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CATHRYN FOX

All Lit Up

Rebuilding the fire—one kiss at a time.

Pleasure Inn, Book 3

When interior designer Anna Deveau is hired to create a room made for romance at a Victorian inn, she is thrilled—and a little wistful. A fairy-tale ending will never be hers, but perhaps tapping into abandoned dreams will fan the flames for someone else.

Then she learns the only bricklayer available to build the room's fireplace is Daniel Long. The sexy boy-next-door who filled her teen years with angst, broke her heart—and still colors her nights with red-hot fantasies.

Daniel never understood why Anna stopped talking to him a week before her sweet-sixteen party. Or why the wall between them remains a mile high. But now that he's back in town, he intends to figure it out once and for all. Pushing the limits of her seductive design, he sets out to prove he didn't burn her in the past.

Anna finds herself doing the one thing she swore she'd never do again: laying herself bare. Until the ghost of rumors past threatens to snuff out the fiery fantasy that, this time, Anna thought was real...

Warning: Years of sinful fantasies about the sexy boy-next-door lead to a night of wild indulgence. Be sure to keep a bevy of toys on hand when reading this tale, or better yet, get a boy-next-door of your own.

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All Lit Up

Cathryn Fox

Dedication

Too my wonderful editor, Anne, who always helps me shine and is a dream to work with.

Chapter One

Now that had to be the most scrumptious ass Anna Deveau had ever set eyes on.

Tight.

Defined.

And downright squeezable.

The warm autumn sun beat down on Anna as she swiped her tongue over her dry bottom lip and zeroed in on the delectable male before her. Cripes, that man had buttocks like none other. Firm, ripe, ready for the picking.

Oh my...

As a shiver of awareness tingled deep between her legs, derailing her hard-fought ability to think straight, Anna took extra care in negotiating the cracked and pitted walkway in her thin-soled flip-flops.

Pamina kept pace beside her—the mystical-like woman who'd hired Anna's firm to create fantasy-inspired theme rooms in the rundown Victorian inn situated on the outskirts of Mason Creek. As they strolled along the dilapidated path, Lindsay, a childhood friend and fellow colleague, caught up with them, and they all made their way to the masonry van in the driveway—where said scrumptious buns stood waiting. With the back doors spread wide open, Mr. Sex in a Pair of Jeans braced his muscular thighs against the bumper and leaned forward, presenting her with a perfect, unobstructed view of his magnificent backside.

Yummy...

His gluteus maximus muscles were perfect, all right. Perfect for pinching, or grabbing hold of and palming while he made sweet passionate love to her. A romantic at heart, Anna envisioned those strong hands of his removing her clothes, slowly, methodically, taking the utmost care with her body. Her thighs quivered as she gifted herself a moment to play out the sexy scenario—gentle fingers touching her private, intimate parts with purpose, the rough pad of his thumb working her sensitive nub into orgasmic bliss, his warm, wet mouth buried in the crook of her sensitive neck as he whispered sweet nothings in her ear. A small rapturous moan threatened to crawl out of her throat, and she promptly choked it back as the erotic slideshow played out in her mind's eye.

Taking her by surprise, small beads of moisture broke out on her forehead, and she swiped at them, but the dampness had nothing at all to do with the hot sunshine beating down on the quaint town, and everything to do with the pact she'd made with her friends. A pact she was suddenly questioning the

intelligence of. Damn, it had been so long since she'd engaged in an intimate relationship that her body had turned mutinous. Deep between her legs she felt libidinous, needy and hungry.

Positively horny.

Which had her questioning the logic behind their pact, and begged the question—exactly why had they all renounced the opposite sex again?

“What do you think, Anna?” Pamina asked.

Anna turned toward the tall, willowy woman with the knowledgeable green eyes, and struggled to comprehend the question. As Pamina stared at her, obviously awaiting a response, she shifted Abra—her very overweight cat—in her long, lithe arms as the ornery feline hissed and swatted at an imaginary fly.

Lindsay shot her a questioning glance. “Yeah, what is your opinion on it, Anna?” Her friend’s brow furrowed in concentration as she carefully picked her way forward in a pair of three-inch spiked heels that only a wild brazen woman like Lindsay could pull off.

Not understanding the question and feeling a bit flustered by the sexual energy zinging through her bloodstream, Anna tucked a short blonde lock behind her ear and blinked her mind into focus.

“Anna?” Lindsay asked again.

Just then one of the many skilled workers on assignment at the inn crossed in front of her, and she nearly bumped into him.

“I, uh.” Goodness she'd been so caught up in lusting after Mr. Sex in a Pair of Jeans, completely preoccupied with the delicious images of his hard body climbing over hers, that she hadn't been paying any attention to their conversation, or to all the other laborers milling about in an effort to return the inn to its natural, beautiful state. Truthfully, it was hard to believe that the mere sight of a hot guy had the ability to render her senseless. She was a smart woman, logical, proper, always maintaining a professional demeanor at the workplace, so what had suddenly gotten into her? What the heck had her thinking wayward thoughts about a man she didn't even know?

Lack of sex, she supposed.

No doubt it would shock her friends if they discovered the naughty direction her thoughts had taken. Not that she would tell them. When it came to sex, unlike the bold and vivacious Lindsay, Anna was a very private person. Then again, she shouldn't be fantasizing about the laborer Pamina had hired in the first place. It was a distraction she didn't need. Especially since time was of the essence. She'd put so much work into perfecting her design that she was just beginning the renovations and Lindsay and Anna were well on their way to finishing.

From her peripheral vision, she spotted Candace, the third and final partner in their bustling interior-decoration business, Styles for Living. Candace lunged forward, stretching her muscles on the sun-crisped lawn before her habitual early-morning run. Thankful for the distraction, and deciding to take the focus off

her and her current lack of communication skills, Anna gave a wave and shouted a friendly greeting. Pamina and Lindsay fixed their gazes on Candace and followed suit.

After exchanging pleasantries, Anna turned her concentration back to negotiating the walkway. Fortunately for her, Pamina and Lindsay returned to their conversation, forgetting all about Anna's opinion. Deciding to pay a little more attention, she half listened to them discuss Lindsay's BDSM room, but Mr. Sexy proved too much of a distraction, and Anna stole another glance as they closed the distance between them.

As though unaware of their presence as they approached his van, Mr. Sexy ripped off his professional polo shirt, the company name embroidered on the back, and proceeded to change into his work wear. Good Lord! His sun-kissed skin was bronzed, smooth and glistening under the morning rays. Firm shoulders tapered to a trim waist and the delectable sight had her feeling all warm and wicked inside. A fine tingle worked its way down her body and loitered around that hungry little spot between her legs. If the mere sight of his backside had the ability to rattle her like dice in a Yahtzee cup, she could just imagine what a full frontal would do to her.

Truthfully, only one other guy had ever made her feel so edgy, so sexually aroused, and she hadn't set eyes on him since high school. Nor did she have any desire to. Not after what he'd done to her. Which suddenly reminded her why she'd agreed to the pact and sworn off men in the first place. She frowned, then quickly buried those thoughts in favor of more pleasant ones.

No, it certainly wasn't the time to dredge up old painful memories of Daniel Long, the cute boy next door and Mason Creek High School sports hero who'd been coveted by all. It was time to take pleasure in the fit man before her and commit every striated muscle to memory. At least then when she was lying in bed later that night, it would give her something to fantasize about while she took the edge off. And take the edge off she would. Just because she'd sworn off men and had given up on finding her very own Prince Charming, didn't mean she couldn't dream about delicious, orgasmic sex, did it?

She absently toyed with the gold chain around her neck, bit back a chuckle and shook her head. To think that just a short while ago, she'd been both shocked and embarrassed as she stood on the sidewalk outside Toys4Gals and examined the array of sexual devices through the curbside window. Never had she thought she'd purchase such a toy, let alone use one. Now, here she was gathering quite the collection in her bedside table. Working solo wasn't normally her style. But lack of action had forced her to think outside the box—or inside the box—or... Oh hell, she didn't know what she was thinking anymore. All she knew was that she was hurting. Anna gave a quick shake of her head to clear her salacious musings and wondered if a quick shake of her hips would help push back the lust that gathered there.

As she tried to marshal her thoughts and focus on the job at hand, Pamina stepped forward and spoke to the man at the rear of the truck. Mr. Sex in a Pair of Jeans turned to face the woman who'd hired him. With his work shirt dangling in his left hand, he reached out with his right. As they exchanged greetings,

Anna shot him a glance. Catching his profile, she began a leisurely inspection of his perfect physique. So much for her efforts to redirect her concentration.

Beginning with his rock-hard thighs, she let her glance wander upward, stopping to linger around that impressive bulge just below his waistband. A tremble worked its way through her body and her mind went on an erotic journey as her gaze climbed higher, to take in his handsome face and chiseled features. When her eyes met his, he angled his body, giving her a full-frontal view. As Anna took in the Grade A specimen at the back of the truck, her brain practically shut down and her jaw gaped open. It couldn't be.

Oh God, it just couldn't be.

She attempted to speak, but couldn't seem to formulate any words as the sight of the man standing before her left her speechless.

Totally and utterly speechless.

Not because of those long hewn legs of his, or how she envisioned them wrapped around her body. Not because her fingers itched to touch those tight sculpted abdominals, now damp with early-morning perspiration. And definitely not because those mesmerizing hazel eyes seemed to be staring into her soul, unearthing feelings best left buried.

Oh no, not at all. It was because the man behind those eyes was none other than Daniel Long, the high-school stud who'd destroyed her belief in Prince Charming and happily-ever-after.

He gave her a wolfish grin, flashing his perfect white teeth, as he took one measured step closer, closing the small gap between them. He dipped his head and put his mouth close to hers, and his warm breath felt more intimate than a kiss. As her body absorbed the heat radiating off his bare chest, her nipples tightened beneath her cotton sundress, and she crossed her arms over her chest, fearing he could see her ill-favored arousal.

He gave her a warm smile and a moment of silence ensued as she took a brief second to peruse the features of the man before her. Gone was the young handsome boy from high school and in his place existed a man. A real man. Tall, broad and oozing sensuality in a way the young Daniel never had. The years had definitely done him well, she decided.

"Hi, Anna." His sensuous tone curled through her body like an aphrodisiac as his familiar scent thickened her blood. Not only did that provocative aroma take her back in time, it aroused her senses and made her feel downright hot.

Edgy and distracted, her every nerve ending burned with unfettered desire. Her legs went a little rubbery and she locked her knees to keep herself upright. Once again silence hung heavy, and the tortured sound of her swallowing down the lump that had taken up residency in her throat cut through the air.

Striving for normalcy, Anna blinked her eyes tight and opened them again, convinced that she was hallucinating. Surely lack of sex had her mind conjuring up images of the guy she'd lusted after for years, because no way could her high school crush—captain of the football team and every girl's dream—be

standing before her. Years previous Daniel had gone off to the city for college, and the last place she expected to see him was here in Mason Creek, Connecticut, standing behind a masonry truck, no less. As she sorted through matters, one question remained. Why had he come back after all these years?

He gave a sexy tilt of his head, his eyes assessing her. "It's nice to see you again." His voice was dark and warm, his tone husky and sensual just like she'd remembered, and despite herself, she leaned into him, momentarily forgetting past hurts.

But the ever-protective Lindsay hadn't forgotten. Not even for a minute. She cupped Anna's arm and hauled her back. Her eyes shot daggers at Daniel when she said, "I think you should leave."

Daniel continued to stare at Anna, but with her brain currently on overdrive, trying to process this unexpected turn of events, she could barely vocalize a response.

Deep smoldering eyes skated over her. "Do you want me to leave, Anna?" She didn't miss the invitation or the odd ache of longing in his voice. Nor did she miss the strange way he was looking at her.

"Do you?" he asked again.

As her brains screamed yes, her body, especially the moist juncture between her legs, screamed no. No with a capital N.

"Daniel—" she croaked out, not really knowing what she was about to say.

Discretion aside and ignoring those around them, he touched her hair and that intimate gestures spread warmth through her body. "It's been a long time."

"Yeah, a long time," she agreed, shocked that she could actually speak, let alone formulate a sentence.

"Too long." Something in his voice hitched and Anna had the distinct feeling that he wasn't at all surprised to see her, and that, unlike her, he was completely prepared for this encounter.

Was it possible that it was she who'd inspired him to come home?

She quickly dismissed that ridiculous notion as soon as it hit, and resisted the urge to slap her forehead. Good God, she'd spent years trying to get over him, and it irked her that all it took was one second in his presence to have her fantasizing about Prince Charming and happily-ever-after again. With him. Him! The guy who only thought of her as a conquest, one of a handful of high school girls he'd yet to nail. Perhaps he'd come back to try again. At that thought, Anna squared her shoulders and pulled herself together. Well he could forget it. He couldn't get into her panties back then and he certainly wasn't about to now.

"Of course she wants you to leave," Lindsay interjected and jerked her thumb out toward the road.

Feeling much more in control than she had seconds before, Anna touched Lindsay on the shoulder. "It's okay. I've got this."

"You sure?"

“Yes. Just give us a minute.” With that both Lindsay and Pamina stepped aside, but not far enough that they couldn’t hear their conversation, or Lindsay couldn’t intervene if she felt Anna needed her assistance.

Anna turned to Daniel. He’d only been a boy when he’d given her a hard cold dose of reality, a boy who cared about his own needs. Thankfully she’d found out what he was all about before she’d handed her heart over to him. Because once she had, she was sure there’d have been no coming back from that. In fact, maybe she should be thanking him for opening her eyes to the real world, where Prince Charming existed only in Disney movies and romance novels.

“Why are you here, Daniel?”

He gestured with a nod toward the two women hovering nearby. “I was hired by Pamina to install marble around the Jacuzzi tub and to lay brick around the fireplace.”

Anna gave a quick shake of her head. “No, what I mean is why are you here? In Mason Creek. I thought you’d moved away for good.”

He grew quiet for a moment, as if weighing his words carefully, then stated the obvious, “I’m back.”

“I can see that.” She tapped a restless foot. “What I want to know is why?”

Warm heat passed over his eyes. “Because I—” He opened his mouth to tell her, then seemed to change his mind. He gave a casual shrug and in a low, controlled voice said, “I thought it was time.”

“Last I heard you hated Mason Creek, and everything about it. And when you went off to college, you had no intentions of ever coming back.”

He drew back looking a little hurt, like her words had triggered some dark memory. “I’m helping my brothers with their business.”

Anna nodded. She’d completely forgotten that his older brothers had started the town’s only masonry business, very much needed now, thanks to the growth in the housing market and the boom in new home construction. But hadn’t Daniel gone to State college to get a business degree? Not that she was keeping tabs on him. Because she wasn’t. Not really.

“It’s crazy how much they’ve expanded,” he added.

As she listened, she wondered what a guy with a business degree knew about masonry work.

“I take care of the office end of things,” he said, answering her unasked question. Then he grinned and laughed fondly under his breath. “Mike and John have made a mess of the paperwork. Good thing I came back when I did.”

Anna crossed her arms. “If you run the business end, then what do you know about laying marble and bricking around a fireplace?”

“I’m not without my own skills.” He paused, then pitched his voice low. “I can do a good job for you, Anna. I promise. I’ll make it good. Real good.”

