

"We'll see. Let's get going. Valentine's Day is almost here."

"Do *you* have a date for Valentine's Day?" Amy asked. "Is Cliff taking you out again?"

"Again?"

"I saw you get in his car the other night and go somewhere with him. I see the way you look at each other with big gooey eyes."

"We're just friends." Not even friends, but Amy didn't need to know the gory details. Still, Ali gulped, wondering if she did look at Cliff like that for the whole world to see.

"Uh huh."

But after she treated Amy to her favourite Chinese buffet, and bought her an aqua satin gown with matching shoes and jewellery, her sister mellowed. When they got home, they played a video game and the tension began to fade.

Ali vowed to spend more quality time with Amy, not just tell her what and what not to do and feed her. Their mother had been her best friend. They'd done everything together until she'd come down with cancer. She felt bad that Amy had missed out on doing fun things with their mom. She could at least give her an older sister back, even if it meant she got a little less sleep.

"Well? What are you doing Valentine's Day?" Amy asked.

Ali sighed, "Working." Usually the men got drunker and meaner on nights like this. Only the lonely ones would be there and they tended to drink themselves into oblivion. The drunker they got, the more they wanted sex and the more careful she had to be. But the tips would be high.

"Call in sick. Have fun for a change."

Wouldn't she love to! But Frankie would fire her for sure if she skipped out on him for a holiday. "I can't. I have to pay for that dress I just got you."

"I'll take back the dress and borrow one of yours if it means you don't have to work on Valentine's Day." Amy hugged her. "I mean it."

Tears choked her up. Ali squeezed her sister and held onto her for a long time. She thanked God that things seemed to be getting better between them. "Thanks. But I was joking. I can afford the dress. My boss, however, would have a cow if I didn't show up."

"Your boss is a first-class jerk." Amy took her dress and trotted up the stairs. "Connor's going to love me in this. Thank you, thank you! You're the best."

If only she was. Ali slumped against the wall. She dreaded working on Valentine's Day. She dreaded going back to the club at all. But the chiming clock told her she had to leave in a half an hour to get there on time. She had just enough time for a shower before she left.

Ali felt funny when she undressed in the club's backstage. She didn't feel sexy like she did when she first started this job. She also didn't feel numb, as she'd been until Cliff reappeared. She felt like a whore, showing her body for money.

Frankie had turned up the air conditioner like usual and she felt chilled. He said it was because there were so many people it would be too hot for their customers. She bet it was to make the women's nipples pucker.

She tried to hide her shivers and keep the glasses steady. She knew from experience that if she spilled the drinks, their replacements were coming out of her pocket. That also

kept her from accidentally-on-purpose dumping a drink here or there on a particularly lewd patron. She couldn't wait for the day she could tell Frankie where to shove his lousy job. That fateful day, she would bring a camera to capture his expression on film.

Her feet ached from the high heels and it was only 11 p.m. She longed to change into comfortable shoes but they weren't "sexy" enough, so she was stuck.

One drink order blurred into the next. The job felt nothing like it had at first. Then, it had been exciting knowing men came here just to ogle her. It had turned her on to know they wanted to fuck her even though she had no intention of letting them. Unless, of course, Mr. Right had shown up and had his wicked way with her here in front of everybody.

It had long been a fantasy of hers that Mr. Right would fuck her here in front of everybody while the other men drooled. When she was bored to tears, when she thought she couldn't take this job one more day, she pictured herself being fucked until she screamed in ecstasy. She was sure that look on her face had contributed to many of her obscenely big tips.

She was afraid if she resurrected that fantasy now, that Cliff would be the male star. Her fantasy man's face had always been in shadow. The only thing she'd been sure of was how he made her feel. Which was the way Cliff had made her feel the other night.

Then she spied Cliff across the room, in the corner, watching her. It was dim and smoky so she wondered if her imagination conjured him. Did she want him to be here? One part of her did. Another didn't.

She turned away and made herself focus on her work. If it was her imagination, she had to nip it in the bud. If Cliff were there, he needed to know she wouldn't crumble or rush into his arms and plead forgiveness. He was the one being unreasonable. He couldn't wait a couple more years until she was on track?

