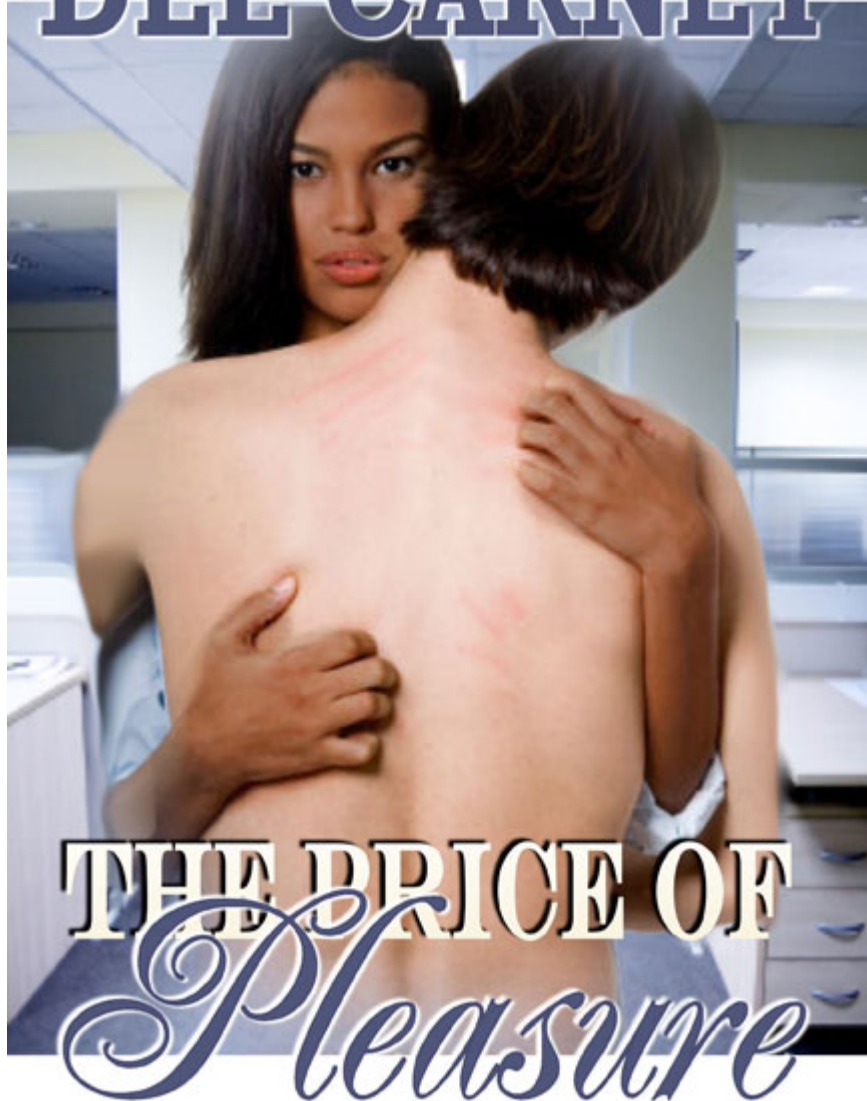


SIREN PUBLISHING

DEE CARNEY



THE PRICE OF PLEASURE

Dee Carney

EROTIC ROMANCE



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000."

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **legal@sirenbookstrand.com**

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

THE PRICE OF PLEASURE

Copyright © 2009 by Dee Carney

E-book ISBN: 1-60601-499-4

First E-book Publication: July 2009

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

All cover art and logo copyright © 2009 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

THE PRICE OF PLEASURE

DEE CARNEY

Copyright © 2009

Chapter One

Jesse Englund glanced at the wall clock, straining to see the numbers.

Jesus. Was that the right time?

One-thirty in the damned morning, and he hadn't even left the office. Since he normally rose at four-thirty to be at work an hour later, there didn't seem to be much sense in going home.

He rolled his head over stiff shoulders and grimaced. He'd have to be up at three thirty tomorrow—correction—today. Staying late meant he'd missed his hour on the running track at the gym. The StairMaster in the corner of his office would have to serve the appropriate penance.

If he were a lesser man, the idea of getting only two hours of sleep, then sweating his muscles into shape for an additional hour would have made him cry. Only if he were a lesser man, though. Jesse Englund, corporate genius and risen star, would stretch out on his office furniture and rise fully refreshed. Ready to face the day.

Fuck.

Who did he think he was kidding? He was getting too old for this shit.

Jesse stood and ignored the pings of protesting joints. Too tired to care about leaving the lamp on his desk still burning, he shuffled to his makeshift bed. By the time his head hit the padded armrest of the couch, he was already asleep.

He dragged his gritty eyes open a few minutes later. A quick glance at the clock oriented him to the fact that it was actually two and a half hours later. He'd overslept.

He slid his hands over his face and then stiffened at a sudden recollection. Something had woken him. There! The quiet clicks of someone tapping at a keyboard drifted into the room. He glanced up at the vents and frowned. During the hustle and bustle of the regular work day, he probably missed noises like this all the time. Right now, during the still of the night, the typing might as well have been in the same room.

Who would be here at this ungodly hour of the morning? It was his corporation, his baby, so it only made sense that he worked long, tortuous hours. He didn't make similar expectations of anyone else.

In his socks, he stalked to the door and pressed himself against it. The knob turned smoothly, not releasing so much as a click as he opened the door. He cracked it slightly open, just enough so he could peer into the darkness of the open floor plan.

Only one area of the room was lit, but a support beam blocked his view of whoever sat at the computer. He turned over reason after implausible reason in his mind for someone to be at work at four in the morning. There were no upcoming deadlines. No pressing matters that required the extended hours. No one stood out as particularly ambitious, so as far as he knew, this wasn't someone's routine.

He wedged himself through the opening in the door and padded across the room. Holding his breath, he eased behind the black woman at the computer monitor. From where he stood, he could see her long, graceful fingers slide meticulously from key to key. The way she agonized over the location of each letter clued him in to her concentration on the keyboard. Either that or she was just a horrible typist.

Slowly, he moved closer so that he could read the contents of the monitor. Jesse caught her screen name first. *Hedonisticfem*.

Hedonistic female? Well, well, well. A smile creased his face at the implication. The idea of a woman whose life was devoted to the pursuit of pleasure sent a plethora of wicked thoughts through his mind. Too many hours at the office and not enough hours in the arms of a woman could do that to a man.

He scanned the next few lines of her text, and the smile slid from his face. His jaw clenched as a wall of red filled his vision.

"There had better be a fucking good explanation for what you're doing!" he thundered.

The woman whirled to face him in the chair, and the scent of cherry blossoms assaulted him. In a matter of seconds he identified her perfume or whatever it was, his gaze drifted from the instant message conversation on her monitor to the woman's face, and Jesse stilled.

She had the most doe-like eyes he'd ever seen in his life. The severe bun formed at the base of her neck made them turn up with that much more dramatic flair. Impossibly thick, long lashes batted at him, almost seductively. He swallowed hard because Christ—her lips? They were full, very kissable lips with just a hint of lipstick.

"Mr. Englund, you startled me," she said in a breathy voice. The woman had her hand over her breast, someplace where her heart would be. "I wasn't expecting anyone else here at this hour."

He couldn't keep his gaze off her mouth. When she smiled, a brilliant set of teeth flashed at him. And—oh *fuck me*—a dimple played right at the corner of her up-turned lips. The chocolate satin of her skin begged to be smoothed by his hands and explored by him.

The insistent flashing of the cursor over her shoulder brought him back from his stunned adoration. What had he been saying? Oh...Right!

"I don't know how you know me, but I don't know you. And I need an explanation right now of why you are here and why you are sending information from *confidential* company spreadsheets via instant message." And it better be good. She had about thirty seconds to convince him to not call the police.

She remained nonplussed by the way he loomed over her. The verbal threat seemed merely an annoyance. She leaned back against the chair, draping her arms over the rails while her grin broadened at his words.

"Jesse Englund. You don't recognize me?"

Hell no, he didn't recognize her. Forgetting lips like those would be a sin.

He leaned in close so that the gravity of his words would not be mistaken. Just because he could imagine her lying stretched out in the nude on his sheets didn't mean much. The business came first. Always. "Now is not the time for games. Answer my question or I call the police."

She arched a single eyebrow, folded her arms across her chest, and leaned in even closer. "You didn't exactly ask a question."

His mind raced to replay his words and he had to bite back the bubble of laughter in his throat. Touché.

As they locked stares, Jesse inhaled more of her floral aroma and internally winced at his heavy decision. He could appreciate a smart ass as much as the next guy, but she picked the wrong man at the wrong time to mess with.

She didn't flinch when he reached past her for the phone. Their mouths came within an inch of grazing, and the intimacy of the gesture was not lost on him. It couldn't be helped. He would not turn his back on a woman who had broken into his office—to do what, exactly? It would bug the hell out of him not to know.

He looked down on those lips one more time and murmured a hair's breadth away from them, "Last chance."

She inclined her head toward the monitor. "Why not check out what's on the screen before you give them a call because you and I need to talk. You may still want to call the police afterward, but I have a feeling you won't. Not if you're half as smart as I know you are."

* * * *

Eden Simmons waited with infinite patience for Jesse to wrestle with himself to a decision. The last remnants of sleep had fallen away from him with each passing second he stood there. Too bad. He looked adorable with his dark hair ruffled and sticking off to one side. A crease on his scruffy cheek tattled on the watch that must have pressed there while he slept.

Sharp, intelligent green eyes brightened as they scanned the screen. She hadn't been able to see them this close up the first time she'd met him. Funny he didn't remember it because she'd never forgotten. Couldn't forget his intensity and focus.

Jesse grunted. "So, what am I supposed to be seeing here?"

She waited until he looked at her before ticking off the points on raised fingers. "First, I'm reviewing a chat session with one of your senior directors and the man who hired me. More on that in a sec. Two, I want you to know I'm simply using IM and remote access software to connect with my business computer. I'm not sending company specific information over the Internet. Give me more credit than that."

“But I know those numbers. I look at them first thing every morning and last thing every evening. Those are our financials,” he interrupted.

“You’re right. They are your company financials. De-identified, I might add. To any Internet hacker who chose to look at them at this moment in time on IM, they are just a bunch of numbers. Third, Mr. Englund, is that you and I once met via a teleconference when your company was looking for a security firm to investigate potential vulnerabilities. You chose at that time to pass on having *anyone* do that for you. Fortunately, your senior vice president found me a few weeks ago and hired me on to check the vulnerabilities. And, I’ve found them. Many, many weak spots.”

She waited again, not certain how he’d take the next bit of news. Eden took a deep breath and plunged in. “In fact, I’ve just stolen two and a half million dollars from your company. Now here’s a question for you, Mr. Englund. What are you willing to do to get it back?”

Chapter Two

For someone she had just robbed blind, Jesse took the news rather well. He reached for the chair at the next desk and slid it over to hers. He lowered himself into it and glanced at his watch.

"Too early for this shit," he mumbled. He looked up, his gaze piercing. "Who are you?"

"Eden Simmons." As the words left her mouth, a flash of recognition streaked across his face. Maybe he hadn't forgotten her after all. The butterflies in her belly shouldn't have rejoiced the way they did with that knowledge.

His eyebrows furrowed. "We did that video conferencing two or three years ago. Only my video screen wouldn't let me see much besides some static." Well-manicured fingers rubbed his eyes in a back and forth motion. "I have about a dozen questions for you, Ms. Simmons, and barely know where to start. But since my need for caffeine is growing near maniacal, I'll start with this...Why the fuck are you here so damned early?"

His lapse into coarse language didn't faze her and she smiled. "To test whether or not I could get in here without anyone's knowledge." Eden shrugged. "Because of the security lapses, it seems that I can. Let me buy you a cup of coffee, and we'll talk numbers and details. Cool?"

"Twenty minutes to shower and shave, and you're on." He stood and walked toward his office. After a few steps, he tossed over his shoulder to her, "Shut off that computer in the meanwhile, would you? You make me nervous."

Eden reached for the mouse with smug satisfaction. She wouldn't be doing her job if she didn't make him nervous.

* * * *

The best investment Jesse ever made in the schematics of his office was the time spent with the designer haggling over the utility of an office bathroom. He wanted functionality. She didn't want to interrupt the flow of the design, whatever the hell that meant. In the end, since he was the one to foot the bill, he got what he wanted. This morning, the standing-room-only stall saved him from any number of rash decisions.

A beautiful woman sat in the middle of his office claiming to have stolen a very large sum of money from him. Worse, she said one of the VPs paid her to do it.

He gave his senior officers free reign when it came to running their departments. If he had to be a part of every one of their decisions, he saw no need for them to have their jobs in the first place. He might as well do it.

Since it was just him and Eden in the building right now, he figured he had few options available to him. If he ignored her and left the matter solely to his department head, he wouldn't get the opportunity to learn more about the woman who kicked up his libido from comatose to rearing-to-go. Might as well make the most of her presence by listening to what she had to say.