She swallowed hard and wondered if he was talking about laying marble or something else entirely.

Lindsay stepped in, probably catching his sexual undertones as well. “I don’t think you’re the man for the job.”

He shrugged. “I’m all you’ve got.” He gestured toward the house. “We’re the only game in town, so if you want the work done...”

“Send someone else from the company.”

“My brothers are on other jobs. Completely buried.” When he turned his mesmerizing hazel eyes on her, it felt like she’d been sucker-punched. “I’m your man, Anna.”

The way he’d said those four simple words caused the blood in her veins to boil. Years ago, she’d really thought he was her man. So sweet, kind, respectful and genuine. Confident, yet always a little shy around her. A real-life Prince Charming. But it was all an act to get her into his bed. She’d learned long ago that beneath that perfect package, Daniel Long was nothing but a bad apple.

And no matter how much he charmed her she would never, ever sleep with him.

She didn’t think.

Daniel watched her—watched the way her telltale opaque blue eyes had raked over his body with heated interest, her flesh moistening from want—only to turn around and see lust give way to anger when their glances collided and recognition hit like a wrecking ball.

What had he ever done to make her hate him?

That question that had plagued him for years. A question that had finally forced him to leave his high-paying job in the city and return home to Mason Creek. With the help of his brothers, he’d kept close tabs on Anna and her family over the years. After all, as teens they’d all been neighbors, and to this day, their parents still shared a backyard.

Truthfully, it was fate that he’d come back when he had. Shortly after arriving, Pamina had contracted their company for a job, which meant Daniel had to learn how to do masonry work and learn how to do it fast. A crash course later, here he was, standing face to face with the woman who’d tormented his soul since he’d moved in next to her during his senior year of high school.

In all the years that he’d been gone, he’d yet to get her out of his mind. And no matter how many women he’d bedded, he couldn’t help but imagine he was holding the sweet girl from next door. The same girl who’d always reduced him to a bumbling idiot whenever she was near.

Many years ago, the first sight of her face had pretty much ruined him for any other woman. Lord knows he’d tried for the distraction. After skipping town he’d slept with anything in a skirt, but all that proved was that his heart belonged at home, with Anna. She was smart, modest and romantic, so unlike the other girls he knew. He grinned, thinking about how many times he’d spied on her from his bedroom window, watching her indulge in one of her romance novels, or put together designs in her sketch book while she lounged on her back deck.

Back in high school, the girls had thrown themselves at him. Daniel had been captain of the football team, and everyone had wanted a piece of him. He could have had any girl he wanted, but the one girl he really longed for, the one who lived next door, was the one girl he couldn't have.

Now he was back, no longer that nervous young boy he once was, ever determined to prove how good they could be together. She might hate him, for reasons he vowed to unveil, but he'd be damned if she didn't want him. The desire in her eyes reflected his own and spoke volumes. They both had it bad for each other, and he was hell-bent on doing something about it.

As she stood there staring up at him, her blue eyes glistening beneath the early-morning rays, his heart did a little flip. The warmth in her gaze had never failed to affect him and just being this close to her had his brain swirling with need.

She felt that need every bit as much as he did. It was written all over her face; her eyes were full of want, her body full of unrequited longing. But she continued to turn a blind eye to it, ignoring the powerful chemistry between them, just like she had in high school, when she'd suddenly stopped speaking to him.

Sure he'd tried to speak with her, to figure out what had gone wrong, but every time he'd made an attempt, her protective friend Lindsay came between the two. Anna had stopped coming to the backyard fence to chat with him, and had distanced herself by staggering the time she left for school. Daniel had wanted to set things straight, but he was so young and insecure with her, and things had gotten so awkward he'd had no idea how to close the ever-expanding gap.

As he sorted through matters, he reflected on the emotions she brought out in him, the emotions he brought out in her. Oh yeah, it was well past the time to set the wheels into motion and go after what he wanted. He was no longer that shy boy and had every intention of peeling away her layers and discovering the truth, and in the process teaching her how right they were for each other, because he didn't just want her in his bed, he wanted her in his life.

When he was done with her, not only would she acknowledge the heat between them, she'd willingly act on it, giving herself over to him completely and utterly, body and soul, begging him to fulfill her every need, her every aching desire. Then he'd prove once and for all that they were meant to be together, and they could start making up for lost time.

He stepped closer, close enough that he could feel a tremble move through her body, and dipped his head.

He cleared his throat and lowered his voice for her ears and her ears only. "So what do you say, Anna?"

Simmering blue eyes flitted over him and he could see the torment on her face, the need, the want, the uncertainty. He fisted his hands and resisted the urge to haul her body against his and press his lips to hers, anxious to explore her mouth, her breasts, between her legs, anxious to finally introduce himself to every inch of her body the way he'd longed to do for years.

“Do you want me or not?”

Dark lashes blinked over smoldering blue eyes. “I...want you.”

He let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding, and his heart settled back into a steady rhythm. He took in her watchful eyes and said, “Then lead the way.”

Chapter Two

With Daniel tight on her heels, Anna could barely walk, let alone breathe. Good Lord, if she couldn't put one foot in front of the other, how the heck was she supposed to paint walls, sew curtains and stuff down feathers into the throw cushions? She was liable to lose her mind, not to mention her resolve, with Daniel—shirtless, no less—in such confined quarters with her.

Just thinking about him on his knees, bent over that lover's tub, all hard muscles and sinewy brawn flexing, rippling and relaxing again, had her nipples hardening, pressing against her thin dress and arousing her even more. What she'd do to fill that tub with bubbles and scented rose petals and haul him inside with her. By small degrees her body tightened and ribbons of pleasure forked through her. Deep between her thighs, her sex moistened, dampening her cotton panties. Anna pulled her sundress around her legs and prayed he couldn't smell her arousal as it saturated the long hallway.

Okay, so she couldn't deny that he was handsome, charming and charismatic, and she wasn't at all immune to his blatant sexuality. But that didn't mean she was just going to jump into bed with him, even though everything in the way he looked at her, everything in his body language, spoke of physical want and desire. Sure she wanted him to want her, but not because she was the one girl he couldn't nail. She wanted him to like her for who she was, and for what she was all about.

She cast a glance over her shoulder and he seemed to be lost in his own thoughts.

Trying for casual but failing miserably, she instructed, "Please put your shirt on." She cringed. Damn she'd blurted that out with much more angst than she meant.

His brow rose a fraction. "Right. My shirt," he said, his voice distant, obviously distracted. What the heck was he thinking about anyway?

After he pulled his blue, short-sleeved and form-fitting work shirt on, he stepped up beside her and they passed by Candace's room. Daniel glanced in. He made a face when he spotted the Tantra chair. "What kind of rooms are you designing anyway?"

"Whatever we want. Pamina left it up to each of us. I'm pretty excited about it actually."

"What kind of room has a Tantra chair and a floor-to-ceiling pole?"

"The kind that combines sex and exercise."

He chuckled and the sound went right through her. "Ah, I should have known. Candace always was into fitness."

“Lindsay’s designing a BDSM room.” She shot him a glance to gauge his reaction, fully expecting the wild and wicked Daniel, a big alpha male who enjoyed the conquest, to be intrigued by such a thing.

“I guess I can see her into that kind of thing.” He shrugged and seemed less impressed than she’d thought he’d be. A slow grin curled his mouth when he added, “And I see she’s *still* overly protective of you.”

Anna returned his smile. “That’s my Lindsay.” As she pushed open her bedroom door, his words sank in. “You seem to remember an awful lot about my friends.”

Not that she’d forgotten anything about him. She recalled it all, in fact. From their private backyard conversations, their long walks to school, to the sweet-sixteen party that she’d purposely excluded him from. And of course, she’d never forget the eye-opening conversation she’d heard between him and his friends the week before said party.

Instead of answering, he probed, “So we have an athletic room, a BDSM room...” He paused, giving her an opening.

“For my room—”

He cut her off. “Let me guess. A room for the romantically inclined.”

Anna studied him, and for a brief second she thought she spotted a little-boy-lost look. Something inside her stomach tightened. She remembered that look of vulnerability, had witnessed it many times when they were teens and had spoken to one another over the backyard fence, when he would stumble over his words and make her feel all weird and special inside. But it had all been an act, right? He was simply the confident quarterback out to win at all costs.

One strong hand slipped around her side and came to rest on the small of her back as he guided her to the door. At first touch sexual energy arced between them. The feel of his warm palm on her flesh did the most delicious things to her insides, and she bit down on her bottom lip, trying to fight off the overwhelming desire she had for him.

He dipped his head and positioned it close to her ear. “After you,” he murmured.

As she moved through the doorway, he gave her a smile so sweet and genuine her insides twisted, and she took a moment to consider things longer. Time had changed him outwardly, for the better, could it have changed him inwardly as well? Did he remember things about her and her friends because he’d grown up, changed his ways? Taking an interest in more than just his next conquest?

“So how’d you guess I was designing a romantic room for lovers?”

He cocked a brow. “A Jacuzzi tub. A fireplace. It’s pretty obvious.”

Okay, so it *was* pretty obvious, proving he didn’t really know *her* or her desires at all.

“Right. Of course.” She rolled her eyes and berated herself for her wishful thinking.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why did you roll your eyes?”

“I was just thinking some things never change.”

His voice was a low, strained whisper when he countered, “And here I was just thinking some things should.”

Anna gulped. She didn’t miss the sexual undertones or his undisguised need, nor was she unaffected by the deep-seated desire she heard in his voice. But she was *not* going to sleep with him, no matter how hard he tried to seduce his way into her panties. Decision made, she pushed back her lust, stepped away from him and his warm body, and waved her hand around the room.

Daniel followed her gaze, and she watched him take in the big bay window overlooking the pond, as well as the old fireplace that was in need of an updated design. She grabbed her sketchbook off the nightstand and stepped toward the bathroom door.

“The Jacuzzi tub is in here.”

Daniel moved in behind her and pressed his chest to her back. He glanced over her shoulder and looked at the sketchpad. “These are your ideas?”

She angled her head to see him and when he gave a low side-to-side shake of his head, she tilted her chin, ready to defend her artistic designs. “Yes. They’re my ideas.”

“They’re fantastic.” He scrubbed a hand over his jaw and a look of genuine respect crossed his face. “This room is going to be spectacular. I can’t wait to see the end product.”

She felt pride well up inside her. She’d worked hard on her designs, and although she appreciated his enthusiasm and confidence in her, she mostly hated that it meant so much to her.

His grin was slow, if not a little wicked, and arousal edged his voice. “A woman doesn’t stand a chance if a guy brings her here.”

“What do you mean?” Trying to see the room from his eyes, she perused the large space, taking in the king-sized bed with the unfinished white down duvet still haphazardly thrown over it, the jasmine-scented candles which she’d yet to strategically position for romance and ambiance, and the maroon-colored walls used to enhance passion and imagination, and awaken the romantic spirit in one’s lover.

“With this romantic ambiance, a woman will easily fall under her man’s spell, don’t you think?”

“That’s what I’m going for. Romance and Prince Charming might not be in the cards for me, but I’m hoping it will inspire it for someone else.” When she caught the odd look on his face she knew she’d said too much and immediately began to backpedal, stumbling over her words. “I...uh...I...mean—”

“I always knew you had talent, Anna.” He gave her a way out and she appreciated the gesture more than he knew.

She wrinkled her nose, unprepared for the mix of emotions she suddenly felt. “You did. How?”

A sheepish look crossed his face—a sweet innocent look she’d only ever seen him give her—and it knotted her all up inside and affected her in the most bizarre ways. What the heck was it about that

unguarded expression of his that always got to her, anyway? Not wanting him to know her true feelings, she pinched herself, a quick reminder that it was all an act. Right?

Anna pressed. "How, Daniel? How did you know I had talent?"

"Back in high school, I saw some of your designs." He rolled on the balls of his feet, swaying back and forth like a schoolboy who got caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

She furrowed her brow in thought. "I never showed you any of my designs."

"I used to see them when you sat in the backyard with your sketchbook," he confessed.

Her lids widened, and she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "You were spying on me."

"Well technically it wasn't spying." He gave her a half-smile and continued. "My bedroom window overlooked—"

"You were. You were spying on me." Probably so he could learn things about her and sweet-talk his way into her pants.

Penetrating eyes full of desire and seduction met hers. His tongue snaked out to moisten his lips and in a swift move, he grabbed her hips and pulled her close. The warmth of his touch traveled all the way to the tips of her toes, igniting her flesh along the way. Her body turned to mush and she could feel herself blushing. Hazel eyes smoldered with passion, and something else. Something dark and intense that Anna couldn't quite put a name to.

His gaze fixed on her mouth. "Anna, I—"

She wanted him. God, how she wanted him. On the bed, up against the wall, down on the floor and inside the tub. She ached to feel those strong arms around her waist. To have that warm wet mouth on her body, and to finally experience what so many other women before her had—the pleasure of his cock moving in and out of her and bringing her joy beyond anything she'd ever known. Oh bloody hell, she needed this so badly her entire body shuddered in anticipation. A fire she knew better than to let burn free ignited between her legs. A reminder that she was a woman and standing before her was a red-blooded man who could undoubtedly satisfy all her unsatiated needs.

So what was she going to do about it?

Just then Abra came sauntering into the room. His loud purr had her mind reeling back to reality. With trembling fingers, she pressed the sketchpad into Daniel's stomach and pushed past him, desperate for a reprieve. It was time to get to her head on straight and start concentrating on the job at hand. "We have a schedule to follow so it's time to get to work. Pamina wants to open the inn as soon as possible and I'm falling behind. I'll leave you to look over the plans and if you have any questions, I'll be downstairs."

Or in a cold shower trying to take the edge off.

With that Anna left the room. Once outside she sagged against the wall and clutched her stomach as she drew a rejuvenating breath. Goodness, the man still got to her in a way no other man could, stirring things deep inside her and leaving her warm and wanting. Spending a week in the same room with him was

going to play havoc with her libido. If she didn't soon pull herself together she just might do something she'd regret later—like go back in there, rip his clothes off, and answer the demands of her body once and for all. But since she wasn't into casual sex, and “wham bam thank you, ma'am” wasn't her style, she had to find another way to tamp down her desires—heartbreak wasn't an option.

But if he kept using sexual undertones when he spoke to her, how the hell was she going to resist? Clearly he wanted her physically as much as she wanted him. Was she simply fighting the inevitable?

Daniel worked to rein in his lust as he watched her sashay out the door. Her firm, lush ass dragged his focus and made breathing damn near impossible. His plan was to seduce her, but truth be told, just being around her reduced him to a hormonal teenager again. Hadn't he left that shy young boy behind when he went off to college? Honestly the heat between them had instantly leveled him to that high school bumbling idiot again and rattled him to his very core.

Still, regardless of the sparks between him, she ignored it. Since time was of the essence and the job wouldn't take much more than a week, he had to amp up the seduction and melt her resolve. Once she handed herself over to him, he'd show her how good it could be between them. Then there'd be no turning back. Now, only one question remained. What was the best way to go about seducing the sweet and romantic Anna?

As he watched her go, he replayed their conversation in his mind, desperate to understand everything about her, from what drove her professionally to what made her tick personally. Sure he'd known Anna as a teen, but now he wanted to know Anna as a woman. Her needs, desires, likes and dislikes.