But her resolve waned and she sneaked a peek to where he'd been standing. When she didn't see him, she sighed in relief. She wasn't up to sparring tonight.

The next night, she swore she saw him again but on the other side of the room. She blinked to clear her vision and he was still there.

"Take my tables for a few," she murmured to another waitress. Without waiting for a reply, she made a beeline for the man.

When she reached him, she stopped in front of him and planted her hands on her hips. "Why are you here?"

Cliff swirled his drink in his glass and looked into it as if it would tell him the future. Then he took a long drink. Finally, he looked up and met her gaze. "My case brings me here. I told you this place isn't safe. You should get out while you can."

"So you're protecting me? Watching over me?" She wasn't sure if she liked that or not.

"I'm a public servant. I watch over everybody."

"Isn't it rather late to be working?"

"You're working."

Her head began to ache and her feet could cry all on their own, they were so sore. She was keenly aware of her near nakedness. She could still taste his kisses, could still feel his caresses and her traitorous pussy quivered and longed for his cock.

"I see there's a Valentine's Day party here tomorrow night. Sounds like fun."

She looked down her nose at the paper hearts littering the walls behind him. She had to quash the urge to stick out her tongue at the cupids playing merrily in their midst, looking as if they were aiming their arrows at them.

She moved to the side so she'd be out of their sight and pretended not to notice when Cliff looked at her oddly. She wanted to rip those damned cupids to shreds. They kept reminding her of the day Cliff had walked out on her when she wouldn't marry him right away.

"Oh yeah. Loads of fun." Sarcasm dripped from her lips. "It's my favourite day of the year."

"It could be," Cliff drawled and grabbed her hand. He pulled her onto his lap and nuzzled her ear. His chest burned into her breasts, which peaked without her permission.

Shocked, she stared at him. Then when she regained her senses, she batted away his arms and stood. She jumped up so fast that she stumbled and swayed before catching herself. "Stop that!"

"Why?" He darted a look at her breasts and then at her. "You obviously like it as much as I do. You can't deny the proof."

She glanced down at her traitorous breasts and silently swore, "It's cold in here. Don't flatter yourself."

"It wasn't cold the other night. In fact, it was downright hot."

Before she could come up with a reply, he went off on another tangent. "My grandfather isn't really sick. The old codger is playing us." Laughter danced in Cliff's eyes.

She did a double take. "What do you mean?"

"I had a long talk with his doctors. He's so healthy he's going to live to be two hundred. All that talk about wanting to see me married and see his grandchildren before he dies was just a scam."

She arched her brow. "So he doesn't want you to get married or have kids?"

Cliff screwed up his lips and snorted. "Well, yeah, he does. But he's not going to miss meeting his grandchildren if he has to wait a couple of years."

Something in Cliff's voice sent sparks through her. Did he mean he was willing to wait for her? Then a horrible thought struck her and her breath stuck in her throat. "You only wanted to marry me and have kids to make your granddad happy?"

He stood and pulled her into his arms. "I want to marry you and have kids with you to make *me* happy. I love you. If I was only rushing to make granddad happy I would have married someone else already. But no one else makes me happy. Only you."

Before she could fully grasp what he was doing, he got down on bended knee before her, pulled a velvet box out of his pocket and looked at his watch.

"Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five..."

Her gaze was glued to the box and she couldn't rip it away. "What are you doing?"

He looked at his watch again before replying. Then he gazed up at her with so much love and affection that she lost her breath. "Waiting to Valentine's Day to propose. I was counting down to midnight. Will you marry me? Make me the happiest man in the world?"

She longed to say yes for good this time, but he had only danced around what she needed to hear. "Depends."

He frowned and poised the ring at her fingertip, an antique gold, with a rose setting and a diamond in the middle. "On what?"

"That you accept me, all of me. I have to finish what I've started and become a doctor. Will you wait two or three years for us to have children?"

"I'll do whatever it takes. I won't be happy without you."

She caught a cupid's mischievous glance and knew he'd shot her with his arrow when she wasn't looking. He and his partners in crime were all over the joint.