When he emerged from his office exactly seventeen minutes later, she looked up from the nail file making its way around her nails. She tucked it inside a purse on the floor when Jesse paused at the desk. He moved without comment toward the elevators, noting with some satisfaction that the computer was no longer powered on.

She seemed content not to talk while they rode the elevator down, and he followed her lead. He used those couple of minutes to come fully awake and wrap his mind around the events of the morning.

On the ground level, the café employees moved efficiently. The lack of other customers helped. The counters gleamed, and the scent of bacon permeated the air. His stomach grumbled appreciatively.

Within moments of sitting, he placed an order for a poached egg, whole wheat toast *sans* butter, and coffee, black. Lots and lots of coffee. She, on the other hand, ordered the Eggs Benedict, a cheese Danish and ordered her coffee with two shots of caramel syrup. Jesse stared at her in amazement, wondering where she could possibly put the excess calories. Her clothes hugged her without apology, and a blind man would have a field day navigating her curves.

He waited impatiently for the waitress to leave. When she finally did, he leaned forward in the booth. "So you've stolen some money from me, huh?"

"Mr. Englund..."

"Jesse," he corrected. "You're holding my company's balls in your hands. No need to be formal."

"Jesse," she breathed out his name in an almost-whisper, "I'd hardly call two point five million dollars 'some' money."

He glanced up as the first of their food arrived. "I'm not by any means advocating that you keep it, but you should know that it's only money. I made it once. I can make it again."

"My God, you're not even curious about how I stole it, are you?" Her fingers curled around the ceramic cup the waitress placed in front of her. Bringing the cup to her mouth, she sipped the hot beverage and let out a small moan of pleasure. "Oh man, that's perfect."

Using her other fingers, she twisted off a piece of the Danish and popped it into her mouth. Another small moan later, and she sucked in her bottom lip to run her tongue over it. The unconscious gesture made him inhale coffee down the wrong pipe.

With forced masculinity, he hacked the liquid clear and wheezed. "How the hell can you eat like that? Ah—wait. *Hedonisticfem*. I take it that philosophy applies to food too?"

"Jesse, you have *no* idea what else it applies to."

Her lips curved into another smile and the look Eden shot him sped a jolt of energy straight to his cock. Despite what she said, he was sure he had a pretty good idea what else it applied to and became immediately tempted to find out firsthand.

He shook loose the thought and focused on what should have been foremost on his mind. "Tell me about the money."

"Simple really. Kevin Carmichael thought something hinky was going on in the finance department. He couldn't put his finger on it, but thought someone objective might be able to. Long story short, here I am, a couple million dollars richer for my efforts."

Jesse chuckled. "Somehow I don't think bilking us of even more money was in Kevin's plans for you. Why do you have it?"

"The same reason I broke in this morning. To see if I could." She took a long drink of coffee. "And it seems very much so, that I can."

"Ah, but the million or rather, two million dollar question is, do you plan on returning it?"

She gave him a crooked smile and a shrug. "If I must."

"Sorry, darlin', you must." Jesse reached across the table and clasped her hand in his. He hesitated only slightly before he raised it to his mouth and brushed a small kiss on her knuckles. "But I'll be certain you are well compensated for your time."

The risk he took with the chaste move, like all risks he'd ever taken, was worth the payout.

"Mr. Englund," her voice dropped to a husky level, "why do I think you're not talking about money here?"

About a dozen different ways to respond to her remark crossed his mind in a matter of seconds. As quickly as one came to him, he tossed it aside for being too cheesy, too blatant, too everything but what he wanted it to be. With an internal grimace, he settled for, "Why does it sound like we've just switched gears somehow, and now you want me to earn my money back?"

The flash of teeth made his heart lurch again. She slid her hand out of his and pointed a long finger at him. "Well, you *are* the one who didn't want to hire me, and now it's coming back to bite you in the ass. I don't think earning your money back would be so out of line. You really do need to be taught a lesson."

He pushed his plate to the side and leaned forward. "Did you have something specific in mind?"

She leaned closer, and her voice dropped. "What would you say to me giving you half a million dollars for every time you make me scream your name? In a matter of days or hell, hours, depending on how good you are, your money can be right back where it belongs."

Holy *fuck*.

Jesse's mind shut down. Completely and utterly shut down. Not a single way to respond with some clever, smart-ass remark would come to him. He could only envision his head between her thighs, or her long legs wrapped around his waist as he pumped into her, or the look of extreme pleasure that he could give this sensuous woman in a myriad of other ways.

He shifted in his seat and swallowed several times. After staring into her chocolate-tinted eyes for a moment, he said, "Only five times?"

She reached for his hand and drew a lazy circle in his palm with her fingertip. "Only five times. You're all but guaranteed to have your money back by Sunday evening because I'm free all weekend."

Today was Friday. Sure, he could make his money back before the end of the night, but why? He could drag this out and enjoy two and a half days of burying himself in the pussy of Eden Simmons.

His hesitation must have caused some concern. Eden said, "I tell you what. I'll even give back the first half mil' on credit. You'll just owe me for that one. Do we have a deal, Mr. Englund?"

The business was his baby. He'd do whatever it took to keep it prosperous. If some woman stole his money and offered him a chance to get it back, well damn it, he had an obligation to do whatever it took to do so.

"Ms. Simmons, we most definitely have a deal."

Chapter Three

His BlackBerry chirruped, and he glanced down to scan the incoming text message.

Hedonisticfem: What's yr favorite movie?

By the time Jesse returned to his office that morning, second thoughts began to creep in. Agreeing to the extortion of his own money? A quick call to a private investigator the company used on previous jobs put his mind to a semblance of rest. The return call a little while later confirming that Eden Simmons was indeed legit released most of the nagging doubts.

Kevin's voicemail arrived while he was in a meeting, and the remaining doubts vanished.

I did hire her, Jesse, but there's something you need to know about that. Let's meet first thing Monday to discuss.

If it had been something vital, his chief operating officer knew he didn't have to wait the entire weekend to talk.

Now, in the middle of a conference call with overseas affiliates, his mouth quirked into a smile as he read her message. With half of his attention on the call, he typed in a quick response and pressed send. When the BlackBerry chirruped again almost a minute later, he tilted the screen to read the reply.

Hedonisticfem: Typical male. H8 more: fast car going slow or slow car in fast lane?

This question resulted in a loud, amused snort from Jesse. The sudden silence on his speakerphone produced the important reminder of what he was supposed to be doing. For effect, he coughed loudly once and apologized for the interruption. When the conversation having something to do with foreign language rights picked up again, he felt safe enough to type his response.

J_Englund: Slow car, fast lane. Like more: picnic on lake or moonlit walk?

This time he didn't put down the phone when he sent the message. Jesse propped his legs up on his desk and leaned comfortably against his chair. Voices droned on around him, but his attention remained riveted to the device in his hands.

So this is what it was like to be courted by a woman in the twenty-first century? A guy could get used to it.

No.

It was Eden Simmons that a guy could really get used to.

Two hours, one cancelled meeting, and one dodged phone call later, he estimated they traded somewhere close to a hundred text messages. Wasn't it just this morning that he told himself the business always came first? Sure, he could justify shirking some of his less important duties, but the fact of the matter was, he enjoyed the banter with Eden. He adored looking at her, and the text messaging came a close second to actually being with her. Sharp, funny, and engaging. He wanted the opportunity to know as much about her as possible.

While he waited for a reply to one of his questions, he Googled her and her business. He frowned as he scanned the topics. The information he pulled up was surprisingly scant. In fact, most of the information simply stated that she owned her own business. Nothing in the newspapers. No trade journals. No personal data.

The research originally started out as a way to continue information gathering, but the paucity of data niggled at his mind. Then again, for a single woman in the security business, it probably made sense that little would be available on the information superhighway.

Besides, he probably knew more about Eden in what was said and left unsaid in their game of twenty-questions. She had an older brother. Her parents were still alive. She adored food, which he already surmised. She also knew fine art and appeared well-read. She didn't work out obsessively, but did work at her small consulting business with a ferocity that rivaled his own passion.

If he had to label her, she was just short of perfect.

It took a few minutes to sink in, but while perusing a document on expanding the company's holdings, he realized that's what bothered him.

* * * *

His fingers drummed against the desk.

"You okay?" Dottie asked.

He caught himself before glancing at the BlackBerry that hadn't signaled a new message in a few minutes. "I'm fine. What's up?"

"Boss, you've been watching that clock like a man who's got an appointment with the maker, Himself."

Jesse blinked in surprise. Had he really been that obvious?

"And you don't normally miss meetings." His secretary opened a manila folder, positioned it, and held out a pen. "In fact, if I didn't know that you were asexual, I'd say you were just biding time for a hot date, tonight."

His head snapped up as she somehow managed to nail it on the head, and she let out a small whoop of laughter. With ears burning, he mumbled, "Is that your phone ringing out there?"

"Uh huh. Just as I thought. Jesse Englund, I can't say that I'm surprised, but I am happy for you. As good looking as you are, it's about time you discovered the opposite sex."

"I don't have a thing against the opposite sex...and why are we having this conversation, exactly?"

Jesus. The last thing in the world he needed or wanted was this grandmother of seven to discuss his sex life, or lack of one, with him.

The BlackBerry sounded and he forced himself to let it sit idly by. He could feel the weight of Dottie's stare as he kept his attention on the documents he signed. With measured patience, he read the pertinent lines and scribbled on page after page. His gaze only drifted to the BlackBerry twice.

Her soft chuckle sounded in front of him. She pushed the smartphone toward him. "I'm leaving. Go ahead and handle your business."

Ignoring the phone, he scooted the documents back into the folder and handed it to her. She took it from him, concern evident in her eyes. Her smile faltered on her face. "I'm happy for you, Boss. You spend way too much time here and not enough time for yourself. Don't mess this up, you hear?"

With a cross of annoyance and pride, he smiled back. "I'll try not to, *Mom.*"

She snorted and strode in her sensible shoes toward the door. "You wish."

Hours later, when finally the last person had left for the day, he shut down his computer too. Leaving the building during daylight felt foreign, but he wanted to get to the grocery store and get a few items in his fridge before she arrived. Not only that, he wanted to change the linens on his bed, maybe buy a few dozen roses to adorn the house...

Jesse stopped short of his car, keys in hand.

Why was he going to all this trouble? Eden would be a lay for the weekend. That's it. They'd both get their rocks off and then go about their merry ways.

Right?

Right. Of course. He didn't need a permanent woman. Didn't want one. Hell, didn't have time for one.

He inserted the key and unlocked the door. Sliding into the seat, he caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror. The empty green eyes of a man who wasn't so young anymore stared back.

No matter what his dick thought, maybe if he had a woman like Eden waiting for him at home, there would be fewer nights spent on the cramped couch of his office.

Maybe.

For now, he would work on making tonight the most enjoyable experience he possibly could.

Chapter Four

Someone else had taken possession of her mouth and out the words flew. Half a million dollars per orgasm? Eden snorted. If she had been thinking properly, she would have made it a hundred thousand each. That would give him something to work toward.

She pushed away the thought to focus on more serious matters. *Sweet heaven.* Jesse almost busted her royally for cracking his computer software and worse yet, his company's bank accounts.

Her fingers drummed on the steering wheel as she turned a corner. With the radio off, she had nothing but the thoughts in her mind to listen to.

She hadn't started out with this plan. Her original intention consisted solely of creating so much havoc within his business that it would take his employees months to recover. Her brother, Gavin, wanted a nudge in the wrong direction for Jesse's company so that their own family business could edge ahead for once.

Breaking into the offices of Englund Multimedia partially satisfied her need for kicks and giggles. Mostly though, she needed to use an onsite computer to get past a bastard of a firewall.

Stealing the money should have been a way to get his attention focused on his finances. With his attention there, the misdirection of client files and information might be overlooked.

That morning, after punching the enter key, the doubts that often haunted her dreams at night caused her nerves to tingle. The counter on the computer screen marked the passage of time as the money transferred from the company's account to a dummy one she'd created. The message that signaled the completion of the transfer should have made her glad that it was over.

Poised over the keyboard, she hesitated though.

Did she really have to do this? Did she have to undermine the hard work of another person especially when he'd done nothing to deserve it?

When he caught her red-handed, only seconds after transferring the funds, her heart almost stopped. Instead, an up and personal look at Jesse kicked her neglected sex drive into high gear.

The memory sent a shiver down her spine.

The near-miss kiss at his desk? Lord, the temptation to shift just close enough to him so that they *accidentally* touched almost overwhelmed her. And did he really have to take a shower while she waited patiently at the desk? It would have served him right if she marched into the bathroom and demanded that he made room for her.

Instead, she took the opportunity to think. Hard.

She needed to return the money to him in some overt way so that he wouldn't question why it was gone in the first place.

And this is how she ended up for her troubles.

She exhaled and shook her head with disbelief. He agreed to her proposal because for every second they spent together, everything shifted. She felt it. He *had* to have felt it. They both jogged past politeness when they talked, raced past professionalism in their body language, and landed squarely on hedonic with both feet.