A noise outside the door gained his attention, and he hoped it was Anna returning, ready to pick up where they'd left off only moments ago. He turned to see Pamina enter the room, a look of reproach on her face.

“Abra, what are you up to now?” She clicked her tongue at the fat cat circling Daniel's leg. He looked down at the ball of black weaving in and out of his legs. When the heck had Abra entered the room? He was pretty damn stealthy for an overweight tomcat.

Abra made a weird sound and jumped into Pamina's arms. Once nestled in the crook of her elbow he purred loudly and dragged his paw over one breast. Pamina tapped him on the nose and gave him an admonishing glare. “I don't think so.”

Half-amused and half-disturbed at the bizarre encounter, Daniel wondered what kind of silent exchange was taking place between them. Then again, perhaps he was better off not knowing. Abra made another loud purring sound, and amusement danced in Pamina's eyes as she laughed and gently tossed him out the door. Miffed, Abra offered her his backside and sauntered into another room.

Pamina turned her attention to him and presented a professional face. “Did Anna lay out the details to you and go over her designs?”

He laid the sketchpad down and drove his hands into his pockets. “Yes, I’m all set.”

Padding softly, Pamina circled the room and ran her hand along the down bedding. Her mystical green eyes glistened. “Odd, isn’t it?”

“Odd?”

“Yes, that a woman who no longer believes in romance and happily-ever-after is designing a room for just such a thing. Almost as if deep down in some secret compartment, she still holds a modicum of hope that she’s wrong.”

Apprehension surged inside him. Daniel’s mind raced, recalling her statement about romance and Prince Charming, and how she no longer believed it was in the cards for her. Why would she think such a thing?

A well-used paperback seemed to materialize on the nightstand. He hadn’t noticed it when he’d first catalogued the room. Pamina picked it up and thumbed through the pages. Daniel recognized the book as Anna’s. He’d seen her with dozens of similar novels over the years, all well loved and dog-eared. What was in those passages that had her wanting to reread them?

“But since she’s sworn off men and relationships, I guess she’ll never find out if true love really does exist.”

Unease moved through him and cooled his blood. “Why would she swear off men?” Had someone hurt her? So help him, if anyone had dared hurt the woman he was crazy about, they’d have hell to pay.

His brothers had kept tabs on her over the years. They’d seen many men come in and out of her life, the same way women had come in and out of his. It appeared that neither one of them was able to commit to anything for any length of time, as if she was holding out for him the way he was holding out for her. Wishful thinking, he knew, especially considering she kept pushing him away.

“Something happened, a long time ago, and it caused her to cool on the opposite sex.”

His searched his memories. Was it around the same time she’d cooled on him?

Pamina put the book down, reached into her pocket, pulled out a crisp red apple and took a generous bite. An odd tingling trickled through his bloodstream as she sailed past him. She gave him a peculiar look, tapped him on the shoulder, and around a mouthful of apple said, “I’ll leave you to it, Daniel. I believe you have a lot of work to do.”

Why did he get the sneaking suspicion that she wasn’t talking about the work she’d hired him to do? Nevertheless, after she left he made his way across the room and grabbed the book. He turned it over in his hand and read the back cover. Then he flipped the pages open that had been dog-eared, and read the passages.

Okay, now that he hadn’t anticipated. Maybe Anna was onto something here. No wonder she was hooked.

Twenty minutes later, after speed-reading his way through half the book, he sank down on the bed and wiped his brow. As he considered the hero in the story, he could only assume it was the kind of guy Anna wanted. Strong, confident, a take-charge kind of guy. Not at all like the bumbling idiot she'd always reduced him to. He really hadn't expected to be so nervous around her. He chewed on that a moment longer. After reading all these novels, perhaps Anna felt romance wasn't in the cards because no man could live up to her expectation. He certainly wasn't behaving like a romance novel hero with the edgy, juvenile way he was acting, all nervous and shaky when she was close. He tapped the book against his palm and made a decision. If this was the kind of guy she wanted, this was the kind of guy he was going to give her. But first, more research was in order.

Chapter Three

As the scent of freshly baked apple and cinnamon muffins filled the air, Anna snapped her cell phone shut and pursed her lips in thought as she leaned against the bottom post of the long winding staircase. She'd spent the last couple of days wondering when her mother was going to call to let her know that Daniel was back in town. Now she knew. Honestly, her mother, a romantic like Anna, was still holding out hope that the two of them would eventually get together. She certainly wasn't going to burst her mother's bubble and tell her Daniel wasn't the sweet "boy next door" she thought he was.

Her mom had called to invite her to a dinner party that night, insisting she must attend because she hadn't been by in weeks, but once Anna found out that she'd also invited Daniel and his family she flat-out refused. Working in confined quarters with him for the last couple of days had been hard enough. Seeing him all hot, sweaty, sexy, and sporting a tool belt, no less, while he worked with those deft hands of his, had played havoc with her libido. So much so that she'd actually worn down the batteries on her favorite vibrator. Sadly, her little rabbit would hop no more. She couldn't imagine what it'd do to her to see Daniel all cleaned up. And boy, oh boy, she could only imagine how well Daniel, the man, would clean up.

"Everything okay?"

The deep, raspy sound of his voice sent shivers skittering through her. Of course everything wasn't okay. How could they be okay, not when every time she turned around, the man she was crazy about—still crazy about dammit, despite the heartache he'd put her through—was looming over her, looking like sex incarnate, and blatantly turning on the charm. Was he determined to finally do her in, or better yet, melt her resolve and get her into his bed?

Heck, maybe she should just do it. Maybe that would get him out of her system once and for all. Oh hell! Who was she kidding? One night in his bed would be emotional suicide at best. There'd be no coming back from that.

Working to keep her emotions under wraps, she turned to him at the same time he stepped closer. Their bodies collided and he wrapped his hand around her waist to anchor her to him. Anna swallowed, fabricated a smile and extricated herself from his tenuous hold. Gathering her composure, she shook the phone.

"My mom. She invited me to dinner."

He angled his head and his warm cinnamon-scented breath washed over her cheeks. "Are you going?"

“No. I’m working late tonight.” The truth was, she’d been waiting for Daniel to leave so she could have the room to herself. Then she could finally install the curtains and arrange the pillows, accessories and furniture, without the distraction of his hard body hindering her attention.

“I’m working late too.”

“Oh.” Well then, that changed everything. If Daniel was going to be here, she certainly wasn’t. But he didn’t need to know that, otherwise he might change his plans.

His glance dropped to her chest, making her feel very self-conscious. She pressed harder against the banister, the post indenting her back. At first she thought he was ogling her cleavage, slightly exposed in her V-neck T-shirt. But then something in his eyes softened, and beneath the surface she could see sadness.

“What?” she asked.

“Your necklace.”

Anna slipped her fingers under the chain and gently ran the soft pad of her thumb along the gold. “What about it?”

He rolled one shoulder. “Nothing really. I just remember how happy you were when your mother gave it to you.”

“During my sweet-sixteen party,” she said absently, as she recalled that evening so long ago. It was the only nice thing about that night. She’d tried to put on a good show for her guests, playing the happy party girl, but deep inside she was miserable and dejected because the one guy she wanted to be dancing with under the stars wasn’t there.

Another thought struck. How did he know about the necklace? Had he been spying on her that night too?

A perplexed frown crossed his face. “About that night...”

Dammit, she didn’t want to dredge up those painful memories again. Not now. Not here. And definitely not with him. Before she had a chance to respond, his cell phone rang and he excused himself.

Anna swallowed her unease and turned her focus to the ironing board and sewing machine she’d set up in the front room, and to the curtains awaiting her attention. She sat down, prepared to run the hem through the serger when Candace showed up, looking a little hot, bothered and flustered herself. Anna wasn’t surprised, really. She’d seen the man Pamina had hired to help Candace build furniture. She wondered if her friend was having as hard a time as she was at keeping to the pact.

“Lunch?” Candace asked.

Anna powered down the serger, deciding a few minutes away from the inn was exactly what she needed.

“Love to,” she said eagerly. “Let’s check in with Lindsay.” Perhaps over lunch they could all reaffirm their vow to steer clear of men and that would help get her head on straight and her focus back on her work, where it belonged.

Anna and Candace climbed the staircase and popped into Lindsay's room, which was coming along quite nicely. Unfortunately Lindsay couldn't join them because her shipment of BDSM equipment had just arrived. Too bad. With the way Daniel was affecting her, Anna really could have used a good stern talking to.

A few minutes later they stepped out into the fresh outdoors and walked down the street to the quaint restaurant around the corner. After lunch, Candace decided to go for a run, while Anna returned to her curtains. Much to her delight, the rest of the day passed quickly, with no incidents or encounters with Daniel. He stayed in the room working, and she stayed on the main level sewing and ironing.

As nighttime closed around them, Anna tidied her work area, checked in with her partners, then headed back to her condo. Her mother was right. She'd been so busy working that she hadn't had time to visit. So tonight, with Daniel tied up in the room, it seemed like the perfect night to attend their dinner party and placate them.

Less than an hour later, dressed in her comfy jeans and a knit sweater, she exited her condo and jumped into her car. Her breath turned to fog as she turned her engine over and flicked on the heater. Even though the days were warm and sunny, the nights had turned cool and brisk, a sure sign winter was just around the corner.

The streets were fairly quiet as she made her way to her parents. Numerous cars lined the driveway as well as the cul-de-sac, and Anna smiled, thinking this was just the thing to take her mind off matters for a while.

With her mom and dad's driveway full, she parked on the street, just outside Daniel's parents' house, and made her way up the walkway to the home that she'd grown up in. Her designer's eye took in the beautifully finished two-story with its welcoming country decor. Her mother really did have a knack. Anna had obviously come by her designer skills honestly. Laughter and music reached her ears as she pushed open the front door. Her mother, Margaret, moved through the crowd to greet her, a wide smile on her pretty face.

"I'm so glad you decided to come." She looked past Anna's shoulders. Her mother frowned as she tucked a silver strand of hair behind her ear, a habit Anna had picked up long ago. "Is Daniel with you?"

"Why would Daniel be with me?"

"Well he's working with you, isn't he?"

"That doesn't mean we travel together. Besides, he's working late." Her mother's eyes sparkled, like she knew something Anna didn't. Needing to set her straight, Anna cupped her mother's hand. "Mom, look. Daniel and I are just friends. Nothing will ever develop between us."

"We'll see."

Anna rolled her eyes heavenward and groaned, “Mom,” but she knew any efforts to convince her mother otherwise were futile. Simply and utterly futile. When her mother put her mind to something, there was no changing it.

Ignoring her protest, her mother ushered her to the dining room, and with a wave of her hand she gestured for the other guests to follow. Anna gave her father a kiss on the cheek and took her regular seat. She politely smiled at Daniel’s parents, who sat across from her and were assessing her over the brims of their wine glasses. Then she proceeded to exchange pleasantries with the three other couples who gathered around the long oaken table, which was dressed in a vibrant orange and red tablecloth, perfect autumn colors. Anna was quick to notice that the seat beside her was still empty, and she could only guess who it was meant for.

Anna inhaled and took in the medley of food in the center of the table. Her stomach grumbled. Goodness, she’d forgotten how much she loved her mother’s home cooking. As everyone began to fill their plates and Anna helped herself to a heaping spoonful of mashed potato, her mother initiated conversation.

“So, Anna, I haven’t seen you in a while. Is there anyone special in your life that you’d like to tell us about?”

With the serving spoon poised over her plate, Anna was about to open her mouth and tell her mother no, but slammed it again when questions about her marital status—or lack thereof—came at her fast and hard from the other women sitting around the table.

“Are you dating anyone?”

“Do you have any plans to get married?”

“Have you met Mr. Right yet?”

“Have you and Daniel gone out yet?”

“He’s back for good now, you know.”

“Time for that boy to settle down too.”

Okay, this was a twist she hadn’t—yet should have—expected from her parents’ longtime friends. She loved her mother, she really did, and understood she only wanted what was best for Anna, but this was too much. She glanced at her father who simply offered her an apologetic look. Feeling like she had just been put before the firing squad, Anna blinked, dropped the scoop of potato onto her plate and tried to keep up with the next round of questions.

As her appetite dissolved and she remained tight lipped, the guests began to talk amongst themselves, speculating on Daniel’s sudden return home, and it became clear to Anna that everyone in the room thought she and Daniel belonged together. After a moment of reprieve from their questions, they turned their attention back to her.

Anna glared at her mother, but Margaret presented her with a polite smile in response. She worked to keep her temper in check as she removed her napkin from her lap. She was just about to toss it onto the table and set the record straight, when a voice in the doorway stopped her cold.

“Why don’t we let Anna eat and save the questions for later? The poor girl has been working day and night and is in need of nourishment. Look at her, she’s dwindling away to nothing.” His tone was soft and easy, but commanding nonetheless. Beneath that humor, Daniel meant business, and for that she was grateful.

He stood in the archway, his large body practically blocking the light from the other room. With body-molding jeans riding low on his hips, and a black leather jacket that accentuated his broad shoulder and fit body, the man looked like sin and seduction all rolled into one delectable package. Dammit, did he have to clean up that nicely? As she stared at him and took pleasure in his attire, it occurred to her that like some real-life Prince Charming, Daniel had come to her rescue.

The incessant chatter around the room stopped as all eyes turned to Daniel. With a sexy half-grin on his mouth, he removed his coat to showcase a gorgeous chest and tight abs emphasized beneath his button-down dress shirt. He crossed the room, dropped a kiss onto his mother’s cheek then took his seat beside Anna. After a round of greetings, Daniel effortlessly redirected conversation and in no time at all, everyone went back to filling their plates.

Anna turned to Daniel and spoke in a low voice as they exchanged a long, heated look. “I thought you said you had work to do.”

He arched a brow. “I could say the same about you.”

Okay, so he had a point there.

“Changed my mind. A girl has a right to do that you know.”

He grinned, and shot back, “And what, a guy doesn’t? Hey what’s good for the goose.”

“So I’m a goose now, am I? And a scrawny one at that, apparently.” She feigned insult, but Daniel’s soft laugh soon had her smiling.

His grin broadened. “Would you have preferred I’d let them go on?”

“I supposed you’re looking for a thank-you?”

He angled his head. “A thank-you would be nice.” Something about the way he said that had desire skittering through her veins.

“Fine then...”

He held his hand up to stop her. “Wait. You can thank me later.”

She pursed her lips, wondering what he was up to, but he simply gave her a devilish look and turned the conversation to his progress on the guestroom, entering into safe, common ground, she supposed.

They spent the next thirty minutes talking about the room and her ideas. He listened with interest and for a moment there, it felt like old times when they’d chat about nothing and everything over the backyard

fence. Once the dishes were cleared, the guests made their way to the other room for after dinner drinks, and Daniel went to speak to his parents.

As everyone mingled, Anna tried to blend into the background, but from across the room Daniel spotted her inching toward the door. When his eyes locked on hers and a predatory smile crossed his face, he sidestepped the other guests to close the gap between them.

Anna swallowed and tucked her hair behind her ear. Oh God, how she wanted him. As warmth moved through her, she began to question the logic behind the pact and the logic behind denying her needs.

He eased in beside her and arched a brow. "Looking for a quick getaway?"