She also realised they were the centre of attention, that no one was looking at the real floor show.

"Put the poor guy out of his misery and marry him. Say yes," a grizzly bear of a man prodded from the next table. The fellow gave them a toothless grin and clapped.

Cliff sucked in his breath. Hope flared in his eyes. His nostrils flared. "I'll make you the happiest woman in the world. This was my grandmother's ring. You're the only woman who will ever deserve it. Please wear it."

It was a beautiful piece of jewellery but paled in comparison to the gorgeous man holding it. "If I say yes, will you help me fulfil my fantasy?"

"Your fantasy?"

"I think you'll enjoy it as much as me. That is unless you're the shy, inhibited type."

"I think I like this already. Count me in."

She straightened her finger. Her fantasy teased her and her pussy quivered. "I can't wait to marry you. I also can't wait to make love to you again."

He slipped the ring on her finger and it was a perfect fit as if it was made for her.

"I had it sized to fit you."

She held it up to the light and admired it. "I love it."

He stood and pulled her into his arms. "Let's blow this joint. That is if you want to."

She licked her lips slowly and sensually. "If you mean, 'do I want to tell Frankie where to shove his lousy job,' yes. But first..."

He nuzzled her ear and blazed a trail of hot kisses down her neck.

Her heart swelled and she quivered in his arms. "Just keep going the way you're going," she drawled huskily. "Fuck me here, in front of everybody."

Cliff froze. After a few moments he asked, "Here? In this room, right now, with everybody watching?"

Wicked delight filled her and she nodded. "It wouldn't be the first time."

Cliff growled, "You've done it before? With someone else?"

Laughter tinkled off her lips. "Not me. I meant some of the other waitresses. You're my fantasy man. You're the only one I'd do this with."

She put her finger to his lips and said in a sultry voice, "Wait here. I'll be right back." She found her friend and fellow waitress Lucy and whispered, "Do you have an extra condom or two?"

Lucy winked and palmed two to her. "Have fun, sugar."

"I'm sure I will." Ali sashayed back to her man, holding his gaze. She thrust out her breasts and when his pants tented she felt all-powerful and giddy.

When she reached him, he knelt before her again and peeled off her panties. He buried his face in her pussy and kissed it. He licked her clit and swept his tongue back and forth along her pussy lips.

She wound her fingers in his hair and pushed his face deeper into her pussy. She watched everybody else ogling them with lust and desire in their eyes. Several men had their pants around their ankles and pumped their cocks.

Then Cliff lifted her and set her on the table.

She spread her legs wide and pulled him close. Then she unzipped his pants and pushed them down.

His cock was long and heavy and she playfully tugged it, pulling him to her. Then she ripped the foil packet with her teeth and rolled the rubbery sheath over his cock. "What are you waiting for? Fuck me. We'll never forget this as long as we live."

"What makes you think I'll ever forget any of our time together? I cherish every moment."

She leant against him and put her lips to his. "You're the sweetest man in the world. I was such an idiot."

"No. You're meant to be a doctor as I'm meant to be a policeman. It's who we are."

When he drove his cock into her and she moaned, the men at the next table cheered. "Give it to her good, buddy! Fuck her 'til she screams for mercy."

Against her lips, Cliff murmured, "I didn't know I was in love with such an exhibitionist."

She smiled against his lips, "This is a fantasy. From now on we'll do this in private."

"Anything you want. If you decide you want to live out another fantasy, just say the word."

She could hardly speak, she was breathing so heavily. She clung to him as he plunged into her.

She swivelled her hips and ground herself against him. The fire in her erupted and she screamed in ecstasy.

He drove into her one final time and then held her to him. He dipped his head and kissed the tip of her breast. "Happy Valentine's Day, baby."

She cradled his head against her heart. Then she winked at the nearest cherub on the wall and smiled. Suddenly the cupid didn't look so stupid after all. "Happy Valentine's Day."

About the Author

Ashley Ladd lives in South Florida with her husband, five children, and beloved pets. She loves the water, animals (especially cats), and playing on the computer.

She often incorporates a wicked sense of humour and adventure into her books. She also adores very spicy romance, which she weaves into her stories.

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