Dangling his money in front of him served as a lovely little carrot. Had he turned her down, she would have left humiliated but still determined to return the money. Even now, the programming of the accounts allowed the money to be transferred back to him over the course of the next several hours, deal or no deal. By midnight, he would have all of the money back. But he didn't need to know that. All Jesse needed to know was that she held high expectations for the night.

She, on the other hand, needed to remember that he was just a mark. Nothing more than a means to an end.

His parting words at breakfast still echoed to her. *Come to my house tonight at 8 p.m. Bring an appetite and an open mind.*

That last part intrigued her immensely.

As the SUV pulled to a stop in front of the colonial style home, she cut the engine and took a deep breath.

Whatever he had in mind, she had a feeling she wouldn't be disappointed.

* * * *

Eden pressed the doorbell and smiled at the quaint melody that chimed just inside of the front door. She hummed a few lines of the Star Spangled Banner, carrying the tune over even after the chimes ended. By the time the door swung open, she belted out the song as if she'd written it herself.

"Hoo," she breathed out at Jesse's smile. "I gather from that shit-eatin' grin that you could hear me in there?"

"My neighbors too, I'm sure. Nice voice," he replied. Arms crossed, he propped himself against the door jam. His eyes blazed bright with merriment before they shifted into something a little more mysterious.

Although his gaze never dropped hers, she felt naked as she stood in front of him. Something in the way he looked at her made her feel as if he peeled away her clothing layer by layer. The heaviness of that stare intoxicated her and made a promise about the night ahead.

"Are you going to let me in?" she asked demurely.

He studied her face and then stepped closer so they stood only inches apart. "Just so that we're clear, tonight, perhaps this entire weekend, is your idea. If you want to change your mind right now, I'm okay with that. But if you follow me inside, we'll see this thing through to its conclusion." He dropped his mouth next to her ear until his breath tickled her skin. "And I plan on getting every blessed cent of my money back."

Her pulse raced, but she wouldn't let the tremor deep down surface. "That's exactly what I'm counting on, Jesse."

He pulled his head back so he could regard her again. She bared his scrutiny with an impassive face. No change in her body language either. He inclined his head toward the doorway. "Let's go. I hope you brought your appetite."

Taking his outstretched hand, she clasped it in hers. Instead of the electric spark she expected—wanted to be there—comforting warmth spread over her fingers. Before she could reflect on it, she pulled her hand away to cover her mouth.

"Jesse?" Her voice was almost hoarse. She came to a standstill before the wall. "Is that an original?"

He walked past it with barely a pause. "Good eye."

That's all he could say? Good eye? The man had an original Degas in the entryway to his home and all he could say was 'good

eye?’ The last she’d heard, a Degas painting sold for millions of dollars at a Christie’s auction.

For the first time since she had opened her mouth about this proposition, she hesitated. Something about knowing Jesse could buy and sell her just by casting off a single piece of artwork and still have plenty of money left over made her question his motivations for seeing this through. She could only imagine what he thought of her. Apprehension crept over her nerves, igniting each one along the way.

“You coming?” His head floated into view, the wall blocking the rest of him.

Wide-eyed, she shook her head slowly. This was not a good idea. The man was so far out of her league that she’d need a map, two Sherpas, and a compass just to get into the same *universe* as his league. “Jesse, I had no idea—”

“No idea about what? Come on and have a snack with me. I don’t know about you, but I could eat a little something.”

The exaggerated sigh she breathed out was for her own benefit as much as his. It gave her the courage to follow him instead of running tail-tucked in the opposite direction. She set her jaw and followed.

The strong suggestion by him that she would not be allowed to back out now teetered on a fragile ledge. Eden mentally pulled it back onto sure footing when she beheld the buffet spread out on the wooden table.

“Oh my.”

The varied food platters covered the table’s surface. Her sexual appetite’s future may have been precarious, but her appetite for food would not be left unsatisfied.

“I didn’t know what you liked, so I got a little bit of everything, I think.”

Chocolate. Strawberries. Asparagus. Caviar. Figs. Truffles. More fruit that she couldn’t identify from where she stood and, one mustn’t forget...oysters.

Eden choked out a shocked laugh. “Are these *aphrodisiacs*?”

He grinned back at her and shrugged. “I figured it couldn’t hurt.” He held out a chair. “Have a seat.”

It was like he’d read every bad magazine article on how to seduce a woman. Oysters? Really?

She couldn’t stop smiling as she sat. “Jesse. This is...cute. Thank you for going to so much trouble.”

“I hope you’ll let me pamper you for a little while.”

She nodded because she couldn’t speak. Her breath caught in her chest when she looked into the depths of his eyes. In them, she saw more than a man who wanted more than just to sleep with her. In the swirl of green and browns was a conflagration threatening to break free.

“Jesse—“

“Here.” He picked up a strawberry and let it rest gently against her lips. “Take a bite.”

She sank her teeth into the soft flesh of the fruit and pulled it into her mouth. The sensual sweetness and the floral fragrance sent her senses on a joyride. “That’s heavenly.” Her eyelids fluttered open, and she stopped chewing when she saw his face. “What’s wrong?”

He swallowed hard. “You’ve got the most beautiful lips I have ever seen in my life. Here. Take a bite of this too.”

Eden ran her tongue over her mouth and noted with some satisfaction that Jesse looked as though someone had just stolen the oxygen from the air. If nothing else, the man knew how to make her feel desirable. *Perhaps he deserves if I purse my lips just a little more when I bite into the fig...*

“Fuck,” he whispered after she pulled the fruit from his fingertips. His gaze traced her lips. She could almost feel the heat trail. Jesse picked up a piece of pineapple. “And this.”

“Wait!” She giggled, and then swallowed. “I’ll choke if you keep shoving things at me. Why don’t you eat something too?”

He shook his head, pushing the succulent fruit to her mouth. “Bite.”

Her heart pounded as she accepted piece after piece from him. The way he picked over the morsels, always seeming to find the best pieces sent her pulse racing. She all but had to force him to take some of the food for himself. He ate quickly, his attention always returning to her needs.

He seemed content to just feed her all night if she let him. She almost could. The way his fingers grazed her chin to wipe runaway juice held more promise than anything he could say.

Had she actually been scared of what tonight would bring? She’d set herself up to experience this man in ways she’d fantasized about since that first brief encounter via teleconference, of all things.

Something about the gentle voice, punctuated by his assertive outbursts of cursing made her laugh and her heart soar.

Sure there had been a brief moment of hesitation over whether he would be interested in a woman of a different race, but the way he watched her intently right now chased away any doubts. Jesse Englund was hers for the night. She only had to step up and claim him.

Eden pulled the strawberry from his fingers before he could offer it to her. Closing her eyes, she sucked him into her mouth and swirled her tongue slowly, seductively over the tips of his fingers. The moan he emitted was so soft she almost thought she imagined it. When she looked at him again, she smiled. There was nothing imagined about the heat in his eyes.

“Why don’t we take this upstairs?” she asked.

Chapter Five

Never before had he realized that watching a woman eat could make his cock as hard as it was at this moment. The way her lips moistened from escaped juice. The way her pink tongue darted out to catch the drips. Every movement was a walking ad for sex.

She probably didn't know it, but the cute little skirt she wore rode up on her thighs every time she leaned forward. It never went high enough for him to glimpse her hidden treasures, but the sneak peak of her toned thighs made his heart thump.

Christ. Who was he kidding? Everything she did either made his erection pulse or his heartbeat race. Eden kept him mesmerized. Not just the promise of great sex, but the innocence of her expressive eyes. He had a feeling she hadn't meant for her proposition to go as far as it had. When he told her she wouldn't be allowed to back out, the prompt had been for shock value. Now that she followed him upstairs to his bedroom, the urge to possess her body *just once* consumed him.

He walked to the lamp by his bed and turned it on. She stood in the doorway, not entering, watching his movements. The deep breath she took didn't escape his notice.

He asked, "Are you okay?"

"Fine."

Eden's gaze trained on his hands when he loosened the top button of his shirt. She tracked him opening the next one and then the next.

Her fingers gripped her own clothing like a lifeline. The vice-like grip and her wide-eyed glances around the room oddly calmed him. She was anything but okay, but he would change that right now.

"Come here."

She began to stammer. "Jesse... I don't...I'm not..."

"Second thoughts?" His body tensed for her reply, and he sent a quick reminder to himself to breathe.

“No, that’s not quite it.” She shook her head. “I just don’t want you to think...”

He approached her slowly. “Think what?”

“I just blurted it out, okay?” Her gaze dropped to the floor. “I didn’t start out with the intention of making this ludicrous proposal. And now that I’m here, as stupid as it will sound after I offered you half a million dollars for an orgasm...”

Just as he suspected, then. She got caught up in her own invention and, too late, realized she couldn’t back out. Or, maybe she didn’t want to back out? Still, she started it. He would finish it.

“For a total of five orgasms,” he interrupted. Jesse could reach out to touch her now, but the move could be interpreted any number of ways, and she was already spooked. He needed to calm her some other way for now.

But he would touch her. All over. Explore everywhere.

“What?” Her head snapped up again. “Right...Whew. Five of them. Listen—it’s just that...I’m not a slut, okay?”

The distance that separated them irritated him. He needed to get closer. This just wasn’t close enough. Not yet. Not until he could inhale her cherry blossom fragrance again. Feel the warmth emanate from her skin.

The shame in her voice tossed aside his original plan of maintaining a separation. He stepped closer and slid a hand over her cheek to cup her face. “I never thought that for a moment.”

“But Jesse...” Her eyes widened even further and he slid his other hand over her slender neck.

“Shh. Just kiss me, okay? Kiss me.” Because if she didn’t, he would combust from the need to taste her.

Her eyes were compelling and magnetic, but the draw of her lips consumed him. For a moment—just a brief instant—he let Eden have the opportunity to pull away. To deny him. He lowered his head, and her big, brown eyes closed.

It gave him all of the encouragement he needed.

Soft. From this moment, he knew the true meaning of the word. Her lips against his spoke to him of gentleness, tenderness. Before today, his imagination would have needed years of schooling to come close to predicting how she would feel beneath him. And it would have still been dead wrong.

He drank in her taste, breathed in her air. His fingers ached with the need to travel over her, and memorize her details but he didn't dare move them. He couldn't chance ending this kiss. Wouldn't let anything interrupt his mouth over hers.

When she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him closer, Jesse's heart stopped. It must have stopped. One minute it beat a thousand thumps a minute, and in the next, the world stood still. He willed it into action again because men didn't feel like this. Not because of a kiss. Not because of one woman's touch.

Oh fuck. That little sound she made? His cock ached to distraction already. If she made another little noise like that, he wouldn't be able to help himself. He needed to slow down. Return the focus to her and seal their little proposition right now, but too much clothing separated him from her. He wanted so badly to make her come. A long, drawn out, toe curling orgasm that forced her to scream from the ecstasy of it. Oh yeah. He could do that and he would.

Eden pressed herself against him as a shudder of delight washed over her. The man tasted wild and sweet all rolled into one. The soft curls on his chest tickled her skin, and she reached up to him, snaking her fingers into them. The insistent beat of his heart vibrated beneath her palm. If his erection making its presence known against her abdomen didn't exist, the rhythmic beat shared his secret: Jesse wanted her.

His tongue teased into her mouth. She met him boldly. Distracted by his mouth, the movement of his lips over her, and his fresh taste, somehow, her clothing left her body one piece at a time. The goosebumps prickling her skin as his hands trailed over her naked flesh aroused her consciousness.

"Why am I the only one without clothes on?" Her swollen lips curved into a playful smile.

"Because, this is for you. All of it...just for you, beautiful."

She tugged his shirt from his waist. "I had something else in mind though. It involved you, me..." she jerked her head to the bed, "...and that."

"Later," he muttered before swooping in for another heart wrenching kiss.

Eden pulled away slightly after a moment. Her lips grazed his as she spoke. "You'll give me a complex."

The statement got his attention, and his eyebrows narrowed together. “No, not you. You have a bit of an exhibitionist in you.” He let out a soft laugh. “Don’t bother to look at me like that. I know it’s true, and I’ll prove it. Sit on the bed for a minute. I’ll be right back.”

When the bed released a soft sigh after she got on it, heat crept up her neck. Exhibitionist? Is that what he really thought? She could barely manage to stay still on the bed while uncovered. The urge to slide beneath the sheets until he returned wreaked havoc on her agitated nerves. She settled for crossing her arms over her bare breasts.

With his hands behind his back, Jesse stalked back into the bedroom with a glint in his eyes. She tried to peer at what he hid, but he kept whatever it was protectively covered.

“Turn around.”

Her eyebrows arched, but she complied. Something that rattled met the top of the nightstand, but that was the extent of her knowledge. “Should I be scared?”

“No.”

“Can I ask what you’re doing?”

“No.”

“Are you going to tell me eventually?”

“Can you trust me for a little while?”

She shifted as she mulled the question over. To stall, she replied, “Can I?”