Anna smirked. "That obvious?"

"To me it is."

"Oh really? Aren't you astute?"

"I just know you, Anna."

"You don't know me, Daniel. I'm not that same naïve girl I was back in high school."

Two drinks in hand, her mother stepped up beside them, a glint in her blue eyes. "It's nice to see you two getting reacquainted." She held the drinks out, but neither one accepted.

Daniel cleared his throat. "I was just trying to convince Anna here to take in a football game with me."

Anna's head came back with a start and she swatted him in the stomach, only to meet with a wall of muscles. "What? You were not."

"Oh, Anna, that's a great idea. Come by tomorrow and we can pack a picnic basket. I just picked up some fresh bread and cheese, and I just bought these great wine glasses..." As her mother droned on, Anna gave a slow shake of her head. So much for Prince Charming coming to the rescue. Daniel stood over her, looking all innocent and sweet as he rocked back and forth on his heels. But Anna knew him for what he really was, the devil in disguise.

No longer in the mood to make conversation, Anna excused herself and stepped outside for some fresh air. With everyone mingling, she suspected her temporary absence wouldn't be noticed, and after a refueling breath, she would step back inside, give her goodbyes then make her way home. As she strolled around the garden, to the spot where she used to indulge in one of her romance novels or play with room designs, her glance went to Daniel's bedroom window and to the tall, towering maple tree that she'd seen him climb down a time or two, when he used to sneak out at night. Okay, okay so maybe he hadn't been the only one doing the spying.

She gave a heavy sigh. The truth was, she'd wanted to be the girl he was sneaking out to see, or better yet, the girl he was sneaking in to his bedroom. It had been something she'd fantasized about for years.

The wind picked up, and as she hugged herself to stave off a shiver, heavy footsteps heralded someone's approach. She turned around and came face to face with Daniel. The second his body came into

contact with hers and she caught a whiff of his warm, familiar scent, heat unfurled inside her, and she struggled to maintain a coherent thought.

“You cold?” He pulled her close and ran his hands up and down her arms, but the friction merely created heat in the needy spot between her legs.

“I’m okay.”

Daniel slipped off his jacket, draped it over her shoulders, and pulled her in tight. Feeling warm and wanting and in need of a distraction, she glanced at the towering maple tree. She momentarily wondered if his parents had redesigned his room after he’d left, or if they’d left it the way it was. Not that she knew how it was before his departure, since he’d never invited her in.

“Want to climb it?”

She chuckled as her body absorbed his warmth. “I don’t think so.”

He gave her a boyish wink. “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“Fun?”

“Where’s your adventurous side, Anna?”

“I’m not dressed for climbing trees.” Her voice lacked conviction.

“It’s your only way out, you know.” He pulled a face, fear dancing in his eyes as he pointed to her parents’ living room. “Unless you want to go back in there with those sharks, you don’t have a choice.” He gave a mock shiver. “I’ve never seen such an interrogation. When I first arrived I thought I was in the middle of an intervention.”

Anna laughed and Daniel joined in, and in that instant, she felt like the world had been lifted from her shoulders. Honestly, she’d been strung so tight over the last few days it felt so good to laugh, to let go for a few minutes.

“It *was* an intervention,” she said. “A let’s-get-Anna-hitched sneak attack.” She paused to shake her head. “I didn’t see it coming.”

He touched her gold chain, and when his warm fingers grazed her skin, her hands curled in his shirt. Eyes smoldering, he wet his mouth and in a low voice said, “I think they only have your best interests at heart.”

Needing to lighten things up before she went to mush in his arms and remembering how he’d toyed with her mother, she whacked him on the shoulder and he let loose a moan.

“Hey, what’s with all the abuse?” he questioned, faking exasperation. But that exasperation quickly gave way to passion. “You keep it up and you’re going to get a spanking of your own.”

Anna’s breath grew shallow, and she gulped air, trying for normal. “What’s with teasing my mother like that and telling her you wanted me to go to a football game? She’ll be clinging to that for weeks. You know as well as I do that she wants us together.”

Without an ounce of humor in his voice, he said, “So do I, Anna.”

Her insides twisted. Okay, she understood he wanted her physically, the last few days had proven that. But what she wasn't sure about was why. Because she was the one he couldn't have? Or had he changed and matured over the years, and like her, knew how good they could have been together?

"Why, Daniel. Why do you want this?"

He ran his thumb over her bottom lip. Despite the cold, her cheeks flushed hot and her legs felt a little shaky beneath her. The tender intimate way he looked at her took her breath away. Heaven help her, she was fighting a losing battle here. He was charming, seductive, persuasive—the attraction far too powerful for her to ignore any longer. "Daniel—"

Instead of answering her, he grabbed her hand and tugged. "Come on."

"Where?"

He gestured toward the huge tree branch that hung over the fence. "We're going up. I'll show you the view."

With unhurried movements, he dropped her hand and grabbed the branch to test it. As he pulled himself up, her glance moved to his perfect backside, enjoying the view from where she stood. Instantly, with her brain on overdrive, she couldn't help but think that maybe, just maybe he was right and an adventure was in order. And she wasn't necessarily talking about climbing the tree.

As she warmed to the idea, she slipped her arms through his coat, zippered it, then grabbed the branch to climb. Her tight jeans protested the movement. "These are my favorite jeans, so help me if I rip them—"

"I'll buy you a new pair," he offered and reached down a helping hand.

She scoffed, half-heartedly, aware that she found the situation a little exciting. Not to mention fun and spontaneous. "Couldn't we be normal adults and use the front door? I'm not really a fan of heights."

"Nope. The only way to my front door, is through your front door. And since you're avoiding the sharks..."

He was right, the fence circled the yards, and she wasn't quite ready to go inside and face another swarming.

"Plus this is a little exciting, don't you think?" he teased with a wink. "Sneaking into my room late at night."

In spite of herself she laughed. "I've had more excitement watching paint dry," she lied, masking her enthusiasm. Heck, she didn't want to make this too easy on him, letting him think he was finally going to get what he'd been after for years.

But deep inside her she was excited. Damn excited. Growing up, Anna had always been a rule follower and had never done anything quite like this before. Being here with Daniel and climbing this tree took her back to her teen years when she used to go to bed and dream about sneaking into his room with him, dream about being the one girl he wanted, really wanted.

She grabbed his hand and he hauled her higher. Once they reached the top, Daniel shimmied his window open, climbed inside, then helped her in.

When her flats hit the floor, she let out a breath. Feeling much more comfortable on solid footing, she shut the window behind her. Daniel flicked on his lamp, and as the warm light bathed the room, she took in the décor. A single bed was up against one wall, a navy blue comforter haphazardly thrown over it. On the other wall, there was an open laptop sitting on a small wooden student desk. Trophies and medals adorned the numerous shelves above the bed, and a football lamp sat on his nightstand.

“Nice room.”

He walked across the floor and locked his door. A fine tingle ran through her. Despite being all grown up, something about sneaking into his room felt so forbidden, and it shocked her how much that excited her.

“It’s a shrine,” he teased. “Mom left it the way it was, hoping I’d come back to it I guess.”

“Now her wish has come true. You’re staying here, aren’t you?”

He grinned. “Just temporarily.” Something strange passed over his eyes—it was the same look he’d given her earlier but one she didn’t recognize—when he went on to announce, “I bought the old Murphy house down by the lake. Now I’m just waiting for my goods to arrive. I never thought they’d sell it, but lucky for me, the Murphys recently retired and moved to Florida.”

“You bought the old Murphy place?” She widened her eyes in surprise. “I love that place.”

Again, there was that odd look. “I know you do.”

She pulled a face. “You suddenly seem to know an awful lot.”

He backed her up until her knees hit the bed, and something in his voice hitched. “I know a lot more about you than you think I do.”

Her heart raced, her body grew damp and needy, and her voice came out a little rough around the edges. “And I think you’re a sweet talker.”

He offered her a cocky grin, and she damn near wilted. “Is it working?”

“No.”

“Then why are your cheeks flushed?”

As his primal essence completely overwhelmed her, she responded, “Because it was cold out.”

“And your body, it’s trembling.”

“Like I said, it’s cold outside.”

In a move that took her by surprise, he pulled her close, anchoring her body to his and she could feel his arousal press against her midriff. His cock felt glorious, hard and primed to go, and it took all her willpower not to moan out loud and rub up against it. As her body burned with desire and pent-up passion, pleasure gathered between her legs. She placed her hands on his shoulders, and in a bold move that seemed to catch him off guard, she ran her fingers over his muscles and could feel strength radiating off him.

Daniel swallowed and his powerful hands shook like a juvenile on his first date as they slipped around her back. “And...what about...your nipples...?” His words came out a broken, choppy. “Are they hard because it’s cold out too?”

His cock pressed against her stomach. “I could be asking you the same question.”

“Is it my nipples you’re talking about, Anna? Or something else?” he teased, his voice a little rusty as he gave her a boyish grin that turned her inside out.

As she enjoyed the sexy banter, he dipped his head, the light from the lamp washing over his face and making him look so sweet and innocent. Angelic, even. When she parted her lips, he drew a deep, sharp breath. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted to kiss you?”

She gave a needy sigh. “What are you waiting for?”

The muscles along his jaw tightened, and with the way his heart was crashing against his chest, she feared he might black out. He gave a tortured moan and stuttered when he tried to explain. “I don’t know. I guess I just want to get this right.” His confession immediately brought them to a deeper level of intimacy and everything inside her reached out to him.

Anna laughed lightly, sensing a new closeness between them. Clearly it was difficult to have divulged something that private. He brushed his thumb over her bottom lip, and seeing him flustered by their proximity bolstered her confidence. “No worries, Daniel. I have a feeling you’re going to get it right.”

His body quivered, and his gaze was dark, turbulent. His breath came in a low rush. “And if I don’t?”

Good God, he was nervous. Not only was it written all over his face, it was in his body language and in his voice when he spoke. That same nervousness had always gotten to her, touched her deep and turned her to mush. But was it a ploy or was he sincere? Surely no man could fake distress like that.

The look on his face was so intense, it was both exhilarating and frightening and prompted her into action. She, in turn, gave him a look that conveyed her needs, still hardly able to believe she was here with him.

“Kiss me, Daniel,” she begged, her voice low and sultry. As desire clouded her thoughts, she opened herself up to him, giving herself to him the way she’d sworn she’d never do.

With that his lips closed over hers. At first touch her world tilted on its axis, making her feel heady and dizzy. His tongue moved into her mouth and tangled with hers, tasting, touching, teasing her, and fuelling her lust.

His kiss was deep and sensual, and had her aching to the core. She closed her eyes and pulled his tongue in deeper. As she pressed against him, he groaned and she writhed like a wanton woman in response, unable to assuage the need exploding inside her. From head to toe, her skin grew hot, and she was pretty certain if he didn’t soon throw her on that bed and take her—hard, deep and long—she’d go up in a burst of flames.

His hands slid over her body, shaping and palming her curves and leaving fire in their wake. As he pillaged her mouth with hunger and touched her intimately, she frantically tore at his shirt, not wanting to wait one more second to feel his naked skin on hers.

Daniel slipped his hands under the coat she still wore, and ran his fingers over her flesh. Little bumps of pleasure broke out on her skin. His scent enveloped her, and she inhaled deeply, pulling it into her lungs. Bloody hell she wanted him. And she was determined to finally have him, no matter what tomorrow brought.

He slipped his coat off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Just as he moved to pull her sweater over her head, a noise downstairs drew their attention and stopped them cold.

“Daniel, are you up there?” his mother asked.

“Oh fuck,” he murmured and pressed his lips to her forehead, his breathing labored and heavy.

Anna gripped him for support and rested her chin against his chest, as she tried to tamp down her lust.

“My parents,” he whispered, stating the obvious.

She nodded. “Party must be over.”

He shook his head. “Christ, I can’t wait until we take possession of our own place.”

Flustered, and barely able to understand his words, Anna inched back. His mind must be as lust-crazed as hers. Because surely he meant to say when *he* took possession of *his* own place. As she stood before him, all hot and bothered, and in desperate need of release she said nervously, “I should go.” She glanced at the window, her escape route. “I don’t want to be caught in here with you. It might give everyone the wrong idea.”

“Or the right idea,” he offered, stepping into her until their bodies collided.

Her brain was so passion rattled she didn’t even know what he meant by that. Did he want just one night of sex with her, or did he want more? Did she even dare hope for the latter? “Daniel—”

He cut her off and pointed to his window. “Okay, you go that way so no one sees you, and I’ll go downstairs to distract my parents.”

She nodded and appreciated that he respected her need for privacy. But she hated that this night had come to an end so abruptly. She’d spent numerous years fantasizing about this man and this moment, and just when she was about to experience the pleasure of his lovemaking, once and for all, forgetting about past hurts or even what the morning brought, their night had come to a grinding halt. Perhaps some things just weren’t meant to be.

She turned her back to him. “I’ll see you later then.” She tried to keep the disappointment from her voice but failed miserably.

He grabbed her, spun her around and meshed her groin to his. “You’re not getting off the hook that easily.”

“What do you mean?”

His grin turned wicked. “You still owe me.”

“Owe you?”

“A thank-you, remember.”

“Oh right. Th—”

He pressed his fingers to her lips to hush her. “You can thank me by coming back to the inn with me. I’ve been working hard and want to show you what I’ve accomplished.”

“I don’t think tonight...” Even though she was anxious to see his handiwork, as he’d been banging around in that room alone all day, she just needed to get home, jump into a cold shower and pull herself together.

His gaze slid over her and bombarded her with desire. “You have to come tonight,” he commanded in a soft voice, one that told her he had no intention of taking no for an answer.

As her skin flushed hotly, she inched backwards and moved toward the window. Each step brought her closer to his desk, and that’s when she noticed the stack of books behind his laptop. What the heck? Since when had Daniel started reading romance novels? She was about to ask, but he stepped in front of the pile, as if to block her line of sight, and in a firm tone, said, “Tonight, Anna.”

He had an odd look on his face and there was an urgency in his voice that she hadn’t heard before. She paused, wondering exactly what it was that he *really* wanted to show her. Was it the room, or was it something else entirely?

She gave a resigned sigh. “Okay, but just for a few minutes.” She opened the window, stuck her foot out, and shot one last glance his way. “By the way,” she murmured quietly. “The kiss was perfect, Daniel. Just like I knew it would be.”

Something about the genuine smile he sent her way had an invisible band tightening around her heart, and she knew she was in serious trouble here, because any more time spent with him would draw her in so deep, not even a compass could help her find her way out.

Chapter Four

Daniel hurried to the inn, desperate to get there before Anna so he could make the final arrangements and address any deficiencies in the room. Since she had to go through her parents' house first and would undoubtedly face another inquisition, he had plenty of time to set the stage for a night of sweet seduction.

He pulled his van into the driveway, killed the ignition and rushed toward the inn. He shot a glance around and spotted two other vehicles nearby. All was quiet in the neighborhood, and as he navigated the walkway, he took note of Candace and Lindsay's respective rooms. From his ground-level view he could see the lights were still on, and he wondered if they were all working late. Or maybe something else was going on up there. He'd seen the sideways glances between Anna's colleagues and the men Pamina had hired to help them. Not to mention the array of sex equipment set up in their rooms, just begging to be tested.