His reply was quick. “Oh, yeah.” The bed dipped behind her as he positioned himself. “Close your eyes.”

Cool, silky material dropped down and covered her eyes and the bridge of her nose. Instinctively, she brought her hand to her face and held it in place as Jesse tightened the strip behind her head. Opening her eyes against it, she blinked several times. Nothing but darkness greeted her.

“Now,” he said. “I want you to kneel. Mmm...just like that. Spread your thighs a little farther apart. Clasp your hands together behind your back, now. Oh, Eden...that’s perfect.”

Heat flushed over her neck straight to the tips of her pebbled nipples. The position made her breasts thrust out so they must have screamed ‘wanton’ to Jesse. Like this, her ass couldn’t help but proudly display itself too. The mental image overwhelmed her.

“Jesse—” Uncertainty crept into her voice.

He grasped her shoulders, then slid his large hands down her arms. “You’re not bound. Not this time...If anything becomes too much for you, if you want to stop, take off that blindfold. We won’t do anything you don’t like, I promise.”

The flick of his tongue over her earlobe was so sudden and—oh, God—delicious, she shivered.

“Nothing, beautiful, that you can’t handle.”

Somewhere deep in her mind, she recognized that her breathing labored in her chest. Blindfolded and on display before him, she knew she could trust him and that he sought only her pleasure.

The bed shifted and her eyes flew open behind the cloth. Unaware she’d even closed them in the first place, Eden turned her head, trying to capture the sounds of his movements. She knew he no longer sat on the bed with her, but that was all she could determine.

“Don’t move.” His voice floated to her from the right.

She started when something stroked softly against the side of her neck. Eden turned into it and followed the trail it created as it traveled her body by arching toward it. Every move she made attempted to anticipate its path.

It moved from her neck, slowly traveled over her collarbones. When it circled the fleshy curve of her breast, she swallowed hard.

“What is that?” she whispered.

He didn’t reply. The tortuous trail continued uninterrupted. She couldn’t help herself when she shifted toward him again. She jutted her breasts out, and sought more of the feather-light stroke. The soft sound of Jesse’s chuckle sent another blush of heat that led straight to her pussy.

The man knew what he was about. He teased her breasts with maybe a feather or some kind of fur, ignoring her aching nipples and focused on the outline of her curves.

She sucked in her stomach when the trail slid over her belly button. It must have been knowing that he was heading south, heading to where she ached most, that did it. Her sex perfumed the room in a rush. Cool air between her thighs tickled the gathering moisture.

His husky voice dropped close to her ear. “I bet if I touched you right now, you’d be so wet. Wouldn’t you, Eden?”

She licked her lips and nodded. Successfully stifled a moan when the strokes snaked over her hip and followed the join of her thigh.

“Do you think I should? Should I touch you there? Right where you want me to?”

Her mouth was parched. She licked her lips again. “Please.”

He continued over her thigh and stroked softly over the inside. He came close, but not nearly close enough to her wetness. “No. Not yet.” Then the touch left her, and she could have screamed her frustration.

Every nerve ending she possessed was a howling, jumbled mess. Her mental assurances to herself that he would not just leave her hanging on the brink of a precipice brought her little comfort. When one minute of nothing happening stretched into two, she became uneasy. Another minute of silence passing had her straining to hear a sound from him. Anything.

“Jesse?”

She heard it then. The soft rustle of clothing as it dropped onto the carpeted floor. Then without warning, his warm erection pressed against her thigh as he dropped a kiss onto her shoulder.

A hundred carnal thoughts swirled in her mind, each trying to beat the other one for supremacy. She ended up focused on two things: how hard he was and his size. His incredible size.

Too quickly, he took himself away. Eden almost reached up. Almost took the blindfold away. She wanted to see him. Touch him. Taste him.

He seemed to sense her thoughts, and another low chuckle peppered the air. “It’s gonna be worth the wait.”

If her heart could stand the wait. Yeah. It would be fantastic.

Even now, her moisture made her thighs slick. Her clit was so hard it almost hurt. Still outthrust, her breasts ached for attention. She needed to take control of this situation.

“Jesse?” She kept her voice low and submissive. “Can I have some more, please?”

Chapter Six

He had worked quickly to remove her clothing item by item. If not for the promise of participating in much more, he would have taken the time to revel in the beauty of her nudity. The blindfold had been inspired. The resultant pose a work of art. He couldn't get over the chocolate tips of her upturned breasts or the way her brown thighs hummed, taut with expectation.

Jesse made a decision and reached for a nearby item on the tray. He held the item to her nose. "What's this Eden?"

She shifted her head from side to side. Her hands reached out blindly.

"No, beautiful. No touching. Hands behind your back again, please...Good. Now tell me, what is this? Smell..."

Her smile was infectious. "Cherries."

"Right." He dragged the column lightly over her cheek and neck. "Now tell me *what* it is."

He licked his lips and watched with anticipation. She would be stumped by its perfect smoothness. He moved it over her chest and circled a puckered areola. He wouldn't touch it or her nipple. Not yet.

Her chest expanded toward him as she took a shuddering breath. His gaze followed the curve of her breasts and memorized the details. The urge to bend down and take her into his mouth screamed at him.

He fought his urges and his hand continued its journey further down. He stopped to circle her bellybutton, then forged a trail through her dark, glistening curls. A single stroke over her swollen lips caused her to tilt her pelvis towards him. The moan that accompanied it made his heavy cock throb even harder and he didn't think that possible.

"Any guesses yet?" He cleared his throat. Even to him, his voice sounded strangled.

"Can I get a hint?"

"Well, I can use it for something it's not intended for." He took a deep breath. This was it. "It might give you a hint."

“Okay.”

Her guileless reply and the knowledge of what he was about to do almost made him come right there. And that would have been a real shitter on the night. Thank God for a memorized list of batting averages.

He closed his eyes and counted to ten. With a more reined in sense of control, he dropped to his knees before the bed, in perfect sight of her beckoning nether lips. Careful not to touch her clit—not yet—he circled the entrance of her beauty.

When he pushed upward, he watched her face. Her hissed inhale of breath and the slow exhale drew out into a moan of rapture. He slid into her wetness with ease and her mouth parted. Eden’s hips rocked gently with him, matching the rhythm with which the item in his hand fucked her.

Her head lobbed back and she released two quick panting breaths. “Oh, God.”

He could have stayed like that for hours. Sliding it in and out of her slick heat. Listening to her ragged breathing.

The torture of unfulfilled need drove him. Her breaths came faster. The trembling spread over taut limbs. With a wicked grin to himself, he pulled out all the way. Too overheated just wouldn’t do. Not yet.

“Jesse...please...”

The sheen of perspiration over her skin excited him almost as much as her softly spoken words.

He sat back on his haunches. Not moving nor offering her the release she needed ate at him. Beneath the blindfold, her parted lips, the darting motion of her tongue, and her erotic flush beckoned him closer. Called for him to finish what he started.

A wisp of sulphur emanated from the bedside table after he struck a match from his tray of goodies. One part ambience, one part amusement drove the decision to light the tapered scented candle that just previously enjoyed the privilege of being inserted between her thighs.

Her giggle and sigh of recognition robbed him of the joy of telling her what he’d used. No matter. Her glow in the flickering candlelight brought him another kind of joy.

“Lay back against the bed, Eden.” His attention darted to the glistening flash of her slit when she repositioned. “Hands behind your back again.”

He knelt between her thighs and his cock twitched. Just viewing the contrast of his tanned skin against the rich hues of hers made him so hard it was almost painful. Jesus. He was so close to her core and yet, as the saying went, so God damned far away.

Placing the graceful arch of her foot against his shoulder, he dropped his head to her calf. The salty tang of her skin exploded on his tongue as he ran it up to the back of her knee. Only one thing could be sweeter.

Gently, he pushed her leg to the side. His tongue continued its journey from behind her knee, sliding along until his nose tickled the delicate skin of her inner thigh. There was a sharp intake of her breath when he nuzzled her curls to inhale her heady scent.

With one long stroke, he slid his tongue over her swollen lips. Her hips bucked beneath him, but he held her down. He slid down the other side of her labia, and for the first time, tasted some of the nectar he lusted after all evening.

That one little taste did him in.

With a low growl, Jesse forewent all thoughts of teasing and dipped into the entrance of her pussy. He worked his mouth against Eden and drank her in. Tasted. Explored. Worked his jaw greedily against her.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard her desperate breaths. Heard his name panted out as she arched towards him.

Her taste. Her beautiful fucking taste. Everything he knew she would be.

He didn’t want to touch her clit. Not yet. He just wanted to—hell—he didn’t know any more. All rational thought fled. Her drugging effect consumed him. His desire for more made his simmering blood reach full boil.

The increasing pitch of her cries brought his mind back from the euphoria it drifted toward. Pulling away from her took the last vestige of willpower he possessed. He slammed his eyes shut and struggled to breathe even as the pounding of his heart threatened to burst through his chest.

“Jesus, Eden,” he gasped. That was too close. He would get her there, but not like this. Not the first time.

He climbed over her body on shaky limbs until he rested only inches from her face. Gently, he tugged the blindfold away. He eased her arms from behind her back and felt a twinge of regret when she groaned from the movement. It vanished when he glanced into her face.

With smoky eyes, she looked on him with desire that words could not duplicate. Every curve of her body echoed the sentiment. He dipped his head toward hers and pressed a gentle kiss against her mouth.

“Ready for me, beautiful?” he asked when he pulled away again.

She said nothing as she shivered beneath him. Delicate hands flattened against his chest and curled into his hair. Picking her head up, she raised herself until she touched his lips with hers.

“Jesse, wild horses couldn’t drag me away from this bed right now,” she said huskily.

Did he even have to ask if she was ready? Primed as she was, it wouldn’t take much effort on his part to tip her over the edge.

Eden’s fingers trailed over the hard lines of his chest and fanned out over his tight abdominal muscles. His stomach clenched and his entire body jerked when her fingertips grazed the smooth tip of his cock.

His hand explored her reverently, finally—at last—rubbed a thumb over her aching nipple. Another bolt of energy streaked through her.

Jesse continued to succeed in arousing her, always backing off when she was so close to release. He played her body like a maestro, resulting in sensations building and ebbing, flowing and dancing through her.

She wanted him inside of her, not just for her ultimate release. This connection that sparked from the first time he touched her this morning, to the raging storm he caused within her now needed to be calmed. She knew of only one way...one way to stop the maddening urges coursing over her.

She reached down, grazed over his hips and gripped his hard length. Tilting her pelvis, she brought herself to him. Her whispered, frenzied words broke through the silence. “Please, Jesse...please.”

Her heart stuttered when she felt him at her entrance. He pushed forward—*sweet heaven*—until only the head of his erection nestled inside of her warmth.

Eden swallowed reflexively and breathed hard through parted lips. “Oh God, Jesse...I’m gonna...I’m gonna...”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he hissed. “Not yet, Eden. *Not yet.*”

Sweat rolled from his brow onto her. Poised on his forearms, he trembled as if some fever consumed him.

His biceps flexed and she shot each a glance. Her fingers dug into his flesh, sinking in while she staved off the looming orgasm. The white, blood-deprived areas reddened instantly when she let go.

Without regard for the pain she must have inflicted, in a soothing voice he said, “Neither of us is gonna last long. Just—just hold on for me. Wait for me. Okay?”

She nodded and Jesse slid forward into her folds.

This moment in time made everything—her initial hesitation, her embarrassment, her racing pulse—made it all worthwhile. This moment before they would achieve ultimate bliss...where they truly connected for the first time, would forever remain locked in her memories.

He began his slow drag inside of her and Eden cried out as he pumped with long strokes. Together they moaned through the agonizing ecstasy.

As he predicted, the pressure that built from her center and traveled swiftly to her limbs would not be stopped. Behind closed lids, a colorful display of fireworks began to play just for her.

Jesse stroked harder. Faster.

His mouth dropped down over hers and he drank down her moans. He sucked in her lower lip with a growl and then bit down as his body tensed.

That delicious bark of pain caused Eden to explode in a firestorm of sensation. She screamed his name with a hoarse excitation that only lovers know and pulled him into her.

Jesse’s cock surged a moment later and the warm jets of his seed coated the walls of her womb. Each pulse excited her body into wanting more from him, greedily taking his offering.

He rested his forehead against hers and then wrestled his struggled breathing under control while puffs of air caressed her face. Eden trailed tickling fingers up and down his back, reveling in the corded muscles that still trembled at her touch.

His eyes slipped closed and he murmured, “That’s one.”

Chapter Seven

Her eyes flew open to meet the fading darkness. The warm body pressed against her brought back every second of the evening in a heady rush of emotion.

Jesse.

Oh God...what had she done?

She needed to go. Now. This was not right. She couldn't stay here another minute.

When he reached for her again later in the night, he slipped inside her body and they melted together. Jesse took her to soaring heights, and they held each other tightly as they rocked toward oblivion. She didn't allow herself to think. She just gave herself over to him and trembled beneath his tender hands as the minutes, and then hours passed.

In the hints of daylight, her mind regained control.

And, she needed to go.

Eden turned slowly to find the clock radio without arousing him. The rhythm in his soft breathing broke, but then settled when she paused.

Several minutes must have passed, but after many starts and stops, she managed to slip out from beneath his arm. She peered down at his form beneath the blanket and smiled before bending to retrieve her clothing from the floor. Her shoes were...ah...downstairs.

She turned the knob and winced when a soft squeak sounded through the air.

"Eden?"

Not good. Not good. "Go back to sleep. I—" What was she going to tell him?

Light flooded the bedroom after he switched on a bedside lamp. His gaze flitted from her face to the bundle of clothing in her arms. From where she stood, she could see his sleepy hesitation turn to curiosity bordering on anger.

“Going somewhere?” He waited with quiet reservation. The answer to his question already lay with the stealthy way she tried to sneak out of his bedroom. He must have known the answer, but wanted to hear it from her mouth.

Her shoulders slumped. She couldn’t meet his eyes, and kept her gaze focused on her rumpled clothing. “Thank you for a lovely evening, Jesse, but I really have to go.”

“You were going to leave without saying goodbye.” It was not a question. “What about...”

“I’ve already returned the money—“

He cut her off. “This is not about money. It never really was and you know it.”

“Jesse, please. Don’t make this something other than what it is.” With that statement, Eden made up her mind. She met his accusing eyes without flinching. “Money was exchanged. We fucked. Nothing more.”

He needed to let her go, so she threw the words carelessly. She had to make it sting. Whatever it took for him to think that the evening meant little. That he’d been used. Anything but give him a clue that he managed to touch her emotionally. That she wanted to crawl back into his bed and into his arms.

A chill swept over her as she watched him stiffen. They locked stares while her heart hammered wildly.

“What’s going on Eden?” He spoke softly. The venom she expected to be there was surprisingly absent. “You’re not the same woman I was with last night. Certainly not the woman I wanted to spend today with. I don’t understand...What aren’t you telling me?”

She wanted to tell him *My brother, Gavin, is trying to destroy your business.* She also wanted to tell him *I’ve sold my soul to give Gavin a chance to inch ahead of you.* She finally wanted to tell him *I’m so sorry.*

Instead, Eden said, “I have to go.”

With that, she turned and walked out of the room.

* * * *

Jesse froze in place until he heard the closing of the front door downstairs. What the hell happened? He replayed the night’s events

over and over in his mind, but couldn't come up with a reason for the complete one-eighty she pulled.

The sun hadn't completely broken the horizon, but more light cascaded into the room. At this unusually late hour—at least for him—trying to go back to sleep would be impossible and foreign. In frustration, he threw the sheets back only to have a thin film of cherry blossom aroma waft over him.

A rush of memories almost made him stagger back, but he strode with purpose to his closet. After slipping on a pair of shorts and running shoes, he crossed to his treadmill. The rhythmic movements he found after warming up after a few minutes didn't provide the release from his thoughts he craved.

He kept replaying everything. Every detail he could recall prior to going upstairs looped through his mind. When that yielded nothing, he backtracked to yesterday morning.

The report from the private investigator was inconsequential. Reviewing their conversation where Eden first informed him of his security lapses yielded even less. Although...

He could think of one thing. Kevin Carmichael. Maybe he had some answers. The voicemail hinted at something amiss. Nothing important enough to cause concern, but perhaps something that might reveal why Eden had run scared.

He raked a hand through his hair and pushed back the sweat beginning to drip. The hum of the treadmill lulled his mind back to thinking about her.

Jesus. Why couldn't he let it go? Like she said, money was exchanged. They fucked. That was the extent of it.

The concept of enjoying and pursuing a one night stand evaded him, but it wasn't like he never had one before. Only this time, Eden Simmons didn't seem like the type. With her too-polished, too-intelligent persona, the image just didn't fit.

Something else drove her away in an all too frantic hurry.

And he was going to fucking find out what.

He gave the clock a quick glance. Wired from his new mission, he discarded the idea of relaxing this weekend. After the jog, he would shower then shave. That's all he needed to do before setting out to solve the mystery of the woman who in a few hours had managed to cage his heart.

* * * *

The shrill sound of the cell phone jarred her from the memories that taunted her. Eden didn't recognize the coarse, fatigue-filled voice that came from her mouth. "Eden Simmons," she answered without looking at the display.

"Little girl!" The deep rich sound filled her ear. She winced at the familiar greeting that she long since stopped trying to get him to forget. "Tell me something good."

"What is it that you want to hear, Gavin?"

The drive to her house felt interminable. Last night the minutes flew by. Not like now.

"You told me not to ask for details and I'm sticking to that. But I don't think I'm asking for too much with an update."

She flicked her wrist. "It's six in the damn morning and you're calling for an update?"

He laughed softly. Silence hung between them. After a minute, he sighed. "Well?"

"Well what, Gavin?"

"You're leaving the home of my greatest rival after being there all night, Eden..."

Only instinctual self-preservation kept her from slamming on the brakes. She chanced a look in the rearview mirror and her eyebrows knitted together. A stream of curses escaped toward the man waving from the car behind her.

"You followed me?" she said between clenched teeth.

Again, he chuckled and the urge to mash the brakes if only to cause him to rear-end her and wipe away his grin skittered across her mind. "Why don't we grab something to eat, sis?"

She grunted a rude reply that he interpreted as a yes. He named a nearby diner and after she disconnected, changed course for the restaurant. On the way there, she reviewed what to tell him. By the time she pulled into a parking space, nothing came to her. All she could think about was the hurt in Jesse's eyes when she'd left him.

She didn't want to see that again. Her mind obliged somewhat.

Now fleeting images of the passion displayed across his face while they made love chased her. The way he gazed on her that sent a tremor across her heated body. The way he felt inside of her. The comfort she felt in his arms.

The fact that she didn't deserve any of it.

A sharp rap against the window made her jump. "You coming out?" Gavin's words were muffled through the closed window, but she nodded and reached for the door handle.

Blood was thicker than water. She only had to remind herself of that.

Over and over again.

With a sigh, she stepped out to face her brother's inquisition. She started talking from the moment she exited her vehicle and didn't stop until she told him everything. All of the details she kept from him before, he knew now. His reaction shook her to her core.

"What in God's name were you thinking, Eden?" The anger emanated off of him like heat. "When you and I came to our agreement, you were to get into his company, do a little computer magic, and then get out. Why in God's name would you sleep with him?"

He gathered his breath just long enough to continue ranting. "You must seriously be trying to go to jail. If that man decides he really likes you, really has any kind of feelings for you, and then finds out that you fucked him over, literally, you are through. Through! Do you get that?"

"Gavin, I have an idea," she said. Even as she fought it, her throat tightened and tears filled her eyes. "Let's pretend that I already feel really shitty about this. Okay? This way, you don't have to remind me of how badly I've messed up. After all, I did it for you."

His mouth firmed into a thin line as his eyes narrowed. "Don't you dare blame me. I never asked you to sleep with him," he snapped. With a deep inhalation, he threw his head back and then sighed.

"You got me into this mess, big brother." Her temper flared, the fury almost choking her. Through the tears, she found the remains of strength she still possessed. "You put me here."

Gavin looked down his nose at her. "Your own stupidity got you here, Eden."

Eden bit her lip to stop herself from saying anything else. He was partially right, of course. Gavin, Sr. was the one who thought she couldn't handle the family business or even deserved to be there. Gavin, Jr. had always been her fiercest ally until a couple of months ago.

What ever had possessed her to break into their business and try to prove her worth by messing with their funds she'd never know. Why couldn't she have left things alone? Just let her brother and father have their stupid business and run it without her.

But no.

Eden just had to show dear old dad that she was worth having around. Only before she could finalize the transfer of funds and the manipulation of data, before she had her moment of triumph, her brother found out. He didn't say anything at first. Just stared at her in stunned silence. Then the wheels of his mind started to turn. She'd never forget the way his eyes lit up the moment he recognized her talent for its true potential. They narrowed in the next instant when he decided she could be useful by destroying his business rival by pulling the exact same stunt. Only at Englund Multimedia, she would have no intention of fixing the problem she created.

"Listen here," he rumbled. "How ever you decide to fix this, you make certain Jesse Englund has no idea what's really going on."

"I don't know if I can do this, Gav," she said hoarsely.

His eyes narrowed. "You'd better know. Dry up those tears, little girl. I don't even know why you're crying." His upper lip curled in a disgusted sneer. "Don't even try to convince yourself you've got something going for that white man."

"But I think I do." Eden looked up to capture his eyes with hers. She shook her head and let out a low strangled moan. "It was just supposed to be some fun. Something happened...I don't know..."

"It's your decision to make. Go to jail because of a single phone call from me or let this guy's business collapse around him." He stood, pulled out his wallet, and then dropped a twenty dollar bill on the table. He didn't look at her as he started to walk away. "Up to you."

Chapter Eight

“I went back to your house, but you weren’t there.”

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Of course he wasn’t there. He was here. In his office. Where she was standing now. Duh.

He looked up from the newspaper spread over his desk and stared back at her blandly. As she stood transfixed at the doorway, her mind raced for something else to say.

“Why did you leave?” He sounded tired. Almost defeated.

He could have asked her how she broke into his offices again. He might have even asked her how she spent the hours since she last saw him. She would have even settled for him asking how she was.

Oh no. He had to get straight to the million dollar question. The one she didn’t want to answer yet.

“I—I...,” she stuttered.

His eyes narrowed and then the rage radiating from them struck her like a fist. Jesse stood rapidly, and she winced as his chair slammed into the wall. Like a hunter stalking his prey, he crossed the room and left a trail of menace in his wake.

His hands spread beside her shoulders, almost pinning her in place. He repeated his question. The smallest hint of huskiness raked over his words as his short-lived anger faded. “Why did you leave?”

Gavin had said to come up with something. No matter what she tried though, she couldn’t think of a way out of the damage she left behind. She just knew she had to fix it. She just couldn’t let him think he hadn’t touched her.

She shut her eyes. “I needed to think. I need to talk to you...”

“Look at me.”

A subtle hint of coffee aroma washed over her as he spoke. She didn’t need to open her eyes to know how close he was. No doubt, if either of them moved a fraction, their mouths would graze. She opened her eyes, but kept her gaze down.

“Jesse, I need to tell you...”

His mouth slanted over hers. His thumb tilted her chin up and she gave in to him. When he pulled away, flecks of gold sparkled in his eyes.

“Tell me you’re not leaving my side today,” he said. He captured her mouth again. “Tell me you’re coming back to my bed,” he continued before brushing her mouth with his. His hand slipped under the hem of her dress to cup her heated sex.

“Tell me that you’ll never leave me like that again. Not without talking to me first. Tell me that whatever is wrong, we’ll fix it together...”

The protest almost made it past her lips. She almost kept her resolve intact and confessed her sins to him. But then, his fingers pushed impatiently into her panties and slid over her clit.

Electric jolts sped through her as he tormented her body. His fingers curled inside of her and worked magic until she could no longer feel her legs. She remained upright only because she leaned heavily against him, crying out as the pleasure ebbed and flowed.

Somewhat stunned, she barely noticed when he walked her to his desk, his hand never leaving her body as he guided her. Eden draped forward and ignored the hard wood pressing against her abdomen and breasts. Jesse stopped manipulating her long enough to pull down her panties and push the dress over her hips. When he plunged his cock into her, she screamed.

Jesse rode through her sudden orgasm, his fingers gripping tightly to her hips. With long, sure strokes he pounded into her depths until his body tensed. With a final grunt of triumph, he released his essence into the woman who had managed to send his emotions on a dizzying tumult he’d never experienced before.

His thundering heart rate eased down, and the blinding lust backed down with it. Eden pulsed around him as she also struggled to regulate her breathing. The initial relief of seeing her standing there had given way to such disappointment and maybe, anger, over the way she’d left that morning. Looking down on the way he’d taken her, knocking aside the items on his desk, his pants pooled around his ankles, her dress hiked haphazardly over her waist, a flush of shame washed over him.

He pulled out, wincing at his insensitivity. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“For what?” Eden flipped onto her back to watch him. Her eyes still blazed with molten passion. “For being a little rough? Babe, that was hot.”

His lips twitched before he could stop them and shook his head. “It wasn’t meant to be rough. That wasn’t my original intention. It was like, I took out my frustration with you in the end, and I’m sorry for that. You deserve better.”

“Not this time, I don’t.” The playful lilt to her voice vanished into something harder. “We need to talk.”

* * * *

The simultaneous ring of the phone and the chirrup of his BlackBerry broke the deadlocked silence. In between those sounds, he listened to the individual beats of his heart. He kept his focus there. Just listened to the rhythmic beating. He had to meditate on something soothing, calming right now. He needed to remain balanced or lose himself.

Idly, he realized that his hands hurt.

Releasing the clenched fists, he observed the color seep back into them. Since his jaw began to ache, too, he released the pressure on his clenched teeth.