Daniel climbed the stairs and met with Abra on the top landing. As Abra's impenetrable, almond-shaped eyes gave him a once-over, they seemed to glisten with ancient knowledge and universal wisdom. It occurred to Daniel that it was the same peculiar look he'd seen the mystical Pamina give the girls a time or two. As he studied the cat, he had the sneaking suspicion that beneath that ball of fur, Abra was more than just a mere feline. Daniel shook his head and scoffed, brushing off that crazy thought.

But seriously, if he didn't know better, he'd think there was some magical force bringing the couples together at the inn, and Pamina, along with her cat, was somehow behind it all.

Not wanting to disturb the other members of the household, he quietly opened the door and stepped inside. As he shut it, he noticed the way his hands had begun to shake. Jesus, he couldn't believe how nervous he felt.

Nerves, however, played no part in tonight's seduction. After reading all those romance novels, it was glaringly apparent what kind of man Anna liked and what kind she didn't. Right now, with his knees knocking and his heart pounding, he definitely fit into the latter.

Gathering himself, he drove his hands into his pockets and bolted upstairs. Once inside the room, he lit the candles, started a fire in the newly designed fireplace and then stepped back to take in the ambiance. He'd spent hours preparing the room to make it just right for Anna—a woman like Anna deserved nothing but the best—and he prayed she'd be pleased with his efforts. Once he was personally satisfied with the setting, he opened a bottle of wine to let it breathe, before making his way downstairs to gather the rest of the supplies.

Five minutes later he stood waiting at the foot of the stairs, trying to quiet his pounding heart. The shoes tapping a steady beat on the walkway outside heralded Anna's approach. He drew a calming breath as Anna climbed the steps and pushed open the front door. The sight of her perfect body, silhouetted by the golden streetlights, made him quake in anticipation. She was about to flick on the switch when he stepped forward and put his hand over hers to stop her. He wanted her all to himself and was not about to draw unnecessary attention to them.

"Hi, Anna."

"Hi," she murmured, sounding breathless and looking a little startled to see him waiting for her. "You got here fast."

He put his mouth closer to hers and whispered, "That's because I didn't want to waste a minute." He pressed against her and could feel heat rising in her body.

"You...uh...you wanted to show me something?"

He gathered her hand in his and led her to the staircase. "I think everyone is still working. We should be quiet so we don't disturb them."

"Okay." She lowered her voice to match his. "They're probably staying overnight. Sometimes when we're on a deadline, we don't like to waste time traveling."

He arched a curious brow. "So no one would think it odd if you stayed overnight?"

"No, not at all. Why?" Anna tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and blinked up at him.

"No reason." None that he wanted to share right now, anyway. If things went according to plan, neither one of them would be going anywhere tonight. But if she got caught with him in the morning, he didn't want her to feel uncomfortable. She was a private person, and he respected that.

Padding softly they climbed the stairs, and Daniel led her down the hall, anxious to pick up where they'd left off at his place. He pushed open the door, and ushered her inside. When Anna gasped and put her hand on her chest, he couldn't help but smile, pleasure welling up inside him.

"Daniel, it's beautiful," she said, her eyes wide in surprise as she took in the room and drew a breath to pull in the aroma from jasmine-scented candles. "So elegant and romantic." She turned to see the fireplace, now fully restored and brandishing a blazing fire. "You've been busy."

She stepped farther into the room and stopped abruptly when she noticed the small round table set for two, a bottle of wine chilling in a bucket of ice water, and a fruit and cheese tray in the center of the table.

"So I take it this is what you wanted to show me?"

He laughed lightly, but it sounded edgy, even to him. He tried to tamp down his nerves as he stepped up behind her. He pressed her against his chest, and his cock brushed along the small of her back.

"Well, yes. Among other things," he murmured.

"I see..."

And see she did, because the tremble in her body told him she knew exactly what he was referring to.

He turned her in his arms. "You said you wanted to design a room that inspired romance. So I figured we should try it ourselves first. If it can't inspire romance and seduction for us, then it's not going to inspire it for others, right?"

"So, this is all about research then?"

"I take my job seriously, Anna. And I like to leave my clients very, very satisfied."

He listened to her throat as she swallowed. "Leaving a client satisfied is pretty essential in a small town." His gaze fixed on her lips as she wet them with the soft blade of her tongue. "Where word of mouth is most crucial."

Speaking of mouths...

"Most crucial indeed." Daniel slid his hand down her back, enjoying the feel of her curves, and guided her to the table. He pulled out the chair and gestured with a nod. "Have a seat."

As she obliged, he walked over to the radio and turned on the music. A soft romantic tune filled the air as embers sparked in the fireplace, drifting upward and creating warm shadows over Anna's face.

She smiled up at him. "Everything looks gorgeous."

"Yes, everything does," he said sincerely as they exchanged a long lingering look.

She toyed with the stem of the wine glass and glanced past his shoulder at the fire. "I never knew you were so romantic."

He sat, poured two glasses of wine and grabbed a strawberry from the platter. "There are a lot of things you don't know about me, and I think we should rectify that. Starting now."

She took a sip of her wine and he poised the strawberry over her mouth. "Open."

When she parted her lips, he squeezed the berry, letting the juice run over her lips and down her chin. Her pretty pink tongue darted out to lap at the juice, but he had a better idea. Daniel leaned across the table and brushed his mouth over her lips and chin. As the distinct taste of Anna, combined with the sweet strawberry flavor, exploded on his tongue, he damn near lost it then and there.

He moaned. "Mmmm..."

"Delicious," she agreed.

As firelight flickered over them, he watched color bloom high on her cheeks. She waved her hand in front of her face to cool herself down.

"Are you getting warm?" he asked.

She took another small sip of her wine then grabbed the hem of her sweater and waved it. "Downright hot," she said boldly, a playful gleam in her eyes. "You?"

Rattled, he swallowed a tortured moan, his muscles tightening, his cock thickening, his body raging with lust. The passionate look on her face spoke of desire and need, and tonight he planned to give her exactly what she wanted. He just needed to keep it together. But Jesus, he'd wanted her for so long and

needed her like he'd never needed another, that it was impossible to maintain his cool. As flames surged inside him and filled him with raw hunger, he shifted restlessly and tried for casual.

"I guess it's a...little warm in here," he responded.

When his voice came out choppy, something inside her seemed to give, and a tender look came over her face. "Daniel?" She leaned in and her mouth was so close he could feel her warm breath on his skin. Her hand touched his and her soft fingers scorched his flesh. "It's not just a little warm in here. It's hot, and you're burning up."

As though sensing his discomfort, she took the lead, climbed from her seat and closed the small gap between them. Seductive eyes met his as she stood at his side. He loved the way she moved, so easy and sexy. Not to mention the way his sweet, innocent Anna was taking charge. It totally blew his mind and excited the hell out of him.

When she touched his face, Daniel marveled at the change in her. He pushed his chair back to face her, and she threw one leg over his until she was straddling him. She writhed and centered her hot pussy over his aching cock.

Sweet fuck!

Deft fingers went to his buttons and the little vixen slowly undid them. "I know just how to cool you down."

His breath came in a low rush. "Oh yeah?"

She peeled his shirt off, then grabbed a strawberry from the tray. Holding it over his chest she squeezed it, letting the cool juice drip over his skin. He shivered in response.

"Feel better?" Her blue eyes darkened and were scalding with passion as she watched the nectar drip to his waistband.

"Not yet," he managed to get out.

She bent forward and her tongue singed his flesh as she followed the path to his jeans. His internal temperature skyrocketed, and it was all he could do to catch his breath. He gulped air and his mind began to swim with delicious ideas. Like how he wanted to peel her clothes away, lay her out on the rug in front of the fire and spend the night between her legs.

"How about now?" She ran her fingers over his chest. Her touch was erotic and intimate, and fuelled his lust.

As his blood boiled, his body shook all over and his words came out choppy. "Far from it, sweetheart." He ran shaky hands through her hair and shot her a smoldering look that conveyed his need.

"You're still hot?" Her voice was low, sultry, and everything in the way she was looking at him touched him on a deeper level. Fuck, he wanted her. Tonight. Tomorrow. Forever.

"Yeah, still hot."

She paused for a moment, then grinned at him. The sexy curve of her mouth filled him with passion and possessiveness.

“What?” he asked, not understanding the odd expression that had come over her.

Emotions played across her face. “I love it when you look at me like that.” She brushed her finger over his lip and her touch seeped under his skin.

“Like what?” He pinched his eyes shut for a brief second and struggled to maintain control, but need stole every ounce of his strength.

Instead of answering she perused the room and murmured, “The ambiance really does inspire romance and seduction. You were right, a woman doesn’t stand a chance.” She laughed softly. “You’ve really outdone yourself.”

“You deserve more.”

She turned back to him quickly and dark lashes blinked over passion-imbued eyes. “Daniel...”

The way she said his name, so whispery soft, shattered any semblance of control he had left. Sudden, urgent need overcame him, and he was no longer able to fight down his carnal cravings. He wrapped his hands around her waist, anchoring her body to his, and stood up quickly.

“Whoa.” She wrapped her arms around his neck to hold on. She’d better hold on tight because he was hell-bent on giving her the ride of her life. He pressed his mouth to hers and kissed her deeply as he carried her to the fire. The warmth from the flames moistened their skin and melded their bodies together.

Heat arced between them, and he forced himself to breathe slowly as he lowered her to her feet. Emotions pressed against his chest and he cleared his throat in an effort to summon a modicum of control. Anna wasn’t like the others, and being with her was different. She was important to him, and he didn’t want to screw it up.

When her soft hands touched his bare chest with purpose, he inched back and took a second to regroup.

“Are you okay?” There was genuine concern in her voice.

Shit. So much for acting like one of her romance-novel heroes. “Anna, I’m sorry,” he confessed, feeling exasperated. “I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I’m not like this. Ever.” He swayed back and forth and tried desperately to dispel his nervousness.

She stepped into him, her floral scent arousing him even more and throwing him off kilter. “But, Daniel, I like it.”

He frowned, confused. “What? You do? Why?”

Her light chuckle curled around him as she gave him a look that suggested he was dense. “Don’t you see, Daniel? That’s what I’ve always liked about you.”

With all his blood rushing south, he couldn’t quite comprehend what she was telling him. He gathered her tight and felt her pert nipples against his bare chest. “I don’t understand.”

“What’s not to understand? I love it when you show this side of yourself to me. I’ve never seen you do that with anyone else. No one can fake nervousness like that.”

He wasn’t exactly sure what she was talking about. Why would she think he was faking? He gave a quick shake of his passion-rattled brain and tried to make sense of things. “But the books you read. I thought you liked your men alpha, strong and take-charge.”

She laughed. “You are all those things, Daniel. But you’re more than that. You’re kind and sensitive, and when you show me that side of yourself”—she pressed her hand over her heart—“it really gets to me.”

“So you like bumbling idiots. Well that would have been nice to know before I spent all those hours on research.”

Her jaw gaped open. “Is that what the romance novels are about? You were trying to become the man you thought I wanted.”

His grin was sheepish. “Well…”

She whacked him playfully. “You really have changed, haven’t you?”

Feeling much more at ease, he grabbed her hand and anchored it to her side. “Hey, what did I tell you about whacking me?”

“I…I don’t remember.” She nibbled her bottom lip in a good show of innocence.

Well, I’ll be damned.

“So it seems you’ve changed too,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

What he meant was that his sweet, romantic Anna wanted to be spanked. He let loose a laugh. There was more to this woman than he knew, and he was definitely going to enjoy every minute of getting to know her all over again.

He slid his hand down her back and gave her ass a good whack. Her lids flew open and her lips parted. As her eyes flared hot, her chest rose and fell rapidly, alerting him to her pleasure. “Oh my God!”

“You were warned.” He drew his hand back for another whack. Jesus just the sight of her standing there, looking so aroused as he discovered her budding fantasies took his breath away. Desperately needing to see her naked, he grabbed the hem of her sweater and peeled it over her head, then made quick work of her pretty lace bra.

Shaky hands cupped her bare breasts and gave a light squeeze. When her beautiful rosy nipples poked out at him, he bent down and drew one into his mouth. Anna threw her head back and moaned. Christ, those sexy bedroom noises nearly pushed him over the edge.

Daniel slipped a hand between their bodies and worked the button on her jeans. The hiss of her zipper cut through the silence. She moved her hips restlessly as he peeled her pants off.

Then he stood back to look at her standing before the warm fire, desire—for him—written all over her face. In a sexy move, she hooked her thumb around the thin elastic on her panties and gave a little tug, offering him a glimpse of her smooth pubis.

As her gaze moved over his face, his lust mounted. “You forgot something,” she said.

“No I didn’t.”

She arched a brow. “No.”

“No, I left them for you to remove.”

“Such a naughty boy. Maybe you’re the one who needs to be spanked.”

He grinned, loving this playful side of her. “Take your panties off, Anna.”

With slow movements intended to entice, she inched her panties down, shimmying them ever so slowly. A smile lingered on her plump lips as her scent reached his nostrils. When she peeled away the scrap of material and tossed it on the rest of the pile, his breathing grew shallow.

Perspiration beaded on his forehead, his body aching to join with hers. “Now lie down on that rug and show me your pussy.”

Anna sprawled on the fur mat before the fireplace, the moisture on her pussy glistening in the flames. She tilted her head and sexual energy leapt between them. Daniel swallowed and licked his lips.

When she reached for him, he quickly removed his clothes and climbed over her. She widened her legs to accommodate him and tangled her hands around his neck to draw him closer. Her body felt warm and silky beneath his, and all he could think about was burying himself in her and staying there for the rest of the night. Everything with her felt so intimate, so right.

His mouth found hers and he kissed her deeply, reveling in the things she made him feel. She moved her hips, brushing up against his shaft with her body, and he hardened to the point of pain. Fuck, he ached to be inside her but first he wanted to taste every inch of her skin. Beginning a downward path, he licked and tasted her sweet flesh. Nostrils flaring, he breathed in her scent then stopped to pull one of her nipples into his mouth. He sucked long and hard until her cries of pleasure filled the air.

His head came up with a start as a loud noise sounded from the room next door. Daniel smiled. “I guess these rooms aren’t quite soundproof.”

He flicked his tongue over her bellybutton, and she bit down on her bottom lip to suppress a cry. She spoke softly. “I guess we’d better keep it down before someone comes rushing in here to check on us.”

Daniel shimmied lower and using his fingers, he parted her plump twin lips, then drew her feminine aroma deep into his lungs. He groaned low and deep. “I don’t want you to keep it down, Anna. I love the sexy noises you make. Besides I think your friends are a little too busy to be concerned with what’s going on in here.” With that he brushed his thumb over her engorged clit and watched her hips come off the floor.

“Dear God!” she cried out, obviously no longer caring if anyone overheard her moans of pleasure.

“That’s my girl,” Daniel encouraged as he pushed a finger inside her tight opening. When he met with warm slick heat, he damned near lost his mind. “Baby, you’re so wet.”

“That’s because I’ve been waiting for this for over a decade,” she murmured.

With single-minded determination, she moved against his finger, her liquid silk burning his flesh and spurring him on. He dipped his head and made a slow pass with his tongue in an effort to draw out her pleasure. But he couldn’t believe she was already there, hovering on the edge of release. Her cunt was pulsing and clenching around his probing index finger. He gave a slight wiggle of his finger, lightly brushing it over her G-spot. Moaning loudly, she went wild beneath him, her opening soaked his hand and instantly made him delirious with need.

“Jesus,” he murmured as he lapped at her sweet cream, hardly able to believe how fast she’d orgasmed.

“It’s been awhile,” she confessed.

As he drank in her liquid silk, his cock ached and he pressed against her leg in desperate need of release. She gripped his shoulders and pulled him to her. Daniel climbed up her body and found her mouth. When she tasted her own sweetness on his lips, she moaned and he loved the sexy noises she made. In fact, he loved everything about her. Always had, and always will.

“I need you inside me,” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

He groped for his pants, but when his search came up empty he asked, “Condom?”

Need crept into her voice when she rushed out, “I’m clean and I’m on the pill.”

When she arched a questioning brow he assured her, “I am too.”

Her eyes were bright with laughter, and her knowing grin, so slow and sweet, turned him inside out. “You’re on the pill?” she teased.

Flustered and in dire need, he shook his head and forced a quick laugh. “No. I. Well. It’s been awhile,” he admitted. “What I mean...”

“I know what you mean.” Her humor fell away when she added, “And I know what I want.”

“Are you sure, sweetheart?”

“I’ve waited so long for this, Daniel, and I don’t want to feel anything but you inside me.”

His heart swelled, and he understood exactly what they were doing. Making love. Sure he’d had sex before, numerous times, but this was the first time he’d ever made love with anyone. “I’ve spent the last decade wanting this too,” he whispered with effort.

She widened her legs and slid her hands around him. Her fingers trailed down his back, grabbed a fistful of his ass, and squeezed. Hard. A low sexy moan sounded in her throat.

“Please...” she begged.

As sexual energy whipped through his veins, he positioned his cock at her entrance and eased into her, wanting to feel, savor and enjoy every inch as he filled her.

“So good,” she whispered and bit down on his shoulder. She bucked forward, forcing him inside. As her cunt swallowed his cock, her scalding heat engulfed him and his throat practically closed over.

Using long sensuous strokes, he began moving, pumping into her, seeking more than just the physical connection. His breathing grew heavy and his balls constricted. As her feminine heat scorched him, tension built inside him, and he knew release was only a push away. Jesus, he needed to slow down, to make this good for her.

“Harder,” she cried out, her voice full of want.

“Sweetheart, like I said, it’s been a long time for me,” he choked out. “If I go harder I just might lose it.” Damn he wanted to make her come again before he found release.

“Let’s lose it together.”

As her intoxicating aroma filled the air, it pushed him over the precipice. Oh what the hell. They could take it slow next time. He pumped harder and rode her furiously, giving her what she wanted. What he needed.

“Yes...” she cried out and squeezed his ass.

Daniel inched back, slipped a hand between their bodies and brushed his thumb over her clit. As soon as his finger connected with her plump nub, she gave a broken gasp and a violent shudder overtook her. As her liquid heat scorched him, her body vibrated and fragmented his last vestige of control. His heart contracted as he gave a moan of surrender.

He drew a shaky breath, gripped her shoulders and stilled, concentrating on the points of pleasure as he filled her with his seed. While he depleted himself, he buried his face in her neck and she held him tight as he rode out the final tremors.

After a long moment, he eased back to see her. She nestled against him and offered him a smile that warmed his heart. Then she gave a contented sigh, stretched and in a teasing voice said, “I believe that just might have been worth the wait.”

Daniel laughed out loud. He’d never experienced such emotions with a woman. “Yeah, but let’s not wait so long next time.”

She arched a brow and ran her fingers over his face, her touch more emotional than physical. “Next time?”

“We’ve only just begun to test the room, Anna. There’s still the bed, the sofa, the tub...”

Anna whacked his ass and his voice broke off. He gripped her hands and braced them over her head. “And of course we need to address this issue of you whacking me all the time.”

“What were the consequences again?” she asked, the sexy lilt in her voice hardening his cock again in record time.

Daniel grinned, flipped her over onto her stomach, ran his palm over her lush ass and murmured, “Let me remind you.”

Chapter Five

Anna awoke to the sun streaming in through her bedroom window. She stretched and grinned as memories of the previous night came rushing back. Sliding her hand across the bed, she connected with the man who filled her body and heart with warmth.

After their second round of lovemaking, Anna had darted next door to let Candace know she'd be staying the night. When she came back to the room, Daniel had filled the tub with soapy water and the two sipped wine as they indulged in a luxurious soak. Once cleansed and relaxed, Daniel carried her to the bed, where he'd spent the remainder of the night paying homage to every inch of her body. His kisses were so full of emotion and tenderness, there was nothing she could do to shield her heart. Surely to God such affection, compassion and loving concern couldn't be faked, and Daniel wasn't merely trying to finish what he'd been unable to accomplish over a decade ago. Deep in her gut, Anna believed no man would go to such efforts: reading romance novels, spending hours to create a romantic atmosphere, fitting the bed with silk sheets, and even going so far as to fill the tub with scented oils.

Lost in her thoughts, she hadn't realized he'd awoken. "Good morning, Sunshine," he murmured and drew her in for a slow wake-up kiss.

Just hearing his voice had her body stirring to life. "Good morning to you too." As she melted against him, she felt his early-morning arousal. She shimmied and smiled when he gave a tortured moan.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

She was grinning like a fool, but she couldn't seem to help herself. "I'm just happy."

"Me too." He had that strange look on his face again.

"And why are you so happy?" she asked. "Is it because the room worked?"

"Among other things." The grin slowly fell from his face.

She touched his cheeks. "What is it?"

"There is something I've been wanting to ask you for years."

Anna felt her insides tighten. "What?" she asked, rather reluctantly, wanting to put the past behind her and revel in the present for a little while longer.

Without preamble, he got right to the point. "Why did you suddenly stop talking to me?"

Her early-morning bliss began to fade. Now why would he go and dredge up old painful memories and ruin a perfectly good morning? "Daniel—" She made a move to go.

He cupped her elbow and stopped her. “Anna, I really want to know. I also want to know why you didn’t invite me to your sweet-sixteen party.”

“Because you hurt me,” she blurted out, no longer able to hold it in.

The vulnerable look that came over him tightened her heart. “How? How did I hurt you, Anna?”

“I heard you, Daniel.”

“Heard me?”

“Yeah, I heard you, Justin Hollis, and the rest of your football buddies talking.”

Understanding dawned on his face.

“That’s right,” she said. “I came over to invite you to my party, but I heard them teasing you about all the girls you’d slept with and asking when you were finally going to nail me, the last on your list.” She lowered her head. “Everyone was laughing.”

“Christ, Anna.” He cupped her head and pulled her to him. He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I had no idea you heard that. I’m so sorry.”

Was he sorry that she’d overheard it, or was he sorry that they’d been discussing her so callously in the first place? She pulled back, but he simply moved with her. “Well I did hear it and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Look, I’m not going to deny that I slept with girls in high school.”

“From what I understand you reached out and touched more women than Hallmark.”

“No, you’re wrong. There haven’t been nearly as many as you’d think. Most of my reputation was rumor, because there was only one girl I wanted, and she was the one girl I couldn’t seem to have.”

She gulped, really wanting to believe that. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” he whispered against her cheek. “I never understood what happened between us or why you never invited me to your party. It killed me to watch you dance under the stars with all those other guys.”

She dipped her head. “It wasn’t the same without you there,” she admitted.

Daniel pounded the mattress. “For years I used to lie in bed and dream it was me out there with you.”

When his honest eyes met hers and she released those pent-up feelings, old hurts began to fade. “And I used to lie in bed and dream that it was me you were sneaking into your room.”

“Really?” he grinned.

“Yeah. It was my secret fantasy.”

He gave a rough laugh and cupped her bare sex. “Well, there was a time or two—or a million—that I used to fantasize about you climbing that tree and slipping into bed with me too.” He brushed his lips over hers. “Dammit, girl, we’ve lost so much time.”

“What should we do about that?”

“We should try to make up for it.” With that his lips crashed over hers. Daniel pulled her beneath him, holding her captive with his body, as if fearing she’d disappear from his grasp. But she had no intention of leaving. She kissed him back with all the love inside her and then spent the rest of the day between the silk sheets with him while he made sweet passionate love to her.

Hours later, Anna made her way downstairs to grab a bite to eat. Daniel had to make a run back to the shop, then to his parents’ house. They agreed to meet up later that night at the inn. But Anna had other plans. Feeling naughty and adventurous, she wanted to go back in time, relive their old teenage fantasy, and finish what they’d started in Daniel’s room.

Night had fallen as Anna pulled her car into her parents’ driveway. Knowing they were down at the Andersons for card night, along with Daniel’s parents, she used her key to enter. She quietly made her way through the house and slipped out into the backyard.

That tall tree didn’t look quite so challenging tonight, especially since she’d come equipped with loose pants and running shoes. Her heart fluttered as the light in Daniel’s room flicked on. Wanting to surprise him, she grabbed a branch and pulled herself up.

As she neared his window, the voices in the room stilled her forward momentum. Damn, he had company. She was about to climb back down, when snippets of the conversation stopped her cold and brought her head around. She glanced into the window to see Daniel with his long-time buddy Justin Hollis—the same guy who’d been harassing Daniel about nailing Anna over a decade ago.

“So that’s what the romance novels are all about then,” Justin said. “Learning what she likes so you can finally get into her pants.” She watched him flip through the dog-eared pages then slap the paperback against his palm. “I got to hand it to you, pal. It was a damn smart move.”

When Daniel didn’t respond or defend his actions, her heart lodged somewhere in her throat.

“Come on, Daniel, tell me. Did you finally get her to beg for it?” She heard a noise, what sounded like a deep-throated chuckle coming from Daniel. Then he walked across the room to Justin, took the book his hands and tossed it to the floor, discarded, just like she felt. Used and discarded.

“So did she beg for it?” Justin probed again.

Anna turned her back on the conversation unraveling in front of her as she recalled every moment in Daniel’s arms. Oh, Jesus, she had begged for it! Repeatedly. With that sobering reality, her vision went a little fuzzy, and she nearly lost her footing, Anna didn’t wait around to hear anymore. She practically slid down the tree, anger rising in her. Angry that she’d thought he’d changed, and angry that she was a fool to think he had.

As tears threatened she bolted through her parents’ house, locked up behind herself and spent the next hour driving aimlessly around the town, trying to wrap her mind around the idea that Daniel had used her. That he hadn’t changed. That he was that same bad apple from high school.

Even though she'd heard snippets of that awful conversation with her own ears, and her brain warned her to steer clear of him, something in her heart told her no man could fake such emotions. But it was time to stop thinking with her heart, because letting her emotions rule was how she'd found herself in this predicament in the first place.

Deciding to head back to the inn to put the final touches on the room so she'd never have to step foot in the place again, she turned her car around. When she reached the inn, she bolted to the bedroom, determined to get in and out before Daniel arrived.

As she perused the room, her heart pounded against her rib cage. Daniel was right. No woman stood a chance in such a romantic room. She was a prime example. With a lump lodged in her throat, she began to hastily put the pieces together, and that was when Pamina entered, an apple in her hand.

"Anna, what's the rush?"

When she turned to see compassionate green eyes looking at her, something inside Anna gave. Feeling emotionally battered, she dropped to the bed and blurted out the whole damn story. Everything from how she'd loved Daniel in high school to the conversation she'd just overheard.

Pamina brushed Anna's hair behind her ear, then polished her apple on her pretty floral dress. Anna spotted the bruise on the outside skin and was about to stop Pamina from eating it, but it was too late. Pamina bit off a huge chunk.

As Anna looked at the crisp white meat, Pamina tapped Anna's leg. "Just because the skin has an imperfection, a bruise on the outside, doesn't mean that I should just toss it away." Pamina held the apple out for Anna to take a bite, but she declined, having long ago lost her appetite. "You see, Anna. Your Daniel is no different from this apple."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes things aren't always as they appear. You thought this apple was bad because it had a mark on its flesh. But after a sampling, it's clear that it's perfectly delicious."

Anna shook her head, unable to think straight. "Pamina—"

"Daniel might not appear so perfect on the outside, but maybe there is more on the inside than you realize." As she sorted through matters, Pamina added, "He's here you know."

Anna sat up straighter and glanced at the door. "I didn't see his van."

"That's because it's parked out back."

"Why?"

"So the supplies were close at hand."

"Supplies? What supplies?" Why would Daniel have supplies? He'd finished the room already.

"He asked me to send you outside." A sparkle lit in Pamina's eye. "Why don't you go see what he's up to?"

With curiosity getting the better of her, she walked to the window to peer out. What she saw nearly stopped her heart.

At least now Daniel finally understood why Anna had cooled on him back in high school. She'd overheard his friends rousing him, but if she'd stuck around longer, she would have heard Daniel shutting them all down. No one talked about Anna like that and got away with it.

Honestly, he had no idea it was *he* who'd hurt her all those years ago, the one who'd shattered her belief in Prince Charming and happily-ever-after. Hadn't he sworn that he'd kick the ass of the guy who'd hurt her? So apparently it was his ass that needed a good swift kick. Not to mention Justin's. Daniel clenched and unclenched his fist, thankful that he'd taken care of that matter earlier.

Her comment about him faking nervousness finally made sense as well. She thought he was putting on a show to get in her pants. Dammit, he hated how that one incident had scarred her so deeply.

Daniel glanced heavenward and took in the black sky and the mosaic of stars glistening overhead. Perfect for what he had planned. He finished fitting the apple tree with lights as he worked to recreate the ambiance from years ago, ever determined to make things right for Anna.

"Daniel—"

He spun around and his heart missed a beat when he saw Anna standing there. God, he'd never met anyone who exuded sweet and sexy at the same time the way she did. A surprised look came over her flushed face as expressive eyes perused the surroundings. She completely took his breath away. Even dressed in loose-fitting pants and running shoes, she had such an innocent sensuality about her. It got to him in ways he couldn't even imagine.

He reached inside his van and flicked on the music from their teenage years. As he held his hand out to her, he felt a rush of love. "Can I have this dance?" he asked, as overwhelming emotions made him shaky. His entire body trembled.

Silence stretched for a long time, then she murmured absently, "My sweet-sixteen party."

He stepped closer, craving the feel of her next to him. "The way it was meant to be."

She gave a rough laugh and he felt a shift in her, a change. "What's the point of this, Daniel?" she asked soberly. "You've already gotten into my pants." There was a hardness in her tone he'd never heard her use before.

He stepped back. Stunned by her words. "I thought you understood—"

She tilted her head and her voice sounded tight. "What I understand is that I'm nothing but a conquest to you. I heard you and Justin earlier."

His stomach knotted. "I'm so sorry. What did you hear?"

"I heard him asking you if you nailed me. Well you did, so congratulations."

He let loose a frustrated growl. "That's it. That's all you heard?"

“That was enough.”

“If you’d have stuck around you’d have heard me defend you, and nail him.” He rubbed his sore knuckles. “Just like I did over a decade ago. But you didn’t stick around long enough to hear it then either.”

Anna’s eyes widened in utter surprise, and her lashes fluttered. “You punched Justin?”