His heart hurt too, but he didn’t know how to fix that.

Jesus. She attacked the one place he was vulnerable. The one God damned place. She could have set fire to his home. Run a steamroller over his car. Hell, posted a billboard announcing to the world he had a small penis. Anything—*anything at all*—but come after his fucking business.

And she did it while he was falling in love with her.

“Jesse, please. Turn around and look at me. I’m so, so sorry.”

He couldn’t look at her now. He remained focused on the view of the skyline. Funny, as many hours as he spent in the office, he never noticed it before now. If he came here at just the right time in the evening, it would make for one hell of a romantic view.

“Jesse, yell at me. Tell me to get out. Tell me you’re going to press charges. Just say something, please!”

The phone had stopped ringing again. It must have gone off three or four times already, but always ended after two rings. The same for the BlackBerry. Now, the clock ticked to fill the silence. He never

noticed that before either. It was like each day when he arrived here, the tasks, the meetings, the phone calls consumed him. The mundane sights and sounds of the day filtered past him without a second notice.

His business was his singular obsession to the exclusion of everything else.

At least it had been.

For a single day, his thoughts centered on her. Smiles that crossed his lips came suddenly and unexpectedly just by thinking of her. He looked forward not to the next meeting where they discussed how they could trump the competition, but to after work when he could spend more time with her. That he would spend an entire weekend away from the office, but in her arms, hadn't bothered him the way it would have before.

He swiveled his chair around and planted his hands on his desk. With an unflinching gaze, she raised her chin in the air, probably waiting to hear his sentence.

"Why?"

That brought a frown and a flutter of surprise across her face. "Why?" she repeated.

"Why."

Eden opened her mouth to speak, but a sudden crash outside caught their attention. He glanced at her as he stood to face whoever was heading their way.

Kevin Carmichael walked through the door, sweating profusely, his face bunched in a ball of explosive red. He stalked straight to Jesse who sat back down upon recognizing his friend. "I've been trying to get a hold of you all morning! Have you seen it?"

"Are you okay, Kev? Seen what?"

"For Christ's sake, I can't believe you of all people don't know yet." He walked past Eden to the other side of the desk without acknowledging her presence. His eyes went wide at Jesse's blackened monitor. "When's the last time you've been online, man?"

"Kevin. Slow down..."

"I want you to see this for yourself," he muttered while pressing the power button. "And it's a damn good thing you're here too. Maybe you can help us fix this mess."

His acknowledgement of Eden at last appeared to startle her. "Me?"

“Jesse, check your damned BlackBerry. We’ve been ringing and texting you for almost an hour now. Is it not working or something?”

“Or something...Why not just save us some time and tell me what’s going on? You’re starting to worry me.”

“If worried is the only reaction you have, I’d be worried about *that*. We have been screwed, Jess. Royally screwed. Something’s gone horribly wrong.” The fine tremor in his voice added weight to his words. “All of a sudden, our numbers make no sense whatsoever... It started with a transfer of funds. Two and half million.”

Jesse traded a glance with Eden, but didn’t acknowledge the ‘mishap.’

“Thank God, whatever happened there corrected itself because by the end of last night, it was back. But the money has been siphoning out of our account since then. What started as a slow trickle has been ramping up in speed. I called the bank, but no one is answering on a Saturday. If we wait until Monday...God, I don’t even want to think about it...”

“Where’s Scott in all of this?” The chief financial officer should have been the one to inform Jesse of the goings on.

“Trying to get a hold of someone at the bank and put a temporary hold on the account until we can figure out where the money is going and why.”

“Do you know anything about this?” Jesse asked. He saw Kevin startle at the question, but then follow his stare. Although it should have been impossible, his eyes widened even further.

Eden shook her head. “Absolutely not. Just the two point five, which I’ve corrected. And you already know that I will correct the rest of what I’ve done.”

“The two point five million? You had something to do with that?”

Jesse said dryly, “She tested our security by seeing if she could remove it.”

Kevin whirled to face Jesse. His face reddened further and Jesse had the irrational, although probably not impossible, fear that the man would stroke out. “That goes way beyond what I hired her to do. She was not authorized to do any such thing!” He sat down hard in the remaining chair. “Christ. When I found out her brother was Gavin Kingsley, I thought...Jesus. Stupidly, I was just waiting until Monday to withdraw the contract. I had no idea. None.”

“Wait a minute,” Jesse barked. “Gavin Kingsley as in *my competition* Gavin Kingsley? The CEO of GL Kingsley, Inc, *Gavin Kingsley*?”

With her silence, everything clicked into place. He now knew the why of what she had done.

Jesse suddenly felt the burden of the world’s biggest con because his greatest rival’s sister held the reins of his business in her hands.

Chapter Nine

“Why do you have different last names?” Of the hundreds of thoughts racing through his mind and churning the acid in his stomach, this proved to be the only one he could voice.

A fatigued sigh escaped her. “Our mother divorced his father. We’re half-siblings really.”

“You didn’t say a single word about the conflict of interest when I hired you to analyze our information security. Not a whisper when you signed the confidentiality agreement. I had no idea, Jesse.” Kevin shook his head angrily, and then said through clenched teeth, “Goddamned bitch!”

“Hey!” Jesse shot to his feet. He ignored Kevin’s startled reaction and dropped his voice down low. “You’ll want to be careful of what you say to her in my presence. There are things going on here of which you have *zero* knowledge. Instead of hurling insults, I would suggest that you get the other officers in here for a meeting, so we can figure out what needs to be done.”

He didn’t know who was more surprised by the speech, him or Kevin.

“Are you seriously protecting her? After *this*?”

“I had nothing to do with it, Jesse,” Eden snapped.

“And how do we know that? It’s called corporate espionage, not to mention outright theft...”

“Enough! Kevin—assemble the officers. Now.”

Kevin cut steely eyes at him. “It’s your funeral, my man.”

“That’s right. It is...The sign says *Englund* Multimedia. When that changes, you’ll be the first to know.”

Without waiting for a response, Jesse dropped to his chair and began typing so that he could review the damage firsthand. Before he could even log on, his COO barked commands at whomever had been unfortunate enough to be the first person he called. Kevin’s voice drifted out of the room and into the corridor.

The two men butted heads often, but that was why he liked him. Kevin instinctively knew when to challenge his boss and never did it in front of subordinates. He kept Jesse balanced.

Eden's soft voice distracted him from the screen when she said, "I should go."

"You," he said, stabbing a finger at her, "will sit right there. When you were confessing, you could have mentioned Gavin, but you decided to keep that gem to yourself. Anything else you're keeping from me? Anything else I should know?"

He released a sigh so sorrowful, she hurt just by hearing it. He slid a hand over the stubble already forming on his jaw, wiping away the trace of emotion from his face. "Jesus, Eden... What am I supposed to think about this? I'm going to have a devil of a time convincing my team not to press charges. Probably the only thing saving you is the fact that you returned the money you stole in the first place."

Eden's eyebrows shot into the air. Of course, he had a point or two, but that last little bit stung. The *only* thing?

She stood to her full height, stalked to his desk, and planted her feet firmly on the carpet. Opening her mouth to speak, she paused before a sound could escape. What was she going to say, really?

She couldn't have destroyed her chances for a future with Jesse any further than if she had planned it this way from the get-go. If only for what could have been, she had to fix this. She may have lost the man—she was resigned to that already, no matter how painful—but she wouldn't let him lose the one thing that mattered to him.

Her brother may be blood, but it didn't make him right in this. He didn't care if he hurt Eden by dragging her into a world of dishonesty by forcing her to sabotage Jesse. Why had she lost sight of what he was really doing to her? Why did she let him scare her with his threats?

Eden blew out forcefully. She'd earned whatever she had coming to her. She didn't have to drag Jesse down with her. This fiasco needed to end.

"I know you have no reason to trust me, but with your permission, I'd like to log in and see what I can figure out," she finally said.

For a moment, he said nothing, just studied her face. Anxiety tied her stomach into knots. She needed this one last chance to right the way she'd wronged him. To prove to him that she knew how important this was to him.

“Can I really trust you Eden? From this point forward, can I trust you?”

Hope surged into her chest with his questions. “I promise you that you can. Give me a chance to redeem myself, and I’ll show you.”

“I don’t have a family. I can count the number of true friends I have on one hand, and I barely keep in touch with most of them. It’s just me and this business. Do you understand?”

She nodded. The underlying message was clear. Letting her in would mean trusting her with his entire universe.

“I’ll ask Kevin to set the meeting with the others for an hour from now. If you find something useful before then, let me know.”

Eden nodded again and turned to leave. When she got to the door, she paused. Keeping her attention on the floor, she said softly, “I won’t let you down, Jesse.”

With that, she hurried to the nearest office. She wouldn’t let him down. Not again.

* * * *

“God, please tell me that smile is because you’ve got some good news.”

All eyes turned to Eden as she walked into the conference room. She dropped the grin quickly. It wasn’t good news necessarily, but she was on a roll. She only pulled away from the computer so she could update Jesse. After a hasty briefing, she wanted to get back to work.

Jesse stood and held out an empty chair near him. She ignored Kevin’s narrowed eyes as he watched her take the seat. With a casual glance around the room, she surveyed the men comprising the company’s officers. Four very tense men scrutinized her with less finesse. She noted all of them were older than Jesse, a fact that didn’t surprise her. Her observations were interrupted when Jesse started speaking to her again.

“Eden, meet Scott, Lawrence, and Nick. Respectively, CFO, CIO and legal counsel. Gentlemen, Eden Simmons is consulting with regards to information security.” He brought his gaze back to her. “You have something?”

She switched on her presentation mode. “As I cautioned yesterday Jesse, your system is full of holes. Whoever provided the initial

security for your company either meant to undermine you or simply didn't know what they were doing. Fortunately, what you have is a virus. Unfortunately, what you have is a virus."

Lawrence interrupted. "A software virus? We're protected against that sort of thing."

The red flush across the back of his neck and the intensity of his stare clued her in to who might have been responsible for security. His crisp white polo shirt accentuated the deep tan he sported. Liquid blue eyes surveyed her coolly, without a doubt, measuring her worth.

She shrugged. "Your protection wasn't adequate. A virus planted itself into your system and when someone logged on to the bank's system, secured information was inadvertently uploaded as well. Enough data to let someone from the outside know how to access your accounts."

Jesse gave a curt nod to Nick who would need to know when to include the police in the matter. "You're sure this was on purpose? Someone stole it?"

"Absolutely." Eden stood. "I don't have the details yet, but I'm getting there. So, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to make like a bloodhound."

Kevin looked up from his BlackBerry where he had been typing using two digits. "You're going to what?"

"I'm gonna track that sucker down."

"I'll come with you." Lawrence rose from his chair and hurried to her side.

She glanced back at Jesse before leaving the room. Worry framed his eyes. She wanted to soothe away the crease above his brows. Maybe when this was over...

As he caught her gaze, Eden winked at him and hoped it would be enough for now.

* * * *

"So what makes you think it was done from the inside?"

Eden looked up from the monitor, but her fingers continued to fly over the keyboard. "Because in order for me to get past your firewall, I had to get access to an actual on-site computer. Whoever did this would have the same problem unless they were very, very good. I doubt that's the case, fortunately, because I was able to track the virus

so easily. A true expert would have hidden it better or made it tougher to crack.”

“Seems pretty expert to me to get this far,” Lawrence said.

“Maybe. But I’m better than he is. Just watch.”

It was slow going, but Eden went line by line through the code, pulling out the bits that struck her as inconsistent or odd. Based on some of it, the virus appeared to have been uploaded in pieces, dating back a couple of months. To her chagrin, she realized their hacker possessed a little more cunning than she originally gave him credit for. Still, she could handle it. She paused long enough to crack her knuckles and kept typing.

Crap. He really was good enough to make her life miserable though.

“You need to eat something, Eden.”

Blinking to ease the dryness in her eyes, she glanced in surprise at the owner of the sentence. Jesse held out a deli bag and a bottle of water. She swiveled in the chair and winced as a twinge of pain raced down her neck and across her shoulders.

“You have no idea how long you’ve been sitting there, do you?” he asked in an amused voice.

She took the outstretched bottle and swallowed half of the contents down. That’s when she noticed Lawrence’s absence. Her stomach growled loudly at the same time. She *had* eaten this morning, right? And what freakin’ time *was* it?

“It can’t have been that long,” she responded.

“Honey, it’s been four and a half hours since we last saw you.” He pushed the bag toward her. “There’s a turkey sandwich and some chips inside. Lawrence tells me you’ve stopped the flow of money. If all you’re doing is tracking down where the virus originated, now’s a good time for a break.”

Her stomach rumbled again, almost begging for a reprieve from starvation. Sighing against defeat, she took the bag. “Thanks.”

He waited until she started eating before he leaned comfortably against the chair. He scanned the monitor and looked back at her. “I don’t know what you’ve done or said to him, but Lawrence is very impressed with you.”

She swallowed some of the sandwich. “Oh? I thought I must have bored the pants off of him.” Pointing to the empty chair, she chuckled. “You can tell by the way he stuck it out.”

He smiled with her, but it didn't reach his eyes. His face became serious after a moment. "I really like you, Eden. Why did you do it? You never said and I want to hear it from you."

The change in topic caught her off guard, but when her mind finally caught up, she acknowledged to herself he deserved to know. In a brief moment of panic, she almost considered making up some complex story because it seemed so stupid now.

Instead, she blew out a breath and hoped he would understand the truth. "Gavin's the third GL Kingsley, you know," she said pointedly. "When his father divorced my mother, I came along a year later and man, was GL the second pissed. She'd denied him a second child, only to end up pregnant by the man she married after him. He has it in his mind that had they remained together, I would have been a boy."

Jesse nodded in understanding, as if he knew the type of man who wanted only boys as offspring.

"Long story short—I won't bore you with the details—I am not good enough to step foot onto GL Kingsley business property, much less run one of its branches. Even back when I had my brother's support, I'm technically not family. Or, at least, not family *enough*. I started my consulting firm to show them both that I could run a business successfully, and that I am smart and capable." Her voice tightened. "But that wasn't enough either. One day, I got this crazy idea in my head that if I could prove to Gavin's dad my worth, he might change his mind. So, I broke into their offices..."

"This sounds familiar," Jesse replied dryly.

She nodded. "Yeah, I moved around some files. Got access to some money I shouldn't have been able to access. And got busted doing it."

His eyebrows furrowed. "By whom?"

"My dear big brother." The words tasted bitter. "He decided that my skills would be best put to use if I utilized them here. Either agree to that, or get sent to jail for espionage."

"For Christ's sake..."

"From the second I actually did what I set out to do to you, I regretted it. And when I got to know you even further...I'm so sorry, Jesse. You have no idea."

Jesse pointed to the remains of her sandwich and waited until she lifted it to her mouth again before he spoke. "In a perfect world, people are hopped up on scruples and never do anything wrong," he

said. “To get where I am, I’ll be honest, I had to do some things that were borderline legal.”

She chewed automatically, not knowing where he was going with his confession.

“In the end, I have to ask myself, was it worth it? If I had to do it all over again, would I? Almost every single time, I have to answer yes.” He studied her face. “Now you tell me—if you had to do it all over again, knowing what you know now, would you?”

Eden didn’t have to think about her answer, but her stomach tightened as if the food she’d just ingested disagreed with her. “If it’s the only way that we would have ended up together for this short time, then yes, I would.” Her voice and gaze dropped. “Even if it meant ultimately losing you.”

There was a long pause where her pumping heart was the only sound in the room. Finally, in a strangled voice, he said, “I’ll let you get back to work.”

She didn’t look up when Jesse stood. When the door softly shut closed, she turned back to the keyboard and began to type.

A moment later, she wiped away the tears that blurred her vision.

Chapter Ten

Jesse brushed past Scott on the way to his office. Although their shoulders touched, he could barely pause long enough to apologize. His mind whirled.

The fucking gall of Gavin Kingsley.

How could Eden's own brother blackmail her into setting up Jesse's company to fail? If she'd refused, she would have gone to jail. If she'd succeeded, but had been caught, she'd still go to jail. Of course, there was nothing stopping Gavin from blackmailing her even further had she succeeded and not been caught. The blackmail might have gone on for years until everyone her brother saw as a threat had been eliminated.

He couldn't imagine being in her shoes. Nor could he imagine the guts it must have taken her to confess to him. Her hands shook as she talked, and she could barely look him in the eye. She did it though. He had nothing but respect for her because of it.

He collapsed into his chair, the weight of what to do with the information keeping him in place. Earlier, for a split second, he thought she hadn't told him the entire truth. He almost believed she might have done more damage than she was willing to confess. Watching her present to his officers, seeing how hard she worked in front of the computer, eased the doubts one by one.

She worked like a fiend to reverse the damage. She also seemed genuinely perplexed by the timeline of data in the code she reviewed. If her actions really precipitated the events, nothing should have occurred before about a couple of weeks ago when she started trying to hack into Englund Multimedia. The data, however, indicated someone implanted the virus coding over the course of months. Long before she stepped into the picture.

That made him think.

Jesse pulled his chair into place in front of his desk. With a few clicks of his mouse, he opened files that were duplicates of the ones

she reviewed and corrected. It took him a few minutes to reorient himself to the computerese he'd long since abandoned. Once he started to recognize the long lines of commands and prompts, he smiled. He cracked his knuckles, positioned the keyboard in place, and began to type.

He hadn't become the CEO of a multimedia company without a few skills of his own.

* * * *

"Thank you for agreeing to see me." Jesse smiled, then proffered his hand.

The resemblance between Gavin and Eden could not be hidden. Their distinctively shaped eyes and facial structures announced their relationship to anyone who knew them both. If in his past, he'd seen Gavin more than once every other year or so, he would have recognized the similarity immediately.

The tall man wore a polo-style shirt, the sleeves pressed so crisp they looked like they could cut paper. Designer khaki slacks meant to look casual instead identified his affluence. The gold luxury watch flashing on his wrist didn't shake the image, either.

"Of course," Gavin replied as they shook heads. "I admit I'm a bit curious about why we're meeting at a restaurant on a Saturday, especially so late in the night. But," he shrugged, "it did seem a bit urgent."

The errand Jesse had been on earlier took longer than expected, but the results were worth every extra hour.

"Yes, I'm sorry about that." He waited for Gavin to sit before joining him. The waiter hovering nearby caught his attention and he inclined his head, beckoning him over. "I'm having a Scotch on the rocks. Would you care for something?"

"The same." Gavin's fleeting glance at the waiter was dismissive. Jesse mentally reminded himself to unclench his jaw. The sheer arrogance wafting from his rival could not be his concern at the moment.

Jesse dropped his voice low, as if wary about having someone from another table overhear their conversation. "Listen, I'm just gonna cut to the chase, if you don't mind. Over the past couple of days, my company has run into a bit of financial trouble."

Gavin's eyebrows rose. "Oh? I'm sorry to hear that."

Jesse wanted to roll his eyes. Instead, he shook his head as if saddened. "We've lost a great deal of money. Enough to seriously jeopardize our future."

A gleam appeared in Gavin's eyes. He leaned toward Jesse, the methodical slowness of his movement making it seem as if he wasn't eager. But Jesse saw right through him. The man positively vibrated with enthusiasm.

"That doesn't exactly explain why we're here, Jesse," he said. "Every business has its ups and downs..."

"I'm seeing your sister. Did she tell you?" he interjected.

Gavin stiffened, but nodded. He sat back in his chair, once again putting distance between himself and Jesse.

"I like her, man," Jesse continued. "Besides being beautiful as all hell, she's smart and funny. Real genuine, you know?"

Jesse watched him process the conversation's flow. He knew what Gavin should be thinking if he were in his shoes. First, Jesse comes to him with tales of business woe. Then he brings up the fact he's dating his sister. As his fiercest competitor, and a CEO of a company in excellent standing, Gavin would be in a position to offer a charitable handout. Jesse, not to mention Eden as his current love interest, would have no choice but to be grateful. Grateful enough for a little tit for tat, as it were. Maybe shareholder or profit sharing grateful.

Oh yeah. He knew exactly what Gavin would be thinking.

"My sister's good people. But I'm still not quite getting why I'm here."

"Not just genuine, either." Jesse kept the ball rolling. His attention unfocused, as if he searched for just the right words. "I mean, I think she must like me too, because she's honest..."

"Jes—"

He flashed the other man a look of disdain. "Honest enough to tell me about her part in my company's potential demise."

Gavin stilled. "What do you mean?"

The waiter arrived at that moment to drop off the amber liquid Gavin ordered. Jesse picked up his own glass, and took a long swallow of the contents. Warmth spread down his throat and into his belly. The same sensation that flowed over his extremities had nothing to do with the drink, though. Gavin Kingsley looked like he would pass out at any moment.

Jesse waited until they were alone to answer him. “She told me about stealing two and a half million dollars from me. Money she did eventually return.”

It took him a moment to reply. If Jesse didn’t know better, he would have thought Gavin wasn’t aware of that last part.

“I don’t know what to say. Her behavior is inexcusable.”

“She also told me that someone’s loaded a virus into my computer system. One bad ass enough to send our finances scurrying.” They locked stares. “Fortunately, she’s so damned good at what she does, she’s working like a demon to scrub it out of our system.”

“I still don’t know...”

“The thing that got me,” Jesse continued as if Gavin hadn’t spoken, “is that the virus had been loaded long before Eden came into the picture. So, I did a little investigative work of my own. Why don’t you take a guess at what I found?”

Gavin’s mouth tightened into a thin line. After a moment, he ground out, “I wouldn’t know.”

“I’ll give you a hint. Not only did I find out how the virus was uploaded, but I also found out who paid to have it done.”

Jesse had no sympathy for his former employees. The trail they left behind had been confusing because of the use of multiple log-in IDs and computer terminals. As Eden told Lawrence: They were good. Fortunately for Jesse, not quite good enough.

When he visited them at their home, the husband and wife team broke down almost immediately after he accused them of uploading the virus. Their employment termination inevitable, only their transcribed and notarized confessions that implicated Gavin saved them from being handed over to the FBI.

The look in Gavin’s eyes was murderous. “What do you want?”

“First, drop the attitude. Mister, my relationship with Eden is the *only* thing saving your ass right now.” He lowered his voice, the venom dripping from every word. “For her, you and I are putting this whole thing to bed. The entire thing...the espionage...Eden’s blackmail...*everything*. It goes no further. You never come near my company again, got it?”

“That’s it?” Derision danced on the short question.

“That and the fact Eden never hears of this arrangement. Ever. You tell her you’ve had a change of heart. That you’ve seen the light.

Whatever you have to say, but I don't want her to know what a fuckup the brother she still looks up to really is."

Gavin blinked in surprise.

Jesse started to stand, but paused at the look on Gavin's face. "You mean, you really didn't know that woman worshipped the ground you and your father walk on? Why do you think she tried so hard for your approval?" He smiled grimly. "I guess it doesn't matter now. You just make certain you and I have a permanent understanding."

Based on Gavin's return glare, Jesse had just made an enemy for life, but he had no doubt they definitely had an understanding.

Chapter Eleven

“You did it, baby” he whispered to her sleeping form.

Jesse bent down, slid his hand over her back, and gripped Eden’s shoulder. Then he positioned her legs over his arm and stood. Lifting her from the uncomfortable position she slept in at the computer desk didn’t take much effort. She roused for a moment and then settled against him.

His chest tightened as he breathed in her familiar scent. Pressed tightly against him, she felt so good—so right—in his arms again. The fact that she was honest with him, was willing to sacrifice herself for him and his company, endeared her even that much more to him.

For a moment, he considered where to take her. At two in the morning, he was exhausted, his eyes gritty, and the mere thought of driving home seemed an insurmountable task. The couch in his office slept one person easily. Two people would be laughable. No matter where they ended up though, it needed to be someplace private for the two of them. Of that much, he was certain.

As he waited for the elevator, he glimpsed movement from the corridor. He turned and faced a startled Kevin whose gaze roamed from Jesse’s face to Eden in his arms, back to his face again. Jesse waited patiently for what he would have to say. He would let him get it off his chest, but Jesse would not explain himself. Friend or not, Kevin didn’t have to understand what he was doing. He knew without a doubt.

The elevator chimed its arrival and Eden shifted. Keeping his attention on Kevin, he nuzzled her neck softly, cooing gentle words, until she stopped moving.

The older man watched without comment. When Jesse stepped into the elevator, Kevin gave him a curt nod. As the doors slid closed, Jesse returned the acknowledgement with a nod of his own.

* * * *

Her bladder was close to bursting and her head pounded as if she'd spent the night on a bender. On automatic pilot, she pushed away the plush comforter and slid her legs over the edge of the bed. When her feet touched down on the luxurious carpet, her senses flooded back in a hurry.

Where the hell was she?

She swung her gaze around the room, taking in the decoration. The ivory colored walls, heavy damask draperies and a mahogany armoire were unfamiliar. The groaning man who struggled to sit up brought a smile to her face, though.

"Do you know you snore?" he asked while stifling a yawn. His eyes widened before a pillow hit him squarely in the face.

"I do not!"

Jesse shrugged. "If you say so, but I'm the one who listened to it for most of the night."

His hair stuck out to the side again. His eyes were a little bloodshot, too. Neither of them could have gotten much sleep, and it showed on him. Although, even with uncharacteristic five o'clock shadow, he was just as handsome as ever. Absolutely adorable. Hell, she adored *him*.

As for her, maybe she'd avoid the mirror and hope she fared better, although she doubted it. Her body ached in places she didn't know existed, and she felt like curling up under the covers again. On top of that, Eden didn't want to question how they'd ended up here, wherever here was, because being alone with Jesse was the last thing she expected.

For now, nature called. Ignoring him, she plodded into the adjacent bathroom, shutting the door behind her. After a quick glance around the room large enough to hold half of her apartment and with décor that put most art galleries to shame, she made use of the facilities.