He rocked awkwardly. “Juvenile, I know, but no one talks about you like that and gets away with it, Anna.”

She gave a confused shake of her head. “But I heard you laugh.”

He frowned. “Laugh? I hardly think I was laughing.”

“Well I heard you make some strange sound. It came from deep in your throat.”

“That wasn’t a laugh, Anna. That was me trying to keep my temper in check. Either that or I was going to toss Justin out the window.” As a soft tune crooned in the background, he stepped into her and brushed his fingers over her cheek. He stood over her for a long time, just holding her and letting her sort through the turn of events, and praying she believed him. Believed *in* him. As he watched her, he felt something inside her give, and when she softened in his arms, he let out a relieved breath.

“Pamina was right,” she said.

“About what?”

“You really are like an apple.”

“An apple?” As his heart overflowed with love, and his body filled with desire he drew her closer and they exchanged a long look. “How am I like an apple?”

Anna laughed. “It’s a long story.”

“And you’ll have plenty of time to tell it to me over fine wine and candlelight when we move into the old Murphy place next week.”

Her head came back with a start. “The Murphy place?”

“Well technically now it’s the ‘Long’ house, since I bought it for us.”

Happiness spread across her face and there was a glint of humor in her eyes when she said, “Pretty presumptuous.”

He offered her a crooked grin. “I like to think of it as determined.”

“Back in your room, when you talked about us taking possession of our own place...you had this planned from the start, didn’t you?”

As her warm familiar scent filled him with need, he lowered his voice and went on to explain, “Don’t you see, Anna. I left here long ago because it killed me to be so close to you and not *have* you. When you stopped talking to me, the world as I knew it came crashing down. I moved away, hoping to get over you.” He gave a quick shake of his head. “How I thought I could ever get over you, I’ll never know. But I’m back now, for good, and I’m determined to make you mine once and for all. I don’t just want you in my bed,

Anna. I want you in my life. I need you to trust me, to believe in the magic between us, because we belong together.”

Blue eyes full of love stared up at him and it nearly unhinged him. “I always thought so too.”

As a riot of emotions raced through him, everything inside him reached out to her, and it was all he could do to draw in air. It took effort to speak. He swallowed. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Her lips twitched, and she moved restlessly against him, conveying her needs. “You have that look on your face again, one I couldn’t quite put a name to until now.”

“What is it?” he questioned in a soft tone, gripping her hips to pull her against him, harder.

“It’s love.” Her smile was full of emotion as she flashed dark lashes at him. “It’s love, Daniel. And that can’t be faked.”

He pitched his voice low. “I’ve always loved you, Anna.”

“And I’ve always loved you.”

As his body ached to join with hers, Daniel circled her waist and began to walk backwards, toward the empty van.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice a bit giddy.

“About all this time we lost...”

She feigned innocence. “What about it?”

He gestured with a nod over his shoulder. “Do you think...?”

“You want me to have sex in your van?” She whacked him on the shoulder. “What kind of girl do you think I am?”

Oh he knew exactly what kind of girl she was.

He gripped her hands and pinned them to her sides. “Hey, what did I tell you about hitting me?”

She nibbled her bottom lip, a ruddy hue on her cheeks. “I...uh...forget.”

His cock grew another inch as lust surged through him. “Do you need me to remind you?”

Anna’s chest heaved with excitement when she said, “I believe I do.”

Laughing, Daniel tugged on her hand and pulled her into the van with him where he proceeded to remind her, and to make up for lost time, as he showed her how good they were together, over and over again.

Epilogue

Pamina stood on the sidewalk and glanced at the gorgeous Victorian inn which, after much hard work and dedication by a talented group of professionals, had finally been restored to its former beauty. Everything from the manicured lawn, the repaved walkway to the freshly painted cedar shingles and the fantasy-inspired theme rooms had taken this place from ordinary to extraordinary in a little over a month. Honestly she couldn't have been happier with the end results.

Not only had Lindsay, Candace and Anna created rooms beyond her expectations, they'd all found love in the process—with a little help from her and Abra, of course.

Speaking of Abra...

She glanced down to see him weaving in and out of her legs. Every few seconds he'd glance upward and purr, trying to catch a glimpse of her silk panties, no doubt. Pamina laughed. Goodness, what was she ever going to do with him?

Never missing an opportunity, Abra jumped into her arms, brushed his rough tongue over her cheek. "Oh, I can think of a few things."

Pamina scoffed and rolled her eyes. "I'm sure you can."

Suddenly a dark cloud moved overhead, covering the clear blue sky and chilling the late-afternoon air. A cool gust came out of nowhere, blowing around her body and seeping into Pamina's bones. Suspecting there was a greater force at work here, she gave a little shiver and pulled Abra in tighter, wrapping her arms around his furry body in an attempt to absorb his heat.

"Pamina," he said, his voice low and sexy. "There are other ways I can warm you, you know. Don't you think it's time you changed me back?"

She grinned. "I suppose it's worth considering. You did manage to help me fill the place with love and passion."

"And don't forget that I saved that romantic moment when Candace and Marc needed condoms." He gave a tip of his head. "Good thing I'm always on active duty."

Pamina laughed out loud. "You weren't on active duty, you were spying. You're nothing but an old tom cat, Abra." She tapped him on the nose.

"I most certainly was not spying," he said, feigning insult. "I was just hanging in the wings in case they needed anything."

She looked into his mystical eyes and smiled. “Well done, Abra. Well done,” she murmured and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Abra purred loudly and shivered in her arms. Pamina reached into her pocket, pulled out a shiny red apple and took a big bite. One minute Abra was snuggled in her arms in feline form, the next his hard muscular body was pressed against hers, chest against chest, groin against groin, his hands holding her tight against his warm flesh.

This time it was Pamina who shivered. And it wasn’t from the cold breeze.

Instantly the wind died down, and she had the sneaking suspicion that someone far more powerful than she had cued the frigid breeze to bring them together. She drew in a deep breath and could smell magic in the wind, but it wasn’t coming from her or Abra.

She took in the Adonis before her. “Hello, Abe,” she said softly, her voice a little unstable as her body turned libidinous.

“Hello, Pamina.” He brushed his thumb over her cheek. “Thanks,” he said, his voice genuine, his eyes sincere. A moment later, he dipped his head, his mouth so close to hers she was sure he was going to kiss her. Honestly, she would never get used to his charm or blatant masculinity. “And Pamina,” he whispered, “You’re wrong about me still being a tom cat.”

“Ab—”

He cut her off. “I’ve learned my lessons and now I only have eyes for you.” As her insides turned to mush, he gave a slow shake of his head. “I’m just not sure why I’d never seen it before.”

She looked deep into his eyes and didn’t know what to believe. Truthfully, she’d always loved Abe, loved his spirit, his fun-loving nature, and his zest for life. But how could she be sure of his sincerity. Did she dare hope he’d changed?

As if he’d read her thoughts, he gathered her hand in his. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?” she asked, not sure her rubbery legs could actually carry her up the stairs.

“I have a surprise for you.”

Her eyes widened. “You do?”

Abe led her to the staircase until they reached the top level. “Up there.”

“In the attic?”

Instead of answering Abe reached out and pulled the cord to lower the stairs. He waved his hand. “After you.”

Not knowing what to expect, she tentatively climbed the stairs. When she reached the top, she stopped and gasped.

Abe came up behind her and wrapped his hands around her waist. “I had the girls secretly design this room for you. I know how much you miss your home when you travel.”

“How did you manage? You were a cat.”

He grinned and glanced heavenward. "I had help, and believe me, the girls knew there was a whole lot more going on between us."

Her hand went to her chest, "I really don't know how you did it, Abe, but it's beautiful." She waved toward the sky. "It's a replica of my bedroom."

"That's because I want you to feel at home when you come back to visit the girls."

"How did you know I'd come back?" Once a job was done they rarely returned.

"Because you've all grown so close, and these girls are like family to you." He gave a sexy grin the curled her toes. "Imagine how surprised they're going to be when you just hand this place over to them."

"I can't wait to see their faces." She took a moment to glance around the room, which was designed in warm whites, fluffy throw pillows, her favorite rocking chair, and numerous bowls full of ripe apples to add a splash of color. She felt a little teary. "That's the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

He made a tscking sound. "Then you've been hanging out with the wrong people."

"I've been hanging out with you," she teased, trying to lighten the mood.

His voice dropped an octave, to show the seriousness of his words, she supposed. "Things are going to be different, Pamina. Very, very different, but also very, very good. You have my word on it."

"Your word, huh?"

"That's right." His deep voice seeped under her skin and elicited an erotic shiver. As he looked at her with need and desire, unrequited passion moved through her.

She touched his chest. "What else do I have?" she asked playfully.

He placed his warm hand over hers. "Well, besides my word, you have my heart..." He got quiet for a moment, and then she spotted a wicked gleam in his eyes. "And if you're really, really good, I might let you have my body too."

"Oh, but Abe, I have been really, really good."

He scooped her up. "Well, in that case..."

As heat moved through her Abe laid her out on her cloud-like bed, where he proceeded to remove her clothes and spend the first night of the rest of their eternity offering her his heart and his body.

About the Author

A former government financial officer, Cathryn Fox graduated from university with a bachelor of business degree. Shortly into her career, Cathryn quickly figured out that corporate life wasn't for her. Needing an outlet for her creative energy, she turned in her briefcase and calculator and began writing erotic romance full-time. Cathryn enjoys writing dark paranormals and humorous contemporaries. She lives in eastern Canada with her husband, two kids and chocolate Labrador retriever.

To learn more about Cathryn Fox, please visit www.cathrynfox.com. Send an email to Cathryn@Cathrynfox.com or join her chat group, http://groups.yahoo.com/group/wicked_writers/.

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All Worked Up

It's just one little bet. Winner takes...all.

All Worked Up

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Pleasure Inn, Book 2

Tired of aspiring actors using her to get close to her movie-producer father, Candace Steele has sworn off relationships. At least until she's achieved her dream of restoring an old inn on the outskirts of Mason Creek. The new carpenter who's been hired to help her create bedroom furniture designed for...*endurance*...is throwing a kink into her plans. Watching his athletic body pound wood is doing things to her hormones that have her rethinking her vow.

When he agreed to take the job, Marc Collins intended to keep the sexy spitfire at arm's length. But Candace is giving him a run for his money in more ways than one. It's tough to keep just his eyes on—and hands off—his boss's daughter when she's hell-bent on seducing him. And when she pulls a fast one and wins an impromptu bet, what's a red-blooded guy to do except let her collect her winnings...*all* of them.

The heat they generate melts the fresh paint off the walls. But when seeds of doubt make Candace put on her running shoes to flee, Marc will have to talk fast—and run faster—to capture her heart.

Warning: This red-hot story contains graphic sex, frank language, wet play, use of orgasm-enhancing props, and to top it all off, it's all caught on film—just in case you missed anything the first time. <wink>

Enjoy the following excerpt for All Worked Up:

As he approached the spot where Candace had pulled him into the water, his pace slowed and his mind raced, recalling the way her nipples had tightened beneath her tracksuit. He spent a long moment staring at the water and considered taking a dip to cool himself down.

"Going in?"

He tightened at the sound of her voice behind him. When he spun around and took in the warm flush on her cheeks, the sexy way her nipples pressed against her tank top and the way her long, tanned legs looked in her provocative short shorts, he almost gave in to temptation.

The hungry look in her eyes made him ache. Fuck he wanted her so badly, he could barely think straight. Pleasure raced through him, and his cock swelled inside his running shorts. Candace cast a glance down, and when her eyes traveled back to his face, they were gleaming with mischief. Okay, he needed to put a stop to this and he needed to do it now.

As he ran over every reason to back away, he said, "Candace, I—"

Jesus, what was he going to tell her? That he was hired by her father to watch over her? That he wasn't who she thought he was? The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her or deceive her. After all, she trusted him enough to try to seduce him.

Okay, he needed to put some distance between them. But when she went up on her tippy toes and put her mouth close to his, every reason he had for keeping his distance suddenly dissolved.

“I think going for a swim is a great idea.” The soft seduction in her voice pulled him in and shattered any semblance of control he thought he had.

Without warning, she climbed into the water. At the sight of her gorgeous, wet body, need exploded inside him.

Ah, Jesus...

Unable to contain the heat rising in him, he jumped into the water with her, knowing there was only one way to feed the hunger gnawing at his insides. When she stepped close, and skin touched skin, she poised her mouth open in invitation. His cock took over where his brain left off and his lips crashed down on hers. Aware of her desire, he gripped her by the hips and pulled her to him, meshing their bodies together and lining up their nether regions. When he pushed his cock against her pussy, she gyrated and moaned into his mouth.

As the warm afternoon sun beat down on them, it occurred to him that they were outdoors, in plain sight. Hell, he needed to get behind closed doors with her before someone stumbled upon them. “The path...people.” He felt a tremor move through her and realized how much that excited her. He gave a low, heated laugh, intrigued by her boldness. “I had no idea you were so naughty,” he whispered into her mouth.

Her laughter churned with passion and expressive eyes brimmed with desire. “Neither did I. Until just now. You must bring that out in me.” She cupped his cock and gave a gentle squeeze. “Now let’s see what I can bring out in you.”

Christ, he knew better than to get intimate with her—especially in public—but the look in her eyes and the thrill it gave her to play this little exhibitionist game prompted him into action. Every damn reason he had for staying away from her suddenly seemed so insignificant, and giving her everything she ever wanted had become more important than his own well-being.

He gripped her tank top and peeled it over her head, exposing her luscious breasts. With pleasure racing through him, Marc moaned and wet his mouth. “So beautiful,” he murmured and brushed the pad of his thumb over one perfect nipple.

She arched into him, and he could hear the note of desperation lacing her voice when she asked, “Would you like a taste?”

Cravings like he’d never before experienced swamped him. “Hell, you know I would.” Trembling and entirely lost in the moment, he inclined his head and drew her hard bud into his mouth. *Fuck...* Her fingers raked through his hair and held him tight. As she swelled in his mouth, she gave a low erotic whimper and he damn near erupted on the spot.

Her hands raced over him with aroused eagerness, tugging at his shirt and shorts almost frantically. Wanting to slow her down so they could enjoy and savor every sinful moment, he inched back, gripped her

hands and placed them at her sides. His gaze moved to hers, and when his glance was met with heat, passion and vulnerability swirling around in a sea of green, his heart softened and everything inside him reached out to her. Tenderness stole over him as emotions gathered in a knot deep in his gut, and he instinctively knew he had to make this good for her. So damn good it would help her fight every last demon that plagued her darkest corner.

He pitched his voice low. "Come here, sweetheart."

She stepped into him and he backed her up against the embankment. Once he had her caged between his body and the grass, he leaned in for a slow soul-searching kiss.

She tugged at him, heat reflecting in her eyes. "Easy, baby," he responded, and once again secured her hands to her sides.

Their gazes collided. "Marc, please..."

Reining in his lust, he took in the erotic sight of her and the way she had so readily opened up to him, trusting him with her pleasure. "You can beg all you want," he assured her with a grin, as the cool water lapped at his waist. "But I'm not in any hurry. Now that I have you where I want you, I'm going to leisurely explore your body." With that he gently shaped her contours, kneading her flesh and enjoying the feel of her soft curves in his palms. His mouth moved to her neck. With slow, easy movements, he properly introduced himself to her. Trailing lower, he paid homage to her breasts using his hands, mouth and tongue, sucking, nibbling and licking and taking his sweet-ass time before moving to her belly button, which was just inches out of the water.