After washing her hands, she opened a package containing a toothbrush and toothpaste and used them to wash away some of the sleep. Still feeling grimy, she decided to take a quick shower before facing him.

The double-showerhead was heavenly. It rained down perfectly soothing droplets of water that washed away the fatigue creeping

through her bones. In the hypnotic drum, she reflected on the man waiting for her beyond the bathroom door.

Eden washed quickly because she wanted to confront Jesse and find out what was going on. She'd been certain he no longer wanted to see her. What had changed his mind? Then again, when all was said and done, did she really care?

The shower curtain suddenly flew open and she whirled to face the man who plagued her thoughts. Jesse stood in the nude, his gaze trailing from her feet, up her body until he met her eyes. Based on the lust written all over his face and stance, she'd been plaguing his thoughts too.

The green slits of his narrowed eyes gave her reason to pause. Deep beneath the lust of his gaze, a hint of anger still simmered. Was this now to be a repeat of what happened yesterday in his office? Would he take her roughly again? Take out his anger on her body while she gratefully and wantonly accepted it? She'd been so certain in her pleasure of seeing him when she woke up that she didn't have a chance to process the true meaning behind it—the why of the situation. Now, for the first time since she met him, she was nervous about being alone with him.

"Move over," he grunted.

She raised her eyebrows. Those certainly hadn't been the first words she expected out of his mouth. Something in his manner made her drop the snarky reply poised on her lips. Instead, she pushed the curtain further to the side. When she started to step down, his arm shot out, effectively blocking her path.

"Stay where you are."

Her spine stiffened of its own accord, but her feet somehow managed to obey. Apparently, they knew a ticking time bomb when confronted with it.

Jesse stepped under the spray of the water and turned his face into it. A groan that sounded eerily like hers a few minutes ago escaped from him as tension melted out of him. She would know. It was exactly how she'd felt.

As he soaped his body, she tried not to follow the path of his hands, but instead focus on the where, when and especially why of the situation. But, she couldn't help notice that he'd missed a spot beneath his pectoral. She could just reach out and splay her hand over the hard contours there, help him out...

No. Focus on something else.

She'd betrayed him in the worst possible way, and here they were, alone in a shower together in a fancy hotel. Alone. Where no one knew where she was. Not at his house with neighbors as witnesses. They were some place where they could be anonymous.

Oh, hell.

He was going to kill her. It wasn't like she didn't have it coming.

She almost screamed when he turned to face her. Her heart settled down when his words sank in. "Do my back?"

Despite immediately feeling foolish, her hands trembled as she ran them over his tanned skin. Trails of soapy bubbles followed her movements, the muscles of his back tensing and flexing as if her very touch scalded him. Eden continued to rub until he hummed a soft moan. Jesse tensed again almost immediately. As if he didn't want her to know how she affected him. He faced her.

"Your turn," he whispered.

This was the same man who blindfolded her in his bedroom. The same one who trusted her with bringing his business from the brink of destruction. The same one who, despite everything they'd been through in a few short days, held her heart.

He guided her in the large shower. He even braced her hands against the tile walls. The sensation of his fingers as he swept her hair over a shoulder hinted at some of the tenderness that still existed between them. When he massaged soap over her back, she curled into his touch.

Heavenly.

* * * *

As soon as she had closed the bathroom door, Jesse chastised himself for being too eager. He was like a teenager on his first date. All he could think about was whether or not they'd make it past first base.

Now, as he ran the soap over her soft skin, he marveled. He wanted so much to be with her. Even now, he tested every limit of his self-control. The urge to throw her against the wall, and pump himself inside of her over and over again until they were both too spent to stand ate at him. He envied the water's ability to travel all over her

satiny brown skin. All he could do was follow its trail with his fingertips.

She arched her back and he throbbed painfully.

Jesus. He could just slide right in. She would be ready for him. He knew she would.

He slid soapy hands over the fleshy globes of her ass and probed her slick heat.

Fuck. So ready.

“Jesse?”

The way she said his name, so unsure, made him smile. He didn’t respond, just continued to explore. First one finger, then another. Up to one knuckle and then two. He pushed into her warm sheath, searching for the sweet spot that made her tremble.

“Jes...Jesse?”

He leaned closer, pressing his mouth next to her ear. “I only counted four the first time and I don’t renege on deals. Ever.” Finding the spot, he curled his fingers into it with slow, sensual intensity. “We’d better start counting all over again. Five orgasms, right, beautiful?”

Eden’s answering moan echoed off the tiles. He clamped down on the soft flesh of her neck with his teeth and moved his fingers harder and faster. Her hands searched the wall for purchase, scrambling for something to clasp onto. Her body vibrated beneath him as she groaned out his name repeatedly.

Then he did pull his fingers out only to slide his cock in until his pelvis pressed against her ass. The water beating down on his back and her keening cries spurred him to pump into her again and again. She rotated her hips against him, meeting him thrust for thrust. Her head fell back against him as he continued to drive himself into her heat. The way her pussy grasped him like a fist opening and closing around him matched the rhythmic beat of his heart.

The shuddering gasps. The way she said his name in the heat of passion. The hungry cries of “Oh God!” All of those noises almost made him forget himself inside of her. Still, he wanted more.

Jesse slammed into her one more time, stopping only when he’d bottomed out. Her pussy pulsed around his cock, producing a groan from him as he tried to calm his boiling blood. Swiftly, he pulled out and forced her back against the wall. He hooked her lean thigh over

his arm and slid back in, eliciting another low moan from her and a throaty growl from him.

“Look at me,” he murmured. Her eyes snapped open, then unfocused as he rolled his hips. He would have none of that. His voice hardened. “Look. At. Me.”

She did and the rich, dark coffee of her eyes riveted him. For a moment, the pulsing spray of warm water was forgotten. Beneath his palm, the cool tile that he leaned on for support vanished. Even the sultry mist swirling around them disappeared. Time stood still and in that moment, all he knew was Eden.

Her irresistible lips drew him in. His eyes still fixed on hers, he pressed his mouth over hers, a burst of mint assaulting his senses. As their lips met, her fingers gripped him painfully. Her pussy began to spasm. The base of his cock tightened and he prayed for a reprieve. Just a little bit longer, so he could tilt her all the way over the edge, too.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed harder, faster. Every nerve ending he possessed seemed to terminate at the head of his cock where she squeezed with increasingly frantic rhythm. Just before his body succumbed to the torment, Eden trembled and then stiffened. He drank down the scream that immediately escaped from her, his cock pounding voraciously into her depths.

A flare of heat and a rush of moisture from her pussy was his undoing.

All that he was poured into her. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't stop the pulse after sizzling pulse of his cum. Driven by some primal need, he panted out her name, grasping her thighs tightly, driving himself over and over. He couldn't stop. Couldn't fucking stop the waves of pleasure ebbing and flowing over him. Where his ecstasy ended and hers began, he couldn't tell. At last, during the hazy thought he might very well happily die from sensory overload, she drained the last of his essence.

By the time his shaky limbs obeyed his commands again, he had relaxed his hold on her thighs. His hips continued their slow roll though, his semi-erect cock still buried between her thighs. Eden looked at him with wonder in her eyes and a sly smile on her face. Jesse returned the grin.

He was just getting started.

Chapter Twelve

Only a miracle would get her legs back in proper working order. She was sure of it.

They'd probably used up enough hot water during the multiple trysts in the shower to run a few households for a month. That didn't stop him from dragging her onto the bed for another round, taking her once on the lounge chair and then making her scream with exhilarating fear as he pounded into her later in front of the *open* sliding glass window.

Back on the bed again, Jesse trailed his fingers over her back, stopping only when he reached the crack of her ass. She slapped him playfully away. "Don't even think about it, bub."

He snorted out a laugh. "Don't worry. I think you broke it."

Lord, but that made two of them.

With a giggle, she turned to reach for her food, dipped a French fry into some ketchup, and contentedly munched on the room service delivery. The pause gave her a minute to mull over the events, even though they brought a blush to her face. Despite his obvious, renewed affection for her, she couldn't help but wonder what brought about the change.

The bed dipped as he reached for a fry from her plate. The heat of his stare as he chewed forced her to look in his direction. She cocked her head and smiled. "What?"

"You tell me," he said. "What?"

There didn't seem to be much point in putting it off any longer. Curiosity made her itch. "Why are we here?" she asked softly. "Yesterday, I thought...well, I don't know what I thought. But this wasn't it."

He rolled over onto his back and stared at the ceiling. Almost of its own volition, her gaze traveled over his chest and abdomen, sneaking down for another look at the column of flesh that titillated her. His heavy sigh brought her attention back to his face.

“The long and short of it is that I wanted to wake up next to you, Eden.” A heavy hand raked through his hair. His gaze flickered to her before seeking the comfort of the ceiling again. “And I asked myself if I had to do this weekend over again, from start to finish, just how it played out, would I? I thought hard about that. I can’t remember the last time something or someone came before my business, Eden. I really can’t.”

She reached out to him, and stroked her hand across his cheek. He turned into the touch to press his lips against her palm. When he pulled away, he said, “I probably won’t be very good at this relationship thing, but I want to seek my comfort in you, not in financial data and business deals. I want to see where this can go, if you’ll let me.”

“If I’ll let *you*? Jesse—I don’t deserve a second chance from you. God knows I want it, but I don’t deserve it.”

“Believe me, you do.”

Her heart fluttered as a new silence between them spread. What the hell was she thinking? He wanted a relationship with her and she was talking him out of it. Nice move.

Finally, he chuckled.

Suspicious, Eden narrowed her eyes at him. “What?”

He glanced at her, the smile still on his face. “I’m just thinking about the look on the staff’s faces when I brought you here last night. You were out cold and I had to tip them like crazy to let us in without registering first.”

“I’ve had about four hours sleep total in the last three days!” She shrieked as he suddenly grasped her around the waist, pulling her to his side. The plate of remaining fries tumbled to the floor with a loud clunk.

“And why, beautiful one, have you had so little sleep?” His voice grew husky, and the look she came to know so well bloomed in his hooded eyes. When he reached down to stroke himself, her eyes widened.

“You said it was broken!”

He leered. “I lied.”

* * * *

Jesse rifled through his wallet again, his eyebrows furrowed. Roughly one hundred and twenty dollars remained. Odd. That was a few hundred short. He must have been going through his cash faster than he realized.

He laid a ten dollar bill on the counter and waited for the barista to finish making his coffee. With a deep inhale of the heady atmosphere, he recounted the tasks awaiting him at the office before he would be able to knock off and head home. If he planned it just right, there would be time for a quick shower and shave before he had to pick up Eden for dinner and a movie.

He couldn't wait to see her.

Occasionally, he marveled over the fact their relationship hadn't gone stale in the months they'd been together. Even more surprising was that she put up with him during those first few weeks when he lost track of time, stayed late at the office and more often than not, ruined their plans. She accepted his workaholic habits with grace, which made him try that much harder to break them.

They talked often, as if she wanted to be sure he had no reason to ever doubt her again. And he didn't. It seemed she held some unspoken rule with herself to stay away from his office despite his protests to the contrary. He argued the unfeasibility of staying away, but she never took the bait. Eden just gave him another patient smile. She didn't know it, but he had plans for her and his desk again.

He could be patient too.

In those few times his anger flared—whether directed at her or if she was just a convenient target—she gave as good as she got. It didn't happen often, which was almost a shame. The make-up sex left him grinning for a week.

Their relationship certainly had its highs and lows, which was just fine by him.

As the cashier handed him the steaming cup, he pushed the ten forward. His BlackBerry chirruped and seeing who it was from, he turned from the counter.

"Sir," the cashier called, "your change!"

"Keep it," he tossed over his shoulder.

He glanced at his surroundings and chose a seat in the corner, where his back could press against a wall. His lips twitched as he read.

Hedonisticfem: Busy?

After taking a sip of the sultry liquid, he typed a quick reply.

J_Englund: Never too busy for you.

His heartbeat quickened as the image of her face flashed in his memory. Such a beautiful woman. He could watch her do nothing but smile and never grow tired of it.

Hedonisticfem: Good.

A long pause separated her next message. He waited patiently, taking in sips of coffee in between glances at the other patrons.

Hedonisticfem: I've stolen \$300 from u. What r u willing 2 do 2 get it back?

His mouth curved into a smile before he began to softly laugh out loud. Her price might be coming down, but her demand would remain the same. He didn't have to think too long or hard about it, though.

To meet her needs would be his pleasure.

THE END

www.deecarney.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dee Carney began writing short stories in middle school, but did not attempt completion of a novel until almost ten years later—which, despite good intentions, she never finished. Almost ten years later, she challenged herself to begin writing again, and her love for storytelling was rekindled. Now, Dee is a best-selling, award-winning author who lives at home in Georgia with her husband, two dogs, and a cat. When not writing, Dee is usually curled up on the couch with a good book!

Dee writes under two names. To learn more about all of Dee's books, please visit her on the Web at www.deecarney.com.



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com