Needing to go lower, he lifted her by the hips and set her on the bank, lining her pussy up with his mouth. He gripped her shorts and toyed with the waistband.

"Marc...?"

"Yeah, babe." The strange look on her face spoke volumes. She didn't understand his slow seduction, his need to please her. Didn't understand that it gave him pleasure just to please her.

Her eyes clouded and he felt a curious shift inside him. "I...I—"

"I know, babe. Really, I do." And he did know. That every asshole she'd been with had cared more about his needs than hers. Deciding to show her another side of lovemaking, Marc proceeded to inch her shorts down her silky legs, leaving her lacy panties behind.

She sat before him, quivering, her eyes watching his every move carefully. She reached for him, to touch him in return, her soft hands greedily sliding over his skin, and even though he liked it, he anchored her hands to her sides, intent on making this all about her.

Scorching sex: definitely on the menu. Hold the love, please.

Romeo for Hire

© 2009 Jane Beckenham

Workaholic Carly Mason is caught between a rock and a hard place. The rock: an invitation for four days of sun, sand and...well you get the picture...with her friends. And her mystery man. The hard place: Mr. Invisible, who lusts after her with delicious abandon, is a fantasy that doesn't really exist.

Then she encounters a motorbike-riding Adonis whose image taunts her during the wee small hours. And when fate drops him in her sights the next day, she grabs the opportunity to offer him a job. Pretend to be her Romeo, just for the duration of her getaway.

Exhausted from months negotiating his multi-million dollar company's expansion, Marco Valente is more than tempted by Carly's outrageous proposal. If nothing else, it'll give him a temporary escape from his high profile life—and his mother's serial bride attitude.

Once on the island, Carly realizes she's been tricked. She and Marco are the only ones there. Neither has a mobile phone—and the helicopter is disappearing into the distance. For the next four days and nights, it's just Carly and her hired Romeo. And a growing connection that definitely wasn't part of the contract...

Warning: Contains two unbelievably stubborn people undergoing serious cell phone withdrawal, and seriously scorching sex on the beach. Not responsible for reader's failure to apply sunblock before reading.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Romeo for Hire:

Marco's touch set Carly on fire. It was sublime, everything she thought it would be, and more.

As she lay on the bed, she watched him strip, clothes falling where he dropped them. He was a magnificent man and she couldn't take her eyes off him. Broad shoulders tapered to slim hips, the smattering of jet-black chest hair beckoning her fingers. Carly lowered her gaze, suddenly filled with a raging, hungering need to explore his glorious body and any residual calm she thought she possessed shattered as he eased his long, taut body next to hers.

He reached for her, and her body grazed his, chest to chest, hip to hip, the hard sensual thrust of his arousal a potent reminder that Marco was all male. Slowly his eyes darkened to a blue-black, holding hers in a powerful force. His lips sought her mouth, arousing her with a whisper-soft touch. Carly groaned and her body yielded, arching against his. Marco's breathing came in short, sharp intakes and the pulse in the base of his throat throbbed. She ran a finger over it, felt it skip an erratic dance. She couldn't help but smile, enjoying his reaction to her.

"Lesson one," he whispered in her ear.

Carly braced herself, waiting with excited expectation, her eyes closing the moment before he dropped soft, shivery kisses on her eyelids then her earlobes and continuing down to her throat.

Her skin burned with desire, her body consumed by a basic need. She wound her arms around his neck, holding on, praying it wasn't a dream and, like a genie, he would vanish. With the tips of her fingers sliding through his silky hair, the texture a sensual play against her own soft skin, she tilted his head down to her breast.

"You taste delicious," he groaned as he suckled on one pebble-hard nub.

Hearing his whispered ecstasy, she smiled, satisfied. Nothing else mattered. "I'm learning," she managed to say between the teasing kisses he dotted across her lips, her eyes, her face.

"You're a good student," he agreed and sought solace from her other breast. "Your body is so responsive, *cara mia*."

Carly couldn't think clearly, her mind fragmented. She could only feel, touch and taste. All thought beyond the now was gone.

Reacting with a compulsion and desire so strong, she lifted her hips to his. His erection pulsed against her stomach and he began to explore her intimately, teasing her to even greater heights than she thought possible. Emboldened, she slipped her hand between them and clasped him, smiling as Marco exhaled a harsh, ragged gasp.

"Lesson number two."

She smiled. "I try to please."

"You do. Very much."

Lost in a sensory world, Carly's mind went blank. Only Marco touching her, urging her with his fingers as they flickered over her slickness, was important. She gloried in the sensations whirling through her veins, the rhythm of his heightened touch. Finally, as she reached for some intangible goal, allowing her body to surrender completely, her cry of pleasure pierced the night as Marco brought her to heart-wrenching, joyous fulfillment.

Nothing had prepared Carly for this. Nothing. She lay dazed in utter contentment, savoring the spine-tingling moment, too happy to breathe, too fulfilled to think.

Finally, as every wonderful sensation washed over her in a gentle ebbing caress, she let out a shuddering sigh of total release and contentment. "That was beautiful."

"Beauty for the beautiful, *amore*." Marco grinned and trailed a finger down the side of her cheek. "Lesson number three, *cara*. A man makes sure his woman is pleased," he whispered into the fall of her hair and again began dotting butterfly-soft kisses down the curve of her throat. It sent goose bumps shimmying up and down her spine, an instant heat pulsing between her thighs.

"You have pleased me. I've never..." Her voice trailed off, and an embarrassed heat rushed to her cheeks.

But Marco pulled back and the tip of his finger lifted her chin. Her gaze met his.

“Pleasure, Marco. That was the pinnacle of pleasure. I feel complete.” And she was. It echoed through her body in a continuous salve of pure joy and made her heart sing. “You’ve made me come alive. I don’t want to even breathe in case it disappears.” She ran her hands across his skin, reveling in the feel of it beneath her fingertips. “I never want to lose this feeling. To lose...”

“Shush. That is impossible. We have all night.” Dark, teasing glints flickered in Marco’s passion-filled eyes.

“All night. Sounds perfect.” Reaching up, Carly trailed a path over the rough sandpaper stubble of his chin. “Everything I touch is so heightened, so erotic and arousing,” she whispered. “Are our lessons finished?”

One dark eyebrow arched humorously. “Life is one long lesson.”

Carly curved a hand around his blatantly aroused penis, stroking the thick shaft. She arched back, her legs parting. “Then hadn’t we better get on with the lesson?” she asked with a wicked smile.

“The final lesson is about to begin. Kiss me. Now,” Marco instructed and with a gentleness that surprised and warmed her, he edged himself to her moist center, tentative and teasing as he nudged at her slick folds.

“Now, Marco. Please?”

He smiled down at her. “Patience, *cara*. A man needs to know his journey before he starts.”

Inch by delicious inch, Marco entered her. Carly reveled in the feel of him, wanting him to fill her. Faster. Harder.

“At last,” Marco sighed and captured her lips. “I’ve waited a long time for this.”

Lilting laughter slid from Carly. “A few days.”

“It seems a lifetime.”

Touching her crosses the line...and shoots his code of honor all to hell.

Breaking Daylight

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Sergeant Alex Shepard is all about getting the job done. That single-minded purpose helps him forget the fact he hates the jungle as he leads his Special Forces team in search of Honduran drug lord Santiago Saldana. His quarry eludes him, but the woman left behind in the compound is the next best thing. Saldana's mistress—an American woman who clearly puts her own pleasure over right and wrong.

Isabella Canales has been Saldana's prisoner for four long years. Worse, he's taken away her most precious possession. Except Alex doesn't believe a word of it. The clock is ticking, and she's frantic to do anything to convince him to take her home. Even agree to serve as bait to draw Saldana out.

As they push through the tangled jungle dodging bullets and ambushes, Alex fights his growing respect for Isabella's determination—and an attraction that's impossible to resist, whatever she's done. But Saldana never lets go of what's his. And betrayal is his deadliest weapon...

Warning: An arrogant hero who meets his match in a sexy heroine who makes him look past her face and into his soul. Gunfights and explosions (in and out of the bedroom).

Enjoy the following excerpt for Breaking Daylight:

She looked through the peephole, saw the top of a bent head.

She jumped, choking back a scream when he pounded again.

"Open up, Goddess."

Shepard.

Still shaking, she unlatched the door and turned the knob. Shepard swayed in the doorway, clearly drunk, but when he lifted his eyes to hers, she recognized his vulnerability in his sad eyes, downturned mouth.

"Shepard, what is it?"

But he didn't speak, just stepped inside the room, closing the door behind him. He slid a hand under her hair, bending to kiss her in the same movement.

She'd longed to know how he would taste, but tequila had had no part in her imagination. Not like this. When she pushed at his shoulders, he eased back to look at her, his eyes heavy lidded and filled with pain.

Then he whispered, "Isabella. I need you."

She didn't want his words to mean anything. She'd heard them before from men who didn't even know her name. She had dreamed of Shepard being different, that he might actually love her, would take care of her the way he loved and cared for Rebecca. But she was scared to hope.

Still, hope had her curling her fingers around his neck, pulling his mouth to hers.

His mouth was hard, like the rest of him, hot, commanding. His stubble rasped her tender lips as he closed his hands around her waist, his calluses snagging the silky fabric of her robe.

Then he pulled it apart.

She grasped his wrists. "Rebecca." She wouldn't betray another woman.

He frowned. "It's over."

The hope flared brighter and she was ashamed of herself for a moment. Shepard was hurting, Rebecca too, and she was taking advantage of it. He wouldn't like her any better in the morning than he had twelve hours ago but she didn't care. If it was all she could have, she was fine with that. She wanted to know what it was to be with someone who made her feel safe.

His tongue in her mouth was skilled, daring, moving in strokes and sweeps that had her toes curling into the plush carpet. When he parted the robe a little more, the roughness of his clothes rasped her skin.

She wanted more.

He backed her up until her hips bumped the edge of the dresser, and she reached to balance herself. His fingers tangled her hair and he tugged her head back, releasing her mouth and following the line of her throat with his lips.

She moaned and felt him smile against her skin.

Then he went lower, tracing that bared strip of skin between her breasts, pausing only long enough to release the robe's tie, then down her belly.

His hot breath sent shivers over her skin. He parted her legs and his mouth was on her with the same manner of command as he'd kissed her, his lips drawing, his tongue darting, stroking her swollen flesh with amazing accuracy.

The orgasm hit her hard. She came with a keening cry, arching backwards, gripping the dresser, but he didn't stop, draining every bit of pleasure from her, adding his fingers, alternately stroking and penetrating her until she came harder, the room spinning, the only solid thing holding her up was Shepard.

As casually as if he hadn't destroyed her, he stood, watching as she sprawled helplessly in front of him, boneless. He kissed her again, his mouth wet with her, peeling her robe away, sharpening her desire. She clutched at him, sliding her hands up under his T-shirt to feel the ridges of muscle, to urge him to undress.

He stripped off his shirt and she reached for him, wanting to touch, feel, claim, but he moved back, shucking off his pants too. The erection she'd seen at the waterfall was just as magnificent, but he'd sheathed himself before she could touch him.

"Turn around," he said, and she did, on shaky legs.

He pressed a hand between her shoulder blades, bending her over the dresser so she was face to face with her own reflection in the mirror. Then he parted her legs and entered her with a powerful thrust.

Humiliation warred with arousal as she watched his face in the mirror, watched him moving, feeling the corresponding strokes. It was sexy as hell, but their first time should be face to face, looking into each other's eyes. Romantic, not sexual acrobatics.

She'd exercised her body, trained her muscles to make a man come quickly, but now she pushed the numbness aside, opened herself to the sensations and the emotions. Instead of fake words of praise for her lover, she centered on her own pleasure, wanted to draw the sensation out, to feel the pleasure he could give her.

Bracing her weight on her palms instead of her elbows, she rose up, making him work just a little harder to stay inside her. Making him need to stay inside her. She hadn't turned to her old tricks. Instead of letting her mind shut off, she reveled in the feelings he worked to give her.

"Christ, Isabella," he grunted, making shallow thrusts to find his way back to the same depth, sending tingles of pleasure through her.

Keeping him at the same angle, she backed against him, frustrating him, pleasing herself.

She took one of his hands, guided it to cover her, guided one finger down to stroke her, and she came. Hard. Out of control.

He unhooked her arm from around his neck and bent her over the dresser again, pounding into her, drawing out her pleasure till he came too, collapsing breathless and sweaty across her back.

She shouldn't have been surprised or hurt when he didn't cuddle her. Instead, he withdrew almost immediately to deal with the condom, then closed his hand around hers, almost a tender gesture.

"Let's go shower."

As she followed him to the bathroom, she got a good look at his streamlined body, no fat anywhere. She watched him lean in to adjust the water temperature, then he stepped in first and reached for her.

"I want to touch you everywhere," he said, backing under the spray to shield her.

"I think you did," she murmured shyly, not sure whether to face him after he'd seen what he could do to her, how he could make her lose control.

Gently, he turned her so her back was to him and bent his head to the curve of her shoulder, sucking the spray of water from her skin. He slid his palms down her arms, up into her hair. "So soft," he whispered.

His erection nudged her bottom before he eased back, gliding his hands over her breasts to the vee of her thighs then up again to her breasts to flick her nipples.

"Shepard," she whispered.

"Alex," he said against her skin.

"Alex." She twisted in his arms, letting her skin slide against his and she pulled his head down.

Alex closed his mouth over hers. God, she was everything he'd dreamed about and more, soft, giving, welcoming. Responsive. Every brush of his touch over her skin had her sighing or gasping, like she was

some virgin who'd never been touched. Like she lived for him to touch her. So he touched her and kissed her, bending her over his arm, taking her mouth greedily, taking, taking. And she gave.

Alex didn't want to be on his feet anymore. He wanted her under him. He shut off the water and swept her up in one of the big towels, stroking it over her smooth skin. She blushed and gave him a beautiful smile. What did that mean? Had he crossed a line here? Could he stop himself if he had?

Not yet, he couldn't. He lifted her in his arms and carried her in to the bed, kneeling over her. His arousal pulsed in his blood, his need to take. He tasted her luscious mouth, the sweet curve of her throat, the lush flesh of her breasts, her dark nipples, one at a time, rolling them with his tongue, dragging moans from her. Her legs parted around his waist, and she pressed against him. The scent of her desire was like a hand, reaching out to stroke him, to entice him. His erection leapt in response, but he reined his desire in.

He was practiced at that.

He nuzzled and licked her breasts, then peeled himself away. She whimpered in protest, a gorgeous sound, but when he returned with his foil packet, she sat up and took it.

"I haven't touched you," she said softly.

Her fingertips hovered near his erection, and it took every ounce of will not to shove himself at her. If she touched him now, he didn't think he'd have any control.

But he wanted her hands on him.

He knelt on the bed, giving her implicit permission. She closed her fingers around him, stroked up toward the tip with a gentle swirling motion, again and again till he thought his teeth would pulverize with the effort not to come.

Then she lowered her head, and her cool breath rushed across his sensitive flesh.



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